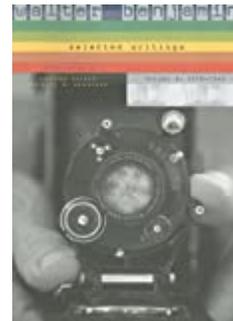




**Walter Benjamin.** *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940.* Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. 496 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-02229-4.



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## Translating the Translator: Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings

First things first: this is a magnificent volume. Translating the work of a gifted translator is undoubtedly a somewhat daunting task. This is perhaps especially the case with regard to Walter Benjamin: writing and publishing in both German and French, Benjamin also delivered masterful translations of Charles Baudelaire and (together with his friend Franz Hessel) Marcel Proust that are still worth reading.[1] Most famous, however, might be his much-quoted essay "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (1921), which served as an introduction to his Baudelaire translations. Benjamin's theoretical claims in this article are easily misunderstood as a kind of post-structuralism *avant la lettre*. Not surprisingly, Benjamin's concept of a "pure language" that occupies the space between different translations, and between original and translation, has generated much excitement among American literary critics and their European counterparts since the heyday of the "theory wars." [2] Indeed, the notion of a pure language without expressive meaning or specific intention suited poststructuralist readings of Benjamin's texts as auratic monuments that could only be approached from a quasi-theological angle.[3] Connected to Benjamin's interest in the Jewish tradition, in con-

temporary philosophy of language, and in historical materialism, Benjamin's theory of translation is, however, a far less solipsistic undertaking. In the essay "Probleme der Sprachsoziologie" (1934/35)—largely ignored by those who present Benjamin's thinking about language simply as a Marxist-Jewish Messianism and thus forget that he read Rudolf Carnap, Karl Böhler, and Ernst Cassirer—Benjamin's theory of translation informs the historical methods with which he seeks to grasp the cultural and political conditions of European modernity.[4] For Benjamin, then, translation is more than a literary genre, or a theological exercise. In any event, we late-comers can count ourselves lucky that, thus far, nobody has attempted a translation of, say, Kant or Hegel based on Benjamin's "pure language." Most likely, such a translation would be as unreadable as HÄlderlin's translations from Greek which—themselves quoted by Benjamin—occasionally verge on nonsense.[5]

Fortunately, the English edition of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* (1996-2003), the fourth volume of which is now available as an affordable and handsome paperback, is entirely free of any capricious theoretical consid-

erations and presents us with a series of elegant translations that, finally, make Benjamin more accessible to a wider English-speaking audience. Indeed, Benjamin's *Selected Writings* is probably the most outstanding editorial achievement in modern cultural history and political thought that has been published in the last few years. Especially intellectual and social historians of early-twentieth-century Europe, who have traditionally not always paid much attention to Benjamin because of the latter's appropriation by literary theory, now have every reason to take Benjamin's writings more seriously.[6] Together with the brilliant English translation of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (1927-1940), Howard Eiland's and Michael W. Jennings's edition of the *Selected Writings* will undoubtedly lead to a more level-headed reception of Benjamin as one of the most important intellectual figures of the twentieth century.[7]

The fourth volume of the *Selected Writings* covers the final years of Benjamin's life, from the increasingly difficult situation of his exile in Paris in 1938 to his untimely death at the Franco-Spanish border in 1940. On the one hand, we can find here some of Benjamin's most influential writings in translations already published elsewhere, now enriched with revised endnotes: "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1938); the third and final version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction" (1939)—which is rightly regarded as one of the main founding documents of modern media studies—and the thesis "On the Concept of History" (1940), one of Benjamin's most cryptic texts, which both summarizes and fleshes out the philosophical principles of his historical thought and whose claims about the task of historical materialism can only be understood properly by relating them back to the practical work of the *Passagen-Werk*.

It is, of course, inevitable that these texts need to be part of any comprehensive Benjamin edition, but what makes the fourth volume particularly exciting are new translations that, often for the first time, make available important texts to English-speaking readers for whom the German Suhrkamp edition is not readily accessible.[8] Among these new translations we can find, for instance, a selection of review articles, such as those of Gisèle Freund's *La photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (1936), which is of central significance for Benjamin's understanding of the history of media as a history of cultural perception, and of Dolf Sternberger's *Panorama oder Ansichten vom 19. Jahrhundert* (1938), which Benjamin regarded as plagiarizing his own *Passagen-Werk* and which led him to accuse Sternberger, the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, of sympathizing

with the Nazis.[9] Equally important, however, is a completely new translation of Benjamin's fragments with the title "Central Park," written in 1938-39, which extend his work on Baudelaire in the notebooks of the *Passagen-Werk* and, at the same time, bridge the seemingly historical difference between his early work on the baroque, especially his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), and his work on the cultural conditions of modernity: in the visual surface culture of nineteenth-century urban life, the ostentatious nature of the baroque returns in the guise of advertising, window displays, consumer goods, and architectural façades that express modernity's social imaginaries: "Allegorical emblems return as commodities." [10]

Likewise, the translation of Benjamin's correspondence with Theodor W. Adorno about the former's work on nineteenth-century Paris constitutes a major addition to Benjamin scholarship and clarifies his ambivalent relationship to the central philosophical tenets of Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's version of critical theory.[11] Adorno, of course, remained skeptical about Benjamin's interest in the (as it were) collective unconscious imaginations of urban modernity, which developed at some distance to the somewhat more traditional version of historical materialism that can be found among the members of the early Frankfurt School. Along similar lines, and seeking to distance himself from what he believed to be the bourgeois tradition of modern social thought, Adorno also rejected Benjamin's interest in Georg Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), while Benjamin defended Simmel—"very interesting things are to be found in the book"—and the way in which the latter sought to overcome the philosophical limitations of precisely the relatively literal reading of Marx that marked Horkheimer's early work.[12] Indeed, what Benjamin described in the notebooks of the *Passagen-Werk* as his own "anthropological materialism" in many ways breaks with historical materialism and, often in hidden ways, draws on Simmel's reflections about the symbolic dimension of economic and social relationships.

The Benjamin that emerges in the fourth volume of the *Selected Writings* is an independent, critical thinker, one whose dismal as well as increasingly dangerous personal situation in exile did not prevent him from producing some of his most fascinating work. The sheer wealth of material that can be found in this volume highlights Benjamin's enormous productivity during the final years of his life, his interests ranging—much as in previous years—from the history of technical media and the philosophy of language to art history, literary criticism,

cultural and social history, political thought, and historical method. Apart from the texts mentioned above, we can find Benjamin writing on Bertold Brecht, Blanqui, and Paul Scheerbarth, but also publishing—once again in French—his short essay on “Germans of 1789,” which appeared in the monthly *Europe* in July 1939, shortly before interwar Europe began to descend into disaster.

Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, who are responsible for the new translations, and Jennings, who also serves as the general editor, have brought together a magnificent volume that deserves to be studied by anyone interested in modern German intellectual and cultural history and, more generally, in the emergence of modernity. Translating a gifted translator might be daunting, but here it is done brilliantly.

#### Notes

[1]. See Walter Benjamin’s translations from Charles Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-89), IV, 22-63; Marcel Proust, *Im Schatten junger Mädchen*, tr. Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel, ed. Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987); Marcel Proust, *Die Herzogin von Guermantes*, tr. Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel, ed. Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

[2]. See Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 9-21; 19.

[3]. See Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig, ed., *Übersetzen: Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001); Beatrice Hanssen, “Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s Work,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 54-72.

[4]. See Benjamin, “Probleme der Sprachsoziologie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 452-480. For a solid account of Benjamin’s theory of translation, see Irving Wohlfarth, “Das Medium der Übersetzung,” in *Übersetzen*, ed. Hart Nibbrig, 80-130.

[5]. See Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 21.

[6]. See Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for

Historians,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 1721-1743; Howard Caygill, “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Cultural History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris, 73-96; Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, “Walter Benjamin Historismus,” in *Passagen: Walter Benjamins Urgeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Norbert Bolz and Bernd Witte (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1984), 163-197; Michael P. Steinberg, ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[7]. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

[8]. A new critical edition of Benjamin, replacing the current edition of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, will be published by Suhrkamp over the course of the next few years.

[9]. Until the mid-1930s, both Benjamin and Adorno had friendly relations with Sternberger, who continued to publish some of Benjamin’s pieces in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* until 1935. By 1938, however, Adorno agreed with Benjamin’s attempt to denounce Sternberger as a hidden Nazi, but—like Horkheimer and Leo Löwenthal—did not wish to publish Benjamin’s review article in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. See the letters in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 703 and V, 1165.

[10]. Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, tr. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 161-199: 183. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 253-286; Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 132-167; Christian J. Emden, *Walter Benjamins Archäologie der Moderne: Kulturwissenschaft um 1930* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 103-112 and 117-128. A previous translation of “Central Park” by Lloyd Spencer appeared in *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 28-58.

[11]. See Detlev Schüttler, *Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus: Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 86-91.

[12]. See “Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno,” in Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, 200-214, esp. 201-202 and 209.

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