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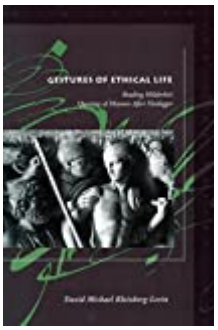

David Michael Kleinberg-Levin. *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure after Heidegger.* Meridian Crossing Aesthetics. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. xlvi + 488 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5088-2.

Reviewed by Thomas O. Haakenson (Institute of Production and Recording and University of Minnesota, Twin Cities)

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Embodiment and the Gesture

David Michael Kleinberg-Levin writes in his *Gestures of Ethical Life* of (what he describes as) "models of disclosiveness," or the way in which "our gestural embodiment could express and exercise a proto-moral disposition that derives its orientation from a preontological attunement by and to our relation to being" (p. xxxviii). Devoted to an examination of the ontology of the gesture as problematic as it is provocative, Kleinberg-Levin's work tries to uncover the body beneath, or to put it differently, before it becomes acculturated–at the point at which "a rudimentary moral sense already operates in the nature of the body" prior to corporeal and sensorial socialization (p. xl).

The strength of Kleinberg-Levin's study is its engagement with "the body" in the writings of thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, whose work reveals sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary notions of sensorial experience. The notable weakness in Kleinberg-Levin's treatment is its lack of historical contextualization. This strategy allows him to situate thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Benjamin, Adorno and others side by side, even though these thinkers' projects and their relationship to the materialism of the body could scarcely be more different. It may seem like a misdirected criticism of an avowedly philosophical study to accuse *Gestures of Ethical Life* of a lack of historical specificity. After all, Kleinberg-Levin is a professor of philosophy, not of history. Nevertheless, he often invokes historical contexts to justify his arguments without actually providing explanations of how context and text relate. A focus on the chapters devoted to Adorno and Benjamin helps demonstrate what I believe to be the strengths of Kleinberg-Levin's close readings, as well as the weaknesses of his often excessively proximate approach. One wonders, in others words, if close readings of concepts leave author and reader seeing only the trees and missing the forest.

In what is simultaneously perhaps the most interesting and the most frustrating chapter in the book, Kleinberg-Levin explores Adorno's work and the body's inherent critical potential. Here is the study at its most provocative: "Like the beauty that Kant attributes to the

products of art and craft, the artifice of tact virtually perishes through a semblance of nature" (p. 114). Yet Kleinberg-Levin follows up this insight, as he does all too often, with a politically impotent and historically detached aside: "When, for example, I speak with the delicacy required by 'political correctness,' I am exceedingly careful in referring to people of certain ethnicities, choosing my words with an exquisite sense of tact, while continuing to support the institutions that suppress them" (pp. 114-115). Surely if the conventions of tact are acculturated, those "others" Kleinberg-Levin identifies as those to be spoken about, and notably not with (!), in the name of something called political correctness are as acculturated to these conventions as anyone. Like "us" privileged cultural mandarins they, too, might find modes of resistance accordingly. Kleinberg-Levin's efforts at clarification in explaining his close readings, in the context of acculturated social gestures, do little to ground his study. Worse yet, these asides too often make the very concept of "gesture" at the heart of the study radically transient: Is a gesture an acculturated sensibility? An ethics of the everyday? A self in opposition to the social? A mode of engagement indicative only of persons and not of institutions?

Of note here is the fact that Kleinberg-Levin's study raises the problem of history not only in terms of conceptual consistency but also in terms of substantive content. Quoting the work of Max Horkheimer and Adorno, Kleinberg-Levin [points out] the parallels in the dialectic of tact and the dialectic of Enlightenment: "The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past" (p. 115). The parallel is more than stylistic, as Kleinberg-Levin suggests: "The 'historical moment of tact' accordingly begins in the Enlightenment when the more artificial conventions of bourgeoisie manners replace courtly manners" (p. 115). Kleinberg-Levin suggests that the emergence of the bourgeoisie marks the beginning of the Enlightenment, which is then followed by a second moment vacating the Enlightenment's moral principles and betraying its spirit. This neatly results in a third, "more contemporary" stage in which the conventions of bourgeois tact appear as mere conventions. The logic of this tertium configuration oddly glosses over the historical simultaneity of the first and second "moments" in the identification of a third "contemporary" stage. What does the dialectic of Enlightenment reveal, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, other than the inseparability of the constructive and destructive aspects of the Enlightenment project? If these moments and stages are indeed separable, why is it not possible to undo our misguided *Sonderweg* and return readily to the Enlightenment ideals expounded by Kant– for example, individual reason free from self-incurred tutelage, ideals so obviously and so greatly missing today?

In a chapter curiously titled "What is Left Intact: Reading the Hand in Benjamin's Writing," Kleinberg-Levin seeks to emphasize Benjamin's focus on something like a pre-historical conscious over and above the Jewish-German writer's historical materialism. Such a focus suggests that "Left Intact" is indeed a subversive criticism of dogmatic Marxism, though Kleinberg-Levin does not develop this criticism explicitly in the chapter. The "Left" in the chapter's title might be shorthand for a dogmatic Marxist politics that refuses resignifying practices, practices often associated with post-structuralism. Suggesting that such a Left is immobile, "Intact," in its refusal to acknowledge changing cultural conditions certainly reads like a challenge worthy of detailed discussion. Kleinberg-Levin's chapter, however, is only partly up to the task.

That said, Kleinberg-Levin gives us fascinatingly close readings of a number of Benjamin's texts, some well-known and others lesser so. What falls out of the equation too often is the revolutionary orientation that motivates Benjamin's attachments to material culture. Again, this omission appears to me a problem of not situating both author and text in historical context. If objects reveal through Benjamin's writings a history of the observer prior to his or her acculturation into the politics of perception, these objects nevertheless are avowedly shaped by the contexts not only of their perception but also their production. Kleinberg-Levin seeks to acknowledge the former through an emphasis on gestures and tact; he avoids the latter by resorting to allusions to the works of other thinkers with "similar" ideas but without discussing the very material, historical distinctions separating their thoughts from Benjamin's.

Deserving mention in the chapter is a point too often glossed over: the role of the grotesque. The history of perception is embodied in critical form in a number of ways in Benjamin's relationship to the grotesque. The grotesque is that style of artistic representation that exposes the status quo for what it really is: an effort to prevent the recovery of historical possibilities in service of a continued tyranny. It is in Benjamin's discussions of children's toys, for example, or in his experiments with hashish, that he reveals this "other" present at its most potentially recalcitrant. It is also evident in Benjamin's

"Artwork" essay, which relates the complex relationships among spectators to the *Groteskfilme* (translated as "slapstick comedies") of Charlie Chaplin. Kleinberg-Levin rightly acknowledges Benjamin's emphasis on another history, an alternative history embodied in the material and perceptual culture of the present moment and demonstrated in these various cultural forms. Children's toys reveal a parallel world of suppressed, forgotten humanity. Chaplin's films satirize bourgeois social conventions in an effort to solicit laughter, but this laughter makes us see our own complicity with the system that alienates us.

In extending the line of thought that sees Benjamin as an advocate of a suppressed history in the present, Kleinberg-Levin groups him with a number of thinkers who sometimes serve to help elucidate Benjamin's points. At other times, however, these other thinkers' ideas only serve to separate Benjamin's work from Benjamin's motives, a strange gesture indeed for a text devoted to a study of how gestures "go missing." The various invocations of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida serve as exemplary in this respect. In discussing Agamben's readings of Benjamin's "theory of origin" as a non-actualized potentiality, Kleinberg-Levin suggests that not only does Benjamin's concept introduce "radically original concepts of 'origin' and 'originality' " but that such concepts do more. They require us to "radically deconstruct the traditional concepts employed by modern bourgeois historiography to ensure that the originality of the origin remains buried in the past and that the future will remain hostage to the fatalism petrified in the fixed and immutable identity of that past" (p. 189). The rereading of the present that Kleinberg-Levin is suggesting looks much too much like Derridean deconstruction to be the historical materialist type advocated by Benjamin, a type that hopes to reveal in the practices of the present and future the suppressed promises of the past through revolutionary engagement. Kleinberg-Levin's radical deconstruction advocates a textual undoing in the present that must always posit the origin as a lost originality. Certainly Benjamin's engagement with aura (specifically, the "Artwork" essay, which identifies the constructive potential of technological and mechanical developments) reveals that this supposedly better tomorrow is achieved by destroying neither the texts nor the concepts of the past but rather by activating these texts' and concepts' hidden meanings in the present. Such an activation does not mean to "radically deconstruct" concepts but rather to expose and overturn the injustice of the social system itself, a system that produces these injustices and insidiously finds ways to support and justify them. Benjamin's belief that such a revolution was possible and his debates with Adorno about the methods of achieving such a social transformation–a very historically specific exchange–must influence readings of any (and I use this term phrase loosely) deconstructive potential in Benjamin's corpus. If this does not occur, such a deconstruction could devolve into a simple exercise of a textual slight of hand, a collection of concepts that look and sound the same despite miles of intellectual and political separation.

All is not lost, however, and Kleinberg-Levin's close readings and intriguing juxtapositions deserve our engagement, for reasons compelling enough to risk opprobrium. If reviewing Kleinberg-Levin's text via an electronic format, via a listserv devoted to scholarly engagement and dialogue, serves to demonstrate reading and potential misreading, it also reveals how disconnected we subjects are from one another, literally and otherwise. Perhaps such an engagement can simultaneously remind us, in and through the act of reading, that even the most distant of gestures of engagement–from the traces of the hand left by pen and paper to the typed letter commanded by a finger at a keyboard–may still reveal latent connections that escape the mediation of any medium. This is a worthy goal for any writer, and one that Kleinberg-Levin does help us work toward most provocatively.

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