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In the Preface to the last collaborative effort of this kind, the *Literary History of the United States* (1963), Robert E. Spiller and his co-editors declared that "each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms." Earlier, not after World War II the editors of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* had made much the same point. In fact, however, the 1948 literary history has stood for nearly forty years, having no editors to disagree in the 1974 edition that their work had belied their original proclamation that each generation must define the past in its own terms.

Among the many questions that editors will ask in opening this new volume is why the possibility of such failure and why the present work appears now. Adequate answers to these questions require an understanding of the social, political, and intellectual history of the last four decades, as well as a grasp of the new critical approaches to our national literature that have emerged in that time. Events such as the Civil War, the war in *Yankee* and the struggle against it, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the struggle of various minority groups to achieve equality in American life have reshaped the way in which Americans view their nation and thereby their national literature and culture. The new questions, conflicts, and cultural movements in American political and intellectual life have created an intellectual environment in which a "redefinition of our literary past" during the last half century has in part, generated exciting new critical perspectives and literary evaluations that are reflected in this book.

This work does not, however, attempt to be comprehensive about the history of the literature of the United States. For many reasons, some discussed in our General Introduction, our primary concern is to provide a critical survey of the literature of the last half century. It is not intended to be a comprehensive history of American literature, but rather a critical survey of the literature of the last half century.

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