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978-0-521-09000-1 - The Sacred Game: Provincialism and Frontier Consciousness in American Literature, 1630-1860

Albert J. von Frank

Excerpt

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## *Introduction: provincialism and the frontier*

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*The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. . . . It strips off the garments of civilization. . . . It puts him in the log cabin. . . and runs an Indian palisade around him. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs. . . . The fact is that here is a new product that is American. . . . Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.*

– F. J. Turner<sup>1</sup>

The early history of American culture is overwhelmingly the story of civilization moving westward, and hardly at all the story of its springing up spontaneously on the frontier. The more or less contrary position – that the frontier was an agent of abrupt cultural change, or a “gate of escape from the bondage of the past”<sup>2</sup>—was advanced with intentional exaggeration by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 and has since achieved an almost mythic hold on popular conceptions of American history. Even though this view continues to be influential, historians since Turner have demonstrated its shortcomings, pointing out that a significant number of those who settled the frontier, including especially the educated and socially prominent classes, were desperately intent on maintaining the old ways and were, in fact, fearful not only of lapsing into barbarism, but of making the apparently most innocuous adjustments to their surroundings as well.<sup>3</sup> The frontier was certainly a formidable antagonist to the natural conservatism of these pioneers, but it was not the impenetrable barrier to the transmission of culture that Turner, in his more emphatic moments, could make it out to be. To allege, as he did, that “complex European life was sharply precipitated by the wilderness into the simplicity of primitive conditions”<sup>4</sup> is to overlook an important, highly functional desire for continuity on the settlers’ part in favor of

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[More information](#)

the national myth that America does somehow represent a new order of the ages. Recent historians have found it necessary in light of the continued vitality of Turner's hypothesis to report what are after all some rather self-evident conclusions – for example, that the culture of American pioneers was “Western European rather than aboriginal”<sup>5</sup> and that “they had an almost grim determination to reproduce modes of life which they had respected and honored in the old country.”<sup>6</sup>

The historical record is full of indications of a lively western interest in cultural matters. Alexis de Tocqueville and other foreign travelers were regularly astonished that in the remotest places and in the rudest conditions, Americans contrived to have books: “There is hardly a pioneer's hut,” Tocqueville wrote, “which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of Henry V for the first time in a log-house.”<sup>7</sup> Writing in 1818, an English traveler named Elias Fordham observed about the West that a “universal spirit of enquiry [existed] among all classes of people. In the state of Indiana, in which there is but one town of six years standing, there are several book-clubs. Newspapers and Reviews from Philadelphia, Baltimore, Kentucky, and St. Louis, are received weekly.”<sup>8</sup> Altogether, the typical pattern of early commentary on the West involves a contrast between a sophisticated, rather condescending expectation of barbarism and a finding of cultivation. The tone is either humorous or surprised, for very early in America's history the stereotype of the Westerner had been established as a rough-and-ready brawler, an antisocial figure whose interests were largely confined to the pursuit of necessities. Speaking of Lexington, Kentucky, in 1814, a writer for *Niles' Register* remarked with astonishment that “society is polished and polite, and their balls and assemblies are conducted with as much grace and ease as they are anywhere else, and the dresses at the parties are as tasty and elegant. Strange things these in the ‘backwoods!’ ”<sup>9</sup>

But not so strange after all. The men and women who actually settled the West – as distinct from those who, merely blazing trails or trapping furs, had little lasting impact on western society – were generally people who had a stake in society and its progress.<sup>10</sup> Little insight is required to see that the Westerners' hunger for culture had unusual psychological and emotional dimensions, or that their motive for so remarkably pursuing cultural interests under such adverse circumstances was a desire, finally, to keep up contact with a world they had left behind yet never meant to abandon. “I have read in books,” said a nineteenth-century Kansas homesteader, “that the people of the frontier kept moving ever westward to escape civilization. But if my experience counts for anything, such people were the exceptions. So eager were we to keep in touch with civilization that even when we could not afford a shotgun and ammu-

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[More information](#)

dition to kill rabbits, we subscribed to newspapers and periodicals and bought books.”<sup>11</sup> This pioneer and many thousands of others in comparable situations doggedly insisted that whatever difficulties their environment might present, certain standards of civilization would be observed. They recognized that the struggle for survival was a matter of the spirit as well as the flesh and that they could be as thoroughly defeated by isolation and cultural regression as by hunger. It was for this reason, of course, that frontier settlers would so often, and at such expense of effort, take with them pianos, fine furniture, and other preposterously bulky heirlooms as ballast for suddenly unanchored identities.<sup>12</sup>

To a significant and influential portion of the frontier population, culture in its various forms meant community. Whether this community was the one established through news in local periodicals or the community of literary societies, theatricals, and lyceum meetings, Westerners relied on such contacts as much to assure themselves of who they were as simply to engage in recreation. The presence in out-of-the-way western places of vital and often rather ostentatious centers of high culture was, in effect, a declaration on the settlers' part that they had not been defeated or changed by their arduous environment but remained as before, civilized beings with specific cultural ties to older communities.

Without consciously intending anything more than the provision in a new setting of a comfortable and familiar life, Westerners were actually accomplishing two other things as well: they were conserving their personal identities through the trauma of relocation (with all its attendant invitations to change), *and* they were transmitting the culture of Europe or of the eastern parts of America to the West. Success in the first of these matters depended to a great extent on success in the second. The relation between them – between the individual and internal issue of continuing to know oneself and the communal issue of retaining shared and sharable values – was intimate, complex, and largely decisive in shaping American cultural attitudes. Historically, in America, the feeling *for* culture has been bound up with a sense of the difficulty of transmitting it, with a sense of the attritional failures, the dilutions, the memorial lapses, associated with all attempts to reestablish older cultures in a new land. The irony is that, while culture degenerated in specific and intriguing ways as it traveled (or was carried) westward, the interest that Westerners took in it (their psychic investment, as it were) deepened proportionately. Ray A. Billington expresses all of this with his usual succinctness and clarity:

The pioneers were cultural transplants who had moved to new homes not to escape the old, but only to achieve greater economic and personal self-realization. They went west in hope rather than

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[More information](#)

despair, and so they looked back upon the value system of the East with nostalgia instead of bitterness. To expect them to shed cultural baggage under these circumstances would be to deny the force of habit in human nature. Alexis de Tocqueville spoke truly when he characterized the frontiersman as “a highly civilized being, who consents for a time to inhabit the backwoods, and who penetrates into the wilds of the New World with the Bible, an axe, and some newspapers.” As they moved, the culture that the pioneers carried with them was diluted, but their loyalty to it was strengthened. Forced to shed some elements of their civilization, they clung so tenaciously to the remainder that it assumed a new importance in their lives. Morality, education, and learning bulked larger in the consciences of the “better sort” in the West than among their counterparts in the East.<sup>13</sup>

Away from the community, away from a culturally reinforcing environment and the presence of “correct” models, there was a progressive deterioration in the way that traditional ideas – such ideas as had in the past held communities together – were understood and formulated. This western deterioration, too natural, too inevitable to be seriously deprecated, is to be seen in virtually all aspects of the nation’s cultural life, from the expression of artists to the various forms of popular culture and the work of craftsmen; and it came about in large part from conservative attempts to reproduce older forms without adequate materials or without an appreciation of the originals sufficient to preserve their integrity. The tendency of the process was, of course, toward greater simplicity, toward a filtering out of nuance and the accommodation of a pragmatic, materialist world view. Ironically, this degeneration of culture was primarily the responsibility of those who cared most about its survival; in fact, the peculiarly intense and almost desperate quality of Westerners’ attachment to culture has had, as we shall see, its own distorting effect on transmission. In any event, this particular sort of intense regard for a diluted culture is just what we recognize as “provincialism.”

Provincialism, and the American variety perhaps especially, ought not to be thought of simply as a condition of cultural inferiority with respect to some acknowledged center. Apart from the difficulty of knowing just what we might mean in this case by “inferiority,” it should be evident that provincial cultures in all parts of the world, and again particularly those bearing some relation to European societies, have produced works of art of lasting, worldwide significance. Unless we merely wish to preserve the word as a pejorative term with little genuine descriptive value, we could, instead, think of provincial cultures as those with an absence or scarcity of cultural artifacts together with a marked desire for

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[More information](#)

them. It follows from this definition that provincials will be acutely conscious of their own cultural conditions and will look elsewhere, either to another region or into the past, for specific guidance, and that in either case the past or that other region will assume special importance as a supplier of “standards.” It follows, too, that a provincial culture will be imitative, though one of the innumerable dilemmas faced by such societies is the need to balance imitation or the observance of extrinsic standards with a self-respecting nativist independence.

The American case is clearly special by virtue of the important role played by the frontier as an antagonist to the continuity of culture, that is to say, in creating and enforcing provincial conditions. Furthermore, the exceptional nature of America’s cultural experience allows one to speak of the modes of thought and apprehension that arose in response to this experience, modes in themselves special and, indeed, characteristically American. It allows us, in short, to speak in terms of an enduring provincial mentality in America and thus to move beyond the broadest historical generalities into a consideration of provincialism in its bearing on American literature.

The provincial mind is formed under conditions of cultural attenuation and amid a scarcity of cultural artifacts. It is the mind formed at and by the end of a long and necessarily faulty transmission of culture. Among several natural responses to this kind of deprivation would be heightened curiosity and inquisitiveness – traits regularly reported by European travelers in America. Charles Dickens tells of his exasperation at being questioned on a Mississippi steamboat first about his rather elegant fur coat and then about his watch; he was “asked what *that* cost, and whether it was a French watch, and where I got it, and whether I bought it or had it given me, and how it went, and where the keyhole was, and when I wound it, every night or every morning, and whether I ever forgot to wind it at all, and if I did, what then?”<sup>14</sup> The question of what provincials may or may not know is less interesting than the question of how they live with what they know, how they think, how they imagine, what status they accord to culture. To read, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s private comments on the compelling appeal of a painter’s studio is to penetrate some distance into that writer’s provincial mentality:

I love the odor of paint in an artist’s room; his palette and all his other tools have a mysterious charm for me. The pursuit has always interested my imagination more than any other; and I remember, before having my first portrait taken, there was a great bewitchery in the idea, as if it were a magic process. Even now, it is not without interest for me.<sup>15</sup>

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[More information](#)

The provincial, in short, is the farthest thing from a jaded personality; lack of familiarity with cultural artifacts or with the processes of art creates in the provincial a rare liveliness of interest that would be ill served by being called simply naive. One might cite comparable examples of a provincially awe-struck response to poetry, or to prose fiction; but for the moment the point is merely that the provincial mind has, after all, certain traits beyond ignorance and simplicity, traits such as wonder, curiosity, and an imaginative freedom that might be supposed to stand a poet or writer of fiction in good stead.

Beyond this the American provincial mind respects learning and cultural accomplishment in others, though it is not a rigorously critical mind. It proves too omnivorously receptive to be discriminating, a fact that further accounts for its astonishingly eclectic character. Nothing, as it were, comes amiss to provincials, and it is therefore often true that their mental as well as their physical equipment consists of the most surprising conjunctions of odds and ends and bastardized forms. Casting about for a typical frontier figure to serve in a tale, the popular western writer James Hall settled in one instance on a Mr. Edgarton, head of an English family emigrating to Ohio:

He wore cambric ruffles, a diamond breast-pin, a dandy waist-coat, and a store of jewelry appended to a watch-chain; but his nether limbs were clad in long splatter-dashes, reaching to the knee, a farmer's coarse frock covered his shoulders, and a great fur cap was on his head. He was equipped, moreover, with a powder-horn, shot-pouch and bird-bag, and held in his hand an elegant double-barrelled gun. We mention these things to show how difficult it is for men to throw off their accustomed habits, and to assume those which are suitable to a change of country or condition. Mr. Edgarton, when at home, was a modest, and a well dressed man; but in attempting to assume the guise of a farmer, and the equipment of a hunter, had jumbled together a grotesque assortment of costume, which gave him the appearance of a stage-player dressed for exhibition, more than that of a plain man of business, which was his real character.<sup>16</sup>

Lack of coherence is generally as evident in provincial thought as it is here in Mr. Edgarton's dress, and for much the same reason. Away from the community, the provincial mind is not only susceptible to influence from every conceivable direction, but it generally lacks the means and incentive to maintain the sort of strong, traditional ideology that might encourage coherence. Miscellaneous influences turn out to be acceptable that are directly inconsistent with inherited beliefs, and go, together with the remnants of these beliefs, to make up provincial minds that are often

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[More information](#)

impressively eccentric. It may be, for example, that the frontier proliferation of “new” religions has less to do with the sheer inventiveness of Americans than with a provincial inability to refuse influence.

The traits of the provincial mind indicated thus far reflect the isolation and the relative scarcity of cultural artifacts associated with a western or frontier environment. Another important condition, already referred to, must now be reintroduced to round out and in some measure qualify the portrait as it stands.

A large and influential portion of the population – including but not limited to the “better sort” of pioneer – observed this provincializing process and mounted a strong conservative reaction to it. Recognizing the threat to inherited religious, social, and aesthetic values, they understood that frontier conditions had to be consciously opposed, their attenuating effects alertly guarded against. The Puritan settlers of Massachusetts, for example, were at first greatly concerned that their new surroundings might prove unmanageably hostile in a spiritual as well as a physical sense, foisting influence on them where they had particularly sought freedom from influence; they were anxious that their best conservative efforts might fail to prevent a general falling away of culture and a corresponding forfeiture of community – in short, they were afraid that they might come to live like Indians. Surviving in the wilderness therefore meant resisting conditions, not adjusting to them, and the result was that these embattled conservatives became as fully conscious of their traditions in a defensive, protective way as they were suspiciously alert to the circumstances that threatened them.<sup>17</sup>

Although we are entitled to speak of a provincial mind, we have at the same time to acknowledge the existence of something like an anti-provincial mind, one whose processes are largely governed by a reaction to the prospect of becoming provincial through the loss of inherited values. The term “antiprovincial,” however, is inconvenient and finally misleading because, in fact, the conservatives ordinarily failed to conserve adequately and, despite their protest, became increasingly provincial themselves. The irony of their cultural holding actions – especially in a frontier setting – lay in the fact that as soon as one becomes self-conscious and defensive about one’s culture, one’s relation to it is irreversibly altered; it tends then to become artificial and petrified, and the very thing the individual had sought to preserve has suddenly become something quite different. Frontier conditions, in other words, promoted cultural conservatism but at the same time required its defeat. Hawthorne was characteristically sensitive to the tragic and destructive irony of this situation – undoubtedly out of a feeling for the history of his own family. Explaining why, as he felt, the “sons and grandchildren of the first settlers were a race of lower and narrower souls than their progenitors had been,”

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[More information](#)

he pointed to the inevitability of distortion and collapse in the transmission of vital cultural values: "One generation," he wrote, "had bequeathed its religious gloom, and the counterfeit of its religious ardor, to the next; for these characteristics, as was inevitable, assumed the form both of hypocrisy and exaggeration, by being inherited from the example and precept of other human beings, and not from an original and spiritual source."<sup>18</sup>

In its terms and tone, Hawthorne's explanation is rather that of a poet than that of a cultural historian. It reflects the influential if not universally shared American beliefs that history is a tragic thing in general and that in its naturally degenerative course it continually disestablishes the community of past and present. This was the hard lesson taught to conservatives by their frontier experience, and as the lesson was taught over and over again the disappointment of defeated conservatives became a fixture of the antiprovincial mentality – or, as I should prefer to call it, of "frontier consciousness." The process hinted at in Hawthorne's explanation is clearly being made to serve a mythic view of history, but it ought not for that reason to be dismissed as a fiction. R. W. B. Lewis outlines a substantially similar process while accounting for the failure in America of the doctrine of original sin, a failure he lays at the door of the "party of Memory" rather than of liberal Unitarianism:

If all the force and meaning of the old idea of original sin had disappeared from the religious consciousness of the day, it was largely the fault of orthodoxy, the religious element in the party of Memory. For that party . . . argued the case in almost exclusively historical terms, affirming the enslavement of the present by the past as heatedly as the hopeful insisted on its freedom. But the orthodox showed little awareness of the organic vitality of history, of the way in which the past can enliven the present: the past was simply the place where the issues had been decided, and the decision was all that mattered. The orthodox habit of presenting the end-product of religious belief drained of all the spiritual impulses which had gone into the historical shaping of it led to a frozen but fragile structure, and one not likely to hold very long against the assaults of the opposition.<sup>19</sup>

One could hardly improve on this statement except perhaps to suggest that the tendency of the orthodox to present the "end-product" as something finished and decided had only a coincidental relation to their belief in original sin; it was much more directly a consequence of their being forced by circumstances, by their American situation, into a defensive posture in respect to their traditions and beliefs. What Lewis says here about original sin might as aptly be said of the conservatives' behavior



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

in regard to language, education, literary style, or table manners. Given that America was a transplanted culture, it was also, necessarily, a culture of end products, of forms detached from the societies and environments that had given them birth and nourishment. Americans who chose to resist the attritional destruction of these “liberated” forms had, therefore, to operate at a unique and ultimately decisive disadvantage. Incapable of redeeming a culture of displaced end products by an infusion of understanding, adaptation or imagination, the conservatives simply retrenched and made the forms themselves, apart from any vital present context, an unalterable standard. But these forms, relayed time and again through the isolation of the American environment, decayed, and the individual identities that had been invested in them altered as well. The results were new, provincial variations of the originals, though not necessarily – as the conservatives invariably supposed – inferior, vulgar, or dysfunctional versions. They were, however, American. As Hamlin Garland puts it, “the ‘provincialism’ which the conservative deplors is not provincialism, but the beginning of an indigenous literature.”<sup>20</sup>

Having said all this, I am aware that I may have raised in the reader an expectation that – with apologies beforehand – I do not mean to meet in the ensuing chapters. It is important for all that follows that the connection between the presence of a frontier and the resultant provincialism of America’s early culture be stated at the outset, and more will be said on the subject presently; but in fact it forms no part of my intention in this work to present a rigorous historical tracing of the connection and its consequences. The subject, as I view it, is not one that will submit to relentless pursuit or an attempt at “definitive” treatment; I believe it is best handled, if it is to be handled at all, in a way that may serve to organize and make sense of what an intelligent student of American literature already knows. The figures I have chosen to consider illustrate, in their different historical settings, different aspects of American literary provincialism; and although the chapters are arranged chronologically, they cannot, I think, taken together, be said to constitute a history in the larger, most legitimate sense of that term. What I have tried to do instead is to make literary history serve the ends of literary criticism, since, finally, my own main interest is in the qualities of mind and imagination that distinguish the work of American writers, a matter that is never more than partly a question of history.

This disclaimer notwithstanding, the reader may still wonder about my choice of writers. Why, after all, Anne Bradstreet, Royall Tyler, Timothy Dwight, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller and not Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards, James Fenimore Cooper, and Walt Whitman? One answer is

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[More information](#)

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that a much longer book might well include these figures, though it may be that an advantage still attaches to having one's say with the fewest points of reference. In general, I have tried to draw attention to the important elegiac note supplied in American literature by the frontier consciousness of defeated conservatives; and if I have skewed the selection at all, it is in the direction of these unfashionable writers. In more particular terms, the colonial and early national writers included here (unlike Taylor and Edwards) have not received the sort of recognition they deserve or may yet receive if their situations are better understood. Anne Bradstreet, in particular, has not been thought of as the frontier writer she preeminently was. The chapters on Irving and Hawthorne form a contrasting pair that would make the introduction of Cooper seem artificial and to a certain extent superfluous, much as the chapters on Fuller and Emerson necessarily leave Whitman out of account. On these matters, however, readers will surely judge for themselves. If in the end one sees how the omitted writers might have been treated, I (preferring always the opening to the closing word) will be entirely satisfied that I have done my job.