

Michael André Bernstein

*Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Pp. 13 + 181. \$22.00

Reviewed by Roy Arthur Swanson

Stating his belief that "the role of theory should only be to illuminate practice, never to dictate it" (122), Michael André Bernstein illuminates the literary practices of foreshadowing, backshadowing, and sideshadowing, and appraises the eminent superiority of the last, if not as a mandate for practice, then as an appropriate point of departure toward a new and potentially effective narrative strategy for fiction based on the *Shoah* (the Hebrew word for holocaust). The appraisal, however, does tend, as the book's subtitle itself indicates, to become prescriptive.

He explains that, in narrative, foreshadowing denotes inevitability: whatever happens is related in the light of what finally happens and is seen as part of an ineluctable progression toward that end, its sole meaning being its part in the progression. This lends no value whatsoever to the individual lives of the *Shoah*'s victims. Backshadowing, a term coined by Bernstein, denotes predictability and the total lack of historical options, lending to the *Shoah* the distinction of realized prophecy and further depriving the *Shoah*'s victims of individual worth. Against these, sideshadowing, a term coined by Gary Saul Morson, recreates the currency of a historical event, retaining all the options available during the event and keeping the participants' perspective free from deterministic hindsight.

An analogue of sideshadowing could be the wave function in modern physics, retentive of all possibilities including the particle into which it collapses, while all remaining particular potentials inhabit their alternative worlds. Bernstein does not employ this analogy, but it may occur to readers who appreciate the creative fluidity of sideshadowing. As an example of this creative fluidity Bernstein cites Dostoevsky's antideterministic withholding of the identity of Smerdyakov's parentage, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, until the mystery may be resolved beyond any pattern of predestination.

His prime examples of sideshadowing in fictional narrative are Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* and Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He shows Musil not to have let the historical fact of World War I predetermine the history of his characters. All avenues of possibility remain open to them, including, and not exclusively, European mobilization. Bernstein even suggests that the incompleteness of the book helps to explain the "centrality of sideshadowing" (109) in Musil's thinking. Proust's closure, meanwhile, is meritorious in its sideshadowing by not revealing biography as destiny. Each episode in the novel, according to Bernstein, "exists almost inviolate in its own distinct sphere" (115) and the novel, as a whole, discloses to its readers the manner of continuous construction and reconstruction of the meaning of any individual's own existence.

Bernstein's initial example of foreshadowing, with its implication of "a closed universe in which all choices have already been made" (2), is "the Christian Church Fathers' reduction of the Hebrew Bible to a cycle of prefigurations of . . . the Gospel story" (2). This is no more an anti-Christian bias than his subsequent complaint about the inefficacy of Jewish novelists is an anti-Jewish note; he remains firmly grounded in his unrelentingly objective study of narrative.

He defines backshadowing as "a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they should have known what was to come*" (16; his emphasis). His initial example is Ernst Pawel's biography of Kafka, in which mention of the birth of Kafka's sister is followed by a notice of the birth earlier that year "in the not too distant Austrian town of Braunau" (17) of the sickly but surviving son of Clara and Alois Hitler.

The focus of *Foregone Conclusions* is on modes of narrating the *Shoah*, which narration, Bernstein argues, is properly accomplished only in historical sideshadowing and neither in works of fiction—not in extant works, at least—nor in most survival accounts, those by Primo Levi being something of an exception. The aesthetic qualities of creative writing themselves appear to elicit positive responses inappropriate to the subject. Thomas Keneally, wishing, with *Schindler's List*, not to debase the record by having recourse to fiction, nonetheless employed "the texture and devices of the novel to tell a true story" (51). William Styron's Auschwitz scenes in *Sophie's Choice* are effectively dismissed as narration akin to "sodomasochistic pornography" (54). In extended argument, Bernstein censures Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*, despite its receipt of considerable praise in Israel, as "completely devoid of sideshadows" (81): in it, the secularized Jews of Badenheim retain a blind optimism even as they lose their freedom and are freighted away for resettlement. The dramatic irony here would amount to foreshadowing. According to Bernstein, Appelfeld does not mention the death camps by name "only because of his certainty that the reader will do so in his place" (60).

The conspicuous absence from his essay of any consideration of fiction by André Schwarz-Bart and Elie Wiesel argues *ex silentio* Bernstein's rejection of their narratives as valid depictions of the *Shoah*. His advocacy of sideshadowing as prerequisite to a valid narrative of the *Shoah* is an imposing challenge to Holocaust-oriented novelists and may well go unheeded by those jealous of establishing their own paradigms. Willy-nilly, the advocacy constitutes a dictating of practice, which, if it should never be the role of theory, seems yet somehow here to be on stage.