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Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan (Cultural Memory in the Present)

Ulrich Baer

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In a bold reassessment, this book analyzes the works of Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan, two poets who frame our sense of modern poetry and define the beginning and end of modernity itself.

The two poets share a feature that seems to block their placement in such an easy chronological or historical scheme: each accounts for an experience that will not fully enter memory, but dissipates in the mind in the form of trauma, fragments, and shock. While Baudelaire, as Paul Valéry was the first to show, explores the trauma of the minute personal shocks of everyday existence in modern life, Celan engages with the catastrophic magnitude of the Holocaust and how it has altered our understanding of history. Can we relate the shocks registered in Baudelaire's poems to the historical horror addressed in Celan's work without denying either the singularity of suffering and loss or the uniqueness of the historical event of the Shoah?

Drawing on trauma studies and Holocaust research, *Remnants of Song* challenges existing interpretations of Baudelaire and Celan by constantly holding in view both the aesthetic dimension of their works and their historical import. The author demonstrates that the act of engaging with a poem on its own terms may serve as an important model for an ethical response to the radical experiences of trauma. Answering Adorno's famous dictum that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, he shows that Celan's poetry continues to posit its own truth by drawing on Baudelaire as a precedent—yet it does so in ways that have little to do with conventional understandings of history.

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