



Beckett's Words: The Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning

By David Kleinberg-Levin



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At stake in this book is a struggle with language in a time when our old faith in the redeeming of the word-and the word's power to redeem-has almost been destroyed. Drawing on Benjamin's political theology, his interpretation of the German Baroque mourning play, and Adorno's critical aesthetic theory, but also on the thought of poets and many other philosophers, especially Hegel's phenomenology of spirit, Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism, and Derrida's writings on language, Kleinberg-Levin shows how, because of its communicative and revelatory powers, language bears the utopian "promise of happiness," the idea of a secular redemption of humanity, at the very heart of which must be the achievement of universal justice. In an original reading of Beckett's plays, novels and short stories, Kleinberg-Levin shows how, despite inheriting a language damaged, corrupted and commodified, Beckett redeems dead or dying words and wrests from this language new possibilities for the expression of meaning. Without denying Beckett's nihilism, his picture of a radically disenchanted world, Kleinberg-Levin calls attention to moments when his words suddenly ignite and break free of their despair and pain, taking shape in the beauty of an austere yet joyous lyricism, suggesting that, after all, meaning is still possible.

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Editorial Review

Review

“By multiplying astute and original links between Beckett's texts and a philosophical tradition moving from Kierkegaard to Adorno, from Kant to Derrida, and from Hegel to Agamben, Beckett's Words demonstrates not so much that “nothing is funnier than unhappiness,” as Nell quips in *Endgame*, but rather that happiness remains a serious task for literature. If Beckett's pointless waiting offers the paradigm of a paradoxical hope without hope, then Beckett's words, pace Adorno and Ricks, will never be “dying words.” Words of endless survival, they keep the promise for a beauty and a justice still to come.” ?Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania, USA*

“To link Samuel Beckett and happiness in the same sentence without an intervening “not” is tantamount to heresy, the call of an apostate; yet the received wisdom of Beckett Studies is ripe for challenge, and Kleinberg-Levin obliges. From its opening pages, *Beckett's Words* is marked by a freshness and erudition from a scholar who actively “does” philosophy. It is a welcome addition to the ongoing rethinking of Samuel Beckett's work, especially of his philosophical inclinations and complexities. I would put Kleinberg-Levin's work up against any of the critiques of Beckett and philosophy, and so I would deem it indispensable for my postgraduate seminars and scholarship.” ?S. E. Gontarski, *Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English, Florida State University, USA*

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About the Author

David Kleinberg-Levin is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Northwestern University, USA. His books include *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure After Heidegger* (2005); *Redeeming Words and the Promise of Happiness: A Critical Theory Approach to Wallace Stevens and Vladimir Nabokov* (2012); and *Redeeming Words: Language and the Promise of Happiness in the Stories of Döblin and Sebald* (2013).

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