Preface

The half-century between 1820 and 1870 saw the transformation of the United States from a small nation of fewer than ten million people largely hugging the eastern seaboard to a country of nearly forty million stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It was crisscrossed with railroads and telegraph lines, neither of which had existed when the period began. The United States had been wrenched apart by slavery and then forcibly reunited by a civil war that cost more casualties than all other American wars combined until Vietnam. With the conquest of the West had come war with Mexico and the wholesale relocation and extirpation of native peoples.

The period also began with a British critic, Sydney Smith, sneering in 1820, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" But by 1870 a diverse and vibrant literary culture had produced writers who are still household names today, such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Mark Twain and Henry James had already launched careers that would span the rest of the century. A genteel literary tradition boasted familiar names no longer widely read today, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Greenleaf Whittier. Women and African American writers like Susan Warner, Sarah Payson Willis Parton ("Fanny Fern"), Margaret Fuller, Lydia Maria Child, Caroline Kirkland, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, once neglected, now command the attention and respect of a growing number of scholars and readers. It is the aim of *American History through Literature, 1820–1870* to place the development of this vibrant literary culture in the tumultuous historical transformations of that half century.

The guiding principle of this encyclopedia is perhaps best expressed in a well-known observation by Henry James in his study of his precursor Nathaniel Hawthorne: "The moral is that the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion." Although James did not regard the "soil" of nineteenth-century American society as particularly deep (he had a rather narrower view of what constitutes both society and culture than we do today), the essays in these volumes address what we now understand as the rich, complex, and reciprocal relations between the literature of the period and the historical conditions that prevailed in America during the period 1820 to 1870.

In the main, however, James was right that wherever and whenever literature flourishes it does so not merely through the splendid isolation of individual genius but in the context of social, cultural, economic, geographical, religious, linguistic, and philosophical (to name only the most obvious) conditions that confront the writer. The literature produced in turn helps to illuminate and bring to life those conditions. The whaling industry, for example, was an important engine of economic growth in early-nineteenth-century America, but the person who studies its impact in terms of economic activity alone will know less about its human possibilities—ranging from the degraded to the heroic—than one who has also read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Conversely, the person who reads that novel only as a literary classic misses the light it sheds on American culture at mid-century: not only on the economy and adventure of whaling itself but on a host of racial, scientific, and religious issues as well.

Perhaps it would be best not to try to distinguish history and literature too finely but rather to recall that there are reasons why, in many languages, including French, German, and Spanish—the languages closely connected with English—the words for "story" and "history" are the same. Each involves some grounding in historical circumstance and each involves some degree of imaginative shaping of experience. Even a literary work as imaginative and otherworldly as Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," for example, may owe its very subject matter to widespread anxieties about premature burial, and the story's lack of a concrete setting is directly traceable to the conventions of transatlantic reprinting practices and the lack of international copyright at the time. Conversely, while the California gold rush, for example, was a historically specific phenomenon, it also played a role in larger American foundation myths and generated a discrete literary subculture that give rise to memorable works by Mark Twain and others.

American History through Literature, 1820–1870 is meant to address several kinds of readers at once: the high school or college student who wishes to acquire introductory information about a certain subject; library patrons who, out of desire to fill in some gap in their understanding, wish to peruse these volumes without premeditated purpose; the teacher of American literature, American history, or American studies who may consult these volumes in order to enrich his or her classes; the researcher who wishes to read an authoritative analysis or overview of a given subject and to be directed to other reliable sources of pertinent information on the subject; and finally, the so-called common reader, who, out of simple curiosity perhaps, wishes to learn more about the cultural ethos of America as it is reflected in history and literature. For all of these kinds of readers the essays in these volumes may serve either as a cogent brief analysis of the topic or as a starting point for further research. Although the essays are authoritative and accurate, they are not neutral synopses. Each expresses the point of view and, indeed, the argument of the contributor. In the aggregate, they reflect the diverse theoretical perspectives of contemporary literary criticism and historiology.

These volumes contain 245 essays ranging from 1,500 to 6,000 words. Each entry contains a bibliography and cross-references to related items. There are also over 200 entry-related illustrations, most of them contemporary to the time period under discussion; numerous sidebars containing key passages of important texts; and several helpful tables and maps. Entries fit broadly into the following categories, but it should be noted that a familiar category of literary encyclopedias will not be found, namely biographical essays on individual authors. This information is widely available in many other places, and the focus of these volumes is on key texts and contexts rather than on the lives of particular authors.

Works. This category comprises texts thought of as both literary and nonliterary, a selective list of "touchstone" titles chosen because they open out in some complex and revelatory fashion to American history. Some titles were popular in their own time or are in ours. Some are regarded as literary "classics," some were benchmarks of

popular taste, some were both, and some were neither but reflect some important aspect of the culture of the times. Our "canon" is therefore dynamic and heterogeneous. Some titles (e.g., the witty *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table,* by the distinguished physician Oliver Wendell Holmes) reveal the fashions and manners of the period but are little known today. Once a best-seller and deemed a literary classic, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* is historically invaluable for its depiction of the period's religious evangelicalism. But many readers find it equally compelling artistically, as Jana Argersinger explains in her essay on this novel. Other women's works of the time (e.g., the African American writer Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Elizabeth Drew Stoddard's *The Morgesons*) constitute psychologically and politically complex responses against conventional historical roles for women. Lovalerie King argues for the political awareness—feminist and otherwise—present in *Incidents,* and Sandra A. Zagarell discusses the compelling psychological eccentricities of *The Morgesons,* which she reveals to be surprisingly typical at a time when women, and families, were expected to be conventional.

Some of history's most intricate and lyrical voices are installed in the present-day canon, although some of their works, like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick,* were not always universally popular. Beyond plot summary, the literary entries follow a format of contextualizing authors within their personal histories and broader historical times. Entries also point out a work's relationship to specific historical incidents (e.g., the impact of the Civil War on the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass,* or the motivational force of the Fugitive Slave Law on the composition of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*). *Works* also includes several historical documents, such as the Supreme Court ruling *Dred Scott v. Sandford,* which is described by Paul Finkelman as both a historical incident and a rhetorical document, an example again of the merging aspects of history and literature in these volumes.

Ideas. These entries characterize the heart and soul of a nation in the process of imagining its identity and in some instances in the process of rationalizing political or cultural decisions of the period, such as the rush to move westward. Examples include Manifest Destiny, manhood, feminism, and honor. Contributors accepted the challenge to hybridize history and literature, combining socially engaged literary texts with the complexities of the nation's historical profile. People seeking literary titles not present in the short list of *Works* can search the encyclopedia's index to find an extensive number of literary texts discussed in other contexts and embedded within American social history.

Genre or Genres. These entries describe literary forms (e.g., the slave narrative, domestic novel, gothic fiction, romance) that can be found within this historical period and that are invariably political and value driven. Slave narratives, for example, arose from a compelling need to document the abuses of slavery, to argue for freedom for the slave, and to alter society's perception about slavery as a necessary institution. *Genres* also dictate a set of literary conventions either invented or improvised upon by authors who resist creative, political, or social constraints. Antagonistic authors set against the social hypocrisies of antebellum society often played against generic expectations to stage their protests (e.g., Michael J. Davey's "The Romance" essay describes how Herman Melville creates an imaginative space in *Moby-Dick* in which to warn against the potential evils of demagoguery in democracy).

Aesthetics. Essays in this category (e.g., "Art and Architecture," "Fireside Poets," "Sentimentalism") identify conscious movements that sought to define what art should be, whether emotional, beautiful, useful, philosophical, or a combination of these things. This period was an especially important time for aesthetics because art was considered the seedbed of moral culture. Accordingly, important aesthetic movements are defined and their proponents identified along with the possible causes and the impact of each movement on American culture.

Institutions or Events. The Civil War dominates this category as "the greatest transforming event in American culture," as John Stauffer puts it in his essay on the conflict. In the longest entry in this encyclopedia, Stauffer characterizes the political, legal, and literary events that converged to catalyze this massive fracture in American identity. Suffice it to say 1820–1870 was an event-filled period (examined here in such entries as "Indian Wars and Dispossession," "California Gold Rush," "Trail of Tears," and "Banking, Finance, Panics, and Depressions"), a leisure-obsessed period ("Circuses and Spectacles," "Theater"), and, perhaps consequently, a period in which institutions for education and reform ("Colleges," "Temperance," "Religion") came into their own. Contributors with a special expertise in these areas describe their inception, various manifestations, and cultural impact.

Places. These essays address real, idealized, or utilitarian places (from Boston and San Francisco to "Nature," "Factories," and "Utopian Communities"); the international scene that was becoming increasingly attractive to Americans ("Canada," "Americans Abroad"), and the fluctuating geography of American space ("Borders," "Agrarianism," "Exploration and Discovery"). Essays describe the origins and defining characteristics of each locale, including the commercial enterprises and literature and cultural institutions (e.g., the thriving German newspaper industry in Cincinnati) that are particular to each. One can also infer from many of these entries that place entails a negotiation in cultural identity that is often fractious and involves winners and losers.

Society, Values, Culture, and/or Ethnicity. The far-reaching treatment of miscegenation (or mixed race relations) by Michael Householder is a good example of the approach and context of the philosophically weighty essays that appear in this category. His essay describes the legal, philosophical, and experiential history of race relations in America with a continual interweaving of important literary voices/texts (e.g., Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*) that responded as well as contributed to ongoing discussions about race. Both in literature and law, in the pulpit and the lyceum and on the lecture circuit, slavery, labor laws, women's rights, immigrant rights, and American domestic imperialism were being bitterly contested. American history springs to life in such provocative entries as "Abolitionist Writing," "Ethnology" (theories of race), "Marriage," "Political Parties," "Pornography," and "Technology."

Publishing. This category of essays analyzes American print culture found in this period (e.g., book publishing, periodicals, journalism), the location of important publishing centers (Boston, Philadelphia), the period's technological innovations ("Book and Periodical Illustration"), important personages involved in the publishing industry ("Editors"), and notable periodicals (e.g., *Godey's Lady's Book, The Atlantic Monthly*). Patricia Okker's entry on *Godey's,* for example, explains its phenomenal success and its special contribution to female authorship in the form of its canny editor Sarah Josepha Hale and its recruitment of women to produce lithographic fashion plates.

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