



Redeeming Words: Language and the Promise of Happiness in the Stories of Döblin and Sebald (SUNY series, Intersections: Philosophy and Critical Theory)

David Michael Kleinberg-Levin

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Probing study of how literature can redeem the revelatory, redemptive powers of language.

In this probing look at Alfred Döblin's 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and the stories of W. G. Sebald, *Redeeming Words* offers a philosophical meditation on the power of language in literature. David Kleinberg-Levin draws on the critical theory of Benjamin and Adorno; the idealism and romanticism of Kant, Hegel, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schelling; and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. He shows how Döblin and Sebald—writers with radically different styles working in different historical moments—have in common a struggle against forces of negativity and an aim to bring about in response a certain redemption of language. Kleinberg-Levin considers the fast-paced, staccato, and hard-cut sentences of Döblin and the ghostly, languorous, and melancholy prose fiction of Sebald to articulate how both writers use language in an attempt to recover and convey this utopian promise of happiness for life in a time of mourning.

“*Redeeming Words* is an elegant, highly learned, and incisive exploration of how language—and thus the greatest literature of our time—both registers the experience of the loss of utopia and affirms hope by making the loss more clear. It takes as its theme the most profound reflections on the role of words in a time of abandonment and disenchantment. Kleinberg-Levin argues not only that words communicate this sense of loss but constitute it by failing to achieve total mastery and transparency and self-consciously thematizing the corruption and also affirmative power of words. At the deepest level, this study analyzes words and what the very existence of words can confer to individuals and communities.” — Peter Fritzsche, author of *The Turbulent World of Franz Göll: An Ordinary Berliner Writes the Twentieth Century*

David Kleinberg-Levin is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Northwestern University. His many books include *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure After Heidegger*; *Before the Voice of Reason: Echoes of Responsibility in Merleau-Ponty's Ecology and Levinas's Ethics*, also published by SUNY Press; and *Redeeming Words and the Promise of Happiness: A Critical Theory Approach to Wallace Stevens and Vladimir Nabokov*.

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