

Forum

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The Bible and *Les Fleurs du mal*

To the Editor:

Abraham Avni's essay (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 299–310) is, as an account of a rigorous investigation, a valid contribution to Baudelaire scholarship. It is refreshing in that it represents a departure from the recent norm of loosely documented critical speculations imitating the esoteric poet's flights through time and space and having, so it would seem, no other purpose than to rival the work itself. I was somewhat disappointed, however, to find missing the intensive interpretative package that would have fructified Avni's efforts in terms of Baudelaire criticism. It is insufficient to conclude summarily, for example, that "Baudelaire's poetry is on the whole literary or esthetic, and not religious" (p. 308). Whatever Avni construes "religious" to mean, he would have been on much more solid ground had he examined closely Baudelaire's biblical allusions in the light both of their intrinsic poetic value and of the ways in which their departure from Judeo-Christian tradition contributes to the meaning of the work.

First, although Avni states accurately that "*Les Fleurs du mal* has fewer direct and open Biblical allusions than classical and literary allusions" (p. 299), he does not inform us that direct allusions to God, Satan, and Christ are, individually and collectively, more frequent than any other single onomastic reference.¹ Furthermore, these specific references are complemented by an extensive religious (and predominantly Christian) vocabulary which appears recurrently throughout the six formal divisions of *Les Fleurs du mal*.

Second, not only does Avni neglect such biblical characters as the Madonna ("Que diras-tu ce soir, pauvre âme solitaire," "À une madone," "Les Petites Vieilles"), Beëlzebub ("Le Possédé"), and a post-biblical Christian saint, St. Anthony of Egypt ("Femmes damnées" ["Comme un bétail pensif sur le sable couchées"]), he also seems unaware that in virtually

every instance Baudelaire's allusions to such figures are rendered "antitraditional" by means of the techniques of distortion, negation, or poetization. Both St. Anthony and St. Peter are portrayed in moments atypical of their place in Christian teaching, and, similarly, Lazarus of Bethany ("Le Flacon") is evoked in the name of art rather than to the glory of Christ.

Baudelaire's presentation of the Holy Virgin also differs markedly from tradition. The poet ironizes on this sacred image in spiting vengefully a "mortal Madonna": Marie Daubrun ("À une madone"). Poetization is the technique applied to the Madonna image in "Que diras-tu ce soir, pauvre âme solitaire"; Baudelaire's fusion of the Holy Virgin, the Guardian Angel, and the Muse in the person of Mme Sabatier combines Platonic idealism and poetic sanctification ("... je suis belle, et j'ordonne / Que pour l'amour de moi vous n'aimiez que le Beau; / Je suis l'Ange gardien, la Muse et la Madone"). The references to David ("Réversibilité") as well as to Beëlzebub ("Le Possédé") reinforce the religious character of ideal beauty (the Mme Sabatier cycle) and the satanic character of sensuality (the Jeanne Duval cycle). And, finally, Baudelaire's allusions to Judas, Abel, Cain, and the Wandering Jew, all reminiscent of the teachings of the Cainites (a Gnostic sect mentioned by Irenaeus and other early writers), represent a further, personalized interpretation of Judeo-Christian tradition.

Third, Avni's statement that "the poet's attitude toward religion is often, if not always, satanic or ambiguous" (p. 299) could have been documented by a more systematic consideration of both the God(s) and the Satan(s) of *Les Fleurs du mal*. In reality, the God images of *Les Fleurs du mal* are much more varied than Avni implies. In addition to the "malevolent God" and the God of suffering, we find a demiurgical God and an animalistic God. The Demiurge, an imperfect deity, is a "Dieu moqueur" ("Un Fantôme") bent on keeping man enslaved. Both the Demiurge and man are victims of a precosmic fall. Humanity rebukes

God as such in “Le Voyage”: “O mon semblable, ô mon maître, je te maudis!” The animalisms are couched in simile and metaphor. A “benign angel,” God’s envoy in “Le Rebelle,” swoops down from the sky like an eagle, seizes the unbeliever by the hair, and commands him to love in the name of God; a similar image characterizes God himself in “Les Petites Vieilles”: these women are “. . . Eves octogénaires, / Sur qui pèse la griffe effroyable de Dieu.” God may also be remote and transmudane. Two poems contain contrasting expressions of God’s increasing remoteness. The seductive woman of “La Destruction” is actually a demon who leads the poet “loin du regard de Dieu”; and an opposite image appears in “Le Coucher du soleil romantique”: “Mais je poursuis en vain le Dieu qui se retire.”

Baudelaire’s presentation of Satan is also much more complex than Avni would have us believe. Satan is the prototype of Baudelaire’s *homo duplex*. His duality is both metaphysical and esthetic. Whereas the Prince of Darkness is the immediate source of ontological evil in “Au Lecteur,” elsewhere he is, “ironically,” man’s only source of light:

Un phare ironique, infernal,
Flambeau des grâces sataniques,
Soulagement et gloire uniques,
—La conscience dans le Mal!
 (“L’Irrémédiable”)

This “beacon” (*phare*) is a metaphoric expression for the artistic dimension of creative imagination. Art and poetry, according to the poet of *Les Fleurs du mal*, are man’s only means of “elevation.” In another invocation neglected by Avni, the oft-quoted concluding quatrain of “Les Phares,” the poet depicts the creative endeavor as the zenith of human dignity:

Car c’est vraiment, Seigneur, le meilleur témoignage
Que nous puissions donner de notre dignité
Que cet ardent sanglot qui roule d’âge en âge
Et vient mourir au bord de votre éternité!

Yet, despite the lofty plane occupied by the arts, they are not divine; they are not a means to salvation. And, a salient point sadly omitted in Avni’s essay, it is above all the biblical and religious allusions of *Les Fleurs du mal* that convey pessimistically the poet’s concept of the salvational insufficiency of both traditional religion and the “religion of poetry.”² My criticism of Avni’s article, then, concerns, specifically, various deficiencies within the framework of the study itself and, more generally, what might be termed critical myopia: his field of vision does not include the admittedly risky challenge of relating his findings to the meaning of Baudelaire’s poetry.

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Notes

¹ See Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal: Concordances, index et relevés statistiques*, ed. Bernard Quemada and K. Menemencioglu (Paris: Larousse, 1965), and *A Concordance to Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal*, ed. Robert T. Cargo (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1965).

² Baudelaire’s religious pessimism is treated copiously by Pierre Emmanuel, *Baudelaire, Les Ecrivains devant Dieu* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967); Joseph Melançon, *Le Spiritualisme de Baudelaire* (Paris: Fides, 1967); and Max Milner, *Baudelaire: Enfer ou ciel, qu’importe!*, Collection Recherche de l’Absolu (Paris: Plon, 1967). Avni mentions briefly Emmanuel’s study, but he shows no knowledge of the poet’s concept of the “impossible reintegration” and fails to consider how this concept relates to Baudelaire’s biblical allusions.

Mr. Avni replies:

I am sorry to have disappointed Freeman Henry, but this happened because he wanted me to write an article on a broader or different topic than I have chosen. My subject and title strictly delimited my study to the influence of the Bible on *Les Fleurs du mal*. His strictures clearly imply that I should have considered the influence on *Les Fleurs du mal* of biblical and postbiblical concepts of the Apostles, the Virgin, and Satan; or written on a topic like “Baudelaire and Christianity” or “Baudelaire’s Concept(s) of God.” How could he otherwise reproach me for not having treated the postbiblical St. Anthony, the role of St. Peter in early Christian proselytism, the postbiblical adoration of the Holy Virgin ironized in “À une madone,” the Wandering Jew, and the Gnostic sect of the Cainites? And how far afield would I have moved had I examined the vocabulary named by Henry, which is not simply biblical, but, by his own admission, merely “religious (and predominantly Christian)”?

True, there are varied and maybe contradictory images of God in *Les Fleurs du mal*. However, a demiurgical God has certainly nothing to do with the Bible. If God’s description in “Les Petites Vieilles” is aptly called animalistic by Henry, then it is surprising he overlooked my quotation of it and comparison with its biblical source on page 301. The other “animalistic” simile, in “Le Rebelle,” does not refer to God: “Un ange furieux fond du ciel comme un aigle / Du mécréant saisit à plein poing les cheveux.” Here Baudelaire echoes a description found in the Apocryphal Bel and Dragon (v. 36): “Then the angel took the prophet [Habakkuk] by the crown of his head and carrying him by his hair he swept him to Babylon with the blast of his breath and put him down above the [lion’s] pit [of Daniel].” The prophet is as recalcitrant as Baudelaire’s “rebel.” By seizing them by the hair, both angels try to force their charges to do