

## Forum

*PMLA* invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, New York, NY 10004-1789.

### Baudelaire and Anti-Semitism

TO THE EDITOR:

Brett Bowles makes the case that although Baudelaire's purported anti-Semitism was not of the commercial or political order of the anti-Semitism that spans modern French history from the Dreyfus case to Vichy and beyond, "[o]n a psychological level" it nevertheless anticipates the transition to that kind of anti-Semitism ("Poetic Practice and Historical Paradigm: Charles Baudelaire's Anti-Semitism," 115 [2000]: 195–208; 206).

I submit, with all due respect for the biographical and historical research that Bowles brings in support of his argument, that the basic premise of his argument is historically and philologically fallacious, and historically fallacious because philologically fallacious. Arguments for historical anticipation are, like arguments by analogy, often suggestive yet all too often also quite flimsy. They presuppose a teleology that, by seeing the past against the pattern of later developments, risks losing sight of what was singular and individual about the past. Thus, Baudelaire, on account of stray anti-Semitic remarks in a personal journal never intended for publication, gets assimilated to a later history of deliberate commercial and political prejudice against Jews. (That Baudelaire was paying the costs of drug and alcohol abuse while also suffering the pains of syphilis is a biographical fact that Bowles, in spite of his reliance on biographical argument, does not mention.) As for a text like the haunting poem "Les sept vieillards," it is no more than anti-Semitism "in masked form" (206). Bowles apparently thinks that the poem's use of motifs like the Judas figure and a "three-legged Jew" ("juif à trois pattes") is sufficient proof in itself of anti-Semitism. The issue of what kind of figure the speaker is and what kind of relation binds him to the phantom figure of the bent old man is never broached. Indeed, Bowles gives no interpretation of the poem's rhetoric at all. Instead, a quick survey of popular and traditional iconography of the Wandering Jew, made without any demonstration of Baudelaire's knowledge of or susceptibility to this iconography, implicitly claims to do all the interpretive work that is

needed. Bowles in fact is so little concerned with questions of rhetoric and interpretation that he can assert that “the narrator of ‘Les sept vieillards’ [. . .] simply walk[s] away from his perceived Jewish tormentor” (204). Anyone who knows the conclusion of this poem, in which the speaker compares himself to a ship with a broken mast adrift at sea, will certainly stumble over that assertion.

Bowles’s informative but fatally skewed argument makes two quantum leaps. First, it equates the private anguish and resentments of a commercially failed poet with a later, widespread public resentment that eventually influenced governmental policy. Second, it makes no distinction between the rhetoric of a private journal and that of a volume of poetry. This is not to say that the material and questions Bowles brings to bear on Baudelaire’s poetry are irrelevant. It is to say that their application to that poetry requires a subtler and more careful mediation than he sees fit to give it. Bowles, unfortunately, seems to have resurrected the view that Baudelaire’s poetry is little more than a symptom of the poet’s implosive psychology, a view he has updated by refurbishing it with a historicist unmasking. At one point Bowles mentions Walter Benjamin. But Bowles’s notion of historicization is certainly not what Benjamin had in mind when he cast Baudelaire’s work as the point of entry into a prehistory of capitalist modernity.

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### Reply:

In his critique John M. Baker, Jr., contends that my argument is “historically and philologically fallacious” because it “presuppose[s] a teleology that, by seeing the past against the pattern of later developments, risks losing sight of what was singular and individual about the past.” In essence, Baker believes that I found Baudelaire’s late-life call for Jewish genocide in a diary not meant for publication, decided the poet was an anti-Semite, and marshaled the necessary evidence, retroactively, to prove that predetermined conclusion. This view misrepresents my approach entirely, for I begin with the 1840s and follow the development of Baudelaire’s prejudice forward to the end of his life. In so doing I show how a nexus of highly personal and singular factors

(identification with Poe and Maistre, financial misery, a persecution-martyrdom complex, enmity toward Michel Lévy) gradually generated Baudelaire’s anti-Semitism.

I suspect that the real issue here is not my methodology but rather the perception that I have committed character assassination by soiling the name of a great artist, one who suffered profound physical pain and social alienation as part of his creative process. (Hence Baker’s irritation that I do not pay more attention to “the costs of drug and alcohol abuse” and the “pains of syphilis” endured by Baudelaire.) Baker is of course right to remind us that arguments for historical anticipation can be self-fulfilling, but they are not necessarily so. Like any other approach, they must be carefully qualified; their validity must be judged on the kind of evidence brought to bear and its interpretation.

Baker questions in particular my reading of “Les sept vieillards,” claiming that I ignore the complex dialectic between poet and narrator in favor of biographical determinism: “the view that Baudelaire’s poetry is little more than a symptom of the poet’s implosive psychology.” Let me assure Baker that I am well aware of the distinction to be made between Barthes’s *scripteur* and the “*je*” *narrant* through which the *scripteur* speaks in a poem. In fact, I treat this issue at length in another article on “Les sept vieillards” (“‘Les sept vieillards’: Baudelaire’s Purloined Letter,” *French Forum* 23 [1998]: 47–62). However, in the *PMLA* piece I chose to focus on the ethics of Baudelaire’s poetic language rather than on its form for reasons of concision, cogency, and my sense of critical responsibility.

On the charge that the presence of the Judas figure and the “three-legged Jew” does not by itself constitute sufficient proof of anti-Semitism, I agree wholeheartedly. These motifs must be contextualized, historically in their own right and with regard to Baudelaire personally, to be valid pieces of evidence. As I show in the article, both figures had a long cultural history that played a central role in the development of theological anti-Semitism. Moreover, contemporaneous sources such as Jules Fleury and present-day historians of anti-Semitism demonstrate that the Wandering Jew was still a highly visible part of mid-nineteenth-century French literature and art.

These facts cannot be disputed. Still, Baker insists, what proof do we have of “Baudelaire’s