

BRYCE TRAISTER, ED., *The New Puritan Studies and American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 242 pp.

Surveying the field of American literary history in 1992, Sacvan Bercovitch found that “consensus of all kinds has broken down,” fragmented into “a Babel of contending approaches” (*Rites of Assent* 355). He especially meant the tradition of consensus scholarship inaugurated by Perry Miller, refined by himself, and since deemed the “Puritan origins thesis,” a vision of a cohesive national culture rooted in the Puritan past that faced increasing scrutiny as an accomplice to Cold War American exceptionalism. His use of “Babel” also hinted at mixed feelings, as if Bercovitch admitted a certain prelapsarian hubris in his forebears’ towering origins thesis even as he hoped for a new solidarity after its collapse, if not the old consensus at least “a dialogue about common conflicts.”¹ Such a dialogue, he argued, could be achieved through a less antagonistic view of ideology, not solely false consciousness to be exposed in others, but the shared presuppositions that color present as much as past criticism. If critics analyzed these presuppositions in themselves as much as they uncovered them elsewhere, he concluded, the field might rediscover a more critically self-aware sense of American literature’s “trans-historical import” (359).

This import feels both more pressing and more elusive twenty-five years later. Bercovitch wrote the same year that Fukuyama hailed the end of the Cold War as the triumph of western liberalism and the end of history itself, but since then various liberal consensuses have increasingly strained under a renewed left and far-right alike. American literary history seems to have fared little better in achieving a dialogue about common conflicts. Gordon Hutner and Sandra Gustafson report a decline in the study of longer literary histories while Sarah Rivett goes a step further in a

¹ In addition to leftist critiques that Bercovitch abetted exceptionalism (see Pease “The New Americanists”), figures like David Harlan and Andrew Delbanco ironically have critiqued Bercovitch for an overemphasis on ideology that finds no worth in the Puritan past, only a “system of deception” (Harlan 962) or “a tedious sequence of bourgeois consciousness” that sees no culture “free from ideological coercion” (Delbanco 6).

reflection on Bercovitch’s legacy, hinting that this decline has damaged the American public sphere: conservatives have “construct[ed] a narrative of origins in our absence,” she writes, elsewhere urging scholars to “rescript” rather than “discard” the origins thesis in response (“Religious Exceptionalism” 396; “Early American Literature” 992-93). Joanna Brooks has issued a similar call for a return to critically-conscious literary histories. “We do not ask our working narratives to announce the one basic gospel truth of the whole great continuous American story,” she writes, but “only a reason to believe that there is meaning to be found in this daunting lot of discontinuities” (443). The unspoken struggle seems to be with what Rita Felski calls the “limits of critique” for literary history, a desire to reclaim “transhistorical import” within a field that has instinctualized (and institutionalized) suspicion towards these kinds of claims.²

A recent essay collection, *American Literature and the New Puritan Studies*, offers an occasion to revisit this juncture as its first page explicitly invites readers “to reconsider the role of seventeenth-century Puritanism in the creation of the United States.” As with Brooks and Rivett, the goal is not a naive return to a master narrative but a more critically self-aware project that traces continuity without replicating the pitfalls of the origins thesis. Editor Bryce Traister outlines the post-colonial, the postnational, and the postsecular as three traits which most distinguish the New Puritan Studies from the old. On the postcolonial, Traister notes that scholars like Rivett, Brooks, Kristina Bross, Laura Stevens, Sandra Gustafson, Matt Cohen, Kathleen Donegan, and Ralph Bauer have thoroughly dismantled a former approach to colonial New England as a self-contained laboratory for Anglo colonists, replacing it with a more complex arena of encounter and conflict. Two essays in the collection build on this work with enlightening results. Betty Booth Donohue argues that Edward Johnson finds himself uneasily “encased” by Native voices in *Wonder-Working Providence*, where “the English are dramatically prodded, frightened, teased, and

² Felski’s diagnosis is more drastic: a postmodern backlash against grand historical narratives has swung to an opposite extreme where “any form of cross-temporal thinking—tainted by the guilt of association—has fallen out of favor” (*Limits of Critique* 157).

sustained by American Indians” seemingly on every side (113). In an especially interesting piece, Allison Margaret Bigelow argues that missionary linguists like Roger Williams and John Eliot shared more similarities than differences with Catholic linguists as fellow participants in an early-modern project to create a universal grammar and “restore Earth to its pre-Babelian state” (93). Although “key agents in overseas imperial administration,” their “linguistic ecumenicalism also put pressure on theological definitions that separated Christian thinkers” and quietly counteracted imperial claims of difference (96).

Alongside the postcolonial, the New Puritan Studies is especially marked by a rejection of the nation as a privileged category of analysis (“postnational” is my shorthand). In place of the field’s former driving interest in the question of American-ness, Traister notes that this concern is now one of several after a “paradigm shift to comparatist, transnational, transhemispheric, oceanic, and even ‘planetary’ ... frameworks” (10). The collection represents this development with some especially strong pieces. Nan Goodman charts how Cotton Mather embarked into “unprecedented territory, literally and figuratively,” in his reflections on the Ottoman Jews, whose unassimilated autonomy (in Mather’s eyes) under Muslim rule offered a model for New England (43). In the collection’s liveliest piece, Jason M. Payton finds a new significance in Mather’s lifelong interest in pirates, arguing that his theological scrapping with an unrepentant buccaneer reveals a shared vocabulary of piety in an emerging Atlantic modernity, both crucial to Mather’s sense of New England’s errand.

Traister especially emphasizes the rise of postsecular theory as a reason for renewed interest in early American religious culture. In short, “post-secular” refers to a body of work inspired by Charles Taylor’s challenge to “subtraction stories”—master narratives in which modernity emerges as religion declines—as critics uncover and contest such narratives in former literary histories, recovering religion’s importance in unexpected corners (*A Secular Age*).³ Here too, the collection is well represented. Alongside pirates, for instance,

³ For example, Joanna Brooks finds a subtraction story in Perry Miller’s narrative of secularization “From Edwards to Emerson” (“Edwards to Baldwin”).

Mather vies for theological and scientific control over midwives and the mysteries of the womb in Brice Peterson’s engaging reading of *The Angel of Bethesda*; as Mather prescribes a comprehensive framework for labor and breastfeeding, he betrays an “uneas[e] about female production” (130) and a broader anxiety in “his management of religious culture in a time of increasing skepticism and scientific thinking” (132).

If the postcolonial and the postnational have been especially responsible for challenging the origins thesis, the postsecular has ironically reinvigorated Puritan and American literary studies by reconnecting their archives with various trans-historical links. Building on Rivett and Brooks’ revisionary returns to Miller and Bercovitch, Traister notes that “colonial Puritan culture and its historiographical legacy enabled different, multiple, and competing versions of the nation’s intellectual and political history to flourish” (7). Special mention is made of Cristobal Silva, Gregory S. Jackson, John Lardas Modern, and Tracy Fessenden as scholars who have already uncovered such links, while several excellent essays in the collection build upon their work by tracking the winding paths of “Puritan afterlives” through multiple archives and methodologies. Jonathan Beecher Field uses the history of monuments to Puritans as an opportunity to consider how these stone archives revise and hide the past differently than our print-based historiography. Harry Brown demonstrates how digital methods can uncover new histories by employing the Farber Gravestone Collection to reveal an increase in visual and textual metaphor on colonial New England tombstones after 1700, especially in cases of a child’s death; Puritan iconoclasm, he concludes, partly eroded as a “response to the pointed grief of child mortality” (187). Through impressive archival and manuscript sleuthing, Michael Ditmore forces us to think more carefully about the history of texts when we use texts to think about history, taking as his example the complex publication history of Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* and Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity”; Ditmore deftly tracks how these ur-texts of the twentieth-century American canon were, ironically, unread in their own time and only salvaged through tangled eighteenth- and nineteenth-century acts of preservation, recovery, abridgment, and revision.

This is the essay collection’s greatest insight: the Puritans indeed left a lasting im-

pact on American culture, but in multiple ways that remain complex and entangled. If neither America's homogeneous nor its sole cultural ancestors, they remain an important root in the family tree in part *because* they survived to branch into different lineages. For this reason, in its larger framing, the collection refrains from interpreting these multiple legacies as anything beyond a master narrative unraveling into humbler cords. Defining the "New Puritan Studies" as postcolonial, post-national, and postsecular emphasizes what these continuities are not more than what they might be, not a self-contained Anglo colony, not the origins of an exceptional nation-state, not a subtraction story about religion's inevitable decline. If the New Puritan Studies aspires to rediscover continuity, it does so with an apophatic caution, talking around its edges lest it slip into the pitfalls of the origins thesis. Each essay in *American Literature* testifies to the new connections this prudent approach can yield.

But an excess of caution also risks multiplying our number of working narratives unto diminishing interpretive returns. The collection makes no claim about central continuities between the Puritans and America, about whether some connections matter more than others; instead it settles for "a more expansive view," twelve or more Puritanisms for "twelve or more American Literatures"—one for each essayist (223). But why stop at a dozen? Joanna Brooks calls for working narratives with origins in "thousands of autochthonous spiritualities" with "branches as plural as its roots" (443). This rhizomatic approach can yield surprising and sometimes enlightening connections, but if not balanced with bolder claims for core continuities, one ends up with a reconstructive babel only a little better than its deconstructive predecessor, what Jameson diagnosed as a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (68). On this larger theoretical question, the collection never quite finds its footing, pitching between desire for and suspicion of continuity. Its "Afterword" speaks dismissively of "continuity fictions" on one page and declares like a Foucauldian catechumen that "we no longer believe in that kind of thing" (221), while the next page ventures that "a Puritan past that is more subtle, more complex, and more heterogeneous might solicit a return to continuity [...] that doesn't depend on a facile or inac-

curate set of historiographical assumptions" (222-23). This promising hypothesis remains unexplored as the collection settles for multiplication instead. Its strongest insight—that the Puritans live on in American culture in various ways—feels anticlimactic, its momentum dissipating in scattershot.

There is a difference between more versus better working narratives as well as a critical reason for distinguishing between the two. With Felski, I especially admire Wai Chee Dimock's theory of textual "resonance"—the ways in which texts retain, change, and accrue meaning across time as later readers encounter them in new contexts—as a way to evaluate central threads of "temporal interdependency without telos" (Felski 158). This theory also dovetails with Bercovitch's call for ideological honesty as a means of clarifying literary history's "transhistorical import" ("Problem of Ideology" 639). For if we can critically consider why texts still resonate with us in our present moment, and if we interrogate the ideological reasons for this resonance, we may be likelier to discern common commitments and constraints within this shared moment and, in turn, a sharper sense of where American literary history resonates therein. Neither a master narrative nor a babel of deconstruction and reconstruction, this "diachronic historicism" (Dimock's term) illuminates why certain texts and tropes remain persistent (not "timeless") just as much as where they acquire new meanings in new eras, challenging canons as critics articulate new resonance (1061).

This approach frames the question of the Puritans' lasting legacies in American culture differently: instead of defending, deconstructing, or exponentially scattering origins, it asks why certain core facets of the Puritans have waxed, waned, and changed throughout American history, why Puritan origin stories—an object as much as a mode of analysis—resonated in the first place.⁴ The collection's closing essay by Abram Van Engen best approaches this kind of criticism as it tracks the surprising genealogy of John Winthrop's declaration to his fellow colonists that "we shall be as a city upon a hill."⁵ Winthrop's use

⁴ The field of memory studies, influential in Europe yet underutilized in American literary studies, especially offers useful conceptual tools for critical analysis of origins as stories.

⁵ Full disclosure: Van Engen served on my dissertation committee.

of the phrase, drawn from Matthew 5:13, has become more famous today than in 1630 as a slogan for American exceptionalism, quoted and cited by politicians and critics especially since the twentieth century so as to root an exceptional American identity in sacred Puritan roots. But Van Engen reveals that in the seventeenth century, Matthew 5:13 in fact “belonged to Catholics” far more than the Puritans as a proof-text for the perpetual visibility of the institutional church. Protestants approached the passage defensively, forced to reinterpret it not as a guarantee of the church’s “perpetual visibility” but instead a less settled “injunction to lead holy lives [...] that, if followed, would make the true church visible” and if not, would conceal it (214).

This careful account of seventeenth-century exegesis opens onto a larger historical irony: the Protestants’ more unsettled and defensive interpretation of Matthew 5:13 is in fact what allowed twentieth-century critics and politicians to connect Winthrop’s use of the passage to the United States, and in rather unpuritanical ways. “Modern political usage of ‘city on a hill,’” Van Engen concludes, “has gradually transformed back into the more universal Catholic meaning of a singular and exceptional truth, applied now to a nation, not a church,” for while “politicians return to Winthrop for the origins of American exceptionalism, they often leave out the variability of visibility and the simile so central to Protestant interpretations” (215). This makes all the difference, for “much meaning depends on whether [...] the United States just *is* the city on a hill” or whether it might be more or less *like* it (215-16, emphasis in original). If the latter, dissent, as Bercovitch argued, becomes a necessary part of its utopian aspirations; if the former, dissent threatens an exceptionalism already achieved. The larger point is unstated but clear: American exceptionalists get their supposed Puritan ancestors all wrong when they miss the warning in Winthrop’s “city on a hill.” Such an argument underscores the trans-historical import of Puritan millennialism by historicizing its persistence and contingency alike.

Where Van Engen implicitly critiques exceptionalism, Dimock’s theory of resonance has a more explicit mission to embrace “literature as a democratic institution, vibrant and robust,” for “across time, its very words become unfixed, unmoored, and thus democratically claimable.” “This semantic democ-

racy, robust and vociferous,” she concludes, “is the most eloquent tribute to literature” as “a crucial democratic institution” (1060, 1068). I would include the work of literary history in that project, for such is what can be gained and sustained if critics consider our common conflicts rather than going a hundred separate ways to avoid the debate. Avoiding the pitfalls of grand origins theses need not imply abdicating any interest in core continuities; as Edward Said wrote, “the problem of beginning is the beginning of the problem”⁶ (42).

Bercovitch suggested this potential in a revision between the earlier and later versions of his essay. In the first, he reflected that the “babel of contending approaches” in American literary history was “reminiscent of the sectarian polemics that erupted in the last, great days of Rome,” lapsed into “the barbarism of the scholastics” (“The Problem of Ideology” 633). In the essay’s final form, he described the critical babel as “reminiscent of the sectarian polemics that erupted in the early days of the Reformation” (*Rites of Assent* 355). I suspect that he decided on the second as a more hopeful image, not the beginning of a scholastic Dark Age but of modern spiritual life in all of its incipient confusion and energy, where the consensus of a centralized church had given way to bickering Protestants—antinomians all, yet filled with the spirit. Perhaps he hoped that future critics would increasingly resemble its latter-day revivalists, wooing congregations towards their vision of the past’s present import and future potential. It could be worse.

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⁶ Said introduces a helpful distinction between origins and “beginnings.” With post-structuralists, he rejects the former as a divine-idealist mode of analysis that risks teleologies. The latter is defined by *intention*, a marked effort to inaugurate something new, rooted in language and society yet capable of what William James called “genuine creation.” That is, if Said rejects origins-based thinking, he also sees a poststructuralist tendency to underestimate the power of beginnings, a diagnosis I would extend to the practice of American literary history today.

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