



IN MEMORIAM

Michael André Bernstein
Professor of English and Comparative Literature
UC Berkeley
1947-2011

Michael André Bernstein was born on August 31, 1947, in Innsbruck, Austria. While still in elementary school, he moved to Toronto, where his father had settled, and completed his schooling there. He thus grew up with three languages — German, English, and French (his French-speaking grandmother lived with the family). To these he added a fluency in Italian and a strong competence in Latin and classical Greek, thus acquiring by the time he was in his early twenties an ideal linguistic preparation for a career as a scholar of comparative literature. He attended Princeton University as an undergraduate, where he attained the highest undergraduate GPA in the history of that institution, graduating in 1969 as class valedictorian. He completed a doctorate in Romance languages and literature at the University of Oxford in 1975. That same year, he accepted an appointment in English and Comparative Literature at Berkeley. UC Berkeley proved to be an ideal setting for the flourishing of his gifts as a teacher and scholar. He remained staunchly devoted to it, resisting overtures from other universities, and he ended up spending his entire academic career at Berkeley.

Michael Bernstein's work as a scholar-critic is marked by his originality in understanding writers and framing issues and by his personal vision of literature, history, culture, morality, and their intersection. In an era when literary scholarship exhibited a pronounced tendency to define itself in various schools and ideological trends, he consistently raised his own probing questions, shaped his own critical vocabulary and method. Intellectual rigor was something he always demanded of himself as well as of others. Some of the writers to whom he was drawn were political extremists promoting views quite antithetical to his own, for he was fascinated by the moral perils and the possible residue of insight in the expression of extremes. His first book, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (1980), is an exploration of how a modernist poet, and one who would become deeply implicated in Fascism, uses difficult verse form to engage the complexities of history. Three major critical studies would follow, each concerned with the ways literature is embedded in history and articulates positions that have serious moral consequences. *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (1992) traces the literary attraction to the rejection of moral constraints from Horace through Diderot and Dostoevski to Celine, concluding with a chapter on Charles Manson. The decision to end the book with the trial of the notorious cult-leader and murderer is one only Michael Bernstein would have made, vividly illustrating his view that the celebration in literature of an antinomian morality can carry over dangerously into the real world. *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (1994) is probably Michael Bernstein's most influential book, widely read by historians as well as by literary scholars and the general public. It is a quietly passionate argument against what he calls "back-shadowing," which is reading back from a historical catastrophe (his main example is the Holocaust) to imagine preceding moments in history as inevitably leading to that catastrophe, thus distorting the lives of those who have gone before and depriving them of the choices they actually exercised as historical agents. Michael Bernstein's last critical book is *Five Portraits: Modernism and the Imagination in Twentieth-Century German Writing* (2000). Here he pursues many of the historical and moral themes he engaged in his previous work as he considers Rilke, Musil, Heidegger, Benjamin, and Celan, offering fresh and probing discussions of all five of these writers who have been the repeated subject of critical attention.

Early in his career, Michael Bernstein had published a volume of poetry, *Prima della Rivoluzione* (1984). In the late 1990s, while continuing to write literary criticism, he made a striking turn to the writing of fiction, which proved to be a real vocation for him, becoming a vehicle for his abiding interest in character, motive, social behavior, and politics. His first volume of fiction, *Conspirators*, a historical novel involving revolutionaries of various stripes and set in a town in Galicia in the last years of the Hapsburg empire, was widely celebrated, named by the *Los Angeles Times* among the 25 best novels of 2004 and shortlisted that year for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for a best first book. It was translated into Italian, French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish. He had completed a large part of a second novel, with a contemporary setting, at the time of his death.

Michael Bernstein's accomplishments received due public recognition. He was given the Koret Israel Prize in 1989, its inaugural year, an award in which he took special satisfaction. He was named a Guggenheim Fellow in 1989, and in 1995 he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His books were enthusiastically reviewed not only in scholarly journals but in publications of general interest. His own work as a critic was increasingly directed to general audiences. He was a frequent contributor over the years to *The New Republic*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, and the *London Review of Books*. He developed an accessible style for these review-essays and repeatedly exhibited his gift for reframing the discussion, raising new questions, and providing persuasive answers.

The area of teaching that Michael Bernstein represented with great brilliance in his thirty-six years at Berkeley was modernism in both poetry and the novel, with a concentration on English and American, German, and French writers. Year after year, he led fascinated students through the entirety of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and he also regularly taught Joyce, Musil, Flaubert, Pound, and Stevens. These were all writers he deeply loved, who spoke to his own life, and he was able to convey that love to students in magnetic lectures free of jargon, marked by humor and humanity as well as analytic insight. Very few literary scholars could command his extraordinary breadth of knowledge — historical, political, and philosophical as well as literary — and he had a gift for passing this on to his students without pretense or pedantry.

Michael Bernstein was a loyal friend, finely attentive to the personal and intellectual concerns of those to whom he was close even in the midst of his own vivid performances as a remarkably perceptive and witty conversationalist. He was a devoted and proud father to his three daughters, Anna-Nora Bernstein, his daughter by his first wife, Jeanne Wolff Bernstein, and Amitai and Oriane Sachs-Bernstein, the daughters from his marriage to Dalya Sachs-Bernstein, who cared for him bravely and lovingly through his long last illness.

The University of California at Berkeley has established the Professor Michael A. Bernstein Memorial Fund to support a fellowship for graduate study in modern literature in his honor.

Robert Alter
2011