

BODE-PEARSON PRIZE

“Rare, extravagant spirits,” says Emerson in his essay on History, “come to us at intervals, who disclose to us new facts in nature.” Tonight it gives me great pleasure, on behalf of my fellow committee members, Elaine May and James Miller, to award the Bode-Pearson prize to one such spirit, indeed, the presiding spirit of American Studies, Sacvan Bercovitch. Through his writings, intellectual projects, and service to the Association, Professor Bercovitch has made an unparalleled set of distinguished contributions over the last 30 years. Perhaps no single literary historian has exerted the profound influence over his field that Bercovitch has, for he has been the key figure in the ideological turn of American literary study and the galvanizing source of its interdisciplinary practice. If the American Studies community is infinitely more robust than it was the last time the Association met in Philadelphia in 1983 when tonight’s honoree was its president, it may well be the fruit of Sacvan Bercovitch’s labors. If this sounds extravagant, know that it merely does justice to the extravagant bounty of his learning, the extravagant scope of his inquiry, the extravagantly searching range of his intellect, the extravagant intensity of his example for three generations of students, and the extravagant vitality of his commitment.

Bercovitch began his career as an Americanist with his publication, in 1966, of an essay on Cotton Mather, but he had begun his informal study of America some years before. As a Canadian from Montreal’s rough-and-tumble Yiddish-speaking quarter, his fascination with US culture preceded his engagement with its literary traditions. While Bercovitch never lost that connection to his past, and indeed, translated several of the great Yiddish writers of the 20th century, his own American studies took him to the New School of Social Research, Reed College, Hightstown, New Jersey, where he trained to join a kibbutz in Israel, then on to Claremont College, where he took his graduate degrees, then to Brandeis, and UC-San Diego until he arrived at Columbia, where he was to stay for 13 years before taking his last academic post, at Harvard. Like Hawthorne’s Holgrave, he worked at various trades, scholarly and otherwise, all of which contributed to the swell of consciousness that resulted in two paradigm-changing scholarly works of his early career: *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1979).

In the early 1980s, Bercovitch developed the intellectual underpinnings of the next great phase of his career, when he edited and coedited two seminal books of the era, *Reconstructing American Literary History* and *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Let me remind you how influential those collections were when they appeared two decades ago. For the first, Bercovitch assembled an impressive line-up of scholars and literary historians whose work would resonate for years to come--like Sandra Gilbert, Walter Michaels, Werner Sollors, Wendy Steiner, Robert Stepto, and Eric Sundquist, scholars who made the case for a profession only slowly--all too slowly--awakening to the realization that the literary history of the US *needed* to be reconstructed; with Myra Jehlen, he showed that the urgency of that reconstruction was ideological and that classic American literature, the redoubt of liberal humanism, was nothing if not

political, in a series of essays by Jonathan Arac, Houston Baker, Gerald Graff, Don Pease, Carolyn Porter, Jane Tompkins, and Alan Trachtenberg, among other distinguished contributors. These collections, in no small part, helped to reinvent the study of American literature and, in so doing, changed the future of this Association.

Some of you will remember vividly what the Association's meetings were like as a direct consequence of Bercovitch's term, in San Diego, New York, and Miami, and can assure people who have only recently found a home here that the intellectual ferment of these years was dizzying, especially to the extent that it matched Sacvan Bercovitch's critical example: the cultural study of literature and literary study of culture **broke wide open** the intellectual boundaries of the Americanists' sense of the object of scholarly inquiry. That generation of scholars changed the way we do business, if only because they followed the ways his work so vigorously aroused the possibilities of interdisciplinary study, through what Bercovitch called the "reciprocities between symbolic and social systems." Moreover, his leadership also gave the Association a new critical urgency, by moving it away from the hidebound, dry academicism that had dominated it for the previous two decades and toward public engagement. At the time there were many who resisted and not a few who resented this new direction, yet the growth of the Association might suggest just how sorely needed and how keenly received was the charge that Sacvan Bercovitch had laid before us. The ASA's sense of itself has evolved in the last ten years, and perhaps the role of cultural study of literature and the literary study of culture is not as crucial as it once was, but these changes have only been possible because of the difference that Bercovitch--his colleagues, students, and followers--first wrought.

That charge was freshly shaped in his next great contribution to American literary studies, his supervision of the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*, brought to completion only in the year before last. This project made bold to rewrite, not as one book or two or even the 4 volumes that its predecessor had essayed 70 years prior, but as 8 volumes written by some thirty scholars. The task proved arduous, and perhaps its completion depended as much upon the contributors' loyalty to Bercovitch as it did their commitment to their assignment. The lesson rehearsed in page after page of the *History* is "dissensus," the vision of literary history that rejects easy coherence and instead accommodates the evidence of vivifying resistance out of which a fuller, truer history may be understood--the turning of the inside of literary texts out and the turning of contexts in. Bercovitch's founding idea prompted a complex way of imagining literary historiography, one that especially enlivened the understanding of students and younger scholars, so much so that the "History" that they created was largely understood to be something of a generational enterprise. Indeed, the influence of the *Cambridge History* can be calculated in way its separate parts have arrived with all the authority of established wisdom; its arguments crystallize the very terms of our practice over twenty years. In this sense, its 8 volumes are but the shell of a project that will outlast us all.

Bercovitch's own reading and research led him to Hawthorne and inevitably *The Scarlet Letter*, but I will pass over the great achievements of his scholarship, just as I also pass over the dutiful recitations of his many, many honors and awards, the editorial and advisory boards and executive committees on which he has served, the consultantships,

the positions of leadership he undertook in a surprising variety of places all too numerous to mention, in order to take a final few minutes to recall his presidency of this association. In so many ways, the current ASA is a wonderful prism of his multifaceted accomplishments. Members of longer standing than I will testify that Bercovitch “saved” the ASA, by which they mean that during his tenure he undertook a major effort to resuscitate and transform the organization. At the time, ASA was wholly dependent on the University of Pennsylvania and in debt a considerable amount of money to them. Penn even held the copyright to *AQ*. Bercovitch mobilized a number of influential ASA members, including past president Daniel Aaron and Leo Marx, to change the modus operandi. He also realized that, most of all, the culture of ASA had to change, and beginning with a panel of luminaries devoted to the organization’s future at Philadelphia 1983, he undertook to reshape it into the entity we know today. As part of a major re-evaluation, the Association took ownership of its journal, established new publishing arrangements, raised new funds, relocated to Washington, DC, shifted to annual meetings (although the planning for this began with Bercovitch, Michael Cowan eventually pushed it through). Plus, the ASA under Bercovitch began to internationalize, reinvigorating ties with the Canadian and European Associations, even as it moved forcefully to diversify, naming Martha Banta as program chair of the San Diego conference, which, in turn, featured the work of several future presidents--Mary Helen Washington, Stephen Sumida, Vicki Ruiz—all of whom became involved in organization for the first time.

In short, we might dedicate ourselves tonight to making ASA worthy of this immeasurably rich legacy. So please join with me and applaud, **extravagantly**, the career of Saki Bercovitch.

Gordon Hutner

Professor of American Literature, University of Illinois

Editor, *American Literary History*