

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 7, 2015, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Sacvan Bercovitch was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

SACVAN BERCOVITCH

BORN: October 4, 1933

DIED: December 9, 2014

Sacvan Bercovitch, the Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature, *Emeritus*, and the foremost Americanist of his generation, was born in Montreal, the third child of Ukrainian Jewish parents, the painter Alexander Bercovitch and the radical Yiddishist Bryna Avrutik, who named him after Sacco and Vanzetti. He and his two sisters Sara (renamed Sylvia) and Ninel (Lenin spelled backwards) grew up in poverty, and Saki spent much of his childhood in foster homes, reaching higher education only through a circuitous route that included brief episodes at the New School for Social Research and at Reed College and work as a dairy farmer in an Israeli kibbutz, where he met his first wife, Gila (Hannah Malmquist).

Back in Montreal, he worked in Steinberg's grocery store, whose manager encouraged him to continue his education. He went to night school and received his B.A. from Sir George Williams College when he was 27, then entered graduate school at Claremont and was awarded the Ph.D. in 1965, with a dissertation on Cotton Mather. Various teaching appointments followed at Brandeis University, the University of California at San Diego, and Princeton University. He taught at Columbia University from 1970 to 1983, where he became the Old Dominion Professor in the Humanities. In 1983 he joined the faculty of Harvard University and soon taught such popular courses as "The Myth of America," which would itself assume mythic status. He met his second wife, Susan Mizruchi, a Professor of American literature at Boston University.

He became internationally known for learned and provocative work on the entire range of American literature. In his book *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, he undertook a "cultural close reading of popular and high literature, sermons and histories, July Fourth orations and protest manifestoes" and traced the pervasive presence of Puritan rhetoric in America. "The rhetoric of America," he writes, "united a more or less random gathering of emigrant groups under an identity of newness, and declared as preordained its dramatically, sometimes arbitrarily, shifting boundaries, from thirteen East Coast states to half a continent." Central was a new notion of selfhood that he called "auto-American-biography: the story of one's self as symbol of America, as in Thoreau's *Walden*." In *The American*

Jeremiad he wondered how rhetoric of critical indictment, going back to the fire-and-brimstone sermons of the Puritans, could be transformed into a mode of affirmation. “In this country,” he writes, “the *unmediated* relation between social structure and social ideal has made the very exposure of social flaws part of a ritual of socialization—a sort of liminal interior dialogue that in effect reinforces the mainstream culture.” The books *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* and *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* as well as many essays and published lectures further expanded and deepened his approach. He edited such landmark collections as *Typology and Early American Literature*, *Reconstructing American Literary History*, and *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. For an entire decade he served as general editor of the monumental eight-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature*. He also took a deep interest in Yiddish literature and translated into English works by Sholem Aleichem, Solomon Ary, Itzik Manger, and his own mother. He was a charismatic lecturer who advised more than a hundred doctoral dissertations and senior theses.

Bercovitch found a global following for the way he defined the field, and his work was translated into many languages, among them Chinese, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, and Portuguese. He was elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, served as President of the American Studies Association, and received such honors as the MLA’s James Russell Lowell Prize for the best book of the year and lifetime achievement awards in three fields: Early American Literature, American Literature, and American Studies. Upon being awarded one of these remarkable distinctions, he commented drily: “I’m trying to let it go to my head.”

Saki, as he was known to his friends, students, and colleagues, was a vivid character. An anarchist at heart, he was skeptical of institutions and critical of all fashions in literary criticism, from austere New Criticism to the lavish celebrity worship of today. He stylized himself modestly as a Canadian outsider, a figure from a Kafka story, or a chess player who has to deal with rules that are constantly changing. He could quip skeptically: “The universities used to cater to the elite, now it’s democracy. But universities *are* elite, you can’t democratize physics and chemistry, so the humanities are the tithe that they pay to the culture.” Still he would remind graduate students that a career in the humanities was a “good gig” and that university teaching was in reality “the last aristocratic profession.” Recalling how, after a lecture on the problem of American identity, he was pressed (“a bit belligerently”) by a questioner as to where he himself *stood*, he replied, “One foot out the door.” Later, looking back on that exchange from retirement, he glossed his earlier remark without disowning it: “I would say now that I stand securely within a community that can accommodate chronic outsiders.”

In conversation he was congenial, humorous, paradoxical, and utterly unpretentious. He had an uncanny ability to be at once knowing and innocent, a sophisticated master of the textual archive and a wide-eyed stranger, like Kafka’s Karl Roßmann, amazed by what he was

witnessing on the shores of the New World. He was warm, and at the same time elusive. His readers must have guessed that he was—and his colleagues and former students knew Saki to be—a whimsically self-questioning, disarmingly candid, and charmingly vulnerable man who would surprise you—and then surprise you again.

In 2000 ill health forced Saki into early retirement. His long and complex life and his own illnesses gave him patience and insight about how to deal with adversity. He succumbed to cancer last December and leaves his wife, Susan, his sons, Eytan and Sascha, and his sisters, Sylvia and Ninel.

Respectfully submitted,

Donald Fanger
Stephen Greenblatt
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