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Introduction

Cohesion, Dissent, and the Aims of Criticism

Of recent theories about American culture and cultural studies, perhaps the most wide-ranging in their implications are Sacvan Bercovitch's ideas about cohesion and dissent. Bercovitch has developed these ideas throughout the course of his writings on American literature and culture. In these writings—most prominently, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self, The American Jeremiad,* and, more recently, *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*—Bercovitch has focused on texts central to the way Americans define themselves to themselves. His inquiries into these texts have disclosed patterns of American rhetoric and symbology that have been characteristic, enduring, and in many respects dominant. At the same time as he has examined these texts, Bercovitch repeatedly has questioned pervasive assumptions about method and interpretation in American literary and cultural studies.

One such assumption that has been central to American literary historians has to do with the relationship between the writer and society. American literary scholars frequently have shaped their work in the form of narratives of conflict, specifically conflict between individual writers and American society as a whole. Thus, for example, in two founding works of American literary studies, Vernon Parrington traces the development of "native liberalisms" in their struggles against traditional authority, and F. O. Matthiessen, in a similar vein, claims as the "one common denominator" of American Renaissance texts "their devotion to the possibilities of democracy."[1] Many influential studies that followed,

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even those that primarily concerned themselves with issues of aesthetics and consciousness, would rely on a similar characterization of American literature. In one such study, the consideration of form and style is enabled by a particular vision of American culture: "American literature is a struggle with already existing literary, social, and historical organizations for power over environment and over language itself."[2] From this perspective, American literary consciousness emerges through its struggles against convention. Notions such as this depend on a narrative of American culture, a narrative constituted by the tension between a conformist society and a series of individual voices more closely associated with an ideal of America.

The relationship of these individual voices to society, along with the ways in which scholars have narrated this story, have been subjected to a series of inquiries within the work of Sacvan Bercovitch. In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* the constituent terms of this narrative, "America" and the "self," are discussed. Bercovitch explores how these two concepts simultaneously have come to prominence in American culture—and, most significantly, how these terms work to sustain each other within a teleological vision of America. In this national vision, America is always in progress toward its ideal. The term "America" consequently conveys a sense of both promise and anxiety about the shortcomings of the present. As Bercovitch notes in the opening of *The Puritan Origins,* this vision has had immense power in American culture. Accordingly, he centers his analysis "on the interaction of language, myth, and society, in an effort to trace the sources of our obsessive concern with the meaning of America."[3]

The other term in this pair, the "self," has also had great power in our culture. Like America, the self operates proleptically as it continually refers to an anticipated ideal. To understand this term, it is necessary to examine something other than the typical claim made on its behalf. The self has routinely been granted a kind of epistemological priority over society as a whole. Truth first arises in the individual consciousness, and only then does the society have access to it. In those narratives of American literary history that promote this claim for the centrality of the self, a debased society rejects the individual revelations of truth. As Bercovitch suggests in *The Puritan Origins,* once one accepts the claim of the priority of the individual consciousness, one is then obliged to accept the entire narrative of the *opposition* of individual consciousness to society. An alternative to this understanding of the rela-

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tionship between the self and society is implied in Bercovitch's opening statement of the importance of "the rhetoric of American identity." The focus on rhetoric and on "the interaction of language, myth, and society" signifies a departure from traditional ways of approaching American writings. From this perspective, the individual work is neither the expression of a transcendent consciousness nor is it the incarnation of an American essence. Instead, meaning arises in the exploration of the specifics of social interaction.

Bercovitch's rhetorical analysis in *The Puritan Origins,* which provides the methodological basis for his subsequent work, describes how the symbol of selfhood has been invested with significance. In *The American Jeremiad* he extends his analysis of American selfhood by calling for renewed attention to the relationship between the self and the community. Specifically, he demonstrates how individual criticism of American society and demands for change may operate as ritual activities. Bercovitch argues that because of its "prescribed ritual form . . . [c]onflict itself was rendered a mode of control: a means of facilitating process through which process became an aid to socialization." For an example of this process, we may look to Thoreau, whose "aversion to most aspects of American life is well documented, and nowhere more fully than in *Walden.*" What is questioned here by Bercovitch is the way critics have often accepted Thoreau's aversion on its own terms, without attention to the way his criticisms of American life, particularly those in *Walden,* have themselves been engaged within the rhetoric of an American national errand. As Bercovitch states, "What makes *Walden* part of the tradition of the jeremiad is that the act of mimesis enables Thoreau simultaneously to berate his neighbors and to safeguard the values that undergird their way of life." Thoreau may call for individual and social change, but because this call is based on a return to an ideal of America, it effectively functions as a ritualized jeremiad.[4]

The symbol of America necessarily plays a large role in the rhetoric of the jeremiad. Conventionally, during the course of the jeremiad, the community is called to task for falling short of the ideal of America. An imagined ideal American community, with which the audience is invited to identify, is then projected onto a fictional future. The corruptions of daily activity are symbolically purged, and the performance over, a renewed sense of community is affirmed. Thus, the jeremiad ratifies the social order through a ritual process reminiscent of the Aristotelian psychology of

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tragedy. Bercovitch's interpretation of such conflict as a ritualized social activity exposes the shortcomings of critical celebrations of individual consciousness. By showing how the energy of the marginal consciousness is redirected toward the service of a central, communal ideal, Bercovitch, in effect, deconstructs the spatial metaphor on which the individual-community dichotomy—and the concomitant allegiance to the individual consciousness—has rested. The logic of the American jeremiad demands that the centrality of the community routinely be reconceived by the marginalized individual consciousness. And the individual consciousness, authorized by the community, no longer appears as a detached and free point of origin for ethical action.

Bercovitch thus begins his analysis of cohesion and dissent in American culture by interrogating an American literary history that has often posited an opposition between the individual and society. By shifting away from an analysis of literature that stresses the individual consciousness as the source of truth, Bercovitch displaces the radical dichotomy between, on the one hand, the individual consciousness as a source of knowledge and, on the other hand, a conformist community that reserves for itself the authority to adjudicate claims of knowledge. Instead, he distinguishes between individual experience (or belief) and a desire for social cohesion that routinely subsumes the former category. No longer do we have a situation in which literary works are *either* expressions of individual consciousness (consequently worthy of canonical status) *or* debased expressions of conventional, conformist thought. Rather, we have a *dynamic* relationship between individual and community, one that accommodates individual protest by highlighting the quintessentially American function of protest.

In *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, Bercovitch continues his inquiry into a selfhood that derives its significance from the symbology of America. Turning his attention to a work central to the nineteenth-century American canon, Bercovitch explores the link between Hawthorne's comment that "the scarlet letter had not done its office," and Hester Prynne's return and voluntary restoration of the scarlet letter at the novel's conclusion. The apparent discrepancy between Hester's protest against Puritan authority and her final return to the locus of this authority is a problem that has generated relatively little discussion among the novel's critics. This oversight is not especially surprising given the scholarly preoccupation with Hester's resistance against narrow-minded community authority and the implied potential for transcendence on

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the part of the individual imagination. To Bercovitch, however, Hester Prynne's ultimate accommodation of Puritan authority reveals a most important aspect of the story. As Bercovitch notes, "*The Scarlet Letter* is a story of socialization in which the point of socialization is not to conform, but to consent."[5]

Socialization might seem an unusual perspective from which to view *The Scarlet Letter.* After all, in the character of Hester Prynne, Hawthorne provides one of the strongest nineteenth-century literary images of an individual who struggles against stultifying social conventions. Yet it is important to recall the antebellum political and intellectual milieu to which Hawthorne was responding. Because of the pervasive fear of social breakdown in the antebellum United States, a focus on the issue of socialization rather than individual consciousness is germane to *The Scarlet Letter.* Threats of regional conflict were prominent, but perhaps more importantly, social cohesion was especially threatened by the ethos of the expanding market economy. Whereas at one time eighteenth-century ideas about compassion and sympathy could be taken for granted, such mechanisms for social good, though still mainstays of antebellum moral philosophy, decreased in importance during the course of the nineteenth century. And, although nativist sentiments were not yet at their late nineteenth-century level, contemporary attacks on immigration indicate a feared loss of social homogeneity. Moreover, as Bercovitch notes in *The Office of The Scarlet Letter,* the years immediately preceding the writing and publication of the novel were politically tumultuous: not only was 1848 a time of revolution in Europe, but it was also the year of the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls.

Within this historical situation, Hawthorne's use of the symbol of the scarlet letter suggests the routine operation of consensus in American society. Bercovitch focuses on Hawthorne's silence about why Hester decides to return to New England and to resume wearing the scarlet letter. As Bercovitch remarks, "she has no choice but to resume the A. To make choices involves alternatives; it requires us to reject or exclude on the ground that certain meanings are wrong or incompatible or mutually contradictory" (*Office* 21–22). Her action in the final chapter describes the reciprocal operation of individual dissent and social cohesion. Hester validates her individualism with an act that simultaneously affirms individualism and social hegemony. And, as Bercovitch continues, the reader is implicated in the process through the need to interpret: "To have choice (in Hawthorne's fiction) is to keep open the

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prospect for interpretation on the grounds that reality never means either one thing or another but, rather, is Meaning fragmented by plural points of view." This "fragmentation" creates "an enriched sense of unity, provided we attend to the principles of liberal exegesis" (*Office* 22). Thus, Bercovitch tells us, in our attention to the ambiguities of *The Scarlet Letter,* we have been following Hawthorne's directions of how to interpret the novel according to the logic of American culture, that of "liberal exegesis." If, however, we do not follow Hawthorne's directions, we instead find ourselves confronted with an ideological question: How does liberalism work?

In response to this question, Bercovitch observes the insistence of the ending, the fact that although "process" prevails, it serves to obscure the operation of "telos" (*Office* 159). The "process" to which he refers amounts to the multiplicity of interpretations of the scarlet letter that Hawthorne repeatedly invokes, a multiplicity that has preoccupied critics interested in ambiguity. The "telos" has a more definite, albeit double significance: the return of Hester Prynne and the reassertion of normative social relations. This fulfillment of the office of the scarlet letter is inevitable, and it is the manifestation of cultural cohesion. Ironically, this operation of social cohesion is what we see at work in scholarly analyses that celebrate the ambiguities of *The Scarlet Letter.* Problematizing the feature that has so often been central to critics of Hawthorne's writings, Bercovitch defines ambiguity as "the absence of conflict" (*Office* 26). Hawthorne's literary strategy amounts to an enactment of liberal ideology: "His purpose is to rechannel indeterminacy into pluralism, conflict into correspondence, and relativism into consensus" (*Office* 24). The problem with many past scholarly interpretations of Hawthorne has been that in their celebrations of indeterminacy and ambiguity, they have participated in a tradition of liberal exegesis. By disclosing how the interpretive act is already inscribed within cultural bounds, Bercovitch reveals the manner in which this scholarly tradition of interpretation effectively displaces political difference with pluralistic interpretation.

The critique of pluralism that Bercovitch offers in *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* extends the account of cultural dynamics he has provided in his earlier works, and it also provides a subtle yet important shift of emphasis. Both *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and *The American Jeremiad* discuss works in the literary canon, such as *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass,* alongside non-

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literary writings, such as early American sermons, in terms of their relationships to American culture. But in *The Office of The Scarlet Letter,* he describes his purpose as the attempt "to integrate ideological and aesthetic criticism" (xvii). And he elaborates on this proposed integration when he states that while his own approach attends to the workings of ideology, it does not preclude a concern with literary structure: "ideological analysis can be a richly aesthetic form of criticism. Properly conceived, it blends the appreciative and the cognitive" (*Office* 155). Having established in his earlier work the significance of rhetorical criticism, Bercovitch now turns to certain aspects of formal criticism in his analysis. As he states, his approach "blends the appreciative and the cognitive" with the goal of replacing "the reductive polarities of both old formalisms and new moralisms" (155). This methodological revision warrants attention. By highlighting the significance of aesthetic issues within a piece of explicitly ideological criticism, he seems to suggest an increasingly complex idea of the role of the critic. Certainly the critic in *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* has the obligation to read against the grain of the novel, to examine the significance of contexts to the text. But, in addition, the "aesthetic" and the "appreciative" cannot be ignored by the critic of American culture. Instead of evoking the image of the heroic reader who uncovers the hidden political and cultural significance of the text, Bercovitch assumes that the text does not necessarily fail to act on the critical reader.

Bercovitch's reassessment of the critic's work introduces the important issue of how scholars are to understand the discipline of literary studies. In recent years, scholars have discussed with increasing specificity how and why certain writings have been excluded from disciplinary concern, and they have undertaken the important work of reevaluating the literary canon and those critical works that have helped to shape this canon. The construction of these dominant discourses of American culture along with the ways in which a network of interlocking symbols have been invested with significance are especially salient issues in Bercovitch's work. His analyses of symbology have helped to open up literary and cultural studies in important ways. A potential problem arises, however. Like all systems of analysis that bring to light underlying processes, Bercovitch's has the capacity to generate a critical formalism, one that would advance a deterministic vision of American culture and pessimism about the possibility of change. Such a closed, deterministic analysis could seem the logical outcome of a

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theoretical opposition between individual will and social cohesion that inevitably resolves itself in a ritualized and mutually reinforcing manner.

Despite the appeal of this logic and the tough-minded critical posture it evokes, this manner of interpreting American culture would decidedly contradict the rhetorical tone and the inclination of Bercovitch's own work. As he notes, he neither advocates "a conspiracy theory of canon formation" nor the idea that "literature is a form of co-optation" (*Office* xx). His discussion of the way a work such as *The Scarlet Letter* both depicts and engages its readers in an enactment of a socialization process shows how criticism has perpetuated this process of mystification. But by removing the patina of the natural which has been associated with individualistic American dissent, Bercovitch implies the possibility of a social criticism that is not complicit in ritualized cooptation.[6] And, by announcing as his methodological goal the integration of "ideological and aesthetic criticism," Bercovitch offers the possibility of altering the terms of literary studies. He suggests how to avoid the problem created by dualistic figurations of the discipline that only offer as possibilities either endorsements of modernist conceptions of the individual imagination, or a style of historicist scholarship that threatens to obscure the distinctive qualities of literary studies.

Nevertheless, the possibility of interpreting Bercovitch's work as both pessimistic and deterministic remains as long as we do not directly acknowledge the cultural work of the critic's writing. Accordingly, it is necessary here to add—or, more properly, restore—the term *pedagogy* to the debate over Americanist criticism. The way pedagogy has been obscured becomes most apparent when we look at the way that scholars have distinguished between theory and practice. In the conventional way of conceiving this division, theory has amounted to the reading of certain types of texts, generally philosophical or metacritical commentaries. By contrast, practice has been the reading of certain other texts, those traditionally defined as more literary. With the advent of poststructuralistic notions of intertextuality and the argument that all texts may be examined in terms of literary structure, the distinction between different types of texts has seemed increasingly arbitrary. This distinction has largely appeared to be the result of those historical and institutional pressures that led to the formation of distinct disciplines. If we now are willing to understand the theoretical work of literary studies as the reading of all texts, we can acknowledge as the practical ends of scholarship the displaced act

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of pedagogy. Teaching is, after all, what most academics ostensibly get paid for. Should we not then—in the same spirit that motivates us to consider the cultural contexts of aesthetic works—restore to consideration the activity that fills the days of so many scholars?

By restoring pedagogy to the critical discussion, we can avoid both the despair that accompanies determinism and the grandiosity that situates literary and cultural analysis at the forefront of all human activity. The restoration of pedagogy is an important analytic move for those concerned about the potentially deterministic tendencies of the analysis of American cultural processes. By noting that academics will use Bercovitch's analyses to teach American literature and culture, we may find a counterbalance to the apparent logic of determinism. Indeed, a sensitivity to the urgency of Bercovitch's prose suggests that however difficult or improbable the possibilities of changing American culture, on some level such a possibility is sufficiently available to warrant a response other than a passive acceptance of the seemingly inevitable.

This collection of essays demonstrates the dissemination of Bercovitch's ideas through a generation of scholars who have found themselves constructively responding to his work. The essays that follow offer a variety of reconceptions of American literary and cultural dynamics, reconceptions that have arisen through engagements with Bercovitch's writings. These engagements, as one might expect, do not necessarily lead to new readings of formal structure in various works—although, as in the case of Bercovitch's reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, attention to such structures routinely plays an important part of analysis. What they do point toward are enhanced understandings of the cultural work literature has performed, the ways in which certain cultural tensions are inscribed in texts, and the ways these texts may perform cultural work of their own. The direction established by Bercovitch's model of cohesion and dissent in American culture guides the writers of these essays in their explorations of American cultural dynamics. Quite often, the discussion returns to potential difficulties within the analytic model itself when it is used to investigate a specific text or problem.

The first group of essays, in the section called "Cohesion and Dissent in the History of American Theory," presents three discussions of Bercovitch's ideas as they bear on the theories and activities of Americanist critics. Bercovitch himself offers a history of

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his own inquiry into American culture, an inquiry that began with a recognition of the symbology of American culture as "an open secret" to a Canadian. His cross-cultural investigation into the "institutionalization of dissent" reveals important problems, not only with respect to the analysis of literature but with regard to the stance of those critics who define themselves as oppositional. In "Jewish Critics and American Literature: The Case of Sacvan Bercovitch," Rael Meyerowitz discusses the ambiguities and difficulties attendant to Bercovitch's position as a Jewish commentator on the most sacred texts of American literature (be they Puritan or nineteenth-century). In addition, he raises a concern similar to that of Bercovitch: Meyerowitz asks whether theoretically sophisticated scholars are themselves implicated in the problematic ritualizing and containment of dissent. Emily Miller Budick's essay, "Sacvan Bercovitch, Stanley Cavell, and the Romance Theory of American Fiction," addresses the idea of the containment of dissent from the perspective of one interested in the function of the American romance. Using Stanley Cavell's ideas about speech as a way to explore Bercovitch's conception of American ideology, Budick turns to *The Scarlet Letter* and discusses the problems raised by the commitment to free and uncircumscribed speech on the part of writers of the romance.

The second section, "Establishing Modernist Traditions of Dissent," features discussions of writers whose work shortly preceded or coincided with the creation of American literary studies as an academic discipline. Donald Childs, in "T. S. Eliot's American Dissent/Descent," notes a series of recurrent tensions in Eliot's writings, particularly his prose. Childs suggests that by recognizing Eliot's reactions to Puritan rhetoric and ideology we can develop a fuller understanding of the kinds of concerns that motivated Eliot's literary criticism, his socio-political writings, and his early work in philosophy. The operation of cohesion and dissent in philosophy is discussed in Barry Allen's essay, "Works on Truth in America: The Example of William James." Allen argues that James's Pragmatism follows in the tradition of an Emersonian rhetoric of American newness, and, accordingly, it neglects its own roots in the western philosophical tradition of truth as that which leads to good. By ignoring these intellectual roots, James unwittingly reinvents in an American idiom the traditional bases for philosophical discourse. The apparently opposite action of translation of discourse *out* of an American idiom is treated in Kathleen Flanagan's "The Orient as Pretext for Aesthetic and Cultural Revo-

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lution in Modern American Poetry." Flanagan tells of how modernists such as Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and John Gould Fletcher maintained an idealized image of oriental aesthetics, an image divorced from all cultural and historical realities, to ground their own work. As Flanagan points out, these writers used this aesthetic to introduce apparent innovations that, in fact, left unchallenged central tenets of western poetics.

The third group of essays, "Cohesion, Dissent, and Contemporary Cultural Boundaries," offers discussions of the dynamics of dissent in more recent literary works. In "'Chaos Goes Uncourted': John Yau's Dis(-)Orienting Poetics," Priscilla Wald explores the relationship between aesthetic and political representation. This relationship forms one way in which cultural subjects "can be dialectically engaged with the processes of their creation and location—and with the epic task of founding a 'home.'" Specific cultural tasks are also evident in José David Saldívar's "The Hybridity of Culture in Arturo Islas's *The Rain God*." Saldívar, noting the tensions specific to Chicano identity, indicates how the dynamics of book publishing shapes the contemporary reception of ethnic literature and how in the work of Islas we may find a refutation of the narrow American sense of literary and cultural heritage. The relationship between the writer's work and the politics of literature forms the basis of Kathy Smith's inquiry, "Norman Mailer and the Radical Text." Smith discusses Mailer's recent work with PEN, the international writers' organization, and his *Armies of the Night* with respect to the logic of consensus. In these three essays we can see how challenges to cultural authority reveal the normalizing discourse of cohesion as it forces these writers to look back critically onto the construction of the dissenting subject.

The dissenting subject forms the focus of the final section, "Problems of Marginality in America." Helen Burke's essay, "Problematizing American Dissent: The Subject of Phillis Wheatley," raises difficult questions about the study of works that had been excluded from the modernist literary canon. Distinguishing between Wheatley as a rhetorical subject and Wheatley as a historical subject, Burke shows how Wheatley's identity as a writer "was achieved at the cost of reinscribing the very structure that oppressed her." Speech did not empower Wheatley, nor does it resolve the problems raised in Theron Britt's "Before the Law, after the Judgment: Schizophrenia in John Barth's *The Floating Opera*." Commenting on the link between law and schizophrenia in Barth's first novel, Britt argues that although the critique of the existential

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self undermines traditional authority, the cultural pattern of cohesion reasserts itself in the appearance of postmodern indeterminism. In the concluding essay, "Bercovitch's Paradox: Critical Dissent, Marginality, and the Example of Melville," Carol Colatrella returns to the issue of Bercovitch's cross-cultural criticism through a discussion of *Typee*. Melville's sailor protagonist, Tommo, serves as a kind of model of Bercovitch's cultural critic, one who is sufficiently engaged to feel a part of and apart from both American and Typee cultures.

Tommo's discomfort is reminiscent of the position of the critic of American culture. Insofar as criticism of American culture is all too easily understood to reinforce cultural cohesion, those who find themselves responding to Bercovitch's ideas can take no easy comfort in any simple notion of oppositional criticism. Through the act of teaching, critics of culture are transformed into disseminators of culture. This is not by any means meant to suggest that criticism is futile. Nevertheless, critics must recognize the cultural resources that have so often transformed dissent into cohesion. Close attention to these resources guides the writers of the following essays in their considerations of the specific historical and cultural situations that accompany the texts they discuss.

NOTES

1. Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1930), 1.vi. F.O. Matthiessen, *The American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), ix. Critics have recently reassessed Matthiessen's work, noting the conflicts between his stated political allegiances and his inattention to slavery and race relations among other problems. For an extensive treatment of these issues, see William E. Cain, *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Also of interest are Jonathan Arac, "F.O. Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 90–112, and Myra Jehlen's remarks about Matthiessen in her introduction to *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

2. Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), ix.

3. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), ix.

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4. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 160, 185, 186.

5. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), xiii. Further references to *Office* will be made parenthetically in the text.

6. In the closing chapter of *The American Jeremiad*, "The Symbol of America," Bercovitch points out that any rhetorical power apparently gained by the cultural critic through the use of the term *America* is routinely redirected into a ritualized reaffirmation of American teleology. Accordingly, the purposes of the wary critic are best served by an avoidance of any visionary appeal to American potential.

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