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Search Terms: Ignatieff

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Edit Search

Print Email

Document List Expanded List KWIC Full

◀◀ previous Document 17 of 19. next ▶▶

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Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History

by Michael Andre Bernstein

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When I look back at the figures who occupied the pedestals of intellectual prestige during my graduate education--Marx, Freud, Levi- Strauss, Foucault, Althusser--not one of them remains standing. In the lonely garden of postmodern thought, the alley ways are littered with toppled statues. The great authorities are discredited; and the remains of their reputations are fought over in tenured coteries. Thinking in the 1990s means strolling through that abandoned garden. The overgrown paths are strewn with broken relics, from which only a certain departed grandeur may be inferred. And these ruins do not offer inspiration, only the melancholy of vanished worlds. Melancholy, but not nostalgia. The sentimentality about lost certainties is a little grotesque. It is important to remember all the intellectual intimidation. In the name of these passing fashions, so many anathemas were pronounced, so much conformity masked itself as radicalism, so much bad writing passed itself off as gnomic insight. It is an occasion for gladness, then, that there are no reigning tyrannies left, except the tyranny of nostalgic pessimism itself.

In retrospect, the allure of grand theory concealed the extent to which the thrilling shock of the new was really the expiring shudder of the old. Marxism and Freudianism were the last gasp of nineteenth-century ideologies, as they collided with circumstances and conditions that they could not explain. What seems extraordinary now is that these venerable Victorian gentlemen were treated as modernist prophets. In keeping them alive, we kept ourselves in a state of arrested intellectual development. Now, the moment comes at last when we can give them a decent (but final) burial. It's not that Marx and Freud (or Weber, or Durkheim, or the other masters of my Harvard social studies course) will not be read in the next century; they will be read wherever respect is paid to ambition and genius. But at last they will be read archaeologically, as the remains of a mental universe that we no longer can call our own.

This leaves us in a curious state of intellectual denudation. For theories of the past are always maps of a possible future. Now we are walking backward into the future, and without maps. Of course, most of the time we have managed without maps; ideology was a fact of culture, not a fact of nature. Nor are we without refracted glimpses of the future. It may be sentimental to think of artists as seers, but this form of sentimentality is ancient, and it has a basis in reality. Artists do seek to capture, as theorists do not, the unrepeatable particularity of the present; the paradox is that it is only in the unrepeatable present that the

future can be glimpsed at all.

But the grand narrative analysis that would link all these glimpses of the future together into swaggering, predictive, nineteenth-century-style theory is not so much beyond our reach as beyond any conceivable grasp. The overreachers have been shown to have overreached. The grand synthesis is not merely out of style; it now seems, for the first time since the Enlightenment, incoherent. And its fall into incoherence owes much to what Michael Andre Bernstein rightly describes as its insistence upon "foregone conclusions."

Foregone conclusions: as forms of historical or psychological inevitability, Freudianism and Marxism sought expressly to leave us unsurprised by the world. Everything singular in our experience could be put down as an unexceptional instance of some larger and more comprehensive truth. An event was inevitable or it had no meaning. Contingency was insufferable. Everything that happened could be made to look as if it could never have happened otherwise. To argue with such determinism, moreover, was to give proof of bad faith or false consciousness or inauthenticity. Only the bourgeois and the neurotic refused the truth of grand narrative. (The reactionary merely had a different narrative, and so was a more acceptable heretic.)

We bourgeois neurotics may not have inherited the earth, but there is no returning to the systems. The ruin of theory is general. And the universal disarray, right and left, is no bad thing. It gives heart to those who have always believed that thinking is best done alone. The collapse of the grand narratives restores those of us who endured compulsory miseducation at their hands to the contemplation of contingency, chance, accident, strangeness and unfamiliarity: all of which are unfailing stimuli to serious thought. For once, honest awe and honest perplexity have been allowed to enter our heads.

Yet we are frightened of our perplexity. The popular vogue for chaos theory is a sign of this. (If chaos can be theorized, it is not really chaos at all.) We no longer believe in any particular narrative, but we long for narrative as such. We have what Bernstein calls "a nostalgia for determinism." The habit of thinking of our century apocalyptically is well-entrenched--seeing it as the worst century in recorded history and predicting worse to come, as in certain strains of environmentalism or the current fashion of viewing our times as a return to the Dark Ages, with our civilization being overrun by barbarians, variously perceived as the ethnic nationalists without or the so-called underclass within. The habit shows that we prefer stories to no story, even when the story scares us half to death. There is an intoxication in the apocalyptic, as Bernstein reminds us, and there is comfort in the coherence of catastrophe.

Michael Andre Bernstein's splendid book is a hearteningly affirmative product of this new age of uncertainty and self-doubt. It is written in aid of the proposition that this is neither the best nor the worst of times, and that, in any case, what we can possibly know about the times is bound to be particular and discrete rather than universal and sweeping. Bernstein mounts an eloquent, humane defense of the idea that thought should devote itself to what is singular, specific and prosaic. He has produced a fine example of useful trespass, a lucid inquiry into the philosophy of history by someone who isn't a historian at all but a professor of comparative literature at Berkeley. As a (former) historian, I enjoyed it precisely because the terrain it takes for granted--literary theories of narrative--is more or less unknown to me.

Bernstein's chief concern is with foreshadowing, by which he means the feeling of historical inevitability, the tendency to read the past in terms of the future and to judge historical actors in terms of their capacity to predict or foretell events. The primal foreshadowing, he argues, is the early Christian refiguring of the Hebrew Bible as a prophecy of the coming of Christ. He argues that "the very idea of history as a linear unfolding from darkness toward light, and from ignorance toward truth" starts with the early Christian reconception of Jewish religious history as prophecy. The vast, somewhat disorderly universe of the Hebrew Bible was diminished into a single choral antiphon prophesying the coming of a single redeemer. This reductionism, Bernstein argues, is present in all of the narratives that humans have developed to make sense of the passage from time past to time future. In this sense, the Marxist teleology of revolution, if considered as a narrative, recapitulates the foreshadowing strategies of the Christian redemption story.

In all forms of foreshadowing, the future is invested with the sole authority to accord meaning to the past. In reality, as we know, lives can have meaning (and dignity) in the present, even when they end in failure, defeat or annihilation in the future. Their worthiness is not to be judged by how they turn out. Most forms of historical grand narrative are success stories writ large, and are as cruel on the large scale as the myth of success is cruel on the small. Walter Benjamin once remarked that we should emancipate ourselves from the idea that life and work have significance only if they are remembered in the future. There are countless lives and works whose worth endures even if they are remembered only by God. Our problem, of course, is that we have put history in the place once occupied by the Remembrancer, and in doing so we have equated significance with historical success.

Bernstein is hardly the first person to remark on the teleological reductionism of Christian apologetics, Marxian history and Freudian psychology. All of Isaiah Berlin's writing on the philosophy of history can be read as a sustained attack on the "inevitabilism" that afflicts Marxian, and to a lesser extent Freudian, narrative. But Bernstein adds significantly to the discussions of the historians by examining art, specifically the attempt by twentieth-century novelists, such as Joyce, Proust, Broch and Musil, to find forms that would break free not only of the heavy-handed ironies of historical foreshadowing, but the closure demanded by the novel form itself.

All novelists play God, but a good God, Bernstein insists, does not judge his characters for not knowing what he alone can know. If a novelist allows himself the ironies of hindsight at his characters' expense, readers are let off the hook: they are handed a position of easy superiority toward fictional creatures floundering on the edge of the unknown. Bernstein gives a marvelously insightful reading of Robert Musil's great novel *The Man Without Qualities*, to show how Musil struggled to avoid cheap ironies at the expense of characters paddling about on the lip of the waterfall of World War I. "The Habsburg Empire we actually are shown in Musil's pages could just as easily have lasted many years more than collapse when it did."

Foreshadowing is most easily avoided, Bernstein argues, when novelists learn to side-shadow, that is, when they demonstrate the contingent nature of their characters' choices. Side shadows are alternative plots and explanations of behavior, roads not taken in the writer's elaboration of the form. Good novels keep side shadows in; bad ones shut them out, and allow a reader (and their characters) only one destiny, one fate. Side-shadowing speaks to the contingent and haphazard way our lives unfold. This contingency leaves us with a haunted sense of lives that we might have lived, choices that we might have had good reason to make. Only in mediocre art does life unfold as fate. Yet all of us yearn, in Bernstein's words, for the possibility that our biography "will be revealed as destiny," and that "the life we ended up having was, from the outset, actually the only possible one." This is what makes us suckers for bad books.

In illustrating this theme, Bernstein selects a courageous, if controversial, target: Aharon Appelfeld's novel *Badenheim 1939*, a book that many people think is a very good book indeed. Appelfeld's novel tells the story of a group of complacently ignorant Austro-German Jews holidaying blithely in an Austrian spa town on the eve of the Holocaust. In the course of the novel, the town is turned into a Third Reich transit camp, governed by a "sanitation department" that throws up walls and barbed wire around the town and eventually orders the baffled, indignant and unknowing holiday makers into a set of dirty railway cars.

We know where those railway cars are headed. We know everything that the vacationers do not know. The novel is thus a fable of self-delusion built on the "interaction between our knowledge and their ignorance." It opens up the whole issue of what assimilated European Jewry could have known, and should have known, about their predicament. In reality, of course, by 1939, any German Jew who could was beating down the doors of the consulates of Europe seeking visas and asylum. This is why the English version's addition of "1939" to the title absurdly heightens the apparent stupidity of the holidaymakers. By 1939 no Jew in his right mind would have been holidaying in any of the real Badenheims of this world.

Bernstein's case is that by setting *Badenheim* when he does, Appelfeld effectively forecloses any engagement with the difference between delusional and plausible misrecognition of the Jews' historical situation. What Appelfeld's irony forecloses, for the reader, is the possibility of genuine pity for the characters. They are seen as poor, deluded shades, meandering on the road to destruction.

The irony is that this exercise in foreshadowing is the work of someone who was himself a victim of the Shoah. Appelfeld's parents, wealthy assimilated Bukovina merchants, were exterminated, and he survived only by escaping from a camp, hiding among peasants and then falling in with the advancing Russian army. In Israel he became one of the first writers to address the Holocaust, and at first he encountered strong resistance from an Israeli readership that, at least in the years before the Eichmann trial, showed little desire to read stories of Jewish victimhood and martyrdom. And yet Appelfeld's attempts to face Israeli culture with the implications of the Holocaust have confirmed rather than confronted the heavy foreshadowing implicit in the Zionist readings of the Diaspora experience.

In modern mainstream Zionist thought, Bernstein argues, the Shoah is taken as proof of the untenability of the Diaspora and the futility of assimilation. It is an almost stupidly obvious telos. The hopeless attempt to blend into gentile life is regarded as the root cause of the blindness that engulfed European Jewry. Had they been true to themselves as Jews, had they kept to themselves, they would have understood that early departure to Zion was their only possible salvation. Those who did not see this were blinded by self-hatred. Bernstein's book is a sustained polemic against such condescensions on the part of posterity. He wants to

defend "the reasonableness of those who made the fatally wrong guesses."

He is right to do so. While it may seem reasonable for French Jews who had memories of the Dreyfus affair to take these as portents of things to come, most French Jews actually drew the opposite conclusion: their community had already survived the worst. Likewise, while Karl Lueger's anti-Semitism in pre-1914 Vienna might be seen, in retrospect, as a warning sign, in reality no warning signs could possibly have prepared anyone for what actually happened: Jewish citizens of Vienna made to clean sidewalks with toothbrushes in 1938 and, four years later, death camps. The Zionist account of history simultaneously accepts the unimaginability of the Holocaust and then insists on its inevitability. But if it was unimaginable, those who did not believe it was possible were not deluded. If they could not possibly imagine their end, they could not imagine it as inevitable. Indeed, Jewish history in the twentieth century reveals one unerring pattern: what cannot possibly happen will happen.

What is at stake here is the dignity we accord to those who can no longer speak in their own name. In saying that the Holocaust was inevitable, we take some essential mark of respect away from the actions and the thoughts, the fears and the beliefs, of those now dead. We accord them the pity due to tragic mistakes, but we do not accord them the respect they deserve. We do not recognize the reasonableness of what they thought and did, and the extent to which their circumstances made clarity so hard. We refuse them their due, which is that they did what they could in the face of the unknown and the unimaginable. If we claim that they might have known what awaited them, we condemn their actions as futile and their beliefs as illusions. We say, in effect, that their lives were a waste, judged by how they ended. There is a next step, not very distant, when we begin to blame them for their fate.

These forms of thought betray an effort to avoid the full weight of sorrow, to find some form of thought, however cruel, that would shield us the living from what we have lost. We would rather believe that it could not have happened otherwise than to entertain the still more agonizing thought that

it need not have happened at all. It is false comfort to believe that cruelty is a human destiny, when in truth it is a human failure.

Michael Ignatieff is the author of *Scar Tissue* and *Blood and Belonging* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). He is writing a biography of Isaiah Berlin.

**LOAD-DATE:** August 13, 1996

◀ [previous](#) **Document 17 of 19.** [next](#) ▶

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