

DAVID BERGELSON

When All Is Said And Done

Translated from the Yiddish by
Bernard Martin

Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1978.
Pp. 310. \$13.50 Cloth; \$7.25
Paperback.

The destruction of the Jews in Europe put an end to one of the most extraordinary cultures that flourished in the despised ghettos and secluded *stetls*, and which actually were a repository of untold riches of human spirit in its search for the sublime. In the smouldering ruins of Europe after 1945, there was left one center of Jewish culture which was not entirely wiped out, namely, Russia. In 1952 Stalin stamped out this last spark during the infamous "purges" in which Yiddish schools, theaters, press, and publishing houses were liquidated, and scores of Jewish writers murdered; among these was David Bergelson at the age of sixty-eight.

In 1913, when Bergelson was still in his twenties, he wrote the present novel under the original Yiddish title, *Nokh Alemen*. It was immediately acclaimed, both thematically and stylistically, as a masterpiece. On the face of it the novel deals with the disintegration of the Jewish *stetl* in prerevolutionary Russia. This in itself was nothing new, since outstanding writers, such as Mendele Mocher Sefarim, had done it before, and much more effectively. Bergelson was not (at that time) a social critic, and the book, to the degree that it is a social commentary, is so by default. The stifling atmosphere of the small town in which the drama of the novel plays itself out also rings a familiar bell and brings to mind a crowded gallery of provincial heroines pining away in the tedium of their surroundings: Emma Bovary, Hedda Gabler and, above all, some of the Chekhovian characters. In the introduction, the translator of the book makes a direct reference to Chekhov's significant influence on Bergelson. And yet, *When All Is Said And Done* is, in a profound sense, very different from any of the above.

Mirel Hurvitz, the heroine, is both an individualized character and a symbol. On the first level she is the spoilt only daughter of a scholarly father, "the scion of many generations of learned and wealthy

ancestors" (p. xv), who, in his distracted and rather disarmingly aloof manner, mismanaged his worldly affairs and is on the brink of bankruptcy. To alleviate his burdens Mirel decides, on an impulse, to marry the rich Shmulik Zaidenovski who, both socially and intellectually, is her inferior. The degree of her distaste for the future husband, and for family life as such, becomes obvious when we learn that she marries Shmulik just "as a joke," "temporarily." This impulse of equivocal generosity results in redoubling her own misery, practical destruction of a foolish but loyal and loving husband, abortion, and a long list of male casualties who become enmeshed in her inexplicable fascination.

Mirel is a product of a refined and overcultivated Jewish tradition which collides and gives way to the vulgarity and boorishness of an upcoming middle class. The *stetl*, once a seat of scholarship and patriarchal leadership, is now dominated by proprieties empty of a moral vigor, religious forms reduced to stale habit, and by men whose very names evoke boredom and mediocrity. Stagnation and monotony have turned the *stetl* into a bloodless phantom. Mirel, vibrant and yearning for some form of fulfillment and beauty, unlike a Chekhovian heroine, has no past upon which to feed a morbid nostalgia, nor a worthwhile illusion which could direct her towards a future. She is too intelligent for self-deception, too proud to let herself slip into corruption, too strong-willed for the comfort of compromise, and too selfish for self-abnegation. Mirel is in search of an answer to the riddle of her existence, and the looming certainty that her relentless persistence leads to perdition does not deter her. Her ruthlessness—both to herself and to others—has a Nietzschean quality to it, and sets her apart from the common moral distinctions. The nonchalance with which she manipulates her own, as well as others' hearts and souls, puts her, at times, in the realm of myth and romantic imagination. Whether Bergelson intended it or not, Mirel is of the same mettle as a Faust and a Lorelei, uncomfortable as such a coexistence may be. Being both the subject and object of a devouring longing, she sings forever the souls of those who love her. Her fascination, like a primordial curse, spells disaster but also enriches those who succumb to it. She has the power to stir dull hearts and, like the forbidden fruit, opens eyes to intimations of some

earthly splendor. Yet she herself is desolate and lost and in quest of a revelation. Ironically, Hertz, the enigmatic Hebrew poet who intrigues her and from whom she expects some ultimate answers, refuses to take her seriously and remains silent. In the end Mirel leaves her house, husband, and town, and simply disappears.

Mirel the disconsolate and destructive, willful and independent, is a bold divergent from the Yiddish literature of the time. True, Tevye's daughters were as determined and individualistic as Mirel, and more constructively so. It is precisely this sympathetic presentation of her single-minded aestheticism, untempered by charity and reverence for life, which makes her quite unique and which must have prompted some critics, such as Samuel Niger, to call the novel not really "Jewish." (See Martin's "Introduction," p. xviii and footnote 4.)

Stylistically too the novel treads new paths. Following the then prevalent school of impressionism, Bergelson adopts the style with uncontested success. In the words of Bernard Martin: "The impressionistic form of his novel . . . was by no means original with him . . . But Bergelson introduced stylistic devices of his own admirably suited to his artistic purposes. Among them are the virtually complete avoidance of dialogue and the substitution for it of indirect quotation, the constant repetition of phrases and complete sentences, and the frequent use of passive verb forms" (p. xviii).

The translation into English is extremely readable and yet conveys admirably the peculiar idiom and linguistic interpretation of a world secluded in itself. The poetic qualities of this novel are masterfully transmitted into a foreign language. The small town sadness, juxtaposed against the humble splendors of nature, combine into a singular blend when projected through a Jewish sensibility, a sensibility steeped in ancient tradition and yet keenly aware of new influences.

When All Is Said And Done is a major artistic accomplishment and Bernard Martin should be commended for his labor of love.

Miriam Roshwald

NINA BAYM

Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978. Pp. 315.

Nina Baym treats woman's fiction as a genre which ran its course in America from 1820 until 1870 and whose golden years were in the 1850s. For Baym, woman's fiction is written by women, about women for women and essentially describes woman's trials and eventual triumph. She points out, more than once but unfortunately with no documentation, that the reading public in America expanded vastly before the Civil War and most readers were women. Baym comes to the defense of these "popular" writers, too often lumped together as "scribbling women" by Hawthorne and later commentators, as novelists whose work fulfilled the needs of the people who read them.

Although each writer is obviously different, each of these novels is basically a bildungsroman without the psychological character development inherent to that genre. Basically, each story deals with the progress of a young woman, often starting with the heroine as a young child, as she encounters misfortune after misfortune (caused by external events and not character flaw) which, instead of breaking her will, strengthens ("perfects" is the word most used by these authors according to Baym) her already "good" character. At the end, she usually marries a cheerful, hard-working, energetic man, often a minister, who respects her and accepts her as an equal. Thus, the typical heroine has a character of goodness and strength: she does not have to struggle over which road to take. She triumphs and she gets the prize.

Baym quite correctly points out that the reader of these novels was more interested in the heroine than in the hero and was more attracted to the novel that had "local color" and dealt with situations that the reader knew first hand—running a farm, domestic problems and financial difficulties—than those placed in the category of gothic romances whose settings and dilemmas were unknown to her. The reader of these novels was able