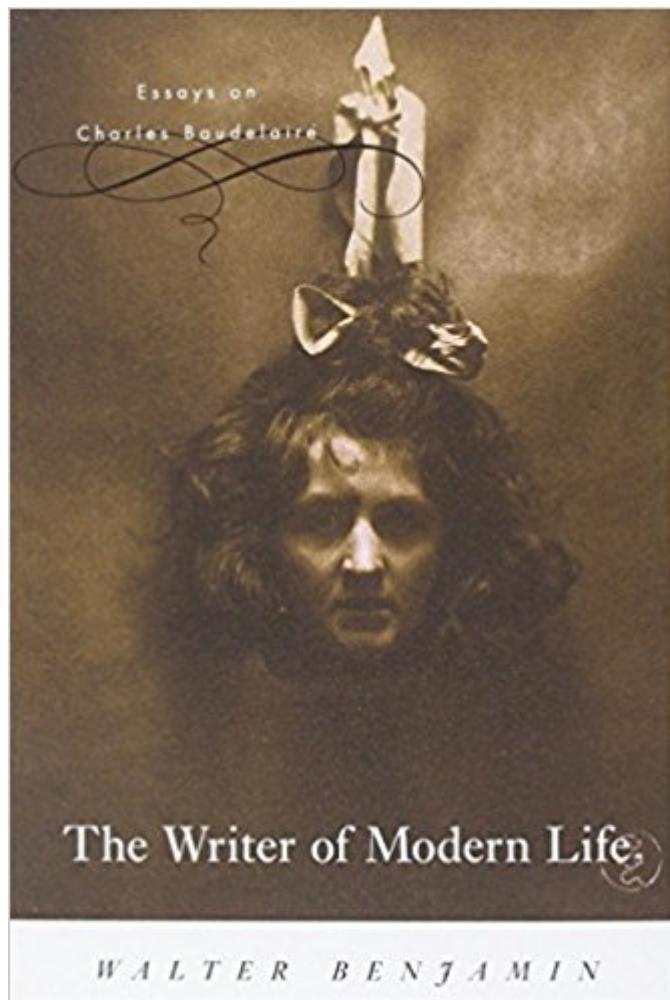


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The Writer Of Modern Life: Essays On Charles Baudelaire



Synopsis

Walter Benjamin's essays on the great French lyric poet Charles Baudelaire revolutionized not just the way we think about Baudelaire, but our understanding of modernity and modernism as well. In these essays, Benjamin challenges the image of Baudelaire as late-Romantic dreamer, and evokes instead the modern poet caught in a life-or-death struggle with the forces of the urban commodity capitalism that had emerged in Paris around 1850. The Baudelaire who steps forth from these pages is the flâneur who affixes images as he strolls through mercantile Paris, the ragpicker who collects urban detritus only to turn it into poetry, the modern hero willing to be marked by modern life in its contradictions and paradoxes. He is in every instance the modern artist forced to commodify his literary production: "Baudelaire knew how it stood with the poet: as a flâneur he went to the market; to look it over, as he thought, but in reality to find a buyer." Benjamin reveals Baudelaire as a social poet of the very first rank. The introduction to this volume presents each of Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire in chronological order. The introduction, intended for an undergraduate audience, aims to articulate and analyze the major motifs and problems in these essays, and to reveal the relationship between the essays and Benjamin's other central statements on literature, its criticism, and its relation to the society that produces it.

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Customer Reviews

It took a very long time to read but that is because it was a pleasure to read and who rushes through pleasure. (Perhaps too many of us.) I found the discussion of Baudelaire useful, difficult and often

even lovely. As Walter Benjamin looks back nearly a century to understand his own time, so I find much in his thoughts helpful not only to better understand and so read, Baudelaire, but also Benjamin. Benjamin, along the way, offers some insights into our own confused/comic/tragic times. I find Benjamin persuasive: Baudelaire is not simply the poet of Modern Life, but the poet of the psyche of Modern Life--the last lyric poet before lyric poetry was silenced by incessant noise. (A condition that defines both Hell and life as we know it.) By Benjamin's time, the notion of modernity lost whatever positive strains it once possessed as it passed from a grim industrial, into the global. Benjamin's radical conception was that it was possible to find in the life of a man and his work, who lived a century earlier, a guide to understand his own time. In the same way, we would profit, by reading Benjamin, dead now for 70 years, to understand something of our urban, if not urbane existence. The shock has not gone away in spite of the cushion of personal digital technology. Niccolo Machiavelli, in another City, in the early 16th Century, wrote: " If the present be compared with the remote past, it is easily seen that in all cities and in all peoples, there are always the same desires and the same passions as there always were." Here, as elsewhere, Machiavelli is prophetic. We may transition, but we don't change.

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