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## Scholar and Exegete: A Tribute to Sacvan Bercovitch, MLA Honored Scholar of Early American Literature, 2002

Although Sacvan Bercovitch is best known for his powerful and influential studies of Puritan and classic American literature, and is most properly honored on that account by the Modern Language Association Division on American Literature to 1800, the extravagant scholarly reach of his work—and the unusually profound intellectual leverage he brought to bear in his practice of interpretation—can only begin to be measured if we take some account of the improbabilities and idiosyncrasies of his academic career. Bercovitch's first published article, in 1964, was "Dramatic Irony in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*"; his second and his third, in 1965, "Romance and Anti-Romance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" and "Three Perspectives on Reality in *Paradise Lost*." Only thereafter does his publication record begin to reflect his interest in the vagaries of early American culture, when he published in 1966 his essay "New England Epic: Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*." But throughout his long and distinguished career, amid the many justly admired and often reprinted essays and books on Puritans, Hawthorne, Emerson, Bancroft, Twain, Melville, Cooper, James, Faulkner, Franklin, Thoreau and others, there appeared occasional essays on Milton and Blake, Thomas Mann, Wordsworth, "Empedocles in the English Renaissance," "Literature and the Repetition Compulsion," Shakespeare, and Kyd; and a series of translations from Yiddish, beginning in 1966 and continuing to 1994, introducing writings by Itzik Manger, Yaacov Zipper, Sholom Aleichem, and Solomon Ary to readers of English. It seems right, in view of the extra-American breadth of these writers and topics, that in retrospectively characterizing the development and nature of his own fascination with the meaning of America, Bercovitch should look to Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog" for a governing motif.<sup>1</sup> Bercovitch is the opposite of a provincial

Americanist: the literary culture of the world—ancient to modern—is the rich background against which he sets the discovered singularities of his adoptive country.

But this is not to say that his approach is that of a mandarin humanist whose wide range of literary reference buttresses his confident overview of his subject. Bercovitch writes from deep within the puzzlement and amazement that America has elicited in him, the mixture of admiration and astonishment that is still connected, in him, to what he has called “the peculiar insularity of [his] upbringing” in the immigrant slums of Montreal. The “Yiddishist left-wing world” of his parents, characterized by “Romantic-Marxist utopianism”—an amalgam (as he has described it) of reverence for the spiritual treasure of high art and delusively cherished hope for world revolution—locates him very specifically in relation to the American topics of his scholarship and criticism.<sup>2</sup> From one angle, he might seem an utter outsider, with the utter outsider’s useful intellectual estrangement; but from another angle, he might seem uniquely positioned to understand sympathetically a different but comparably insular culture, the culture of belief in what Bercovitch characteristically has termed “the myth of America.” There is no question that Bercovitch has been the foremost interpreter of early American literature and culture of his generation, and probably of several generations; it is difficult to imagine the combination of incisive native intelligence, scholarly determination, personal identity, and searching curiosity that could produce another equally charismatic interpreter of America.

Bercovitch is the son of Alexander Bercovitch and Bryna Avrutik, Jews born in the Ukraine in the 1890s who grew up during a time of deep poverty, social upheaval, and periodic pogroms. Bryna idealistically joined the Red Army in 1917, and was wounded at the front in Poland in 1919. Her faith in a Communist future remained undimmed, according to her son, for the rest of her life. Alexander Bercovitch was an artist: he learned to paint from some monks in Kherson (his hometown) who rewarded his fascination with their endeavors by providing him with paint and some elementary instruction; his talent took him at 15 to Palestine to study in 1907, and later to St. Petersburg and Munich. World War I forced him to return to Russia, however, where he was immediately conscripted; soon he deserted, and hid out in the home of his future wife’s family. Circumstances

took them to Moscow, where their first daughter, Sara (later Sylvia), was born; then to Ashkhabad, Turkestan, where their second daughter, Ninel (Lenin spelled backwards), was born. In 1926 they emigrated to Montreal with their two daughters, helped by Bryna’s brothers, who had preceded her. In October 1933 their son Sacvan (his name an amalgamation of Sacco and Vanzetti) was born. Nine years later, Alexander Bercovitch left his wife and children permanently, after several previous separations, and while his older sisters were old enough to look after themselves, Sacvan bore the brunt of the family’s poverty and disarray, landing in foster homes at several points in his young life. His father died when he was about to finish high school; his mother’s severe rheumatoid arthritis led to her permanent hospitalization at about the same time (she died in 1956). With his mother cared for and his father dead, Sacvan felt free to leave Montreal.<sup>3</sup>

Bercovitch’s unlikely sojourn in higher education began in the early 1950s, when, not long after high school graduation, he enrolled first at the New School for Social Research, having followed his curiosity to New York; soon he received a scholarship to Reed College, and hitchhiked to Oregon where he spent a year of study. But instead of continuing in college, the value of which eluded him at the time, he decided to go to Israel and join a kibbutz; after a stint at the Hightstown, New Jersey, training farm of the Hashomer Hatzair (a left-wing Zionist youth organization with which he had been affiliated in high school) he was sent to Kibbutz Nachson, near the battle-torn Jordanian border, where he shoveled manure and milked cows. It was there that he met his first wife, Hannah Malmquist, known as Gila (who would later serve as editor in chief of the Library of America). In 1958 they left the kibbutz, returning to Montreal, where, while holding down a day job at Steinberg’s, a supermarket chain, he went to night school at Sir George Williams College, which was then the adult extension of the Montreal YMCA (later it was to become Concordia University). Bercovitch received his B.A. from Sir George Williams in 1961, and went on to Claremont Graduate School—chosen, he says, because it had the prettiest brochures, and also because Gila was from Los Angeles and was inclined to return to the area. After three years in residence at Claremont he accepted an instructorship at Columbia University, where he taught for two years (receiving his Ph.D. meanwhile from Claremont in 1965); in 1966 he was hired as an assistant professor at Brandeis University, where he again taught for two years; and in 1968 he moved as an associate professor to the

University of California, San Diego (again, he stayed two years). In 1970 he moved to Columbia University, where he remained until 1983 (meanwhile being appointed Old Dominion Professor in the Humanities in 1980): it was during this time that he published his first major books, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978). From 1983 until his recent retirement Bercovitch has been the Charles H. Carswell Professor of English and American Literature at Harvard University: during this period at Harvard he published *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"* (1991) and *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1993), a collection of his essays.

Interspersed with this series of regular academic appointments, Bercovitch has been a visiting faculty member at Princeton University, Dartmouth College, Tel-Aviv University, and the University of Rome; he has frequently been a teacher at the Bread Loaf School of English; he has held fellowships in residence at the National Humanities Center, the Center for Advanced Study in the Social and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, the American Antiquarian Society, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the Huntington Library; he has won fellowships and grants from the Ford Foundation, the John Carter Brown Library, the Newberry Library, the Guggenheim Foundation, the ACLS, and the NEH; he has been a distinguished lecturer and keynote speaker at countless universities, colleges, and conferences in Japan, the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, China, England, and Scotland; served on a wide array of professional advisory boards, editorial boards, fellowship panels and committees, and the like; served as president of the American Studies Association; and won the James Russell Lowell Prize of the Modern Language Association for the best scholarly book of the year (for *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"*). His friends know, however, that despite such an unparalleled record of honors and accomplishments, he is deeply disinclined to plume his feathers or to expect the deference that is, nevertheless, due him and his scholarly work.

It is, perhaps, useful to review certain obvious circumstances and qualities of that work. Although characterized by large historical claims and bold intellectual syntheses, Bercovitch's work is intensely scholarly in some very traditional ways.<sup>4</sup> Two of his books—*The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"*—are sustained, closely textured interpretations of single texts (one chapter of Cotton Mather's *Mag-*

*nalìa* in the first case, and one novel of Hawthorne's in the second). It comes as no surprise that several commentators on Bercovitch's work have described its thorough, painstaking, meditative quality as "Talmudic" (Meyerowitz 216) or as resembling that of the *gaon*, the traditional Jewish scholar-genius (Elisa New, qtd. in Klingenstein 349). Bercovitch himself—who in recent years has published a number of fascinating and provocative essays on methodological and disciplinary questions—has described his own approach as that of "cultural close reading" ("Games of Chess" 16). This is not the place for an extensive examination of Bercovitch's critical principles; in any case, they can be observed in his writings and they have been articulated lucidly in several recent essays (e.g., "Games of Chess," "The Question of Literary History," "A Literary Approach to Cultural Studies," the "Postscript" to *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"*). In his critical practice, and in these essays on theory and methodology, it emerges quite clearly that certain of Bercovitch's notable critics—Crews, Harlan—are also his least insightful, for they imagine him to be politically doctrinaire, even moralistic. More alert readers of his work notice how suspicious he is of political grandstanding, how impatient he is with the contemporary academic cult of the subversive or resistant. It is true that *ideology* has always been an important concept for his work: *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* famously ended with an assessment of the "palpable social effects" of the Puritan-derived rhetorical strategy of representative American selfhood: the material historical facts of social pluralism were subsumed in a national myth of sacred election, and this subsumption "argue[s] the importance of ideology (in the Marxist sense) in the shaping of the United States" (186). By the time of the Hawthorne book, Bercovitch found it necessary to say explicitly what might have been obvious to careful readers: that in his view, and in his critical practice, "ideological analysis can be a richly aesthetic form of criticism" (155), and to be truly critically penetrating it needs to be wise to the aesthetic dimension of literary texts. As he puts it elsewhere, those critics who are interested solely in ideological demystification have simply "left aesthetics to the aesthetes" ("Games of Chess" 16); his aim has been to "replace the reductive polarities of both old formalisms and new moralisms . . . with a more flexible sense of the interactive elements in art as cultural work" (*Office* 155).

The example of scholarly rigor, searching curiosity, and untendentious inquiry that Bercovitch has presented has been widely influential, nowhere

more clearly than in the work of the many graduate students he has supervised over the years. On the occasion of his retirement, Harvard University hosted a conference in his honor, featuring as speakers a selection of his doctoral students from Columbia and Harvard. "The Next Turn in American Literary and Cultural Studies," as the conference was called, was notable for many reasons, but perhaps most conspicuously for the variety and distinction of the scholarly and critical work Bercovitch has sponsored: while there have been mechanically Bercovitchian essays and books published in the wake of his own, Bercovitch's students have learned precisely not to mimic his work but to reproduce, as well as they can, his independence of mind and unpredictability of argument. It is this outcome that honors him most truly.

## NOTES

1. See "Introduction: The Music of America," in *The Rites of Assent*; also, adapted from this introduction, "Investigations of an Americanist," Bercovitch's response to David Harlan's critique.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
3. Biographical information is gleaned from Bercovitch's self-reflective "Introduction: The Music of America," and also from Klingenstein and Meyerowitz, who interviewed Bercovitch and, in the case of Klingenstein, interviewed several of his family members as well.
4. It is worth noting that Bercovitch is an adept practitioner of the traditional form of the annotated bibliography: his edited collection of essays on *Typology and Early American Literature* concludes with his 90-page guide to the literature of typological exegesis from the Bible to the twentieth century. *The American Puritan Imagination* likewise ends with a "Selected Bibliography" arranged by Bercovitch, as does the *Ideology and Classic American Literature* collection. Bercovitch's early monograph *Horologicals to Chronometricals* concludes with an appendix, "Bibliographical and Explanatory."

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