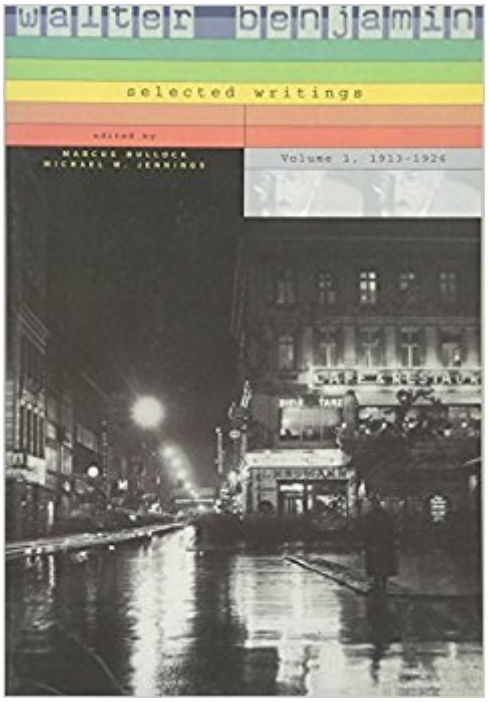
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Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926



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Synopsis

Walter Benjamin was one of the most original and important critical voices of the twentieth century, but until now only a few of his writings have been available in English. Harvard University Press has now undertaken to publish a significant portion of his work in definitive translation, under the general editorship of Michael W. Jennings. This volume, the first of three, will at last give readers of English a true sense of the man and the many facets of his thought. (The magnum opus of BenjaminÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Paris years, The Arcades Project, has been published in a separate volume.)Walter Benjamin emerged from the head-on collision of an idealistic youth movement and the First World War, which Benjamin and his close friends thought immoral. He walked away from the wreck scarred yet determined Ã¢â ¬Å“to be considered as the principal critic of German literature.Ã¢â ¬Â• But the scene, as he found it, was dominated by Ã¢â ¬Å“talented fakes,Ã¢â ¬Â• soÃ¢â ¬â ¢to use his wordsÃ¢â ¬â ¢Ã¢â ¬Å“only a terrorist campaign would I sufficeÃ¢â ¬Â• to effect radical change. This book offers the record of the first phase of that campaign, culminating with Ã¢â ¬Å“One Way Street,Ã¢â ¬Â• one of the most significant products of the German avant-garde of the Twenties. Against conformism, homogeneity, and gentrification of all life into a new world order, Benjamin made the word his sword.Volume I of the Selected Writings brings together essays long and short, academic treatises, reviews, fragments, and privately circulated pronouncements. Fully five-sixths of this material has never before been translated into English. The contents begin in 1913, when Benjamin, as an undergraduate in imperial Germany, was president of a radical youth group, and take us through 1926, when he had already begun, with his explorations of the world of mass culture, to emerge as a critical voice in Weimar GermanyÃ¢â ¬â„¢s most influential journals.The volume includes a number of his most important works, including Ã¢â ¬Å“Two Poems by Friedrich HÃƒÂ¶lderlin,Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬Å“GoetheÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Elective Affinities,Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬Å“The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬Å“The Task of the Translator,Ã¢â ¬Â• and Ã¢â ¬Å“One Way Street.Ã¢â ¬Â• He is as compelling and insightful when musing on riddles or childrenÃ¢â ¬â„¢s books as he is when dealing with weightier issues such as the philosophy of language, symbolic logic, or epistemology. We meet Benjamin the youthful idealist, the sober moralist, the political theorist, the experimentalist, the translator, and, above all, the virtual king of criticism, with his magisterial exposition of the basic problems of aesthetics.BenjaminÃ¢â ¬â„¢s sentences provoke us to return to them again and again, luring us as though with the promise of some final revelation that is always being postponed. He is by turns fierce and tender, melancholy and ebullient; he is at once classically rooted, even archaic, in his explorations of the human psyche and the world of things, and strikingly progressive in his attitude

toward society and what he likes to call the organs of the collective (its architectures, fashions, signboards). Throughout, he displays a far-sighted urgency, judging the present on the basis of possible futures. And he is gifted with a keen sense of humor. Mysterious though he may sometimes be (his Latvian love, Asia Lacis, once described him as a visitor from another planet), Benjamin remains perhaps the most consistently surprising and challenging of critical writers.

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Customer Reviews

For many readers, [Benjamin's]Ã¢â ¬Â¦scrupulous attention to detail, this sense that everything can be made to speak, explains [his] force as a writer. His hermeneutic skill is nowhere more evident than in his essay on Goethe's Elective Affinities, the most important previously untranslated article included here. He confronts the novel from several perspectives, using it to illuminate the institution of marriage, the morality of love, and the project of artistic creation. At the same time, the essay offers a powerfulÃ¢â ¬â ¢and frankly mysticalÃ¢â ¬â ¢image of criticism itselfÃ¢â ¬Â¦ Esoteric much of the work is, but its originality inspires. If cultural studies is headed back to basics, Benjamin's luminous musings are a rewarding place to start. (James Surowiecki Lingua Franca)To encounter Benjamin's piece ['The Life of Students'] is like overhearing the opening notes of one of the most intellectually compelling friendships of our century. It is greatly to the credit of Harvard University Press to have made the text finally available to English-speaking readers. In general, the editors of this volume have made an exemplary choice of what to include, and when their projected multi-volume section is complete, it will constitute the most important compilation of Benjamin's writings outside the mammoth German Collected Works. (Michael AndrÃƒÂ© Bernstein New

Republic)[A] splendid new edition of Benjamin's own Selected Writings. (Times Higher Education Supplement)[T]he publication of an ambitious new edition of Benjamin's selected writings [is] a genuinely exciting event. In place of a limited selection of Benjamin's more immediately accessible pieces, American readers now have the chance to wander the full range of his work, and to gain a real sense of the often contradictory but always provocative combination of philosophy, criticism, and cultural history that it offers. (James Surowiecki Boston Phoenix)Benjamin has gradually emerged as a major presence in 20th-century letters. This reputation rests on his extraordinary and highly idiosyncratic gift for original and far-reaching insights. It was his ambition to become Germany's leading literary critic, a status that many no doubt would be inclined to award him posthumouslyÃ¢â ¬Â¦ Benjamin is sometimes misunderstood, since only certain parts of his overall output have come into view here. The 65 pieces collected in this excellent first volume of the new Harvard Benjamin should help clarify the larger picture as well as deepen and enliven the discussion. (Steve Dowden Washington Times)A glance at the Table of Contents of Selected WritingsÃ¢â ¬â ¢he writes on language, time, colors, children's books, love, violence, messianismÃ¢â ¬â ¢shows us at once Benjamin's provocativeness and his infinite variety. The two longest pieces, both from the early twenties and neither translated till now, are his doctoral thesis, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,' and his long essay on Goethe's late novel, Elective AffinitiesÃ¢â ¬Â¦ [The latter] is an exemplary piece of lit crit, brilliantly analyzing the book's layers, motifs, symbols and subtextsÃ¢â ¬Â¦Benjamin's reverent feeling for tradition gives weight to his radical readings of tradition. Both essays could be an inspiration to people doing cultural studies today. (Marshall Berman The Nation)[Walter Benjamin] is no less than a major enrichment and revision of the image of Walter Benjamin's criticism in the English-speaking world. (Tyrus Miller American Book Review)Today, the presence of Walter Benjamin is invoked in aesthetics, in political philosophy, in the theory of literature and of film, in linguistics and theologyÃ¢â ¬Â¦ [T]his [is a] sumptuous first volume of [his] Selected WritingsÃ¢â ¬Â¦ [T]here is more to this feast of a book than demanding gravity. The look at 'Old Forgotten Children's Books' is an arch delight. The sketch of 'Naples' (1925) anticipates the vital part the Mediterranean was to play in Benjamin's search for inexpensive nirvanas. The brief entry on 'Love and Related Matters' of 1920 speculates on the coming sexual revolutionÃ¢â ¬Â¦ Throughout Walter Benjamin, the prodigality of suggestion haunts one. (George Steiner The Observer)Selected Writings, Volume I increases our understanding of this most important of writers exponentially. There is nothing like Benjamin, and I can hardly imagine a more rewarding book being published this year. (David Wheatley The Irish Times)The appeal of Benjamin's writing, according to Terry Eagleton, lies in the way it 'manages marvellously to

combineÃ¢â ¬Â¦[Marxist] 'aesthetics' with the entrancing esotericism of the Kabbala.'Ã¢â ¬Â¦ Benjamin is admired not in spite of but because of his arcane syntax, murky vocabulary, and buried meaningsÃ¢â ¬Â¦ You have to seek the truth in Benjamin's writings, if you have the patience, and not treat them as conveying knowledge. There is an awful lot of husk to burn in the process, but the theory of truth, if true, explains the obscurity. (Arthur C. Danto Artforum)Bullock and Jennings's Selected Writings series offers and opportunity to reevaluate Benjamin within the context of rhetoric, from a wider body of documents than previously availableÃ¢â ¬Â¦ This first volume of the Selected Writings gives scholars of rhetoric a critical mass of text (from notebook jottings, to student writings and early published works, to Benjamin's dissertation) from which to evaluate Benjamin's work. From this new vantage point, we might identify his potential contribution to rhetorical theory through his writing on communication, the philosophy of language, aesthetics and the political. In some cases, Bullock and Jennings's new edition resonates with and reiterates themes found in the canonical anthologies. In other cases, we are exposed to a Benjamin not previously seen in EnglishÃ¢â ¬Â¦ There are key insights here, especially in these times when the Critical Theory project which has driven the study of mass communication comes into rhetorical studiesÃ¢â ¬Â¦ Benjamin reminds us that to embrace and preserve the true fragment exceeds the condemnation of the system, of the whole. (David Beard Quarterly Journal of Speech)A cause for excitement among literary essayists and critics: Walter Benjamin's scattered works are at last being translated and collected in a carefully edited editionÃ¢â ¬Â¦ Most of his writingsÃ¢â ¬â ¢including some of his most extraordinary accomplishmentsÃ¢â ¬â ¢have never been translated. The loss for American readers is substantial. At long lastÃ¢â ¬Â¦a three-volume, chronologically organized edition of the essays, memoirs, reviews, aphorisms, fragments, and other short forms is being issuedÃ¢â ¬Â¦ The overall quality of the translations is highÃ¢â ¬Â¦ And in Benjamin's case, this is no mean accomplishmentÃ¢â ¬Â¦ His peculiar gift wasÃ¢â ¬Â¦for lightning flashes of sudden, precise, and idiosyncratic illumination. The translators have supplied useful (though relatively sparing) explanatory notes, and the editors have appended a narrative chronology of Benjamin's life through 1926Ã¢â ¬Â¦ This new Benjamin set will be the standard work. (Kirkus Reviews)Readers new to Benjamin will find this a welcome introduction to a challenging but rewarding writer. Those already familiar with his work will be grateful to be reminded, once again, of the wisdom of his maxim, 'all the decisive blows are struck left-handed.' (Graham McCann Financial Times)[W]ith the advent of this volumeÃ¢â ¬Â¦Benjamin's bold and invigorating philosophy of literature will reach a broader audience and truly make its power felt. Here are Benjamin's earliest writings, the youthful efforts of an emerging aesthetic theorist already in command of a vast wealth of material and unafraid to

voice strong and controversial opinions about everything from children’s books to Goethe, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, and such concepts as perception, the philosophy of history, and theories of knowledge and the imagination. (Booklist)Harvard’s systematic presentation of the work of German cultural critic Benjamin has proved a revelation. (Publishers Weekly)Wherever [Benjamin] turned his incisive gazeÃ¢â ¬Â¦the clarity of morning’s first light shines forth. (Haim Chertok Jerusalem Post)

Walter Benjamin (1892Ã¢â ¬â œ1940) was the author of many works of literary and cultural analysis.Marcus Bullock is Professor of German, University of WisconsinÃ¢â ¬â œMilwaukee.Michael W. Jennings is Class of 1900 Professor of Modern Languages at Princeton University.

Because I like to make informed choices, I wanted a table of contents. Here it is provided by Belknap Press: Metaphysics of Youth, 1913ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ1919 ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“ExperienceÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• The Metaphysics of Youth Two Poems by Friedrich HÃƒÂ¶lderlin The Life of Students Aphorisms on Imagination and Color A ChildÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s View of Color Socrates Trauerspiel and Tragedy The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy On Language as Such and on the Language of Man Theses on the Problem of Identity DostoevskyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s The Idiot Painting and the Graphic Arts Painting, or Signs and Marks The Ground of Intentional Immediacy The Object: Triangle Perception Is Reading On Perception Comments on GundolfÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Goethe On the Program of the Coming Philosophy Stifter Every Unlimited Condition of the Will Types of History The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism Fate and Character Analogy and Relationship The Paradox of the Cretan The Currently Effective Messianic Elements Angelus Novus, 1920ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ1926 The Theory of Criticism Categories of Aesthetics On Semblance World and Time According to the Theory of Duns Scotus On Love and Related Matters The Right to Use Force The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages Critique of Violence The Task of the Translator Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in ChildrenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Books Riddle and Mystery Outline for a Habilitation Thesis Language and Logic (IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œIII) Theory of Knowledge Truth and Truths / Knowledge and Elements of Knowledge Imagination Beauty and Semblance The Philosophy of History of the Late Romantics and the Historical School The Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe Capitalism as Religion Announcement of the Journal Angelus Novus GoetheÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Elective Affinities Baudelaire (II, III) CalderÃƒÂ nÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s El Mayor Monstruo, Los Celos and HebbelÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Herades und Mariamne Letter to Florens

Christian Rang Stages of Intention Outline of the Psychophysical Problem Even the Sacramental Migrates into Myth On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Old Forgotten ChildrenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s BooksÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Naples Curriculum Vitae (I) Reflections on Humboldt Review of BernoulliÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Bachofen Johann Peter Hehel (I): On the Centenary of His Death Johann Peter Hebel (II): A Picture Puzzle for the Centenary of His Death A Glimpse into the World of ChildrenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Books One-Way Street A Note on the Texts Chronology, 1892ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ1926 Index

This volume contains selected writings by thinker and cultural critic Walter Benjamin for the period spanning the years 1913-1926. Many of the entries consist in short fragments, interspersed by more lengthy pieces such as The Concept of Criticism and Goethe’s Elective Affinities.Before I continue, I must confess having a soft spot for WB. I first read him, in French translation, at the tail end of my 12 year mandatory stint in the French schooling system which never encouraged and in fact discouraged independent and critical thought - rather the aim of those twelve years seems to have been to annihilate all traces of imagination and creativity and ensure life-long submission to authority.So it was with much fascination and glee that I read some of WB’s earliest essays which opened up a whole world of passionate intellectual enquiry into the nature of reality, all for its own sake. Nor did his output have anything to do with monetary or employment concerns, and indeed, taken too far, such concerns would have stifled WB’s creative spirit and condemned him to obscurity, even post mortem.These things being said, I cannot now, as a mature reader of thirty years, recommend this volume. While I still find WB’s intellectual energy and penetrating analyses inspiring on principle, in practice WB’s writing does not come off well in English translation, for his essays are at times impenetrable, always dense, and all too often obscure in their argument.There are lighter and darker patches of density in this volume but I found my efforts at trying to penetrate the more arduous chunks of theoretical text slimly rewarded, for the contents when grasped are not all that revolutionary or illuminating.Yes, WB offers new insights on certain terrains, such as fate, children’s books, and translation, but I do not find the thinking - when understood - all that convincing or enlightened. WB lacks background knowledge of key areas such as the true content of Natural Law principles, the role of the occult in shaping history and the workings of conspiratorial power. To be sure, he was writing in earlier times but then some texts age better than others.WB is often said to be a good writer, and this may be true in the German original, but in English his texts are chunky, lacking fluidity and clarity. Despite my best intentions of reading the book cover to cover I gave up three quarters of the way through just because of the slog and the small pay-off for

investing time and effort in getting to understand the heck WB is pointing out.While the world would undoubtedly be a poorer place without Walter Benjamin's literary and critical output, ultimately what inspires me the most about the character is his example - as an always curious and diligent non conformist thinker - rather than the actual contents of his musings.Taking all these factors into consideration, the good and the bad, my score for this book is three stars.

impeccable

The selected writings of Walter Benjamin Vol. one is a good beginning to the whole of his thought. You can see how he starts his analysis of critical thought. If you like Walter Benjamin or literary theory this is a good buy.

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