



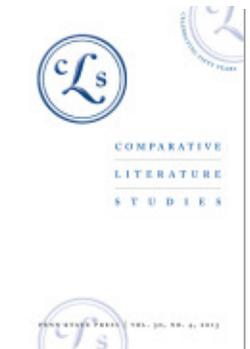
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**Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi, and the Foundations of Responsibility
by Robert Harvey (review)**

Risa Sodi

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important aspect of apocalypticism in modern popular culture. Specialists in multiple disciplines will benefit from its penetrating insights.

Lorenzo DiTommaso
Concordia University (Montréal)

Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi, and the Foundations of Responsibility. By Robert Harvey. New York: Continuum, 2010. 172 pp. Paper \$27.95.

Many who read this review will have some familiarity with *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett's 1952 ontological exploration of pause and purpose. Fewer will have grappled with the extreme minimalism of his later works, such as *Film* (1964), *Lessness* (1970), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), and, most pertinent to the work at hand, *Worstward Ho* (1983). Robert Harvey, chair of the Department of Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies and a professor of French and comparative literatures at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, has undertaken such a mission, but not for the sole purpose of elucidating the later Beckett so much as to work toward a more challenging and, ultimately, more resonant task, to suggest a post-Holocaust universal ethics.

Witnessness is an insightful, thoughtful, playful, and useful book for scholars in many fields, literature, philosophy, and Holocaust studies among them. It is a newful book for those interested in Primo Levi and his concept of the "complete witness." And it is a remindful book for those who see in Dante a philosopher of the contemporary, *ante litteram*. all right, so I do not pun as well as Harvey, and Harvey does not pun as well as Becket, but reading this book, with its copious *-nesses* (starting with the title) and *jeux de mots* (naught/knot/not, one/*l'on/l'uom*, etc.), one comes away with a renewed appreciation of the punfulness of English in its various forms—Hibernian, "standard," and back-translated from French—and Harvey's artfulness in exploding language to reveal precious kernels of acuity.

Harvey's book opens with a preface, "Witnessness: The Coordinates." The mathematical bent of his titling is in line with the process of verbal and conceptual addition and subtraction he applied and also governs the structure of the book itself. After the preface, *Witnessness* proceeds with twenty-five brief chapters, titled in the lowercase and most five to six pages long, on topics as varied as now and readerliness, with echoes of Becket ("lessness," the title of his 1970 prose piece), Levi ("*al fondo*," a slight variant on Levi's chapter "Sul fondo," in *Survival in Auschwitz*), and Dante ("dimness," a nod to the *selva oscura* in which the pilgrim finds himself in *Inferno* 1:1). Harvey evokes Dante even in the structuring of

his book, reminiscent of the three canticles of the *Divine Comedy* and Dante's 1 + (33 × 3) structure (introductory canto + ninety-nine cantos divided evenly among three canticles). Here, similarly, our author provides an introductory chapter (on *-ness*, or capacity), plus twenty-eight chapters divided evenly among three groupings numbered in the manner of modern philosophical tomes (or contemporary software versions), starting at 1.1 and ending with 3.7.

The three "coordinates" of Harvey's "algorithm of ethics" are *witness*, *wit*, and *witnessness* (x). These "lexographic constellations," as he calls them, are inspired by Beckett's *Worstward Ho* and are flanked by extensive readings of Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved* and Dante's *Purgatory*—"a bridging text (or perhaps a *témoin*) between Primo Levi and Samuel Beckett" (x). (It should be noted that Harvey adopts an erroneous title for Levi's seminal work, calling *Se questo è un uomo* "If This Be a Man," rather than *If This Is a Man*, although no subjunctive is used either in the original Italian or in Stuart Woolf's English translation.) A fourth text should be added to this triad, however, and familiarity with it will aid the reader in *imagining* Harvey's "ethics for everyone"—imagination being at the base of his stance—that is, Georges Didi-Huberman's 2008 *Images in Spite of All*.

What, then, is witnessness? Harvey defines it as "the state, condition or potential for being a witness," where witnessing contains "the key to the establishment of ethical relations among us" and wherein "witnesses alone may save the honor of the name, 'human'" (x–xi). To witness, therefore, is to establish betweenness between humans, to exercise empathy or to put empathy to the service of wit and imagination, and to build a "telltale"—in construction terms, a patch over a fault line—between "event" survivors and nonsurvivors.

Wit has the force of the common connotation of the word (as in, "Levi's organizational skill at Auschwitz sharpened and maintained his wits") but also the thousand-year-old connotation of "the seat of consciousness or thought" joined to the modern "superior degree of intelligence or understanding" (52). Wit is present even in dimwits, whose dimness nonetheless does not preclude the presence of sagacity; who possess a "whit of wit"; and who exist asymptotically short of the *Muselmänner*, the "witness-martyrs," embodiments of lessness (themselves asymptotically approaching zero), the naughts who challenge our capability for witness. In Harvey's joyously playful language, the capacity for knowledge and understanding erupts in "a whole host of Beckett *knotheads* whose knack to know [*no*] that the knight is a knacker makes the man who uses his noodle a wit" (52; emphasis added). He continues, "Wit and witness are part and parcel of the same being." Or as

he quotes Beckett in *Worstward Ho*, “Not knowing how know only no out of” (4.3, qtd. 53).

Witnessness is at times an explosive book, as in the chapter “fitness,” an exhortation to “never allowing oneself to lose sight of the other at the limit of one’s oneness” (81). A provocative exploration of the Terry Schiavo case, it also incorporates elements of Levi’s talkativeness-less child, Hurbinek, from *The Truce* and a (recurrent) polemic against *Shoah* director Claude Lanzmann. Other chapters, such as “dimness,” shed light (ahem) on Beckett’s anti-Enlightenment-ness and his intellectual ties to Descartes, Hegel, Mallarmé, Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Levinas (the latter two, plus Lyotard and Derrida, being crucial for Harvey as well). Harvey also suggests Beckett, Levi, and Dante as examples of “undimness” (my application of a Harvey-style neologistic “moreness” to the realm of light) as authors who “join without fusion” to his proposed ethics (88).

Harvey’s crucial chapter—the eponymous “witnessness”—offers the clearest encapsulation of his ethical project: “With our witnessness adjusted to our advantage, we no longer have to wait to learn to read an event in order to be qualified to offer our interpretation and act accordingly ethically” (102). He refines this idea further, in the equally crucial *telltale*, suggesting that an understanding of *witnessness* means that “the human, with his ethical potential, is no longer an individual. ‘I,’ as island, has given way to an awareness of being part of an archipelago. . . . Now, forever ‘beside himself,’ careful for the other as he once was egoistically only for *ego*, the being for ethics extends himself into the being of the other as the other extends himself here” (131). Harvey’s most deeply expressive and inclusive statement comes in the book’s ending chapter, “model-wit.” “The model-wit,” Harvey writes, “—this witnessworks or factory for ethics that everyman, *l’on*, may understand he carries around with him all the time—has room for everyone” (140).

Robert Harvey’s Beckettian model of extreme concentration makes *Witnessness* a challenging book. Yet Beckett is also the key to its unquestionable success. The idiosyncratic, wildly inventive, yet rigorous language the Irish writer inspired, the underpinning gained from mining both Dante and Levi—themselves often linked across the centuries—and the plodding hopefulness of Beckett’s later works sustain the ambitious universal ethics Harvey outlines here. Readers who pick up this small volume will be amply rewarded for their effort.

Risa Sodi
Yale University