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 American Literature, 1630-1860  
 Albert J. von Frank  
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## The sacred game

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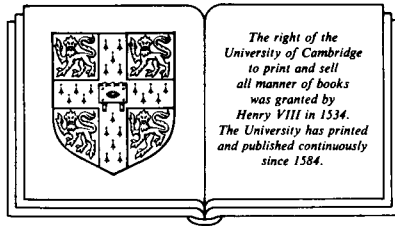
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# *The sacred game*

*Provincialism and frontier consciousness  
in American literature,  
1630–1860*

ALBERT J. VON FRANK



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Whilst the tradition is every day assailed, in their sorrow at the loss of the objects of the sentiment, men go back to the old books, reprint them, repair the old monuments, celebrate ancient anniversaries, praise that which is old though it was never good, and in new buildings copy the elder architecture and in modern poetry and fiction reproduce the antique or the middle age. . . .

This dilettantism is a certain sign that a revolution is on foot. This holding back betrays the fact that the general movement is forward. The retreat on the old literature is a sort of truce and sacred game, in which eminent persons of both parties take a part, as nations delight to mitigate the horrors of war by celebrating in weeds of peace, friends mixed with foes, a religious festival. The analysts take part in this movement. They see in the life of these splendid periods new argument to convict the degeneracy of the age, and even the ablest reformer has relenings of common sympathy which make him glad to find a sort of expiation for the shock he occasions in his admiration for the genius of the Past.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

The fault of our New England custom is that it is memorial.

– Henry David Thoreau

No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.

– Luke 5:39

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## *Preface*

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To open up a subject that was before thought unrewarding, the writer must at the outset convince the reader that a misunderstanding exists. For example, to announce that one's subject is provincialism in American literature is probably to raise an expectation that the discussion to follow will occupy itself only with a small and rejected corner of the national literary culture. So long as provincialism is understood mainly as the disabling liability of backwoods regionalists or self-taught writers of the second rank, such an expectation would indeed be warranted. But the argument of this book is at once broader in scope and, I hope, much less patronizing than such ordinary conceptions of the provincial would allow.

The argument, in brief, is that provincial conditions were not the special case in America before the Civil War but, in fact, quite the ordinary context for artistic expression; as a consequence, they seem largely to account for what appears characteristic or nationally distinctive in the literature. The argument is, further, that these conditions, historically associated with frontier patterns of settlement and cultural transmission, could at times be enriching challenges to American artists, who met them with differing ideals, differing temperaments, and differing strategies.

A number of colleagues at several institutions shared their wisdom with me, which makes this book that much better. I would especially like to thank J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks, true mentors and good friends, for aid and encouragement; indeed, as often happens with the best of teachers, their influence has been as much or more on the writer as on the written. Whether I profited sufficiently from John R. Lankford's love of good prose and responsible historiography is not for me to say, although I am grateful to him for models of both. Andrew Delbanco, Alan Heimert, David W. Hill, Joel Myerson, and Joel Porte read the

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PREFACE

manuscript in whole or in part and offered valuable suggestions. If errors or eccentricities remain, they are, of course, my responsibility.

Finally, I must acknowledge how important to me have been the cheerful encouragement and solid editorial helpfulness of my wife, Jane, who caused me at last to say right many things I had said wrong, and whose tolerance for the umpteenth draft of a passage has been a blessing beyond reward.