

FORUM

Sacvan Bercovitch  
Literary Historian and Theorist



GIUSEPPE NORI

## Introduction

Sacvan Bercovitch, who turned 75 in 2008, retired from the academy at the end of 2001. Harvard celebrated him with a day in his honor, on May 14, 2002, at the elegantly renovated Barker Center, headquarters of the Department of English and American Literature and Language. Many friends, colleagues, and former students convened in Cambridge for the event. An “unforgettable day” (“Retirement” 145), as Saki himself said in a moving thank-you speech at the end of the panels that closed the afternoon session of the conference (*The Next Turn in American Literary and Cultural Studies*, organized by Werner Sollors and sponsored by The History of American Civilization Program, the English Department, and the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, Harvard University). Christopher Looby mentioned the conference in his “Tribute to Sacvan Bercovitch, MLA Honored Scholar of Early American Literature,” while I devoted a brief narrative to that “Red-Letter Day” in the *Annali* of the School of Education of the University of Macerata, trying to recapture the feelings and the mental energies of such an intensely personal and intellectual venue.

While critical assessments on the scholarly achievement of Sacvan Bercovitch and tributes to him (critical, institutional, and personal) keep flowing in journal essays and books, newspapers and websites from year to year, awards and recognitions have also piled up after his retirement – “MLA Honored Scholar of Early American Literature” (2002), “Hubbell Award for Lifetime Achievement in American Literary Studies” (2004), “Bode-Pearson Prize for Lifetime Achievement in American Studies” (2007). All were supported by dense, articulated letters of recommendation, and all were crowned by memorable citations and acceptance speeches.

The Editorial Board of *RSA Journal*, the official journal of our Italian Association of North American Studies, where Saki published an interview when he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Rome in the spring of 1993 (“Cross-Cultural Adventures”), proposed, for this first issue in its new format, to devote a critical Forum to the eminent Americanist as “Literary

Historian and Theorist.” This Forum was conceived as a kind of free and also personal “conversation” about Bercovitch’s “Method and Approach”; I asked potential contributors to focus on any aspect of Saki’s methodology or theoretical views in relation to any of his work: from his influential studies on early American Literature of the 1970s to the more controversial but no less influential ones on classic American Literature of the 1980s and 1990s; from the monumental *Cambridge History*, spanning two centuries at the turn of the millennium, to his work in progress on ethnicity and “Jewishness.” Even for such a relatively small venture as this one, responses were – as is often the case when the figure of Sacvan Bercovitch is involved – enthusiastic and generous, while encouragement came also from all those colleagues and scholars who, for several reasons, could not commit to a short essay by the appointed deadline. The various contributions gathered here are not only and expectedly appreciative but also, in a truly Bercovitchian fashion, critical and dialectical, and, in spite of the Forum’s restricted focus, predictably reach beyond literary history and theory. They touch upon a number of religious and social/sociological concepts, political categories and ideological issues; move from a variety of intellectual and academic associations to scholarly influence, classroom pedagogy, and personal memories; call up broad, cultural comparisons with a multiplicity of figures that, from Protestant New England to multicultural America, range – as a token of the extraordinary sweep of Bercovitch’s vision – from the first Governor of Massachusetts or the founder of Rhode Island to the new President of the United States.

It is a pleasure – and highly appropriate, I believe – to open this Forum with the welcome talk that Werner Sollors delivered at Harvard as part of the “Opening Remarks” of *The Next Turn in American Literary and Cultural Studies*. If that conference may be said to have officially inaugurated the “critical celebrations,” so to speak, of Sacvan Bercovitch and his work after his retirement, then this Forum – within that “community of love and work” (146) that Saki himself evoked at the end of that “unforgettable day” – may claim to be, in its own way, to borrow Emerson’s terms (13), “part or particle” of its flowing “currents.”

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WERNER SOLLORS

## The Next Turn in American Literary and Cultural Studies\*

“Isn’t Saki too young to retire?” “I would very much like to help honor Saki, and if there’s any way in which I can help, please let me know.” “Absolutely! Yes, I’d very much love to come.” “I really appreciate your thinking of me for this event. Yes, I would be very happy to come to the event in May. If there’s anything I can do to help out, please let me know. And thanks, too, for planning the event in the first place.” “Absolutely yes! I look forward to the event with pleasure.” “What a great idea. I will definitely come.” “I would be honored to be at such a conference and would make every effort to be there regardless of funding.” And “If you find you need someone to help with any of the conference details, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

These were the kinds of e-mail messages you sent in response to my tentative and preliminary question whether I should go ahead with the planning of a conference for Sacvan Bercovitch and whether you might be able to be here.

Your responses spoke a very clear language, and the problem soon became to keep this event from becoming a publicly-announced affair, since this room holds only a hundred participants, and we also wanted to keep a certain level of intimacy.

It gives me particular pleasure to open this conference, because Saki has been my very close friend for twenty-seven years, from the time he took me under his wings when I was “visiting assistant professor on leave” at Columbia University in the mid-1970s.

I had first read a Bercovitch essay in Berlin in a seminar on medieval romances. His “romance and anti-romance” analysis of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” impressed me for the ways in which it differed from all the other secondary pieces assigned, mostly essays which pondered whether verbal similarities spoke for or against the thesis that the “Pearl” poet was also the author of “Sir Gawain.” I was surprised later to read in a book by one of

\* Harvard University, Barker Center, Thompson Room, May 14, 2002.

Saki's students that Saki described this essay as the result of his wish to mimic what he thought *PMLA* articles were like at that time: you take the most perverse proposition (Sir Gawain is *not* a romance), and you substantiate it with three examples from the text (Klingenstein 378).

But soon thereafter, Ursula Brumm told me about the field of American literature, "Da gibt es jetzt Bercovitch," and even before I arrived at Columbia, I had stumbled across his 93-page annotated bibliography of "Typology and American Literature" which includes the statement in the introduction: "After some debate, I decided to restrict myself by and large to the typology of the two Testaments: e.g., to exclude many predominantly millenarian works, and, except in a few outstanding cases, to omit entirely the figural rendering of pagan myths" (*Typology* 249). This high level of authority in his works that also forced me to look up such words as "soteriology," to brush up my basic Latin, and to check the "Nehemiah" story in the Bible, did not prepare me for the first meeting with Saki when he surprised me with questions such as whether I thought Clark Gable or Cary Grant was more attractive and with a most detailed analysis of the movie *The Stepford Wives*.

Here, I said to myself, is a scholar who combines extraordinary learning with a tremendous openness to the world, be it popular culture or the built environment of the Upper West Side or of the Boston suburbs, and who simply loves conversation, dialogue, jokes, weird postcards, country music, cartoons, and even academic gossip. At the same time I cherish the radicalism of his views, and admire his sharp, courageous takes on the affirmative character of American culture. "If Ahab is a sinister example of the rugged pioneer free-enterpriser, that may be, the novel suggests, because free enterprise is itself something sinister" (*Jeremiad* 192).

When Saki ran for President of the American Studies Association, his statement focused on jobs as well as on "the relation between academic and political concerns; and the need to regain radical initiatives in teaching and scholarship by reaffirming (with due regard for intellectual rigor) the search for integrative methods and alternative perspectives" ("From the President" 1-2). While this spoke directly, as so much of his work did, to the post-1960s sensibilities, Saki also stressed critically how dissent may inadvertently support and even strengthen consensus, for, "in this country, the *unmediated* relation between social structure and social ideal has made the very exposure of social

flaws part of a ritual of socialization – a sort of liminal interior dialogue that in effect reinforces the mainstream culture” (*Jeremiad* 204–05).

In this spirit, he performs literary exegeses of the whole corpus of the American tradition, from the jeremiad to Norman Mailer, and with very substantial work on Cotton Mather and Melville, Hawthorne and Emerson, but in order to present his close and nuanced readings as a form of radical cultural critique, Saki finds it convenient to use real or imaginary reference points outside the culture, outside its myth and ideology: he stylizes his own intellectual trajectory as that of a Canadian immigrant scholar’s “journey into the American self” or as the epiphany of Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog,” the recognition that interpretation can be mystification. From such a perspective he finds that American Studies in the United States, “as it had developed from the Forties through the Cold War decades,” seems “a method designed *not* to explore its subject.” (And abroad, “it took the form of an academic Marshall Plan”) (*Rites* 1, 10, 375).

His ironically-taken vantage point permits him to launch his challenges in such a way that his whimsy, his double-edged humor, shines through even the most devastating critiques. The issue, he writes, “was not co-optation or dissent. It was varieties of co-optation, varieties of dissent, and above all, varieties of co-optation/dissent.” And he asks why new Americanists were “so intent on demonstrating the subversiveness of authors who for the most part had either openly endorsed the American Way, or else had lamented American corruption as the failure of New Eden.” He makes us wonder, whether we have all simply been engaged in a game of chess the rules of which can change while the game still goes on? He illustrates his point with a Thurber cartoon in which a woman who smiles like the Mona Lisa is asked by a perplexed man, “What do you want to be enigmatic *for*, Monica?” (*Rites* 20, 23).

Saki’s questions go to the core of our enterprise, and it is not surprising that, as a teacher, as a *maître penseur*, he has not only inspired thousands of undergraduates at Brandeis, University of California/San Diego, Columbia, and Harvard to rethink the “myth of America,” but has also provoked more than sixty graduate students to write dissertations and to become active in the world of scholarship. Today’s panels provide a glimpse of the range of his former graduate students and of their extraordinary accomplishments, and I am looking forward to three exciting panels to which I hereby welcome you.

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JONATHAN ARAC

## Fragments of Bercovitch's America

Writing in the first week after the Inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States, I reflect on the power of cultural and theoretical insight that generated Saki's formulation: what "America" means to the United States is that "the true conservatives [are] on the left," offering instead of "radical alternatives" "an indigenous tradition of reform" (*Rites* 19). This moment of hope and healing feels very different from what it felt like nearly forty years ago, during the Vietnam War, when the great American patriotic writer Ralph Ellison accepted an invitation to Nixon's White House. Yet the fundamental pattern is the same. What good fortune that American scholars have the perspective offered by an immigrant, upwardly mobile super-smart aleck from Montreal's Yiddish left.

I'm completing a volume of my essays, to appear in Donald Pease's "New Americanist" series and titled *Against Americanistics*. What do I mean, "Americanistics"? It has cognates in many European languages but does not actually exist in English, so I can invent a meaning: the American study of America for Americans. This is my gloss on Saki's astonishing phrase that condenses his work on *Puritan Origins of the American Self*, the "auto-American" (170, 179). Saki, from what he calls his Sancho Panza's view of America, revels in the intricacies by which this pattern plays out. As an American from birth, I have had a harder time handling the complications of affect. In elucidating this pattern, Saki's work offers the possibility of an American Studies that understands the United States within a larger world. Americans need our friends from elsewhere, to follow out Saki's speculation: "what would happen ... if 'America' were severed once and for all from the United States?" (*Rites* 65).

Beyond and before the special theoretical or methodological contributions that Saki has made, in reading his classic work the impression arises first from an extremely rare combination unmatched among Americanists: erudition across an extraordinary range of materials, combined with an intellectually scintillating prose. Ideas flash and crackle that would seem mere specula-



tion were they not warranted by the density of citation that plumps the footnotes. The literary scholar reaches out and pulls in history and anthropology and specialized religious works, the Americanist aptly quotes an astonishing array of British and European writers.

When I began Harvard College in 1963, the great experience of my first semester was reading *Moby-Dick*. Yet as I pursued my studies, I had no ambition to become an Americanist, because, in a word I didn't yet know, the institutional form of American study in that time and place seemed too exceptionalist. The mythology of America could not, to me, account for what was happening either in Vietnam or in the Civil Rights movement. I encountered Saki's work in the middle 1970s, when I was a beginning faculty member involved with British Romanticism and the Victorian and European novel. I started to become an Americanist when I took seriously the call with which he ended *Puritan Origins*: "the importance of ideology (in the Marxist sense) in the shaping of the United States" (186). I responded to the call by my essay on "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*," and I was thrilled when this essay was recruited for the co-edited volume *Ideology and Classic American Literature*.

Meanwhile, Saki himself had moved along in his thinking, to the view of ideology as dissensus by which he conceived the vision of the *Cambridge History of American Literature*. Within this massive undertaking, to which Saki gave much of twenty years, I wrote a book-length study that I doubt would otherwise have found a publisher at that stage of American literary study. By elaborating the interplay between the genre forms of "national narrative" and "literary narrative" in the 1850s, I tried to reframe the debates over cooptation and opposition provoked by *The American Jeremiad*.

My later work, in relation to *Huckleberry Finn*, criticized many scholars (whose substantive political views I often share) for what I called their "nationalization of literary narrative" (133). In reviewing Saki's work recently, I find in "The Music of America" a cognate point, but made much more memorably. He criticizes "oppositional" critics for "their overall tendency toward allegory." He does not mean the explicit use of allegory as a critical tool, as in Paul de Man or Fredric Jameson, but rather a form of reading that remakes the work in terms of a later politics. What Edward Said criticized as the "rhetoric of blame" (96) in postcolonial studies finds its mirror image in (what I call) hypercanonization, always finding ways to make the works we

love say what we wish. The problem with this “beatification of the subversive” comes from its “denial [of] historical evidence” and its “confusion . . . of literary analysis with social action” (*Rites* 17). Of course literary analysis is a social act, but we don’t change the twenty-first century by attributing our views to nineteenth-century writers.

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NANCY BENTLEY

## Disenchantment, Ideology, Aesthetics: The Work of Sacvan Bercovitch

Have humanities scholars become disenchanted with disenchantment? There is evidence that, at least within the North American academy, ideological critique may be losing the dominance it has enjoyed for the last two or three decades. Bruno Latour’s 2004 essay, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” has shot to the top of the list of most cited essays ever published in the journal *Critical Inquiry*. Eve Sedgwick, too, has suggested that a “hermeneutics of suspicion” may have exhausted itself, as “paranoid” styles of interpretation have crowded out other modes of analysis and acquired something close to the status of dogma. And Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988) is enjoying new bibliographic life in some quarters of North American literary and cultural studies. The reception of these and other works suggest a new wariness – or at least a certain weariness – with the project of exposing and demystifying the ideological forces at work in art and culture. Will the pendulum swing back to the “theological” criticism that preceded the turn to ideology, criticism in which expressive culture is prized for possessing not just a unique set of properties but a transcendent ontology? Will a thousand (Harold) Blooms flower? (Sedgwick; Felski).

Before we anticipate such a reversal, we would do well to have before us an informed understanding of ideological criticism at its most inspired. No scholar did more to introduce contemporary ideological analysis to American studies than Sacvan Bercovitch. The volume of essays he edited with Myra Jehlen in 1986, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, marked the ascent of

ideological criticism as the leading paradigm in the field, and Bercovitch's concluding essay is a sustained examination of the methodological issues attending that critical turn. The shift from myth criticism to analysis of ideology, Bercovitch showed, opens the study of culture to tracts of experience and operations of language that had been largely occluded – not just the beliefs inherent in cultural myths but a broader field of competing social interests, uneven material conditions, and enduring political contradictions. Not all of the scholarship that followed this lead has avoided reductive moves or preordained answers. Yet, far from being a program of cynical reason (to borrow Sloterdijk's term), Bercovitch's work from the first demonstrated an engaged and deeply engaging – some of us would even say enchanting – openness to the complexity of culture's power to both constrain and sustain lives.

Returning again to questions of method, a number of Bercovitch's recent essays have shown us even more clearly how and why his ideological criticism manages to produce an expansive rather than reductive understanding of the "claims of art." In "Games of Chess: A Model of Literary and Cultural Studies," for instance, Bercovitch focuses closely and with considerable brilliance on the factors that *distinguish* literature and art from other kinds of language games such as propaganda or religious thought. He does so, however, not to rescue art from contamination by ideology, still less to allow ideology to become the master key to explaining the meaning of art. Rather, he points to art's distinctiveness to help us grasp its worldly power *as* art – the power to keep us in touch, as it were, with the norms and beliefs we acquire as the heirs of communities and histories, without requiring us (as propaganda and religious tenets do) to pretend that those norms should – or, indeed, could – explain away all that exceeds them. By its very nature, Bercovitch argues, the work of art cannot help but return us "to gaps between experience and explanation," a route that can take us beyond or through existing answers to the work of pursuing questions. Thus Whitman's poetry "gains power *through* ideology," Bercovitch insists, "by reaching down to accumulated layers of cultural meaning," an itinerary that recalls us to both the comforts and the costs of social cohesion even as it hints at possibilities for unbinding or recombining them (15, 27, 34).

Art, in this view, neither transcends the ideological nor is trapped by it. Only by remaining alive to art's difference can we learn from its proximity to ordinary language and ideological forces, the site of "interconnections and

cross-influences” in which art moves and has its being. This is not cynical reason, then; but it *is* worldly reason, a secular practice that will never surpass the limits that condition (and thus enable) human life and thought, but a practice in which we can’t know in advance just what those limits are. Analysis that ignores art’s *proximity* to ideology, Bercovitch reminds us, risks becoming a theology of art that would make art itself ideological.

If ideology criticism is a project of disenchantment, it is not necessarily bound to a hermeneutics of paranoia or cynicism. Those of us lucky enough to have studied with Bercovitch learned this not just from his writings but also from his classroom. I can recall a moment from a session in a Melville seminar, for instance, when an uneven, meandering class discussion among the graduate students gave way to Bercovitch’s close analysis of a single passage from the novel *Typee*. By focusing on textual details as simple as the behavior of birds, he was able to unfold multiple dimensions of meaning through an interpretation that held us all in thrall. Both critically and artistically, the moment demonstrated a precept that was central to Sacvan Bercovitch’s view of works of literature: that while novels, like all artifacts of culture, are shaped from the ideological materials of their moment, the same resources of language that transmit ideology also carry the capacity to break free from pre-existing ideas and to open new thresholds of experience and understanding.

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EMILY BUDICK

## Saki and Me: The Making of an Americanist

For those of us who began the study of American literature in the 1960s, when the new criticism still held sway over critical practices and not very many people yet disputed the doctrine of American exceptionalism, the writings of Sacvan Bercovitch were radical and transformative. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978) had a familiar ring to them. I myself had studied the Puritans at university and had received a full introduction, not only to the Puritans themselves, but to Perry Miller’s reapropriation of them for the American tradition. Yet, Bercovitch’s Puritans

and Miller's were not quite the same. Nor was the tradition they seemed to found. By the late 1970s, when Bercovitch's two studies appeared, the canon as defined by Hawthorne and Melville (major figures for Miller, too) had just begun to be challenged as racist and patriarchal. Bercovitch's approach to the American tradition and its Puritan origins, to which he came as an outsider nationally, culturally, and, for that matter, religiously as well, held an exquisite line between preserving the canon and demonstrating how that conservation was precisely that: conservative, a way of perpetuating a set of norms and beliefs that were not without flaws and had been less challenged by the major writers of the tradition than reaffirmed by them, in brilliant, illuminating, and even (still) inspiring ways.

The American literary canon that had come into existence in the years surrounding the Second World War – the canon defined by Hawthorne and Melville, Emerson and Thoreau – had been forged by strong political ideologies. It had been meant to reflect the American difference from Europe, the ways and reasons that the United States of America had not, like Europe, fallen prey to totalitarianisms such as fascism and communism. Ironically, this American difference was understood to be the apolitical demeanor of nineteenth-century American writing, its universal, pluralist, democratic egalitarianism, much of which was reflected in the new critical reading strategies that had, since the 1930s, been applied to the interpretation of these texts. Yet, as was becoming clearer and clearer during the post-War period of African-American and feminist activism, the American literary canon reflected deep biases in American culture that needed to be redressed. Already in his early forays into the American Puritans, Bercovitch gave us a way of understanding the pragmatics of American religious and cultural idealism, its tug-of-war dynamics between values we all still shared as Americans (and Americanists) and biases we had come to reject. He mined the rich field of ideological power that the literary texts unleashed without losing sight of how that power was not only an aesthetic achievement but a political one as well. With Bercovitch's brand of American Studies, Americanists like myself didn't have to choose between an exceptionalism that exempted American writers from the follies of the human condition and a whole-scale condemnation of the literary culture as sexist and racist. Rather, we were led to see that the culture (as embodied in a text like Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, as Bercovitch brilliant-

ly interpreted it), reflected both tendencies in a single, continuous evolution of an American ideology.

The strands of Bercovitch's earlier undertakings in the rhetoric of the Puritans and the lasting implications of that rhetoric for what he was to call "the music of America" came together most powerfully in the volume to which the essay of that title serves as the introduction: *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1993). This volume has been for me among the most important influences on my own relationship to American literature, especially as the canon and its study have been transformed over the last decades by the New Americanism, cultural studies, neo-Marxism, African-American and feminist criticism, and deconstruction. Taking as a central text a non-American work – Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog" – and bringing into play his own origins outside the American self, as a Canadian immigrant of Jewish, Yiddishist descent, Bercovitch provides a model of what we might want to label, adapting one of his own remarkable phrases in that essay, *the hermeneutics of non-transcendence*. "Kafka's story," Bercovitch writes, "is a great parable of interpretation as mystification – facts marshalled endlessly to build up contexts whose effect, if not intent, is to conceal or explain away. It is also a great parable of the limitations of cultural critique – *limitations*, not just illusions, for in fact the story conveys a good deal about the dog's world, in spite of the narrator's inability to transcend it" (3; the phrase "hermeneutics of transcendence" appears on p. 4). Bercovitch's great contribution to literary studies in general and to American literary culture in particular is his grand commitment to the non-transcendent place of culture. This space of production and interpretation does not necessarily damn us to the repetition of all human evil and error. It also, however, does not transport us immediately past the dangers inherent in society and government. Rather, it delivers us into the all-too human condition, providing us with the tools we need in order to comprehend our culture. Bercovitch's coming into America from outside becomes a virtual paradigm of the necessity to hear the culture's music with an ear for both its familiar ordinariness and its extraordinary strangeness. All of us listen as both insiders and outsiders to notes both harmonious and discordant. International American Studies is one of the offspring of Bercovitch's labors. If the founding fathers of American literary criticism in the years surrounding World War II had intended to make the national liter-

ature, as had the Puritans the nation itself, a beacon on the hill, then Bercovitch, by leading the literature home to its internal contradictions and foibles, rekindled that light and enabled it to shine all the more brightly on foreign and domestic shores alike.

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EMORY ELLIOT

## Essential Bercovitch\*

*The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) continues to be an essential book for establishing the rhetoric of American identity that has remained the fundamental blueprint for the religious, social, political, economic, and cultural forms that have persisted since the early decades of the seventeenth century in what would become the United States. In my courses in American literature, I present Bercovitch's arguments about the way in which typology and rhetoric were employed by the New England clergy and magistrates to keep the communities focused upon their national mission. While students may be unaware of it, the binary Manichean logic derived from Calvinism reassures many Americans that they possess the truth and have God's favor. Not only sermons but political speeches, radio and television programs, and films also confirm daily to American audiences that the United States is first among nations. As a result, most immigrants to America soon adopt many of the values and forms of behavior that stem from the jeremiad rhetoric.

If *Puritan Origins* were the only book Bercovitch wrote, we would still owe a great deal to him, but he never stopped moving forward and developing new dimensions to his arguments. *The American Jeremiad* (1978) also remains

\* Emory Elliott died on March 31, 2009. He was 66. The Italian Association of North American Studies, in the words of Giorgio Mariani, joined "Americanists all over the world in mourning the loss [of such a] distinguished scholar and personal friend of many of its members" (<http://www.aisna.net/elliott.html>). His sudden death prevented him from giving a title to this piece, which he had promptly sent us to honor Sacvan Bercovitch's seventy-fifth birthday. The present title has been provided by the editors.

an essential book for understanding the United States. As Bercovitch once noted, virtually every U.S. Presidential Fourth of July address is a jeremiad. These books established a significant shift in the field with their focus upon the utopian spirit, American exceptionalism, and a continuity of thought and language stemming from the early New Englanders. Bercovitch then expanded his arguments to include U.S. ideology. In 1986, two important volumes edited by Bercovitch dramatically challenged the research and teaching of American literature and American Studies, *Reconstructing American Literary History* and, with Myra Jehlen, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. These volumes announced a turn in the field toward a form of highly critical analysis of the ways that literature, rhetoric, and critical theory were employed to reconstruct the social, political, and literary histories of the United States over the last three decades. Many of those who were being called the “New Americanists” were chosen by Bercovitch to contribute book-length volumes to the *Cambridge History of American Literature* and identified themselves with Culture Studies.

With a focus on many previously under-examined areas of U.S. history and culture, such as the dire effects of U.S. racism, imperialism, and capitalism, the research that flowed from such subject matter resulted in the cultural wars that raged during the 1990s and still persist today. The United States was proclaimed to be a free society in which criticism, dissent, debate, and protest were accepted and a society so malleable that free speech could generate changes of direction and policy. But Bercovitch argued that such openness was an illusion because the rhetoric of the jeremiad functions to dispel dissent and to co-opt dissenters. Critics and opponents are assured that current problems can be resolved by returning to and embracing the nation’s founding principles and ideals.

Bercovitch received considerable criticism in the 1990s from both sides of the culture wars divide, but from early on, he always asserted that the United States is neither better nor worse than other powerful modern nations. What has always amazed him, however, is the degree to which this nation is able to form a general consensus regarding so many things and the degree to which it remains confident in its notion of its own superiority and exceptionalism.

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NAN GOODMAN

## Border Lives: A Reading of Sacvan Bercovitch and Roger Williams

What is the meaning of America? This question has been at the center of Sacvan Bercovitch's work since its inception – since he stumbled on America, as it were, in a journey that took him from Canada, where he was born, to Israel, where he lived and worked as a young man, to California, where he went to graduate school. This journey gave Bercovitch a unique perspective that can, as he himself suggests, be associated less with that of an outsider (whose status inevitably gives way to that of an insider) than with that of a border-crosser (whose status is neither in nor out, but poised somewhere in the middle). As a border-crosser, in other words, Bercovitch has been neither completely detached from nor completely immersed in the American experience, but has rather been alive to an America that is less than ideal and yet capable of being idealized – an America, as he puts it, whose virtue lies not in its potential for greatness, but in the juxtaposition of its often flawed and messy reality with that potential. “My own America,” he writes, “if I may call it so, elicited a different sense of wonder. To put this in its proper prosaic terms, it elicited a critical method designed to illuminate the conflicts implicit in border-crossing, and to draw out their unresolved complementarities” (*Rites* 27).

With this statement, Bercovitch links his personal life to his intellectual life typologically and in doing so invites a further typological comparison that links his work to that of the great Puritan dissenter, Roger Williams, whose critical method and personal journey also revolved around border-crossings. Known in popular culture as a champion of religious tolerance and of peaceful relations with the Indians, Williams was equally if not more concerned with promoting a vision of America that, like Bercovitch's, revolved around the tensions inherent in what turned out to be inevitably porous borders. In fact, Williams's fifteen-years-long dispute with his one-time friend and life-long nemesis, John Cotton, was a dispute about whether the borders – between England and America, between one colony and another, between one version

of the Puritan church and another – could or should be crossed and what the consequences of border-crossing might be.

On Cotton's side of the dispute was an idealized vision of a Puritan community that would be home to like-minded individuals who, having once crossed from England to the New World, would remain in place and be border-crossers no more. These individuals would constitute a stable, homogenous community in perpetuity, with no traffic in or out. On Williams's side of the dispute, of course, was an idealized and homogenous vision of the church, but a wholly realistic and practical view of the colony as a place of shifting borders and of diverse inhabitants. As Williams repeatedly explained, the moment the Puritans set foot in the New World they were confronted with the religious and cultural other – dissenting Puritans, Indians, Jesuits, Quakers, and the like – both inside and outside their own borders. It was, after all, as Bercovitch reminds us, only because the myth of homogeneity was not a reality in the colony that the jeremiad, warning against the dangers of border-crossing, was born. People who found themselves in need of more land, more political or religious tolerance, or more money, crossed the border – territorial and ideological – encountered otherness and came to internalize it. Even John Cotton, who touted the virtues of permanent settlement and derided those he called "outlivers," considered moving from his home in the Bay Colony when opportunity in the form of a better job in the New Haven Colony knocked.

At the heart of the New England Williams and Bercovitch describe, then, is a place that could not reconcile its vision of borders with their reality. This New England was, as both men suggest, no more homogenous and no less contingent than was the England of old. Cotton's solution to this problem was to increase the colony's constraints, to bind people through the imposition of draconian laws, and to compel faith rather than to inspire it. For Williams, however, the solution was to establish a commonwealth that would retain its structural integrity and authority and yet remain porous enough to accept people with different beliefs from multiple and diverse backgrounds. Beginning with *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and moving through *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"* and beyond, Bercovitch has carried Williams's approach forward, placing borders and the "conflicts implicit" in crossing them at the forefront of his inquiry into America, drawing for our benefit an America that is at once a place of symbolic coherence without diversity and of

endless diversity without coherence, a place of the politics not of opposition but of reconciliation, a place very much like the Colony to which Hester returns at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. Transformed from outcast to model citizen, Hester, we recall, returns to the Colony from Europe and takes up the onerous scarlet letter once more in a gesture that Bercovitch reads as a commitment to and dependence on the adulterated world America has become. And as the writings of generations of Bercovitch's students attest, we have, thanks to this reading of *The Scarlet Letter* and of Bercovitch's vision in general, come, like Hester, to accept "the conditions of our dependency," both personal and intellectual, and to wake up to an America that is for all its impurities and contingencies more home than it ever was.

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MARY LOUISE KETE

## What's Funny About Sacvan Bercovitch?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Mark Twain's  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is funny.  
Sacvan Bercovitch, "Deadpan Huck"

It is not a truth universally acknowledged that Sacvan Bercovitch is funny. But it should be; and not just because, as he tells us himself in "Investigations of an Americanist," of the peculiar insularity of his upbringing and the continued and deliberate eccentricity of his relationship to American Studies (974). Sacvan Bercovitch is funny because he often makes me laugh – and cultural criticism doesn't often make me laugh. Only Sacvan Bercovitch, of the small set of truly consequential cultural critics to which he belongs, would compare the purport and methodology of his own "investigations" of American culture with the "Investigations of a Dog" to whom nothing, "it seems escapes observation, except the presence of humans" (975). One of the funniest things about Bercovitch, then, is his refusal to exempt himself from what he has described as an elaborate joke – if by joke we mean the pursuit of interpretation – which is just one way, as he has argued, we participate in the

larger joke of ideology. The really funny thing is that his laughter is not mean-spirited, but rather strangely and mischievously compassionate, perhaps because Bercovitch, the cultural critic, is as much the victim of his own “faith both in progress and in interpretation” as anyone else (“Deadpan” 106). In this sense, then, I am suggesting that Bercovitch shares much with the Huck Finn he presents in “Deadpan Huck, or, What’s Funny About Interpretation.” Bercovitch’s critical approach is based on an appreciation of, not despair for, the particular limits that our cultures place on our ability to comprehend our worlds and ourselves. His best criticism invites his readers to join him in the pleasure of this appreciation despite the fact that his analyses of the American condition have as their “snappers” or “nubs” (to use Mark Twain’s terms) some version of the point that “man’s fate is acculturation, a vicious predisposition, and the exit into darkness” (“Deadpan” 105).

Humor, it seems to me, is a key element of Bercovitch’s approach to cultural criticism. In fact, he says as much in his 2002 essay “Deadpan Huck; or, What’s Funny About Interpretation,” which began as a lecture he presented as the 1998 Buckham Scholar at the University of Vermont.\* For the humorous story is particularly suited to describing the “cultural transactions” – the interpretations – designed to lubricate the “joints of the social body” and to help us to transcend the “movements of history” (“Deadpan” 105). In “Deadpan Huck,” Bercovitch leans heavily on Mark Twain’s own generic analysis of the humorous story to try to explain what’s “Funny About Interpretation.” Bercovitch’s best criticism contains narrative elements that, not unlike the best of Twain’s humorous stories, “bubble gently along” in a grave voice in which he “does his best to conceal the fact that he

\* This lecture, given in 1998 at the University of Vermont for the Buckham Scholar Program, was titled “What’s Funny About Huck Finn?” Bercovitch’s work was the subject of two, semester-long seminars; one for faculty and one for graduate students. He then came for a week to present two formal lectures and to work with the graduate students. My contribution to this collection began with my memory of Saki’s great generosity to me personally in coming to the University of Vermont in this way, but also from remembering his response to one of my students who asked him, with great earnestness, to explain the secret of writing such dense and complicated prose. Saki looked up, grinned sheepishly and responded with equal earnestness, that it had always been his ambition to write as clearly as possible and that he wished he had succeeded better. The conversation that ensued about the difficulty of writing had a profound effect on each of those students as Saki welcomed them as fellow travelers in the strange land of cultural criticism.

even dimly suspects that there is anything funny” before concluding “with a nub, point, snapper or whatever you like to call it” (Twain, qtd. in “Deadpan” 90-91). Perhaps a good example comes from an early version of what was revised to become the Introduction to his book, the *Rites of Assent*. “Investigations of an Americanist” from the *Journal of American History* begins as a conventional scholarly argument, a corrective response to what Bercovitch saw as the several mis-understandings or mis-classifications of his work that were current in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But it becomes a species of the humorous story demonstrating Bercovitch’s contributions, not just to the field of critical cultural studies, but also to the tradition of humor as practiced by authors such as Franz Kafka and Mark Twain.

Bercovitch’s “Investigations” is written in the appropriately grave voice and style of literary and cultural criticism. The well-structured argument is supported by thick readings of three separate narratives: a short history of American studies, a personal memoir of his relationship with the field of American Studies, and Franz Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog.” The sardonically humorous “Investigations of a Dog” serves, for Bercovitch, as a way to understand the joints – the points of conflict, connection, flexibility and weakness – of the other two stories. It provides him with a “great parable of interpretation as mystification” and as a parable “of the limitations of cultural criticism” (976). In the course of his reading of Kafka’s story, however, the “grave voice” of academia is inflected by the “grave voice” of the deadpan narrator who is also telling the story of his own interactions with both the investigations of the other scholars of American culture – the Americanists – and with the compelling topic of American culture. Bercovitch gives no hint that he suspects there might be something funny, incongruous or even insulting about comparing the critical aims and methodologies of various strands of Americanist criticism to the futile, even silly, interpretive efforts of Kafka’s poor, lonely and metaphysical dog. Perhaps this is because Bercovitch expresses so much compassion for the dog. After all, Bercovitch reminds us, the dog drives himself to death in his inconclusive pursuit of the relationship between beauty and sustenance. But this analogy between the dog of Kafka’s fable and the various critics who have tried but, according to Bercovitch, failed to adequately comprehend the nature of his own contributions to American studies, is not the “nub” or “snapper” of Bercovitch’s story. That would be too easy, too mean and

predictable. These other critics are what Twain would call the diversion meant to draw “attention from the nub” of the humorous story (“Deadpan” 105-06). The real snapper, of course, is that Bercovitch recognizes that his own investigations of the “music of America” might have even stronger affinities with those of Kafka’s dog.

In Bercovitch’s account, Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog” illustrates that, though the “dog’s interpretations . . . mask the rules” of the music that the dog so desperately wants to comprehend, “they reveal the world he inhabits” (980). For Kafka, the funny thing is that interpretation prevents comprehension. For Bercovitch, the funny thing is that the limits of the dog’s interpretations reveal the world both negatively (in terms of “cultural otherness”) and ambiguously (in terms of the “set of cultural secrets”) (977). Kafka’s ridiculous dog might be mystified, self-aggrandizing and mystifying but he is also, to Bercovitch, a sympathetic character, and Kafka’s story is a positive “model of cross-cultural criticism” (976). “Investigations of a Dog” depicts the promises and limits of Kafka’s attempts to interpret dogdom as much as it depicts the promises and limitations of a dog’s interpretation of humans. Kafka’s story, or rather Bercovitch’s reading of Kafka’s story, becomes a model for Bercovitch’s aspirations for his own critical methodology; a methodology in which the terms are reciprocal, not dichotomous, and which depend upon the recognition, not the negation, of limits (976). The funny thing, the tricky thing, about Bercovitch’s critical approach is to keep that reciprocity of terms from collapsing into mutual exclusivity and to keep oneself from indulging in a utopian negation of limits or dream of transcendence. The trick, Bercovitch’s “Investigations” shows, is to appreciate that the “frustrating sense” of the boundaries of our interpretive abilities can actually nourish our ability to gain some “insight into our own and others’ actual non-transcending conditions” (976). This isn’t always easy or exactly pleasurable for, as Bercovitch admits, that “frustrating sense” can feel like bumping one’s “funny bone.” The funniest jokes, the most powerful interpretations, are the ones that are on us; and what’s funny about Sacvan Bercovitch is that he is not afraid to be funny.

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MICHAEL P. KRAMER

## Up From Assent: Sacvan Bercovitch and the Theory of Assimilation

Some years ago, in an undergraduate course on ethnic literature at the University of California, Davis, I taught Phillis Wheatley's well-known poem, "On Being Brought From Africa to America":

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a saviour, too.  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd and join th'angelic train. (19)

After I read the two elegantly spare quatrains to the class, a young black man raised his hand and insisted that Wheatley could not have written the poem. Not quite knowing where he was headed – after all, his comment eerily echoed the opinions of the good people of New England who doubted her authorship over two centuries ago – I assured him that she had indeed written it. He countered, "No way a black person wrote this poem." So I told him and the class what we know about Wheatley's life, about her education in the home of John and Susanna Wheatley, about her examination before the worthies of Boston, and so on. Still, he persisted. "No way a black person wrote this poem." This went on for a while, until finally he conceded: "I'm not saying she didn't hold the pen, but these are the words of a white person."

It might be overly dramatic to say with W.E.B. Du Bois that a veil hung between the student and me, but there were certainly substantive differences between our views of Wheatley. To him, a slave's suggesting that slavery was somehow providential was unthinkable, unconscionable – unless, of course, she was coerced or was puttin' on ol' massa. Similarly, he could not accept as sincere

her seemingly self-hating suggestion that a redeemed American/Christian state was preferable to a benighted African/Pagan state. So he concluded that the poem was not written by a black person, that it amounted to little more than ventriloquism. He refused to consider what seemed to me not only possible but probable: that Wheatley meant what she said, that she had assimilated the Euro-Christian world view of her masters, that she understood herself and valued herself in those terms, that she protested against racial prejudice in those terms, that the poem was her rite of assent, an instance of what I've taken to calling the art of assimilation.

It probably wasn't so clear to me then, but my student's point of view was rapidly becoming (probably already had become) the dominant, orthodox view in ethnic literary study, and mine was plainly the minority, heterodox view. The orthodox, oppositional point of view valorized difference and resistance, searching for them in all the nooks and crannies of American literary history, offering an alternative to the consensus view of the country's history. It theorized the social project of assimilation as cultural coercion, the aversion of difference. It saw the individual's attempt to assimilate as capitulation. The most compelling oppositional theories were often extrapolated from models developed from European or Third World experience. For Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, the paradigmatic case of the failures of assimilation was the tragedy of modern Germany, where the offer of emancipation and the eager acceptance of German Jews culminated in the Holocaust. Bauman theorizes assimilation as symptomatic of the disease of modernity, of the misguided and ultimately untenable efforts to impose uniformity on heterogeneity. The valorization of sameness in modern nation-states under the guise of emancipation and equality was "an invitation to individual members of ... stigmatized groups to desist loyalty to the groups of origin ... to challenge the right of those groups to set proper and binding standards of behaviour, to revolt against their power and renounce communal loyalty" (106). But while it uprooted the individual from past and community, modern society did not truly offer anything in return, leaving the individual in an unresolvable state of ambivalence. Assimilation could never be wholly achieved, as the desire for assimilation itself became a stigma, a mark of otherness – and, in the end, full entrance into the society was denied. The object of the assimilatory project – the immigrant, the colonial subject, the slave – was doomed to be, to use



Homi Bhabha's postcolonialist phrase, "almost the same but not quite" (86). This slippage marks assimilatory gestures and utterances (such as Wheatley's poem) as mimicry, betraying the coercion behind the project and the ambivalence of the object. Hence, my student's insistence that the words of a young black woman were not hers but those of a white man.

However compelling this approach to assimilation might be for other cultural situations – pre-Holocaust Germany, say, or colonial India – the oppositional view of assimilation did not seem to me sufficient to the dynamic complexity of American reality. For all its ideological sophistication and emotional force, the theoretical model assumed by critics such as Bauman and Bhabha seemed to me to oversimplify the multifaceted sociological phenomenon of American assimilation. For in America, even taking into account the history of racism and inequality that doubtless grieved and angered my student, assimilation *happens* – not only to German Protestants such as Philip Schaff who "came to the United States in 1844 to save emigrant Pennsylvania Germans from the dangers of pluralism [and] stayed to join the consensus" (Bercovitch, *Jeremiad* 168), not only to German Jews who came to America before and after Hitler, but also to Africans, Asians, Mexicans, and Native Americans. Not always in the same way or to the same degree, not necessarily in ways that satisfy us or keep us from pulling out our hair and shouting in rage, but assimilation happens.

Sacvan Bercovitch offered an approach to American culture that allowed for a more nuanced understanding of consensus, an approach that did not denigrate difference, or resistance, but was skeptical about how different difference really was, was curious about the way resistance resisted. In America, he suggested, consensus did not necessarily mean ideological uniformity or behavioral conformism but "symbolic cohesion," not uncritical allegiance but a shared rhetoric that could sustain a complex of competing values and even encourage dissent – as long as it was dissent in the name of America. Moreover, Bercovitch argued, for American dissenters, "the very terms of cultural restriction may become a source of creative release." Consider, say, "the Jewish anarchist Paul Goodman berating the country for abandoning its promise," or "the descendant of American slaves, Martin Luther King, Jr., denouncing injustice as a violation of the American Way" (*Rites* 355, 29). (Or, I might add, Phillis Wheatley's reproaching Americans for their failure to understand the

providential mission of the slave trade.) In these exemplary cases, deep dissatisfaction with America is creatively transformed into an affirmation of America, a rite of assent. Consent and dissent are made to correspond. (In this sense, the classic application of Bercovitch to ethnic literary theory is Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*.)

By shifting the focus to rhetoric and symbology, Bercovitch opened the way for a deeper appreciation of assimilation. While oppositional critics dismissed assimilation as surrender, I, following Bercovitch, took it very seriously, as achievement. While they saw it as absence, as the negation of ethnicity, I saw it as presence, as the emergence of ethnicity. While they saw it as a failure of the imagination, as the eruption of ambivalence, as a pathology in need of a cure, I saw it as imaginative success, as a cause for astonishment and wonder.

To say that assimilation *happens* consistently and pervasively in America is not to say that it is easy to explain. Indeed, for over a century, ever since the concept of assimilation was pressed into service to help conceptualize and evaluate the progress and prospects of the nation's growing minority population, the term has been riddled with confusion. Writing in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1901 – when immigration was at its height, African-American history was at its nadir, and the academic discourse was still in its swaddling clothes – Sarah E. Simons complained that “when the theme [of assimilation] is touched upon no clearly defined, stable idea seems to exist, even in the mind of the author” (791). In his benchmark 1961 study, *Assimilation in American Life*, Milton Gordon responded to the ambiguity and did much to untie the knotted complex of phenomena referred to by the term, and many studies have followed in his wake (for developments after Gordon, see Zunz, Gleason, Morawska, Kazal, Gerstle). Still, at the dawn of the present century, in her introduction to a new collection of essays on the subject, Tamar Jacoby nevertheless had to admit that “even on the core issue – on just how assimilation does and should work – there are as many views as there [were] essays” in her volume (5, 12). The term is so unsettled that one historian can confidently claim that you can't talk about Jewish American history *without* talking about assimilation, another can be equally certain that American Jews have not assimilated at all (Gartner 171; Lipstadt 211; see also Kramer).

Gordon attempted to dispel the ambiguity that adheres to discussions of assimilation by enumerating seven stages of the process, from mere acculturation to civic assimilation, from “almost the same but not quite” to seamless integration. He also enumerates three categories of assimilation theory – anglo-conformity, melting-pot, cultural pluralism – distinguished by the extent to which minority cultures contribute to American culture, or do not. Oppositional critics would no doubt dismiss the ambiguity and multivalence of assimilation as the symptoms of its underlying irresolvability. Following Bercovitch, however, I prefer to find virtue in ambiguity, to see it as a condition for the imaginative resolution of the conflicting forces at the heart of the assimilatory situation, the simultaneous desire to assimilate and not to assimilate. I see it as the matrix of the art of assimilation.

One of the many topoi of the art of assimilation is the paradoxical representation of Americanization as ethnic fulfillment. I will offer two very brief examples. My first is from Israel Zangwill’s drama, *The Melting-Pot* (1908). David Quixano’s enthusiastic claim to America is met with an ethnic slur by Quincy Davenport, his New English blueblood antagonist, and the Jewish protagonist responds:

Yes – Jew-immigrant! But a Jew who knows that your Pilgrim Fathers came straight out of his Old Testament, and that our Jew-immigrants are a greater factor in the glory of this great commonwealth than some of you sons of the soil. (86-87)

My second example is from Charles Eastman’s autobiography, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916). Caught between his father’s desire for him to Americanize and his grandmother’s revulsion from the white man’s culture, Eastman resolves his ambivalence this way:

Ah, grandmother! you had forgotten one of the first principles of your own teaching, namely: “When you see a new trail, or a footprint that you do not know, follow it to the point of knowing.” (28)

In each of these texts, assimilation is given *ethnic* justification: David’s renunciation of the Jewish past for the American future is here cast as an

acceptance of Jewish biblical norms, and Eastman's abandonment of the life of the Sioux for "civilization" is configured as *adherence* to tribal ways. Just as "the very terms of cultural restriction ... serve to incite the imagination, to unleash the energies of reform, to encourage diversity and accommodate change," so too difference may be creatively reconstituted as sameness, radical change reconfigured as tradition, a Jew and an Indian reimagined as Americans (Bercovitch, *Rites* 355; for more on Zangwill, see Kramer; for a different view of Eastman, see Peterson).

Knowing how way leads on to way, I doubt I will ever know what became of my oppositional student. But I wonder what he was thinking and how he felt when he viewed, as he no doubt did, the moving spectacle of the inauguration of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States. I wonder what he thought when the new president spoke these words: "The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness." Did Phillis Wheatley come to mind? Did he think these the words of some white man, or the most extraordinary example yet of rites of assent and the art of assimilation?

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CYRUS R. K. PATELL

## Sacvan Bercovitch and Cosmopolitan Conversation

When I was in graduate school, my advisor, Saki Bercovitch, used to say proudly that he counted among his students one from the oldest religion in the world (Zoroastrianism) and one from the newest (Mormonism). Full disclosure: my father is a Parsee, and I had a *navjote* ceremony when I was in the third grade, making me – officially – a Zoroastrian.

My family had trouble finding someone from the priest class to perform the *navjote* ceremony, however, because my mother was a Filipino and a

Christian – a Protestant, oddly enough, her mother having converted to a Pentecostal sect before my mother’s birth. My parents met at the International House at Columbia University, my father coming from Pakistan to study mathematical statistics, my mother from the Philippines to study literature and drama. We weren’t religious at home, though we did celebrate Christmas and made it a point to attend the Christmas Eve services at Riverside Church in New York, a few blocks up the street from where we lived. My mother sometimes liked to attend Easter services there as well. It was always assumed that I would become a Zoroastrian, as my mother explained it, so that I could keep my options open. I could convert to Christianity but not to Zoroastrianism later, because Zoroastrianism didn’t accept converts. But, when the time came during third grade for the ceremony to be performed, we couldn’t find a priest. We kept hearing excuses along the lines of, “I would do it, but my mother-in-law is very old-fashioned.” Finally, we managed to secure the services of a priest from Bombay who was traveling in the U.S. and spending some time in New York. Four years later, we had to go to London to have my sister’s ceremony done. It was an early lesson in the dynamics of culture, though it would take me years to recognize it: my parents’ marriage was an emblem of cosmopolitan cultural mixing, while the priests’ belief in the importance of cultural purity served as an emblem of all the forces that are arrayed against cosmopolitanism.

When I was growing up, strangers would ask me, “Where are you from?” and I’d say, “New York” or “the upper West Side.” They’d look vaguely disappointed and then say, “No, I meant what’s your background.” I wasn’t really being disingenuous, though I was well aware what the first question really meant. It’s just that I never particularly identified with either of my parents’ cultural traditions. We spoke English at home, and my parents had gradually lost their fluency in the mother tongues (Gujarati and Tagalog, respectively). What I identified with was being mixed and being able to slip from one cultural context to another. To my Parsee relatives, I looked Filipino; to my Filipino relatives, I looked “*bumbai*”; and to my classmates – well, on the rare occasions when someone wanted to launch a racial slur, the result was usually a lame attempt to insult me as if I were Puerto Rican.

Although it might seem predictable that in recent years I have chosen to work on what I call “emergent literatures” – literatures that express

marginalized cultural identities – and found myself increasingly interested in theories of cosmopolitanism, in retrospect there was nothing inevitable about it. In fact, I had planned to study Anglo-Irish modernism (having written a senior thesis on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). But in the fall of 1984, I met Saki Bercovitch, and he set me on a different intellectual path, one that began with a seminar on “ideological criticism” and continued with my work on the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, which he was editing.

The seminar implicitly critiqued the approach to literary historiography embodied in Robert Spiller's *Literary History of the United States*, originally published in 1948, that there is some Archimedean point that the literary historian can adopt in order to gain a view that is perfectly balanced, impartial, and objective. Reading drafts of the essays for the collection *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (which Bercovitch was editing with Myra Jehlen), we explored the relation between literature and ideology, taking as a point of departure Louis Althusser's description of ideology as “a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (109). We recognized the impossibility of the sort of historiographical objectivity that the Spiller history attempted to create. We began to see that what the contributors to Spiller's *History* would probably have called “common sense” or “received wisdom” was often an example of ideology at work.

I think, for example, of George Whicher's essay “Literature and Conflict,” with its condescension not only toward women and blacks, but also to any art that possesses a social purpose. Whicher concludes his section on Harriet Beecher Stowe with this anecdote:

Mrs. Thomas Bailey Aldrich records a delicious anecdote of Mrs. Stowe's early arrival at an afternoon party on a sweltering day, of her innocent partaking of a refreshing punch and feeling a subsequent drowsiness, and of the hostess' horror when she had to receive her guests in the small drawing room close to the alcove where on a sofa, in hoop skirt and lace mitts, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lay sleeping off her potatoes. (585)

“Obviously,” Whicher moralizes in the concluding paragraph of his essay, “Harriet Beecher Stowe was neither a great personality nor a great artist”

(586). (This is the kind of thing that doctoral students were still reading to prepare for their qualifying exams in 1984!)

For literary historians during the past twenty-five years, however, the methodological challenge involved in assessing the roles that categories like gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or class play in literary history requires a reconsideration of the nature of these categories and the ways in which their relationship to the literary was previously conceived. When I was an undergraduate, I was taught that such categories were largely extrinsic to the literary text. If you talked about them, you were “reading into” the text, as students often put it. In Bercovitch’s seminar, however, we explored the ways in which these categories are in fact intrinsic to literary creation and are thus a necessary part of any complete formal analysis of a text.

In fact, our ability to recognize the importance of categories like these shifted over the time that the *Cambridge History* was written. When the *Cambridge History* was in its planning stages in the early 1980s, a fair and progressive approach to contemporary American fiction meant foregrounding the importance of texts written by women, as Wendy Steiner did in her section of the seventh volume (which was devoted to prose writing after 1940), or African-American writers, as Morris Dickstein did in his contribution to that volume. As time passed, however, it became increasingly clear to me as the then-associate editor of the *History* that no account of American fiction after World War II could seem anything but hopelessly dated without an extended treatment of what I began to call “emergent American literatures.” (As associate editor, I was responsible for tracking our “coverage” of the field and tracking changes in the profession and in what people were interested in talking about at conferences like the MLA and ASA.)

I began to argue that some of the most vital writing in American fiction after the Second World War is being done by writers who are conscious of belonging to groups that have been constructed as minorities by American culture and who, as groups, have less cultural standing than the Jewish-American or the African-American. Indeed, in Dickstein’s account of the novel between 1940 and 1970, which takes a resolutely biographical approach to literary history, the big story was the interplay of these two traditions. Bellow, Baldwin, Ellison and Roth emerged as the heroes of his section of the *History*.

I suggested that these other minority traditions needed to be included and needed to be included in a comparative way that made clear the structural affinities among those bodies of literature. During my time as a post-doc at Berkeley, I had been reading Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd's introduction to the volume *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. "Cultures designated as minorities," they wrote there, "have certain shared experiences by virtue of their similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture" (1). In this statement, I heard echoes of Raymond Williams's model of culture as the interplay of dominant, emergent, and residual forms, with emergent culture serving as locus for the creation of "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship," a model that I had first encountered in that 1984 seminar with Bercovitch.

My arguments eventually prevailed, and we looked around for someone who could approach these literary traditions in a comparative fashion. Today, almost all aspirants for jobs in twentieth-century American literature feel that they need to be able to teach ethnic or minority literatures of some kind, preferably in some kind of comparative way. At the time, however, very few people were doing this kind of comparative work, and almost no one was investigating the structural affinities between literatures based on ethnicity and gay and lesbian literatures. And so the job fell to me.

In the course of my work on the subject, I have discovered that emergent writing demonstrates the power of what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls "cosmopolitan contamination." Cultures, in Appiah's account, never tend toward purity: they tend toward change, toward mixing and miscegenation, toward an "endless process of imitation and revision" ("Case" 52). To keep a culture "pure" requires the vigilant policing often associated with fundamentalist regimes or xenophobic political parties. Like Williams's account of the interaction of dominant, residual, and emergent cultures, Appiah's description of culture is all about "conversation across boundaries." Such conversations, Appiah writes, "can be delightful, or just vexing: what they mainly are, though, is inevitable" (*Cosmopolitanism* xxi).

One of the strengths of the *Cambridge History* is its embrace of what Bercovitch has called "dissensus": the volumes essentially put scholars with very different theoretical approaches in conversation with one another with no attempt to smooth over disagreements. That strength is emblematic of



Bercovitch's own teaching and scholarship, which continues to foster conversations across the boundaries of culture and academic discipline. Like that of so many Americanists of my generation and beyond, my work, with all of its twists and turns, has grown out of a conversation with his.

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ANITA PATTERSON

## Bercovitch and Pedagogy: The Virtues of Historicism

Saki's scholarship and massive editorial undertakings have been highly regarded, not least for their generative, shaping influence on the field of American Studies. To my mind, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978) were especially dazzling. Saki's pathbreaking critique of Perry Miller – his insistence that covenantal theology was actually rhetoric, a contingent set of values that would foster a nationalistic, hegemonic culture in the United States – shed new light on the quagmire of Puritan hermeneutics, bridging the historiographic, philosophical, and literary chasm between the New England Mind and the Age of Emerson. Like a Puritan Divine, Saki opened the canon and paved the way to fresh cultural self-understanding; tracking the presence of the jeremiad through two centuries, he lucidly explained the complex role of the American errand, not the frontier, as *the* major impetus driving our national development.

When I first started graduate school, way back in the mid-1980s, Saki had already published these two early studies of classic American literature, in addition to serving as President of the American Studies Association and on innumerable Executive Committees and Editorial Boards. Thus I knew, as we all did, that he was already a major player in the institutional landscape. More important, by the accounts of graduate students who had been enlisted to participate in his various projects, he was a superb professional mentor, a scholar who actually cared about the future of our profession, and who would work long and hard to support a rising generation of teachers and critics. So it wasn't difficult for me to decide that I wanted to study under his guidance.

Even so, arriving at the very first session of Saki's seminar on seventeenth-century Puritan literature, I was surprised and impressed. Saki's opening lecture, a densely contextualized formalist analysis of Winthrop's *A Modell of Christian Charity*, was, quite simply, the most brilliant performance I ever witnessed during my entire undergraduate and graduate careers at Harvard. Saki spoke of liberal consensus and continuity, from the Puritans to the Great Awakening, to Franklin, Lincoln, and Emerson – not, as so many others had, about the maintenance of a hierarchical political regime that was the essence of organized Christianity. I had, of course, read Winthrop many times before. I thought I understood his language and imagery. Still, I could never have anticipated how pervasive the effects of this rhetoric would be as discourse. As a result of Saki's provocative demystifications and transvaluation, from now on I would have to take "America" ideologically, as connoting an entrenched, pervasive, familiar social symbology.

Some scholars pretend to be teachers, but are not as good as their students say; others are, in fact, wonderful teachers but cannot shoulder the burdensome anxieties of top-notch research. All during the time I was researching and writing my dissertation, Saki was embarking on those two great books of the 1990s, *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"* (1991) and *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Constructions of America* (1993). Deftly clarifying linkages among aesthetics, politics, and cultural symbolism, he turned the text, as he puts it, "inside out," and the context "outside in," showing how art is reciprocally related to nourishing institutional norms. By that time, we had all been thoroughly convinced that American society was diverse, conflicted, chock full of subversive, dissenting, and revolutionary energies. But whether and how these messy anarchical forces could be steered toward integration and consensus was still an important, largely unexamined cultural question.

I should also mention that when I first decided to work with Saki, I had just taken a number of courses on Emerson, Freud, and Shakespeare with Stanley Cavell. After that heady philosophical experience, Saki's down-to-earth historicism was not just a refreshing change of pace – it was a downright intellectual necessity. Too many scholars at the time were jumping on the theory bandwagon, wallowing in ambiguity, and posing wrought, unanswerable questions that sounded like they had been translated from the French. Saki, by contrast, demanded a declarative thesis statement and coherent line of

argument. This pedagogy may have seemed a little stodgy at the time. But I honestly wouldn't have survived the so-called "rigors" of graduate school without it. In contrast to many, many other professors at Harvard, Saki grasped how very important it is for teachers to read and then return a draft with beautifully hand-written comments indicating how carefully he has read it. He knew that the only way students learn is through what we, as teachers, do, not just by the lip service we pay to our job as teachers. He taught me through his actions, in short, that universities may very well be the last bastion for meritocracy in America, especially in these dark times. My first book, *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest*, owed a great deal to Saki's deep historical knowledge and insight. It grew as much out of watching intense, volatile classroom debates when I was a Teaching Fellow for his popular "Myth of America" course, as from our intellectually formative conversations during office hours, and lively correspondence and friendship over the years. For these and other reasons, I cannot thank him enough.

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DONALD PEASE

## Echoes of Bercovitch in the Obama Inaugural

As I was listening to Barack Obama's Inaugural Address this past Tuesday, it occurred to me that its rhetoric might serve as a textbook example of what Sacvan Bercovitch famously called an American jeremiad. Obama urged his listeners to imagine themselves in a wintry campsite in the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, when the outcome of the American Revolution was very much in doubt, so that they might understand the lasting importance of the following epistle that George Washington, the nation's founding father, ordered be read to all the troops: "Let it be told to the future world ... that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive ... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]." This passage included the core ingredients of the American jeremiad. In it Obama urged his listeners to embrace the ethos of the American Revolution so that they might turn away from the

course of corporate greed and political corruption that brought America to one of its darkest hours. Obama then enjoined his listeners to rededicate themselves to the nation's founding principles so that they might renew what America had been and will be.

From the beginning of his scholarly career, Bercovitch has persuasively demonstrated how orations like Obama's were constructed out of a set of emulable rhetorical conventions that ratified the continuation of the already-constituted order of things. On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama did urge all Americans to rededicate themselves to the nation's constituting principles in a rhetoric that reaffirmed the political order constituted out of those principles. But what marked this address as anomalous to the American jeremiad was revealed in its having in fact effected a transformative change in the order of things. In the remarks that follow I'll attempt to explain why Obama's address forged an exception to the ruling norms of the American jeremiad by briefly reflecting on the genealogy and provenance of Bercovitch's brilliant interpretation of American literary and political culture.

In his first book, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Bercovitch explained how the Puritans transported the seat of empire from the old world to the new; how their 18th-century heirs strategically changed the meaning of newness from a sign of the colonial status of dependency to the assertion at first of political uniqueness and later of moral superiority; and how, in the name of this complex sense of the new, the nation's founders imagined that the virgin land had itself authorized an imperial summons to conquest and expansion. Bercovitch's benchmark work, *The American Jeremiad*, convincingly demonstrated how the very terms through which American political leaders expressed their dissent indirectly ratified the society's most cherished ideals. In explicating the characteristic literary strategy of Nathaniel Hawthorne as involving the intrication of demands for radical social change within structures of political continuity, Bercovitch's *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"* provided a concrete example of this deeply entrenched cultural dynamic. Unlike his precursors, Bercovitch interpreted Hawthorne's art of moral ambiguation as complicitous with a more pervasive cultural ritual that ratified embedded structures of political assent.

With the publication of *The Rites of Assent*, Bercovitch extended the reach of this analytic framework to American Studies scholarship. Upon remarking

the ways in which the analytic tools of American studies consisted of the same structures – patterns of thought, myth and language – that Americanist scholars had set out to investigate, Bercovitch correlated Americanists’ “rituals” of dissent with more encompassing forces of social integration in American society. With this expansion of the dominion of his paradigm, Bercovitch rejected in advance any possible grounds for the conversion of dissent (whether expressed implicitly by literary works or explicitly by political groups) into the bases for actual social change. American ideology refutes and absorbs subversive cultural energies, Bercovitch cogently observed, “harnessing discontent to the social enterprise” by drawing out protest and turning it into a rite of ideological assent (366).

I criticized Bercovitch’s inability to explain the historically verifiable instances of social change that took place during the American Renaissance in *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context*. In their debates over the highly-charged issues of expansionism, the national bank, slavery, and secession, American politicians and writers deployed the rhetoric of the American jeremiad to support utterly incompatible causes. When representatives of each of these factions used the American jeremiad to give hortatory expression to their uncompromising views on these matters, they deprived the jeremiad of its power to reinstitute an encompassing rite of assent.

But my critique did not detract from the profound insight underpinning Bercovitch’s project. Like John Rawls, Bercovitch recognized that as a liberal political society, the United States promoted civic harmony through the exchange of conflicting opinions among individuals who presupposed a shared and overlapping consensus about the nature of political liberalism. Unlike Bercovitch, however, Rawls invoked this insight to introduce an exception to liberal orthodoxies. According to Rawls, political liberalism could not acknowledge the absolute truth value of any one political position, but only the relative values of positions to which it was reasonable either to assent or to dissent.

It was Rawls’s view that political liberalism could not admit a position that was founded upon an absolute truth claim without violating the assumptions of the liberal political sphere as such. When he arrived at this formulation, Rawls was also conducting a tacit dialogue with Carl Schmitt. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt had maintained that, in fostering a

notion of politics as the noncoercive exchange of more or less equivalent political positions, political liberalism had to remain blind to the defining trait of the political sphere. Schmitt defined that foundational trait as the irreconcilable antagonism between political friends and political enemies. Political liberalism could not permit an irreconcilable opposition between friend and enemy to appear within the political sphere without losing its essential attribute, the recognition of the formal equivalence of all political positions. If the liberal state required the homogeneity of the political sphere for its stability, it could only achieve that stability by prohibiting what Carl Schmitt meant by politics.

These observations led Schmitt to the conclusion that if the liberal state did not represent at least one political disposition as an enemy to the field of liberal politics as such, that field would remain vulnerable to becoming violently disrupted by the appearance within it of political discourses that were predicated on the friend-enemy distinction that it had foreclosed. During the cold war the national security state turned Schmitt's insight into the rationale for changing the rules of the entire political order. At its outset, the U.S. government replaced the liberal state with the national security state, by declaring the totalizing truth claims of marxian Communism an exception to the rules of the liberal political order as such.

In turning Communism into an exception to the rule of political inclusiveness, the cold war state also shifted the terrain of political conflict from the internal domestic affairs of the nation-state to the international arena, where the conflict over fundamental political values was understood to be the matter of a conflict between utterly different imperial state formations. The national security state thereby enabled U.S. political society to remain substantively homogeneous and yet open to a range of political positions and heterogeneous populations through this construction of an exception to its rules of democratic inclusiveness.

Bercovitch's paradigm accurately described the obsessive cultural rituals through which cold war ideology celebrated the proliferation of political dissent as an example of what rendered the United States the leader of the free world. But like the cold war ideology it reflected, Bercovitch's paradigm presupposed that absolutist views and foundational truth claims would always be excluded from liberal political society. Bercovitch's account of American

jeremiad lost some of its explanatory reach in the wake of the cold war when evangelical Christians, market fundamentalists, pro-life activists and paramilitary groups declared their irreconcilable opposition to their political enemies. The absolutist claims and fundamentalist values that these groups introduced into the liberal political sphere violated what Rawls and Bercovitch described as its foundational assumptions.

President George W. Bush abrogated the assumptions formative of the liberal political sphere in their entirety in 2001 when he declared a State of Exception to the constitutional order so as to exercise the extra-legal powers necessary to conduct a global war on terror. While the war supplied the occasion for the state to enact extra-constitutional, illegal violence, it also rendered the sites at which the state exercised this violence vulnerable to being declared unconstitutional.

The Bush State of Exception imposed severe limitations on the people's constitutional rights. It was at the site of those imposed limitations that Barack Obama inaugurated a presidential campaign that was indistinguishable from a constitutional movement. His campaign turned on the American people's right not merely to question or dissent from the State of Exception but to displace it altogether with a reaffirmation of the nation's constituting principles. That's why his reassertion of the constitutional principles of liberty and equality were transformative rather than reactionary. When Barack Obama, who represented members of the U.S. polity who had been denied entitlement to them, rededicated the entire nation to its constituting principles, "We the People" had not performed a rite of assent but a successful overthrow of an unconstitutional order.

I recommend reading the address through the lens of Bercovitch's theory of American jeremiad to recognize what was truly transformative about this moment.

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