CHAPTER **ONE**

Puritan Origins

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"American Studies" as an academic discipline arose in the aftermath of World War II, in good measure from the nation's self-congratulation at the triumph of democratic principles which it believed it best exemplified. The movement's origins, however, lay a generation earlier, among writers and intellectuals who sought to understand what they regarded as the nation's uniqueness. Central to their attempts was renewed consideration of New England Puritanism, which, distasteful as they found its tenets, they acknowledged as undeniably shaping the American "mind."

The linkage of colonial New England to the nation's origins, however, originated earlier; it was in full flower by the time of the much-ballyhooed bicentennial of the Pilgrims' landfall at Plymouth. The nineteenth-century Romantic historian George Bancroft, for example, confidently linked New England's early congregational polity and representative General Courts to the outbursts of popular democracy in the 1770s. In this, he was seconded by none other than his almost preternaturally observant contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville. After touring the United States in the late 1820s, the sharp-eyed French visitor noted the primacy of the influence of New England's "principles" in the founding of the New Nation. They had "spread at first to the neighboring states" and then quickly to others, he wrote, until "they penetrated the entire confederation." By the time of his visit, Tocqueville continued, New England's institutions had exerted their influence "over the whole American world" (2000: 31–2).

Incipient democracy in Church and colony government was one thing, however, and Puritanism per se, another. By the late nineteenth century, in many mainstream Protestant denominations, Calvinist dogma, which had steeled some Americans against the horrors of the Civil War, fell out of favor. The "Social Gospel" – whose adherents believed that Christian principles should be applied to social problems – made it appear anachronistic or, worse, downright irrational. Liberal Protestants, for example, ridiculed such central Puritan tenets as belief in man's innate depravity and lack of free will, because they could so easily encourage

acceptance of the status quo. By the turn of the century, Puritanism was the butt of both severe criticism and caustic humor. Cultural critic Van Wyck Brooks, for example, in his influential *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908), argued that Puritanism was the source of the debased idealism that ruled American culture. The prominent journalist and wit H. L. Mencken pilloried it as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" (1949: 626).

Alongside such dismissal and derision, however, grew a small but increasingly influential school whose adherents insisted that, whether or not one was sympathetic to Puritanism, to deny its significance to the nation's culture was to trade in caricature as gross as any proffered by Puritanism's detractors. In particular, this new appreciation was linked to the investigation of the nation's literary heritage as scholars, fortified now by reading Sigmund Freud, burrowed into veins of literature whose power seemingly derived, as Herman Melville had put it of his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, from "that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or another, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free" (1955: 192). If such a residue of Puritan ideas contributed to the achievement of *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby-Dick*, now squarely in the Modernists' sights, perhaps early New England thought was worthy of more sustained inquiry.

The philosopher George Santayana recognized this as early as 1911 when he traced the sources of "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" to New England's bifurcated heritage: Calvinism and Transcendentalism. The heart of the Puritan had been divided, Santayana noted, between "tragic concern at his own miserable condition" and "tragic exultation about the universe at large." Admittedly, he wrote, by the time of Emerson this "sense of sin" had "totally evaporated," but in American society at large it persisted into the twentieth century, the Genteel Tradition the result of the dialectic between these two ways of considering the self (1968, 2: 87–9). In his remarkable *In the American Grain* (1925), a searching study of the European appropriation of the New World, the poet and novelist William Carlos Williams concurred. In a discussion of the early eighteenth-century Jesuit missionary, Père Sebastien Rasles, for example, one of the lengthier sections of the book, Williams observes to Valéry Larbaud of Cotton Mather's books that they were "the flower of that religion [Puritanism]." Williams admired such work's "rigid clarity," he continued, "its inhuman clarity, its steel-like thrust from the heart of each isolate man straight into the tabernacle of Jehovah without embellishment or softening" (1925: 111, 129). To Modernist critics, such sentiments flowed directly into the worlds of Hawthorne and Melville. If one regarded these writers as representative of what another seminal cultural critic, Lewis Mumford, termed "the Golden Day" in American letters, one had to acknowledge the shaping force of Puritanism on American culture (*passim*).

Most of these early critics and historians, however, were not as interested in understanding Puritanism as in making a case for its metaphorical significance to later thinkers and writers; they appreciated it as a crude, if necessary, prelude

rather than an engaging symphony. A few scholars, however, began to break this mold, particularly members of the English and History departments at Harvard University. In 1925, for example, English professor Kenneth Ballard Murdock published *Increase Mather: Foremost American Puritan*, and five years later his colleague in History, Samuel Eliot Morison, issued *Builders of the Bay Colony*, which comprised biographical sketches of chief members of New England's early generations. These works – unapologetic and sophisticated – opened the sluice gates to powerful streams of scholarship that in the next two decades revised our understanding of American Puritanism. In addition, their and others' work soon thereafter led to incarnations of academic programs that, when linked to those at other universities after World War II, contributed significantly to what became the American Studies movement.

Although Murdock, commandeered for administration, published little else in this field, he remained central to this renovation. As Acting Chair of Harvard's English department and, later, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, he was committed to building the university's offerings in American History and Literature, in terms of both faculty and programs. Among those whom he lured to Cambridge were the already well-established scholar Howard Mumford Jones, and a newly minted PhD from the University of Chicago, Perry Gilbert Eddy Miller, undoubtedly his most remarkable hire.

Miller, a mid-Westerner, had returned to the university after spending time in other parts of the United States – he had lived in the Rockies for a while as well as in New York City – and, more importantly, the Belgian Congo, where, he later reported, he had been vouchsafed an "epiphany." Recalling the great work of the historian Edward Gibbon, the inspiration for which came as he was sitting in the ruins of the Capitol at Rome, Miller had a comparable moment of discernment in the middle of Africa. Disconsolate "on the edge of the jungle," he recalled, he had thrust upon him "the mission of expounding" what he "took to be the innermost propulsion of the United States" (1956: viii). To do this properly he had to begin at what he took to be the beginning, and, discounting the Virginia enterprise because to his mind it lacked the requisite intellectual coherence, he commenced with the New England Puritans. His dissertation director, the English professor Percy Holmes Boynton, though not convinced of the project's significance, indulged his student's whim. The resultant dissertation became Miller's first book, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630–1650: A Genetic Study* (1933), a treatment of the significance of covenant theology to the Massachusetts Bay Puritans.

In his foreword, Miller explained that he had embarked on a new enterprise. He sought to describe "a great folk movement with an utter disregard of the economic social factors" on which recent historians such as James Truslow Adams (one of Miller's particular *bêtes noir*, Mencken another) had anchored their interpretations of New England's founding. He also aimed at those Freudians who dismissed religious ideas as "just so many rationalizations constructed by the subconscious to disguise the pursuit of more tangible ends" (1933: xi).[1] Miller

also explained that he had made a "concerted attempt to realize the continuity of thought extending from the initial stages of English Puritanism to the peculiar institutions of New England," an attitude indicative of a lifelong interest in and appreciation of the European backgrounds to American thought (*Orthodoxy*: xii–xiii).[2] Further, although it would be a few more years before he articulated it so baldly, the book exemplified the foundational premise to all Miller's work, his insistence that "the mind of man is the basic factor in human history" (1956: ix). In this, Miller helped define the new field of intellectual history, for, coupled with William Haller's work on English Puritanism and Arthur O. Lovejoy's on European history generally, his oeuvre exemplified this new direction in historical study.

Over the next two decades, Miller published three path-breaking works. In *The New England Mind* (1939) he compiled "a map of the intellectual terrain of the seventeenth century" that remains the *vade mecum* for those who wish to comprehend the Puritans' intellectual universe upon their departure for New England. Then, in his monumental *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953), he set that Puritanism in motion in the New World, describing with unparalleled sophistication the fate of Puritan ideas from the time of the adoption of the Half-Way Covenant in 1662 through the deaths of Increase and Cotton Mather in the 1720s.[3] Remarkably, even as he was completing this massive work, he published (in the "American Men of Letters" series) *Jonathan Edwards* (1950), bringing the history of New England's religious thought through this theologian's death in 1758. In the 1950s, Miller shifted his attention primarily to the nineteenth century, planning to continue his monumental history of ideas at least through the period of the Civil War; but his work in Puritanism defined and dominated the field of early American Studies through the mid-1960s.

Simply put, Miller insisted that there was such a thing as the "American mind," and its roots lay in Puritan New England. Further, to study it was not merely an academic exercise but a way to gain particular insight into what the United States represented in the twentieth century. In the 1930s others in the academy began to share this view. A similar belief in the coherence of American culture that derived from the European settlers, for example, underlay Herbert Schneider's *The Puritan Mind* (1930), Henry Bamford Parkes's *Jonathan Edwards: The Fiery Puritan* (1930), and, most importantly, Vernon Louis Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, (1927), the first volume of which (eventually there were three) covered the period through 1800 and about which Miller always spoke with respect. A legion of other scholars – Henry Nash Smith, Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Aaron, Leo Marx, and Louis Hartz among them – soon enlisted under the banner of what became known as "American exceptionalism" and extended such study into the nineteenth century and beyond, Miller's grand synthesis the unassailable anchor to their efforts.

Such scholarship about the purported uniqueness of the American experience coincided with the establishment at the college and university level of courses and

programs that eventually coalesced into the American Studies movement. In 1931, for example, at Yale University the historian Ralph Henry Gabriel joined his colleague in English, Stanley T. Williams, to teach a course on "American Thought and Civilization" and six years later published a textbook, *The American Mind*, which had eventuated from their classroom work. In 1936, Miller joined a cohort of senior colleagues at Harvard to form the interdisciplinary program in the History of American Civilization. The group included not only such scholars of early New England life and thought as Morison and Murdock but F. O. Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) quickly became a landmark in the emergent field. George Washington University started a comparable program the same year, and by 1947 more than 60 institutions had undergraduate concentrations in the field and 15 offered advanced degrees as well (Wise 1999: 179). The stage was set for the establishment of the American Studies Association, chartered in 1951.

Thus, through the early 1960s, to study American Puritanism was to read what Miller wrote about it; few scholars had the temerity to challenge what seemed his undeniable erudition. This began to change, however, shortly after his untimely death in the autumn of 1963, only days after John F. Kennedy's assassination. Perhaps his most well-known student, Edmund S. Morgan, put it most dramatically. "When at last [Miller] was gone," Morgan recalled, "one sensed a subdued relief at the funeral service," as though his colleagues knew that they finally were free from the tyranny of his example (1964: 59). Psychology aside, a new generation of scholars, most trained in the discipline of history and one of them, Bernard Bailyn, a young scholar whom Miller himself had praised as contributing to the ongoing renovation of early American Studies, began to question the accuracy of Miller's depiction of Puritanism and, by extension, his notion of an American "mind" (1956: ix).

Miller's earliest critics came from the new school of Social History, those who sought to study History "from the ground up" to unearth and relate the stories of all manner of people (that is, not just the intellectuals) in any given period. In 1965, for example, Darrett Rutman published *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630–1649*, in which he emphasized the great heterogeneity – and interest in commerce rather than religion – that characterized that community's first years, soundly challenging the notion of a coherent Puritan "mind" whose representatives were bent on the spiritual world. A few years later such emergent scholars as Philip Greven, Michael Zuckerman, Kenneth Lockridge, and others (many of whom Bailyn had tutored) began to publish detailed demographic studies of individual New England towns that similarly revealed a much more complex social system than Miller accounted for. If Puritanism had been central to the development of the American mind, such studies implied, scholars greatly misgauged how much conflict (and, some argued, downright apathy) it had engendered.

Soon enough Bailyn himself entered the fray, first with a lengthy introduction to an edition of *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776* (1964) and then

with his award-winning *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1968). In these works, he argued persuasively that New England Puritanism had not supplied the terms through which incipient patriots understood their quarrel with England; rather, they parsed the grammar of the opposition "Country" or Whig party in England whose ideology was aimed at a social and political situation that seemed uncannily congruent to what the colonies faced. Bailyn's arguments crossed those of Miller's one-time research assistant and successor at Harvard, Alan Heimert, who in 1966 in *Religion and the American Mind, From Awakening to Revolution*, extended his mentor's project through the eighteenth century, taking as a blueprint Miller's "From the Covenant to the Revival" (1961).

Like Miller, Heimert was a consummate intellectual historian; he insisted, for example, that fully to apprehend an idea "depends finally on reading not between the lines but, as it were, through and beyond them," an attitude that his many critics condemned for its encouragement of a willful misreading of texts (1966: 11). Not only did Heimert insist on the relevance of religious ideas to the Revolution; he discounted a century and a half of scholarship by arguing that among the ministry it had not been New England's liberal, proto-Unitarian clergy who led the way to 1776 but rather those who had inherited and extended the Edwardsean, revivalist legacy. Such Edwardsean concepts, Heimert argued, as the necessity of a "new birth," the "happy effects of union," and "the wisdom of God in the permission of sin" took on new meaning as the British progressively encroached on American liberties. Despite Heimert's undeniable erudition (and perhaps because of his scarcely disguised hubris), most scholars, however, found more convincing Bailyn's measured dismissal of the legacy of New England Puritanism as constituent of the ideology of the New Nation. Others of his students, most notably Gordon Wood in *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1972), similarly downplayed religious ideas in their studies of the period beyond the 1770s.

Other scholars began to chip at Miller's monument, pointing out his undeniable blind spots as well as matters of fact or interpretation that were wrongheaded. Scholars agreed, for example, that in his biography of Roger Williams, Miller simply was off track, and, retrospectively, some pilloried his understanding of Edwards as somehow supremely relevant to the horrors of the Atomic Age. For some, such exaggeration called into question the accuracy of Miller's understanding of Reformation theology in general (Emerson 1981: *passim*). He had not, after all, been trained in such scholarship but, autodidact that he was, had picked it up as he needed it. Another matter concerned the whole problematic concept of a distinctive Puritan "mind," for the more that scholars focused on individual Puritan writers – like Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, and John Cotton, say – the more apparent were subtle but important differences in their views. Thus, Miller's presumption that it was permissible to treat "the whole literature as though it were the product of a single intelligence" became less tenable (1939: vii).

Yet another issue was Miller's seeming lack of interest in writing qua writing; for a professor of English, he paid little attention to the literary traditions within

which Puritan clergy worked. To identify the jeremiad as a literary form was one thing, but for Miller to say *nothing*, for example, about typology in his volumes on the New England mind now seems extraordinary. Scholars regard this use of scriptural analogy as foundational in Puritan rhetoric, of as much (if not more) significance than the Ramist logic that Miller emphasized. Finally, there is the matter of his sources themselves, essentially the works included in Charles Evans's *American Bibliography* and Donald Wing's *English Books and Books Printed in England*. That is, Miller rarely worked in the manuscript archive, for in writing about the "mind" he was concerned primarily with that which had been made known to others through publication. Given the inclusion in his landmark anthology *The Puritans* (1938) of the works of the newly discovered poet Edward Taylor (which his co-editor Thomas H. Johnson had discovered), one would have thought Miller might have combed the repositories for other significant, if not equally extraordinary, finds. If he quoted manuscript sources, they tended to be items such as Cotton Mather's or Samuel Sewall's diaries, already edited and made available in modern format.

Despite such criticism, however, even in this period, Miller's formulation of Puritanism and his insistence on its centrality to the formation of the American mind never fully lost its luster. As historians of early America began to insist, for example, that the American colonies, "no matter how distant they might be from Britain or how much latitude they may have had in internal development" were all "cultural provinces of Britain," other scholars, particularly those based in Literature departments, continued to connect New England thought to subsequent American culture (Greene 1984: 3). This contributed to a "continuities" thesis that emphasized the relations between Puritan ideas and the achievement of the chief writers of what Matthiessen termed the "American Renaissance."

In 1979, for example, Emory Elliott, in a collection entitled *Puritan Influences in American Literature*, noted that "the task set before the present generation of students" is to "properly assay the impact of colonial Puritanism upon the development of American literature." Elliott assumed that "Puritanism contained the seeds of political and social ideals, structures of thought and language, and literary themes which inspired both the content and forms of much American writing from 1700 to the present" (1979: xii–xiii). Similarly, Mason I. Lowance, in the *Language of Canaan* (1980), sought to show "how Puritan epistemology influenced symbolic modes in American literature during the nineteenth century" (1980: 2). Indeed, as recently as 1994, Janice Knight, one of Heimert's last students, still worked in Miller's paradigm. In her *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*, whose title, as a revision of that of Miller's first book, promised something new, she merely parsed the Puritans' theology more precisely, arguing for a long-standing conflict between a rational and a mystical side to Puritanism from the days of Thomas Hooker and John Cotton on. Like her mentor, she was intent on showing the persistence of a mystical, antinomian side to the movement; and she found it and made large claims for its persistence: in Emerson's

"conversion on the Cambridge Common," for example, which she reads as "a romantic embodiment of the Brethren's notion of private sin and divine effulgence," and in Whitman's "chant of the body politic," a "secularist incarnation of the Christian community." "Rather than discovering the embryonic voice of American imperialism or the prefiguration of bourgeois subjectivity," she concluded (obviously with Sacvan Bercovitch in mind), "an appreciative reading of the Brethren might uncover a utopian alternative within Puritanism itself," one, of course, that was available to later generations (1994: 199).

Even in the 1980s, though, literary historian William C. Spengemann had had enough of such argument and decided to reveal the emperor's new clothes. He condemned the search for such continuities as a brand of self-serving academic wish fulfillment by those who sought ways to fertilize the overworked field of nineteenth-century American Literary Study. His colleagues, he wittily put it, were engaged in "a kind of verbal shell game, in which the prestidigitator places his thematic pea under one shell labeled 'Puritan,' makes a lot of rapid movements on his typewriter, and then produces the pea from under another shell marked 'American literature'" (1981: 179).

But Spengemann was crying in the wilderness. His trenchant criticism had little immediate effect, for another major exponent of New England Puritanism and its continuities was replacing Miller as the dominant figure in the field. Indeed, Bercovitch was conscious of his role, noting in 1978 that in earlier versions of his work he had "muted" his dissent from Miller because he was "unwilling to join in the patricidal totem feast" following Miller's death (1978: 15). But from the beginning Bercovitch's work was revisionary. In 1972, for example, he edited a series of essays, *Typology and Early American Literature*, that did much to redirect Puritan studies. At home in scriptural exegesis, Bercovitch contributed an introductory essay as well as an invaluable bibliography of typological literature from the Church Fathers on, demonstrating the significance of a mode of interpretation of early American culture whose worth Miller simply underestimated and thus virtually neglected, except in the case of his study of Williams, whose thought he simply misconstrued. In addition to providing the underpinning to Bercovitch's own work, this method allowed scholars in a variety of fields to stake out new intellectual vantage points from which to survey the culture of the colonial period. To be sure, he did not single-handedly resurrect inquiry into typology in this period – in 1970, for example, the German scholar Ursula Brumm published *American Thought and Religious Typology*, a translation of a work issued in Germany seven years earlier – but he must be credited with demonstrating how completely biblical analogy permeates American Puritan literature and thus, through his own work and his sponsorship of others', with reorienting scholars to the implications of the complex rhetoric that underlies Puritan thought.

When Mason I. Lowance published *The Language of Canaan* in 1980, with its claims for the persistence of a typological mode of interpretation through the American Renaissance, he merely certified what most had come to believe:

scriptural analogy lay at the heart of the New England Puritan enterprise and so, by implication, beneath American culture as a whole. Bercovitch's revisionary intent was further clarified in his own major works on early New England thought. In such works as *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978), he argued as insistently as Miller for continuities between Puritanism and later American history, but with a different emphasis. In the former, for example, an extended reading of Cotton Mather's biographical portrait of John Winthrop, Bercovitch described how pervasively and indelibly Mather's formulation of exemplary biography marked subsequent American literature. As "the literary *summa* of the New England Way," Bercovitch wrote, Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) (which included the life of Winthrop), stood at the head of a line of such American literary masterpieces as Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), works in whose rhetoric an author's personal and corporate identities were similarly twined. As a result of the Puritans' legacy in the realm of the American imagination, Bercovitch observed, all subsequent American writers composed biographies that melded their personal histories with the story of the nation as a whole (*Origins*, chapter 4: *passim*). In *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch expanded his investigation of the uniqueness and continuity of Puritan rhetoric in American culture and discussed its part in the establishment and maintenance of that culture's dominant ideology. He argued, for example, that the jeremiad was even more significant than Miller had thought. It was a powerful communal ritual "designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, [and] shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols." Miller, Bercovitch claimed, had underestimated the pervasive theme of affirmation and exultation that was part of the jeremiad's equation and essential to its longevity. As he saw it, from the days of Winthrop through the American Revolution and on to the Civil War, America's religious and civic leaders had institutionalized a rhetorical mode in which, alongside threats of divine retribution for the Puritans' apostasy from the God of their fathers, they sang an incessant "litany of hope" to the rising glory of America. The jeremiad functioned to "create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless 'progressivist' energies required for the success of the venture," even as it operated in a very conservative way, as a tool of profoundly middle-class culture and aspirations (1978: 6, 9–18). As Bercovitch later admitted, behind his contentious depiction lay the outsider's – he is Canadian by birth – puzzlement and repulsion at America's insistent belief in itself as a redeemer nation, its self-righteous descent into the quagmire of the Vietnam War the most recent example of such hubris (1993: 1). But, despite the book's withering analysis of the American dream, more than any work since Miller's the *American Jeremiad* legitimated the task of seeking continuities between the literature of the colonial period and subsequent eras.

Another prominent voice in American Studies circles equally critical of Puritanism's legacy was Richard Slotkin. In *Regeneration through Violence: The*

Mythology of the American Frontier 1600–1860 (1973), he described and analyzed what he viewed as the inherent and persistent violence at the core of the American soul, which he traced to the New England colonists' attitude toward both the New World in general and, more specifically, its indigenous peoples. In this, he followed the Modernist critic, D. H. Lawrence, who in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) had been much more caustic than William Carlos Williams about white settlers' insensitivity to the American land and its native inhabitants. Slotkin added power to Lawrence's observations by linking them to the myth criticism of Carl Jung and, more directly, of Joseph Campbell to explore the fact and rationalization of violence in two and a half centuries of American writing. Slotkin was at his most convincing when he treated the period before 1800, particularly in his discussion of Indian captivity narratives (a genre Miller virtually ignored) and witchcraft. Slotkin's anger and disgust at the horror of the Vietnam War looms behind this powerful work, as it does Bercovitch's. For these scholars, the nation's recent past was inextricably linked to what it had experienced from the days of settlement on.

Other scholars, however, severely criticized such harsh, negative assessments of American Puritanism and in so doing illustrated how contested a term it remained. One of the most vituperative of these was David Harlan, who took particular umbrage at what he regarded as Bercovitch's misreading of American history. Bercovitch's protestations notwithstanding, Harlan believed that this critic had come "not to honor Miller but to bury him," offering not an extension of his work but "its denial and negation." Bercovitch's Puritanism, Harlan contended, was "mean spirited and hegemonic," and in so mischaracterizing it, he was "rewriting the entire chronicle of American history – its underlying structure, its essential content, its fundamental meaning." Bercovitch was purposefully "reconstructing the American past, recasting who we have been and redefining who we should become." Harlan regretted in Bercovitch's scholarship the lack of the unmistakable moral dimension that he found in Miller's work. Although Miller had never sought to make anyone "believe" in Puritan theology, he clearly thought (as Harlan put it) that Puritan texts had transcendent value. They could "illuminate the dark corners of life," help us "resist the blind cravings of the ego," and encourage us "to challenge to the myths of self-realization and material progress that have come to dominate American culture" (1997: 33–4). Harlan sought to engender a new respect for the importance of Puritanism to American culture, but because of what some took as his moralizing tone, his criticism of Bercovitch, trenchant as it was, had no large effect. But little by little this critic's juggernaut was slowed, *pace* Harlan, through scholarship that further undermined Puritanism's purportedly foundational role in American Culture Studies. And it was not only the academy's reaction to the morass of Vietnam, for example, that redirected scholarship. More and more historians, for instance, in addition to insisting on the increasing Anglicization of the colonies in the years before independence, shifted their attention to other, hitherto understudied, aspects of the European settlement of the

Americas, de-centering New England from its long-privileged place as the most studied region. A group of scholars informally known as the "Chesapeakers," for example, focused on Virginia and Maryland, producing rich social histories that demonstrated the centrality of the "Tobacco Colonies" to the British Empire. Others extended their view through the Caribbean; their scholarship further removed New England from the center of what eventually became the new "Atlantic History."

Nowhere was the Puritans' marginality more on display than in Jack P. Greene's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (1988). To Greene, the colonial South, particularly the Chesapeake, left the most profound legacy on the subsequent development of American ideology. "Far from being a peripheral, much less a deviant area," he wrote, "the southern colonies and states were before 1800 in the mainstream of British-American development" and "epitomized what was arguably the most important element in emerging British-American culture: the conception of America as a place in which free people could pursue their own individual happiness in safety and with a fair prospect that they might be successful in their several quests" (1988: 5). In Greene's formulation, New England was the odd colony out, not only in deviating from the mainstream of British colonial development but representing a "sharp reaction to, even as rejection of it." In their attempts to create a biblical commonwealth, he continued, the Puritans were "in so many respects anti-modern," and conducted a social experiment "intended not to replicate but to move in precisely the opposite direction of the world they had abandoned in old England," a world in the midst of a capitalist revolution (1988: 36, 38). This jibed with religious historian Dwight Bozeman's argument, in *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (1988) that, rather than ushering in progressive democracy, the New Englanders sought to return to the purity of Christ's first churches.

In no sense, then, were the Puritans the vanguard of middle-class America. Such people were found in far greater numbers almost anywhere else in the colonies, including on the islands of Jamaica and Barbados. In place of the Puritan origins of the American self, Greene posited the Chesapeake origins, because "the central cultural impulse among the colonists was not to identify and find ways to express and celebrate what was distinctively American about themselves and their societies but, insofar as possible, to eliminate these distinctions so that they might – with more credibility – think of themselves and their societies – and be thought of by the people in Britain – as demonstrably British" (1988: 175). To focus on New England was to focus on a sport. Not Cotton Mather's "Life of Winthrop" (*pace* Bercovitch) but the *True Travels* of Captain John Smith or Robert Beverly's *History and Present State of Virginia* offered the archetypal formation of American selfhood, for "in this emerging secular and commercial culture," Greene insisted, "the central orientation of people in the littoral became the achievement of personal independence" (1988: 195). Greene's colonists did not rationalize their

behavior through the subtleties and contradictions of Puritan rhetoric but openly stated why they were in the new land. "Important though it has sometimes been," Greene wrote, the concept of "national election seems never to have been so pervasively and persistently influential on shaping American culture as the notion of America as a place peculiarly favorable for the quest of the good life, defined as the pursuit of individual happiness and material achievement" (205).

Greene's broadside at the Novanglophiles was only the most notable example of what many historians had long thought: that those like Miller and Bercovitch who trumpeted New England Puritanism's centrality to the meaning of America were ignorant of social history and so misunderstood the course of the colonies' development. Moreover, by the 1990s, academic fashion was being set by the "New Americanists," so named by one of their critics, who did not enlist under the banner of "consensus" or "continuities" but of "dissensus," a term that Bercovitch himself popularized in his influential "The Problem of Ideology in a Time of Dissensus" (1993: 353–76).

Having been asked to edit the multi-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature*, in this essay Bercovitch essentially offered a position paper to his contributors, asking them to acknowledge that at the end of the twentieth century one had to write about American culture in new ways. Such concepts as "history," the "literary," and "American," about which there had been consensus for almost a century, now were subjects of lively debate as scholars perceived how such terms themselves were ideological formations. Scholars now had to recognize, he argued, that "race and gender are formal principles of art," that "political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment," and that "aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history." "Directly and indirectly," he continued, the controversies that these perceptions engendered "have undermined the old terms of consensus, and thereby heightened a broad ideological awareness among Americanists, while at the same time arming them against one another with competing modes of analysis" (1993: 357). Description of supposed "continuities" was *passé*; the whole field of American Studies was thrown open for new exploration by a cadre of younger scholars whom Bercovitch encouraged and sponsored as contributors to his massive new enterprise.[4] What distinguished this history, he wrote in the preface to the first volume, "is its variety of adversarial approaches and, more strikingly, the presence throughout of revisionary, nonoppositional ways of relating text and context" (1994–2005, 1: 3).

What marked the study of New England Puritanism in this time of "dissensus"? Bercovitch did not write the section about it for the *Cambridge History of American Literature* but gave the task to Emory Elliott. His Puritans, unlike Bercovitch's with their impregnable consensus, were nervous and tentative. They were not "Founding Fathers but a community in crisis" virtually from their arrival, and what one found in New England were "rich against poor, men against women, insider against outsider, one generation against another – each faction aspiring to political power through the ritual control of language." The result of Elliott's

cogitation, the general editor observed, offered a "double perspective on the period": both "a guide to the interpretation of American Puritanism" and "an analysis of the interpretive processes through which the Puritans forged their vision of America out of the discordant (and finally uncontrollable) materials" (1994–2005, 1: 7). The "new" Puritanism proved its adherents as conflicted as any in all subsequent periods in American history. Thus, it was not so much influential as typical, in this case, of a nation whose destiny was still woefully incomplete.

But the problem of dissensus also raised other issues. Where, for example, did one fit the many "new" writers who had been recovered and canonized by the New Americanists? One could understand connections between, say, Harriet Beecher Stowe and seventeenth-century New England, but what about between Puritanism and Maria Cummins or Fanny Fern or Harriet Jacobs or Rebecca Harding Davis, chief exponents of what now was termed the "other American Renaissance"? If such connections no longer held, of what use was Puritanism to American Studies? By the 1990s (as Elliott's section in the *CHAL* indicated), it had become but another site for exploration of the new generation's chief scholarly (and sometimes ideologically driven) concerns. New England, in other words, now was of interest not so much for any direct influence it had on subsequent American history but for its typicality. Puritanism's significance lay in the always-acknowledged richness of its sources, which allowed for all sorts of new inquiry into matters having to do with the new shibboleth of race, class, and gender.

Some scholars tried to resist this trend. David D. Hall, for example, the foremost practitioner of *l'histoire du livre* on this side of the Atlantic and as formidable a scholar of Puritanism as any of his generation, focused on popular religious belief in seventeenth-century New England, offering not what in Miller's day had been termed intellectual history, but cultural history. In *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* (1989), he traced the persistence of certain pre-migration patterns of understanding the world and thus described a "hegemonic system" that "if understood as culture," was yet "rich in countervailing practices and motifs" (1989: 245). This was a polite way of saying that both Miller and Bercovitch had gotten it wrong, for their understanding of religion was too restrictive, and so they looked for it in the wrong places. Where they saw power that could not be unseated, Hall argued for the notion of a shared culture that did not so much breed division as creative flux, providing adherents varied ways of comprehending how the divine impinged in terrestrial affairs. Looking at primers, chapbooks, and other "steady sellers" rather than at the massive treatises of Hooker or Shepard, he explored the ways in which the laity assembled their spirituality from a variety of sources. His Puritans were rich examples of seventeenth-century men and women for whom faith was fluid, useful in ways earlier scholars had simply missed. Hall's, then was a history, he believed, "of culture as a whole," the story of "how structures of meaning emerge, circulate, and are put to use" (245). His work has influenced many others, the important young scholar Matthew P. Brown among them. His

The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England (2007), a rich evocation of the meaning of texts, extends Hall's notion of the Puritans' verbal universe.

Another such scholar is Sandra Gustafson. In her sections on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England religion in *Eloquence Is Power* (2000), she interrogates her sources to locate a "performance semiotic," that is, an understanding of "the contextual nature and strategic uses of speech and writing as signs relating the individual body to the social body" (xvii). An example of someone who is deeply invested in issues of race, class, and gender, she avoids the charge of ideological partisanship by judicious attention to that enlarged sense of culture that Hall had defined. Herein, for example, she is not so much interested in the words of Puritan divines as of people on the margins – women, African Americans, Native Americans – who similarly understood speech as a technology through which to acquire and maintain power. Nuanced and learned, her analysis demonstrates the best kind of work done by those interested in "dissensus." And, again, her point is not to show continuities but, like Hall, to depict and dissect the complexity of culture in new ways through attention to its many facets. For her, Puritanism is one source (admittedly important) for the technology of speech, and to focus too exclusively on it is to misconstrue what the culture as a whole said, and how.

Or to take another example, consider another scholar of her generation, Philip H. Round. In *By Nature and Custom Cursed* (1999), he unabashedly declares that his book is "not about Puritanism," even though "there *are* Puritans in it." "Rather than viewing Puritan ideology at the center of New England cultural production," his study examines "the social dimensions of New England utterance, investigating how various colonial ideologies were promoted and packaged and how social performance served as the engine for the cultural 'work' these ideologies accomplished in the broader, transatlantic field of English cultural production" (1999: xi). For Round, this transatlantic dimension is significant, as it had become for many scholars who engaged in what was termed the new "Atlantic History," that is, the history of the colonies and metropoles that defined the emergent mercantile revolution. For many, New England alone was no longer the main interest.

Among the first to take Puritanism seriously and subject it to sustained scholarly analysis were people like Murdock and Miller, members of literature departments, who placed it at the headwaters of subsequent American thought. But, for most Americanists, such an attitude has become simply part of a storied past. Consider, for example, the reduced emphasis on New England religious thought in a recent publication of the Modern Language Association, *Teaching the Literatures of Early America* (1999). The title is instructive. No longer do scholars think of early America as having had one literature, in English, nor, by implication, that early American

thought is exemplified in the writings of the New England Puritans. In this volume are essays that treat Native and African American material; and there is a separate chapter on "Early Women's Texts." Moreover, "America" in this work includes the French and Spanish colonies, and "colonialism," "multiculturalism," and "empire" are words with which to conjure. Only in one chapter, in a section called "British Colonial and Postcolonial Writings" is there talk of "The Literature of Colonial English Puritanism" (Gura 1999: 143–54).

In it, I address the challenge of teaching Puritan texts in ways that engage some of the important questions about early America now being framed in the academy. Among these are: the varied reasons for settling the New World and calling it one's own; the manifold ways in which Europeans came to view themselves, over time, as "American"; how an "American" self might differ, in its self-referentiality as well as in its understanding of others, from the European; and how concepts of the "other" – dissidents, participants in rival religious systems (such as witchcraft), or Native Americans – framed colonial identity. These and other questions have solely to do with the place of Puritanism within early (what used to be called "colonial") American culture, not with its legacy in subsequent United States culture. Once a chief constituent to any understanding of the United States of America, Puritanism is no longer central to this project, even if among some scholars it remains fascinating as a complex, engaging body of thought. It does not help, though, as a prominent early Americanist recently noted, that "no one reading manuscripts submitted to the academic presses and journals during the past decade can escape the conviction that theological literacy among early Americanists has declined" (1999: 639). As Harlan lamented, most scholars have lost the ability to study Puritanism with any degree of sympathy.

This melancholy thought returns us to one of William Carlos Williams's brilliant insights. This country's "rudeness," he wrote in *In the American Grain* ([1925] 1956), in large measure "rests upon the unstudied character of our beginnings," and "if we will not pay heed to our own affairs, we are nothing but an unconscious porkyard and oilhole for those more able, who will fasten themselves upon us." This, of course, is what Miller and his generation of early Americanists believed, and as well (with Williams) that "aesthetically, morally, we are deformed unless we read" (Williams [1925] 1956: 109). But, savvy reader that he was, Williams, like the most recent Americanists, understood the violence, literal and linguistic, through which the Puritans wrested control of a land they euphemistically called a "wilderness." Puritanism's usefulness as the central motif through which to understand America only lasted until, in the late 1960s, scholars awakened to this same insight and came to view Puritanism as only one among a number of technologies – the Catholicism of Williams's friend Larbaud was another – through which these Europeans fended off the terror of being such strangers in the land. In this sense, it always connected them more to what they had left behind than to what eventually made them "American."

Notes

1 Here Miller may have had in mind Edward Eggleston's provocative *The Transit of Civilization* (1900), in which he spoke of the settlement of North America in terms of folk movements.
2 Today we would say that Miller understood the importance of the "transatlantic." This is often overlooked by those in his wake who used his scholarship to celebrate (and later condemn), American "exceptionalism."
3 *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* in fact forms the second part of what amounts to a trilogy of works, for in it Miller traces the development of Puritan ideas about the Covenant through New England's first generation.
4 Frederick C. Crews coined the term "New Americanists" in an essay in the *New York Review of Books* (September 24, 1992).

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