



Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940

Walter Benjamin

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"Every line we succeed in publishing today...is a victory wrested from the powers of darkness." So wrote Walter Benjamin in January 1940. Not long afterward, he himself would fall prey to those powers, a victim of suicide following a failed attempt to flee the Nazis. However insistently the idea of catastrophe hangs over Benjamin's writings in the final years of his life, the "victories wrested" in this period nonetheless constitute some of the most remarkable twentieth-century analyses of the emergence of modern society. The essays on Charles Baudelaire are the distillation of a lifetime of thinking about the nature of modernity. They record the crisis of meaning experienced by a civilization sliding into the abyss, even as they testify to Benjamin's own faith in the written word.

This volume ranges from studies of Baudelaire, Brecht, and the historian Carl Jochmann to appraisals of photography, film, and poetry. At their core is the question of how art can survive and thrive in a tumultuous time. Here we see Benjamin laying out an ethic for the critic and artist--a subdued but resilient heroism. At the same time, he was setting forth a sociohistorical account of how art adapts in an age of violence and repression.

Working at the height of his powers to the very end, Benjamin refined his theory of the mass media that culminated in the final version of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Also included in this volume is his influential piece "On the Concept of History," completed just before his death. The book is remarkable for its inquiry into the nature of "the modern" (especially as revealed in Baudelaire), for its ideas about the transfiguration of art and the radical discontinuities of history, and for its examples of humane life and thought in the midst of barbarism. The entire collection is eloquent testimony to the indomitable spirit of humanity under siege.

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