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Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings. Trans. Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 306 pp. Introduction, notes, and index. \$15.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-674-02287-4.

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The publication in English of Walter Benjamin's essays on Charles Baudelaire is a major event in European studies for history, philosophy, culture, theory, literature, and the arts in society. The book is part of the ambitious multi-volume project by Harvard University Press to bring Benjamin's major works to readers of English. The volume of essays on Baudelaire includes extensive notes and comments, as well as several new translations, and a helpful introduction by the editor, Michael W. Jennings. The contents are as follows: "Baudelaire," a short fragment from 1921-22; "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," a sketch of *The Arcades Project* written for the Institute of Social Research in New York in 1937; Benjamin's major essay, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," submitted to the Institute for publication in 1938 and projected as one of three sections of *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, a book within *The Arcades Project*; "Central Park," a set of fragments for the preparation of the Baudelaire book; and Benjamin's last major essay on the poet, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." After the Institute of Social Research rejected Benjamin's essay of 1938, Benjamin wrote "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" with the intention of sending it to the Institute. This final essay is dramatically different from the earlier essay, but it is of equal importance for *The Arcades Project*.

The introductory materials and notes in this volume give insight into the unfinished look of some essays in Benjamin's corpus; for an uninitiated reader, the composition of *The Writer of Modern Life* might appear fragmented and abrupt. Within the volume of Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire, style and concept are dynamically shaped for individual texts, and an understanding of major concepts may require reading several essays. It is essential to understand that this compelling and indispensable book is not a completed work intended for publication in its present form by its author. The reader moves along a level line of text and without warning, it ends or is transformed: the reader then enters another frame of reference. To borrow one of Benjamin's metaphors, the reader falls from one abyss to another. Other essays in the book tell a completely different story: several of them were written to present an overview of the entire project.

Benjamin completed his major essay ("The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire") and then wrote and completed another very different essay ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"), but the monumental work intended to include Benjamin's Baudelaire essays, *The Arcades Project*, was unfinished at the time of Benjamin's death. [1] All of Benjamin's essays are beautifully structured, and they are suggestive of the dimensions that the author intended to reflect in his creation (or a creatively transformed construction) through literature, of a city, a life, and a poetics. The essays in the book were intended to move, through literature and through the dimension of time, toward a cultural archeology of modernity.

The constellation of early twentieth-century modernity pointed Benjamin toward *The Arcades Project*. The work of shaping this project about Paris and modern urban culture sustained the author through a decade of painful exile. His unfinished work-in-progress about "the capital of the nineteenth century"

continues to dazzle us today with its bold design, its powerful use of voice and citation, its intimate vision of a city caught up in modernity and of the poet who gave that city its voices, images, portraits, impressions, landscapes and seascapes, urban snapshots and cityscapes.

Baudelaire's career is a tragic example of the effects of postponement on the here and now. Although it seems almost inconceivable, Baudelaire correctly anticipated the effects of his poetry on fascinated readers of later generations, and he understood the relationship between the appearances of a life squandered in dubious and sordid corners of the city and the reality of that life, poured into imaginative thought. In the distance, he saw not the stars that had been fixed in the sky since antiquity, but, instead, a spectral future in letters. We may understand Baudelaire's poetic and aesthetic artistry as the fertile fruit of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness). This fundamental psychoanalytical concept provides a way of reading past the glib dismissal of Baudelaire's suffering as failure, and it offers a secret path of entry into the vision and mastery of the writer who, almost single-handedly, brought literature into a modernity that lingers.

Even with the Poet's mystically sharp gaze into the future, Baudelaire could not have guessed the extent of his impact on the humanities and social sciences through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. A similar observation could be made about the philosopher, critic, and translator, Walter Benjamin. Both writers succumbed to harsh circumstances at a relatively young age, but their writings flourish after the end of their earthly existences. Each one left a body of work that contains within its pages a mysterious elixir of long life. Baudelaire speaks to us longingly of the arts of retrieval and preservation; Benjamin composes some variations on memory's powers of rejuvenation and resurrection. Baudelaire enters Benjamin's works through the vectors of poetry, images, time, the city, and the marketplace in which poet and critic had no choice but to put themselves up for sale. Bitter and sweet, dark and brilliant, their works continue to resonate and to influence contemporary reflections on modernity.

Starting with his canonical essay on the work of art,^[2] Benjamin's impact on cultural studies has deflected interest away from the literary foundation of his thought, the literary criticism and theory that shaped his work, and the intellectual heritage that he provides for contemporary readers. But these areas are at the heart of Benjamin's exploratory method, and his own literary qualities and concepts draw some of their evocative powers from them. The Baudelaire essays document Benjamin's investment not only in literature but, specifically, in the French literary tradition of modernity, from Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo to Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust, with Baudelaire occupying the most strategic position, at the center.

Two writers who reflected on Baudelaire's legacy and gave it a central role in their own literary writings are Valéry and Proust. Both writers privileged Baudelaire's works of literature (poetry, prose poetry, and prose), and understood that Baudelaire's works of translation, literary criticism, art history, and autobiography were extensions of an aesthetic that transformed the literary, artistic, and cultural landscapes of modernity.

For Benjamin, Valéry opens up the possibility of understanding Baudelaire's conscious articulation of his position through poetry. Proust, author of an immense novel of the unconscious, positions memory, perception, and experience in the terms closest to Baudelaire's terms. Proust's great novel, *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), was written and published during Benjamin's lifetime. Proust died in 1921, several years before Benjamin's exile in Paris, while Valéry continued to occupy a prominent position in French intellectual life long after Benjamin's years in exile.

The Baudelaire essays in *The Writer of Modern Life* focus on the preoccupations that dominate Benjamin's corpus; they allow readers to explore the intellectual parameters of the wildly modern virtual city of *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin's great unfinished work deeply frightened some of his

closest friends with the boldness of its conceptualization. Benjamin's innovative approach to criticism is grounded in an attentive reading of the consequences of Baudelaire's work. His major Baudelaire essay ("The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire") was intended as a completed section of *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* takes up the reading and writing of modernity at precisely the moment when Baudelaire's literary impact explodes in surrealism and related movements, and when Freud's psychoanalytic exploration of the unconscious and of the traumatic experiences of modern life indirectly confirms Baudelaire's intuitions about art and life. Proust and Valéry (as well as Stéphane Mallarmé and Antonin Artaud) take up the literary aspects of Baudelaire's thought on modernity; Benjamin leads us to understand the aesthetic, critical, and ideological consequences of Baudelaire's poetics, and the positions that he takes in writing.

Benjamin's work on Baudelaire is crucial for a contemporary understanding of nineteenth-century culture. Even more important is the capacity of this book to offer a cultural orientation that anchors us—far beyond Baudelaire's time, and some seventy years after Benjamin's untimely death—in the second half of the nineteenth century. Cultural perspective shapes literature—and the study of literature—across encounters of waking thought with the dreamlike fragments that emerge from the unconscious.

Benjamin seeks to understand the impact of Baudelaire's literary works as a testimony of history. The deeply historical nature of Baudelaire's writing is uniquely conscious: Baudelaire the writer seeks to preserve the imprint of history and to write literary works that present and reflect history. Baudelaire's poetry in particular gives evidence of the impact of history on the lonely subjects of modernity. Recognized or subterranean, conscious or unconscious, history enters the lives of Baudelaire's emblematic and allegorical subjects in their experiences of time and memory.

For an understanding of modern French views of time and memory, vividly presented in Proust's writings, Benjamin looks to the philosophy of Henri Bergson. But it is Freud, one of Proust's sources on the unconscious, who takes center stage in Benjamin's understanding of memory and the modern world. Freud's discourse enters the scene of time and memory at the point when Benjamin suggests that Proust's fictional writer is the only subject of modern life who can test Bergson's concept of duration [*durée*]. I would suggest that Proust returns to Baudelaire's poetics of time and memory at the moment when Benjamin indicates Proust's divergence from Bergson. Baudelaire anticipates Freud's analysis of wartime trauma in his accounts of the experiences of shock that permeate modern life. Benjamin seems to suggest that Baudelaire and Freud take experience into twentieth-century contexts, whereas Bergson's thought cannot follow them.

In "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," the central book-length section of *The Writer of Modern Life*, Marx's cutting remarks on Blanqui's politics of conspiracy give insight into the progress in repression that shapes Second Empire culture. Marx and Engels enter Benjamin's exploration of history and literature at the point when political dissidence escapes the theoretician's frame of reference. At the moment when the phenomena that they evoke are escaping their analysis, Benjamin demonstrates the impact on modernity of precisely those phenomena. Like Bergson, Marx and Engels indicate the uncontainable aspects of modern life. It is literature that allows Benjamin to move beyond these vanishing points of theoretical discourse.

Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire unfold two conceptual strands. First, Benjamin shapes his critique in the form of a portrait—photographs, paintings, and images of Baudelaire at work in the allegorical roles and representations that he shaped for poetry. Baudelaire's anonymous narrators are sometimes evoked as the Poet, but frequently indicated only as an observant narrator or a man on the run, surrounded by Night and the modern city. The personae of Baudelaire's world are figures of artists, *flâneurs*, dandies, and women: they are vilified or adored, admired, hated, and pitied, venal and virtual. They are actors on a stage. Their perceptions and experience seem to set them apart from their "semblances [*semblables*]"—their fellow-humans, their kin, those who appear to be like them.

Second, Benjamin's essays engage in the pursuit of motifs, lines of verse and prose, literary images and citations that emblemize Baudelaire's perceptions of modernity. The crowded cityscapes of modern Paris are shaped by the vicissitudes of capital; commerce orients the transformations of value that permeate culture and the arts in society. The solitary artist awaits a day of judgment that may give him a new life.

The new heroes are the disengaged dandy, the nonchalant *flâneur*, and the anonymous artist. Like the prostitute, these birds of prey sift through the crowd looking for the evidence of desire even as the crowd consumes them. They prefer the vacant streets at the outskirts of town, the arcades, and the moody skies of autumn in Paris. Above all, the night world is their preferred ground.

In several languages and in many forms, literature is at the center of Benjamin's thought on culture. Benjamin's theoretical writing on early modernity engages the writer's contemporary moment—the early decades of the twentieth century—as it connected to the Second Empire and the late nineteenth century. At a time when poetry had already projected itself into other genres, perhaps in tacit recognition of its compromised status in the modern world, these essays move forward to reclaim the place of poetic language. Like the writings of Baudelaire and Proust, Benjamin's innovative writings defy classification. The Benjamin corpus combines poetry and prose fiction, translation and adaptation, autobiography and philosophy. The essays on and around Baudelaire reflect Benjamin's passionate pursuit of literature: sensation and experience are filtered through form, style, and language. Benjamin's arcades correspond to the cityscapes of modernity as the shapes of Baudelaire's poems correspond to the conscious project of inscribing literature with history.

The concept of translation is an important element of Benjamin's aesthetic as it is for Baudelaire and Proust. Benjamin the theoretician was a translator of both French writers. Translation is a way of understanding the masks and disguises of allegory: the transformed subjectivity of the modern city dweller takes shape in *The Arcades Project* as a dreamworld filled with quotations and copies, photographs and reproductions.

Proust's novel *A La Recherche du temps perdu* echoes the power and vividness of Baudelaire's poetry: Proust's novel reveals the capacity of Baudelaire's writing to reflect modernity. Whereas Proust's representation of the belle époque is generally misinterpreted as the author's lingering nostalgia for the nineteenth century, Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire reorient the discussion within the context of the twentieth century. The nostalgia presented within the views of Proust's fictional characters recalls moments in Baudelaire's poems, and anticipates a future that Benjamin would come to know. Proust shifts from the nostalgia-permeated break between the two centuries to a more nuanced view of the transformation of French and European modernity. In his exploration of time, memory, and history, Proust positions the first World War and its aftermath as the most important markers of the transformations that characterize the twentieth century.[3]

Poets and artists have had a sense of Baudelaire's powerful role (against all odds, as the poet himself observed) in literature and modern culture. Although Baudelaire may have been the most compelling European figure of nineteenth-century literary culture for writers and philosophers of Benjamin's period—across Europe and around the world—Benjamin alone clarifies what is at stake in Baudelaire's work and in his legacy. Proust's fiction and his late essays set the stage for the rejuvenation of Baudelaire that occurs in Benjamin's essays in this volume.

Moving across the genres and disciplines, Benjamin accomplishes the enormous task of dusting off the shelves; he restores Baudelaire to his rightful place. In other words, Benjamin restores Baudelaire's modernity to his writing. While Baudelaire's corpus is not considered to be a large one, by nineteenth-century standards, Benjamin observes its immense power to transform the interpretation and the sensibility of modernity.

Benjamin's opposition of *Jugendstil*—modern style or Art Nouveau, under garlands of flowers and haloes of all descriptions—with Baudelaire's aesthetic rests on the impact of allegory, borrowed from late Latin writing and from the Renaissance and the Baroque, to be uniquely and unforgettably refashioned in the language of Baudelaire's poems and poetic prose. The layers of Baudelaire's French enter the new language of criticism that unfolds in Benjamin's writings on literature and culture. Translation is a process that Baudelaire developed into a new art form and a new image of what happens in the processes of allegory. The traces of the impact of Baudelaire's language on Benjamin anticipate some of the questions of this reader, looking at the translations in the volume and wondering how they were coaxed out of Benjamin's brilliant and at times intimidating new language. While the new translations in the volume are attuned to Benjamin's language and conceptual framework, the republication of Harry Zohn's often-published translation of "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" illustrates what is at stake in the task of the translator as well as the challenge faced by Benjamin's general reader.

At key moments in Benjamin's most far-reaching essay on Baudelaire, Zohn's translation obscures the meaning of the sentence and its place in Benjamin's constructions of modern experience. In the first section, Zohn translates the German word *rechnen* (to calculate, to count, to tally, to bargain for something) as "envisaged"; he translates *wahren* (keep, preserve, protect, save face, and keep one's distance) as "accord." The Zohn translation obscures Benjamin's subtle shift from Baudelaire seen as an individual subject, a biographical entity, to Baudelaire as the literary corpus and the subjectivity of Paris. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" explores the capital city as a concentrated center of wealth and power, the "capital" that interested city-dwellers ranging from Haussmann to the observer Marx and from the Poet to the ragpicker. In literary and cultural terms, the capital is also the heart of Paris, its life and color. In this sense, Baudelaire's poetics of the subject offers Benjamin the key to modernity: the new Paris, an allegorical entity alive to its subjects, thus puts an end to lyric poetry as it existed before the publication of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.^[4]

NOTES

[1] Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, 2 vols. ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1982); Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on the Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2008).

[3] For a discussion of Baudelaire's impact on Proust and why it is important in Benjamin, see Beryl Schlossman, *The Orient of Style* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

[4] I would like to express my gratitude to the Falk Foundation, the Berkman Foundation, and the Center for the Arts in Society, all at Carnegie Mellon University, and to the Camargo Foundation of Cassis, France, for the generous support of the research and writing of this review essay.

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