



Puritan Jeremiad and American Myth: Sacvan Bercovitch's Study in the Puritan Rhetoric and Imagination

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Abstract

Sacvan Bercovitch is the most influential and prominent Americanist and literary and cultural critic after Perry Miller. In a close textual reading of classic Puritan texts, Bercovitch concludes that the major legacy of Puritan New England is not religious, or moral, or institutional, but in the realm of rhetoric. Rhetoric for Bercovitch is more than verbal ornamentation. It is a set of aesthetic devices that constitute a particular structure of perception, a particular pattern of thought and mode of expression. Bercovitch tries to grasp the imaginative structure and symbolic pattern of American thought underlying in rhetorical devices and believes that the Puritan rhetoric is the primary force that drives and shapes the American imagination. Bercovitch analyzes the Puritan jeremiad, a particular Puritan literary mode, to be a case of his study in the Puritan rhetoric. By the rhetorical device of typology, the Puritans identified America as the new promised land foretold in Scripture. Their migration to New England was a flight from another Babylon or Egypt; their conflicts with the Indians were foreshadowed by Joshua's conquest of Canaan; and New England would in due time be the site of new Jerusalem. Considered as "a kind of imperialism by interpretation" by Bercovitch, the Puritan typology enables the immigrants to usurp the very meaning of the story of the ancient Jews. The Puritan jeremiad survives the decline of Puritanism and persists throughout the 18th and 19th century in all forms of the literature. It bespeaks an "ideological consensus" and helps sustain the myth of America through three hundred years of turbulence and change in American history.

Key words: The Puritan jeremiad; American myth; Typology; Ideological consensus

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INTRODUCTION

Sacvan Bercovitch, the Powell M. Cabot Professor of American literature at Harvard University from 1984 to 2001, is perhaps the most influential and prominent Americanist and literary and cultural critic of his generation. Bercovitch's interpretation of the Puritan rhetoric and imagination is considered as the most important innovation after Perry Miller in early American literature studies and in American studies. He has received the Distinguished Scholar Award for Extraordinary Lifetime Achievement in Early American Literature (2002), the Jay B. Hubbell Prize for Lifetime Achievement in American Literary Studies (2004) and the Bode-Pearson Prize for Lifetime Achievement in American Studies (2007). Among his many books are *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, *The American Jeremiad*, and *The Rites of Assent: the Symbolic Construction of America*. He was also the general editor of the multi-volume *The Cambridge History of American Literature*.

When Bercovitch began his academic career in the 1960s, American Puritanism was "an esoteric sub-sub-field usually under the province of social, intellectual, and religious history" (Bercovitch, 1975, p.ix) and did not draw due attention from critics. Critics believed the Puritans wrote in a plain style and rebelled against ornament in any form. When Bercovitch read the Puritan writers, he astonishedly found that the Puritan literature "abounded in images, analogies, symbols,

tropes, and allusions and had recourse to every kind of rhetorical device". (Bercovitch, 1975, p.ix) This discovery arouses Bercovitch's interest in American Puritan rhetoric. Rhetoric for Bercovitch is more than verbal ornamentation. "It is a set of aesthetic devices that constitute a particular structure of perception, a particular pattern of thought and mode of expression. It is highly figural, working on the basis of type and trope, allegory and symbol." (Harlan, 1991, p.953) By a close textual reading of classic Puritan texts, Bercovitch concludes that the major legacy of Puritan New England is not religious, or moral, or institutional, but in the realm of rhetoric (Bercovitch, 1974, p.7).

Bercovitch analyzes American Puritan jeremiad, a particular form of the sermon in the seventeenth-century New England, to be a case of his study in the Puritan rhetoric and imagination. Considered as a mode of denunciation, the jeremiad was an ancient formulaic refrain in Europe. In the 17th century, it was imported to Massachusetts from the Old world. Later, it was combined with the rhetoric of mission and became "America's first literary type." (Miller, 1953, p.29) The Puritan jeremiad survives the decline of Puritanism and persists throughout the 18th and 19th century in all forms of the literature. It bespeaks an "ideological consensus" and helps sustain the myth of America through three hundred years of turbulence and change.

1. THE RHETORIC OF MISSION IN THE PURITAN JEREMIAD

Bercovitch refers to the Puritan jeremiad as "the political sermon tended at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant-renewal and artillery-company ceremonies, and, most elaborately and solemnly, at election-day gatherings)." (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.4) The Puritan jeremiad is the product of the first-generation colonists. Within the first decade of settlement, the Puritan ministers were already thundering denunciation of the iniquities of the Bay colony such as "false dealing with God, betrayal of covenant promises, the degeneracy of the young, the lure of profits and pleasures." (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.4) Anxious about the moral decay of the colony, the Puritan ministers developed the European jeremiad into a special form of sermon. They warned in the sermon that if people did not acknowledge their sins and promise reform, the punishment was forthcoming. Despite its denunciation of the iniquities, the Puritan jeremiad was characterized by its unswerving faith in the Puritan errand. The Puritans believed they were a peculiar people and their mission a peculiar one. They were a company of Christians not only called but chosen by God as instruments of a sacred historical design. Their church-state was to be a model to the world of Reformed Christianity and a prefiguration of New Jerusalem to come (Bercovitch, 1978a, pp.7-8).

Bercovitch points out that as early as in 1630, the rhetoric of mission began with the sermons delivered by John Cotton and John Winthrop to the Arbella passengers. For example, in the sermon entitled *A Model of Christian Charity*, Winthrop "located the venture within a configuration extending from Ararat, Sinai, and Pisgah to the New World city on a hill, and...to Mount Zion of the Apocalypse." (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.8) In *God's Promise to His Plantations*, Cotton believed that America was the new promise land, reserved by God for his new chosen people as the site for a new heaven and a new earth (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.9). By analysing the earliest Puritan jeremiads, Bercovitch sums up the characteristics of the distinctive American literary type: first, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that detail the actual state of the community and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises and announces the good things to come (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.16).

The Puritan jeremiad owes its uniqueness to the rhetoric of mission. The traditional European model was a lament over the ways of the world. It decried the sins of the people—a community, a nation, a civilization, mankind in general—and warned God's wrath to follow. It thus held no hope towards the future of the human world (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.6). By contrast, the Puritan jeremiad inverted the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success of the mission. Bercovitch believes that the Puritans' cries of declension and doom is part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand: "they believed God's punishments were corrective, not destructive. His vengeance was a sign of love, a father's rod used to improve the errant child. In short, the punishments confirmed their promise." (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.8)

2. THE PURITAN TYPOLOGY AND THE MYTH OF AMERICA

The Puritan rhetoric is grounded on Bible. The Puritans were believers in the Word. They replaced "the rituals of church" with "the rituals of the Word". (Bercovitch, 1982, p.7) The Puritans' obsession with Scripture was manifest in various forms of verbal outpouring such as sermons, treatises, diaries, poems and biographies, etc. In those obsessive verbal rituals, the Puritans tried to fill their colonial venture with meanings by themselves and out of themselves. They found in the Bible the proof of "America" in the verses of "the migration of a holy remnant to a new Zion, the outcast woman in the wilderness who bears the man-child and the revelation of a new heaven and a new earth." (Bercovitch, 1982, p.10) The Puritans announced America was legible in God's promises and they came to America not to usurp but to reclaim what was already theirs by promise (Bercovitch, 1982, p.10).

It is typology that shapes the Puritan imagination. Typology is a particular form of rhetoric. According to Bercovitch, it is "the historiographic-theological method of relating the Old Testament to the life of Christ (as antitype) and through him, to the doctrines and progress of the Christian Church." (Bercovitch, 1967, p.167) For example, Jonah's three days in the whale typologically parallels Christ's three days in the tomb, and Job's patience prefigures Christ's forbearance on the cross. The New England Puritans developed this method into a distinctively American one. They believed that as the Old Testament foreshadowed the New Testament, all of history after the Incarnation foreshadowed the Christ's second coming. (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.14). Hence, from Moses to John the Baptist to the Puritan preachers, from Israel in Canaan to New Israel in American wilderness, from Adam to Christ to the second Adam of the Apocalypse, there was a relationship of analogy.

The Puritan typology infuses the symbolic meaning into the term "America" and constructs the American myth. In May 1670, Reverend Samuel Danforth delivered an election-day sermon entitled *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*, which was considered as the community expression of a whole generation. Danforth condemned the colonists' shortcomings and justifies their afflictions. Yet what did not change was his faith in the founders' dream. Danforth compared the Puritan's migration to the American wilderness to Jews' Exodus experiences and insisted that the only remedy which God prescribed for the prevention and healing of the immigrants' apostasy was "their calling to remembrance God's great and signal love in manifesting himself to them in the wilderness, in conducting them safely and mercifully, and giving them possession of their promised inheritance." (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.12) Like the wilderness through which the Israelites passed to the promised land, the American wilderness is endowed special symbolic meaning. It witnesses the Puritans' progress towards the fulfillment of their destiny and towards the American city of God.

Danforth also mentioned John the Baptist in the jeremiad:

John was greater than any of the prophets that were before him, not in respect of his personal graces and virtues, but in respect of the manner of his dispensation...the Baptist was the harbinger and forerunner. All the prophets saw Christ afar off, but the Baptist saw him present, baptized him, and applied the types to him personally. (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.13)

According to Bercovitch, the figural use of John the Baptist is a characteristic of the New England pulpit, and part of the Puritan legacy to American rhetoric. (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.13) The Puritan writers such as Thomas Hooker, Edward Johnson, Increase Mather and Jonathan Edwards all interpret John as a typological forerunner of their own mission to prepare the way for Christ in the American wilderness (Bercovitch, 1978a,

p.13). Like John the baptist, New England itself becomes a harbinger of things to come. As John prefigures Christ, the Bay Colony is a light proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, a herald sent to prepare the world to receive the long-expected kingdom.

The Puritan typology is a rhetorical strategy by which the Puritans envisioned the meaning of their errand into the wilderness. By the imaginative energy of typology, they identified America as the new promised land foretold in Scripture. Their migration to New England was a flight from another Babylon or Egypt; their conflicts with the Indians were foreshadowed by Joshua's conquest of Canaan; and New England would in due time be the site of new Jerusalem. Considered as "a kind of imperialism by interpretation" (Bercovitch, 1975, p.xi) by Bercovitch, the Puritan typology enables the immigrants to usurp the very meaning of the story of the ancient Jews (Bercovitch, 1978a, pp.10-11).

The typology of American mission persists in the eighteenth-century jeremiads. By contrast with the Puritans, the Yankee heirs in the 18th century no longer strictly rooted their exegeses in biblical texts. The Yankee ministers and political leaders incorporated Bible history into the American experiences such as the War of Independence and the Westward Movement. As Bercovitch says, "they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history into a metaphor for limitless secular improvement." (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.94) Though the jeremiad in the 18th century lost its strict grounding in Scripture, it still based on old metaphors, images and symbols of the Puritan jeremiad. For example, in a jeremiad entitled *The Conquest of Canaan*, Timothy Dwight, signer of *The Declaration of Independence*, celebrated America as "the second blissful Eden bright". He compared George Washington to Joshua the Israelite leader who battled for the promised land. In his opinion, Joshua served as harbinger of a "greater dispensation," to reveal Washington as the Christ-like "Benefactor to Mankind", directing a "more fateful conflict" on "new Canaan's promised shores." (Bercovitch, 1978b, p.130) The typology of mission also fed into the rhetoric of the French and Indian War. By clothing imperialism as holy war, the clergymen extended the typology to accommodate commercial and territorial aspirations. They summoned the colonists to an Anglo-Protestant errand into the Catholic wilderness. The French were the "offspring of that Scarlet Whore" and French Canada the "North American Babylon" and the invasion itself a "grand decisive conflict between the lamb and beast". The victory of the war was "the accomplishment of the scripture-prophecies relative to the Millennial State." (Bercovitch, 1978b, p.147)

3. IDEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS AND THE SYMBOL OF AMERICA

Bercovitch believes the ritual of the jeremiad bespeaks an “ideological consensus” (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.176) in moral, religious, economic, social, and intellectual matters. Bercovitch is influenced by Max Weber in his use of the term “ideology”. Weber’s “ideology” is different from that of Karl Marx. For Marx, ideology is a false consciousness and a system of belief that represent the interests of the dominant social class. Weber criticizes Marx for his one-sided materialist conception of causality, which reduces ideology to a product of economic interests. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber places ideology as a positive force that has enabled and inspired the emergence of a new economic system. Inspired by Max Weber, Bercovitch talks about ideology in an “anthropological sense”:

I mean by ideology the ground and texture of consensus—the system of ideas inwoven into the cultural symbology through which ‘America’ continues to provide the terms of identity and cohesion in the United States.ideology is basically conservative, but it is not therefore merely repressive. As a general principle, ideology functions best through voluntary consent, when the network of ideas through which the culture justifies itself is internalized rather than imposed, and embraced by society at large as a system of belief. (Bercovitch, 1993, p.355)

The power of consensus is nowhere more evident than in the symbolic meaning that the jeremiads infuses into the symbol of America. However, America is not an overarching synthesis which denies any difference. Instead, it is so inclusive as to contain diverse and contradictory outlooks. According to Bercovitch, the symbol of America is an enclosed and bipolar system (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.178). America is represented as either “world’s fairest hope or man’s foulest crime, American heaven or universal hell.” (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.194) The ambivalent attitude towards America is manifest in the major works of American classic writers such as Emerson and Thoreau. American classic writers tend to see themselves prophets crying in the wilderness. They lament a declension and celebrate American ideals at the same time. Henry Thoreau’s *Walden* is a typical nineteenth-century jeremiad. Thoreau describes his life at Walden through a series of opposites which affirm the typology of American mission: Concord’s Puritan fathers versus its present profane inhabitants; America’s sacred pioneer economy versus Franklin’s secular way to wealth; the true American, Henry Thoreau, versus John Field living by some derivative old-country mode in this primitive new country (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.186). Although Thoreau condemns the evil practices in his society, he does not think these as defects of the American Way but sees them rather as an aberration of the stiff-necked chosen people. His denunciation is a ritual to appeal his neighbors to comply with the terms of the New World destiny. The symbol of America both sustains

and restricts the Americans’ imagination. It sets free great creative energies of American writers and becomes the source of their images, metaphors and symbols. Meanwhile, it confines their imagination to the terms of the American myth, barring them from paths that led beyond the boundaries of American culture (Bercovitch, 1978a, p.180).

CONCLUSION

As a Canadian immigrant, Bercovitch is attracted by the question that how a country, despite its arbitrary territorial boundaries and its bewildering mixture of race and genealogy, can believe in something called America’s mission and can invest that patent fiction with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest. His study in the Puritan rhetoric enables him to find an answer to the question. Typology was the rhetorical strategy by which New England finds its redemptive future figured forth in the types and tropes of the Bible. With the imaginative energy of typology, the Puritans infuse a prophetic meaning into “America” and construct an officially endorsed American myth. Typology is the elementary adhesive that bound very facet of New England culture into a comprehensive structure of perception, association, and expression. By analyzing the typology of mission in the Puritan jeremiad, Bercovitch has found the fundamental structure that underlies the American imagination.

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