

SACVAN BERCOVITCH

Cross-Cultural Adventures.
An Interview with Giuseppe Nori

What I would like to do in this interview is to retrace your cultural roots, from childhood to graduate school and then turn to your work as an academic in the United States. Let me tell you right away that I will capitalize on the few facts I know about your life, at least as I happened to gather them through my graduate years at Harvard as one of your students. I first met you almost ten years ago, in the Fall of 1983. It was a drizzly November afternoon when Agostino Lombardo, then a Visiting Professor at Harvard, showed me the way through the Yard over to Warren House where we were supposed to meet. It was a dreamy day for me, and there I was, talking with you most of the afternoon about Melville, Pierre, and other common chimaeras. When I moved to Harvard late next Summer and visited you at your place in Mather House, you showed me and my wife-to-be an oil painting by your father, now considered a major figure in twentieth-century Canadian art. The picture showed two kids (you with a gun and your sister with a flower; if I remember correctly), and you mentioned something about your childhood in a red-light district of Montreal. Over the years I was to pick up some more details about your life. Recently, I have read some passages to that effect in "The Music of America," the introductory piece to your latest collection of essays, The Rites of Assent. Still I can't quite get the whole picture. I think your life in Montreal is important for an understanding of the development of your personality and of your cultural vision, and I would like you to start with that.

Well, I grew up in a poor French district. It had once been inhabited by immigrant Jews but by then most of them had moved out

into a relatively middle-class area. We were really the last of a group of Jewish left-wing poor people inside a French Roman Catholic area. I spoke French and Yiddish before I spoke English. My mother had been a Communist but she left the party by the time I was born—because of the Trotsky Trials and so on—but she held on to her radical principles and there was an assortment of Jewish radicals who came to the house. I mention that because it indicates how marginal I felt growing up, I mean being Jewish, being atheist, having all of these strange notions about what the world should look like in a completely alien world. My parents separated soon after I was born and my mother was very sick (arthritis, colitis, rheumatism), and often in bed, and I was taken care of by my sisters (two much older sisters). Then at a certain point my mother was put into the Hospital of Hope—for people who were incurable (allegory of life)—and eventually I was sent to foster homes. One vignette of life with Mother: she wrote for the local Yiddish newspaper and every once in a while she would get some money, and then she'd have a party, with cake and tea, and her friends would gather to sing revolutionary songs, and in the morning there would be no food again.

Was this in the late thirties?

Yes. Late thirties. It was Depression time and my father couldn't earn a living with his painting, and anyway he wandered away from the family. I lived in foster homes, basically, say from about nine through high school.

Were you happy with your various foster parents?

No. Foster parents are a bad thing. They were not bad people but it was hard to be a foster child. If you have to give your kids away, give them to an orphanage, not to a foster home. Foster kids are very lonely, they are by themselves, and also the people who take foster kids are (in my experience) poor people who do it for money. They don't want you to eat much, and they watch everything. Also they treat their children better. And you know why, you can't complain about it. But it's hard. After high school I went to live in a kibbutz, partly because I had no prospects, partly because the kibbutz seemed to me a socialist utopia, and I thought that if I believed in it maybe I should try it.

How did you come to know about kibbutzes, socialist experiences in Israel and all the rest?

Well, part of my upbringing was Yiddishist, so I was aware of Israel and the kibbutz by that time had a kind of international appeal. It was radical, it was idealistic, it was also a kind of security that I always wanted, like a family, having a ready-made family. I was in a kibbutz for about four years. I married there, my son was born in a kibbutz.

What kind of work in particular; did you do in the kibbutz?

I milked cows most of the time, but I did every kind of work. When I first came I shoveled manure.

That reminds me of Hawthorne's experience at Brook Farm. But he left the utopianists much sooner than you did.

That's right. It was very hard to leave the kibbutz for me.

Do you feel you had an intellectual evolution during those years? Did you have a chance to read or talk about politics?

Not really. I read some. I had always read a bit here and there. I left because I decided that what I was doing was being a farmer, after all the rhetoric was over—ten hours a day, six or seven days a week. I could see my whole life spread out before me, a farmer on this little kibbutz with a hundred, two hundred people, and suddenly life felt very small. It's not that I didn't like it, but I wanted something else. I didn't know what at that point. That was one reason for leaving. There were other reasons as well.

Did you ever find yourself thinking of the past, during those years in Israel? I mean of your family, or of the foster homes you had left behind?

No, my parents were dead by that time. Both of them.

Did you feel homesick for Canada, or for the New World in general?

No. No.

Once you told me a story. You were working in a supermarket in Canada. Then you were given a test and did so well that they decided you should be an executive, so they put you through college. Was it at this time that you discovered the world of the mind? And how did you go from a Canadian supermarket to graduate school in the United States? I also remember a strange story you once told me about serious problems at the U.S./Canadian border at Windsor.

Oh yes, I had almost forgotten about that. Well, my wife was an American, and when we were thinking of coming back we didn't necessarily think of coming to Canada. She had a family in Los Angeles and we wanted to go there, but we couldn't because the kibbutz I was on was a left-wing kibbutz and was then blacklisted. I was actually prohibited from landing in the United States. So we went to Montreal. I didn't have any skills and I got a job in a supermarket and as you said they helped me go to school at night and then I encountered the world of academia.

How old were you at that time?

About 25. I went through college very quickly, got my B.A. three years later and a fellowship (a Woodrow Wilson) to graduate school. By that time the relations between Israel and the United States had changed and the kibbutz was no longer blacklisted. That's when we had this trouble at the border, because although the situation had changed with the State Department, apparently it had not changed with the Defense Department, and the Defense Department controls the border, so I was still blacklisted at the border even though I had a passport coming to the United States. That's why I was held up at Windsor. But I did get through.

How long did they keep you waiting at the gates of the Promised Land?

I was there about two weeks. I made the mistake at the beginning of insisting on my passport—a mistake because I was dealing with the Defense Department. The border guards finally let me in out of sheer pity, because

of how miserable I looked. Then I went to California, at the Claremont Graduate School, and got a Ph.D. three or four years later.

Before turning to your work, I would like to ask you one more question about your life. Earlier you mentioned that you were brought up as an atheist. More than once I have heard you say in conversation that you would like to believe, and that people are lucky who are able to believe, but that, nonetheless, you can't get hold of any definite belief. That reminds me of Hawthorne again, commenting on Melville's plight in November 1856 at Southport, England, when they were sitting and talking together amid more dismal sands than these ones here at San Felice, where we are sitting now in the sun. Hawthorne envisioned his friend's predicament as a struggle between belief and disbelief and yet praised him for his courage and honesty not to give up trying to do one thing or the other.

Yes, yes, I think that's right. That's one of the things that attracts me to Melville and it has also implications for more general attitudes like wanting to belong and not being able to. Sometimes I trace it back to that very marginal way I grew up with all that rhetoric, those big words floating everywhere, all the capital letters—Truth, Hope. Everything seems to me so transparently made up. I can see very quickly—or I think I can, the reasons why people have constructed this apparatus, how the symbols were made, why they were made, and then it's hard to stake your life in it.

Does this account for your skeptical cultural opposition or, as you like to call it, your "cognitive" critical stance?

Yes, I think so. I am now trying to find a way of doing criticism that's simultaneously a way of understanding and a way of appreciating. What I mean by understanding is something that takes things apart, sees how they function, how they work. And what I mean by appreciation is something that sees how rich, complex, wonderful they are. Generally, these two methods have been at odds with each other. Literature appreciation is a process based on mystification, on the veneration of art. I hate this kind of aestheticism. At the same time I think that the achievements of art are wonderful and that there is an endless amount to learn from them. I've tried to see culture through the works of art, and what I would like to do now is

to extend this into a general literary method. The times seem right to me because things are moving towards cultural studies. I think that the demystification of art has become a general enough premise in academia that the danger right now in cultural studies is that the aesthetic dimension will be lost. The canon debate signals that people are tired of saying which works are great and in how many ways. It's not that they don't know, but that it's boring. It seems more interesting to study, let's say, Native American works, Black writers, and so on, without getting bogged down in issues of evaluation. The issues that *do* arise have contributed in their own right to literary study—issues of race, gender, power, have made literature more important, humanistically richer, than it used to be when it was a very specialized subject for a few connoisseurs, a few gentlemen who could talk in intelligent and eloquent ways about the verbal icon. To insist that literature has political and cultural dimensions makes literature more significant and more complex. To deny those dimensions is to be reductive. I would like to bring to cultural studies a mode of both understanding and appreciating the processes of aesthetic mystification.

And now to the mystery of your teachers. Academics usually associate the beginning of their careers with important scholars (not necessarily supervisors or mentors or even colleagues) but nobody seems to know who these people were in your case. You studied at Claremont, but I have never heard you mention the name of any professor there.

There was never a teacher, in that sense, for me. That's bad luck or good luck, I don't know. I had good teachers, but never had a teacher that I wanted to be like, or even a famous teacher.

Did someone encourage your work at some point?

Yes, people encouraged me and I am grateful to them. Neil Compton and Sidney Lamb at Sir George Williams College, Edwin Fussell, Sears Jayne, and (indirectly) Roy Harvey Pearce when I was in graduate school—all of them, and others, were very encouraging to me, very good to me. But it so happened that I did my dissertation on my own, on the Puritans. Nobody at Claremont knew about the Puritans, and they just passed the dissertation. When I came to Columbia there was a possible mentor there,

Lionel Trilling. He was very nice to me. But I had the same attitude toward him that I had for everything else. I thought I could see why he had done what he had done. He believed in Matthew Arnold and the touchstones of English literature. Jane Austen was his passport for entry into a world that Jews weren't then allowed into. He socialized himself into that world. This is not in the least to minimize his extraordinary achievement. It's to explain why I couldn't become his disciple.

You seem to imply that Trilling didn't have anything to do with Jane Austen, really, in his Jewish soul. Why, did you have anything to do with the Puritans, whether in your mind or in your collective experience as an immigrant or a son of immigrants?

No! I think what happened was that I was overwhelmed by America, by "America" in quotations marks, the song of America.

You mean "The Music of America"?

Yes, whenever I turn on Italian TV there's American music! But I want to answer your question about the Puritans. I became interested in the phenomenon because it reminded me of other processes of mystification where people built up rhetoric and believed in it; and I went back to the Puritans to see the sources of it. I began by publishing on nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literature and then worked back toward the Puritans. By the time I began writing my dissertation my instinct was to find out about them, since so many immigrant peoples in the United States were claiming the Puritans as their forefathers. It mystified me. There was another thing. What I saw in the Puritans was something like people going to set up a kibbutz, a city on a hill, a venture in utopia.

Did you see your experience reflected in theirs? I mean your experience as a worker in a kibbutz mirrored in their venture in utopia, as you say.

Well, I thought I could understand something of what they wanted, something of their urgency, their hopes. I could connect to it. All this was not conscious on my part, then.

On the grounds of scholarly eminence and academic power, successful college teachers in the States often move from one institution to another. They are offered better conditions as teachers and, of course, higher salaries. Your European colleagues are treated differently, as you know, so they look at you with suspicion or jealousy perhaps, and they consider you to be players selling yourselves in the marketplace. Even though you didn't move that often in your career, you seem to endorse that system.

What do I make of the system? I think that there is a reason for it, now. I think one of the reasons is that institutional power has broken down in the United States, partly because of the market society. That is, at one point the attraction was Harvard and Yale, elitism. That's being subsumed by the cash nexus, which has more or less decentered academic authority. The result is a system based on reputation rather than institution. It's a new situation, and an interesting one. It is potentially good because it means that scholars are free from traditional constraints. If their reputation depends on their work, and if their power comes from reputation, it's a form of intellectual freedom. On the other hand it also encourages trendiness, a certain playing to the popular media. What is involved here may be a general shift in the whole academic format of literary studies, from an old genteel profession to a new kind of cultural situation with its own dangers and its own advantages. The dangers have to do, I think, with a selling out to the market. And the advantages, I said, are a certain kind of intellectual freedom. Part of the '68 revolt was the demand to politicize academia. Academics should come out of the ivory tower. And I think they did come, right into the marketplace. The situation now has the advantages and the disadvantages of free enterprise capitalism. It allows for a freedom to invent that could really be nourishing. It also ties you to a certain *system*, so that, for example, there's a kind of class-system developing in academia, people who are earning a lot of money and teaching very little. Universities buy professors of literature as an investor buys a certain product, for its marketplace value. I don't know what the outcome will be.

Do you feel comfortable with this system? Don't you think there is a touch of injustice in all this?

Oh yes, there is a lot of injustice. But there was enormous injustice in

the old system too. That doesn't excuse the injustice. It's just that I don't have a nostalgia for the old days of the genteel world, where most people were excluded from the realms of aesthetic study. At least now there is an attempt to incorporate and to make it a serious part of contemporary thinking. The cost of that achievement may be that literary studies have joined the system, as opposed to genteel establishment, which kept aloof from it, or at least *pretended* to disdain it.

People have appreciated your work on early American literature as well as your recent contributions on the American Renaissance internationally. Your book on Hawthorne, The Office of "The Scarlet Letter," received the 1992 MLA James Russel Lowell Prize, the major award for criticism in the United States. And we have had glimpses of the monumental New Cambridge Literary History that you are editing. But there is also a new Bercovitch, so to speak, emerging at Harvard. In a fairly recent article by Emily Budick published in PMLA (Jan. 1992) your work has been compared to that of Stanley Cavell, one of the most influential philosophers on the American scene. You also taught a course on Emerson with him at Harvard last term. And just a few days ago at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" you presented a paper on John Winthrop using Wittgenstein and Cavell to set up your argument. Can we talk of a new Bercovitch, coupling philosophy and cultural studies? Are you having a flirt with philosophy or is this part of a new critical, perhaps theoretical, project in its own terms?

One of the reasons that I became interested in philosophy is that I realized that philosophy has a completely different premise from cultural studies. Philosophy is essentially universalist. Its insights are gained by an erasure of history. Descartes' "I think therefore I am" erases all the particulars that make one condition different from others. And the opposite is true in cultural studies. In order to gain insight into a culture you have to forget about things that are universally true. So it seems to me that philosophy, if it can be worked in with cultural studies, could offer a kind of a distance from cultural studies that would allow for taking a position that's neither relativist nor essentialist. Let me put it this way. Statement 1: We are what we say we are, through the words we use, and these come from the world around us, not from heaven. You might say they come from books, but that's suspect, because (for example) people who think that they

suddenly find eternal truth in the Bible are reading the Bible because it's available, because culture has put certain values on it, and told them how to read it and what to find in it. What we are is how we define ourselves and how we define ourselves comes from culture. At the same time I also believe that what we are is always more than what we say we are, always more. The problem is that when we try to improve our lives what is more about us, more than the status quo, is still being defined by words which come from the culture, so that they point us in a certain direction. What I would like is to find a language which allows for a distance between what we are and what we say we are.

This interview took place on May 23, 1993, in San Felice Circeo, Italy.