

Joachim Du Bellay and Charles Baudelaire

“Heureux Qui, Comme Ulysse” and “Le Voyage”

It was hard to press the ‘Send’ button on this email. The essay itself is about the struggle between bourgeois values and other things. We all know that good intellectuals should be in rebellion against bourgeois values, yet this essay takes those values seriously and even acknowledges the hold they have on us. And further, to some extent it commends the grip of the bourgeois on our consciousness.

I find it difficult to send a retrograde, even anti-intellectual essay, but I do so because I believe there is honesty in addressing even those things that are held in disrepute among intellectuals. This essay is in some ways about a conflict that at one time or another engulfs almost all of us, even if we would prefer not to acknowledge the conflict between our comfort in what we know and our desire to voyage, as Newton did (the line is from Wordsworth) “through strange seas of thought, alone.” It does not take for granted that we can know which side of that conflict should prevail.

But where does the ‘other’ side of that conflict come from? The voyage has always been a part of stories and folklore, everywhere. The quest to examine or re-examine our values has, in our culture, its origins in Socrates. But our attachment to incessantly going beyond, as a way of life, of being? This essay will propose it comes from the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century. Baudelaire? A poet shaping a whole culture? Well, yes.

What follows is mostly an evaluation of Joachim du Bellay’s “Heureux qui, comme Ulysse,” although as it goes on it considers a poem that is perhaps its polar opposite, a very long (but never fear, we will look at only part of it) poem by Charles Baudelaire called “Le Voyage.” Here is du Bellay’s poem:

Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage,
Ou comme cestuy-là qui conquit la toison,
Et puis est retourné, plein d'usage et raison,
Vivre entre ses parents le reste de son âge !

Quand reverrai-je, hélas, de mon petit village
Fumer la cheminée, et en quelle saison

Reverrai-je le clos de ma pauvre maison,
Qui m'est une province, et beaucoup davantage ?

Plus me plaît le séjour qu'ont bâti mes aïeux,
Que des palais Romains le front audacieux,
Plus que le marbre dur me plaît l'ardoise fine :

Plus mon Loire gaulois, que le Tibre latin,
Plus mon petit Liré, que le mont Palatin,
Et plus que l'air marin la douceur angevine.

Here is a reasonably literal English translation:

Happy is he who, like Ulysses, has made a glorious voyage,
Or like Jason who won the Golden Fleece,
And then returned, full of wisdom of the world,
To live amongst his parents for the remainder of his life.

When will I see again, alas, the smoke rise
From chimneys in my small village, and in what season
Will I see again the small plot around my poor old house
Which to me is an entire province, and even more?

More it pleases me, this place my forefathers built
Than Roman palaces with their gorgeous facades;
More than carved hard marble, the simple slate of home.

More my Gallic Loire than the illustrious Roman Tiber,
More my small hill than the Palatine Mount,
And more than sea-salted air the sweetness I breathed in Anjou.

I am not satisfied by any of the translations into English of this poem by Joachim du Bellay, so I have provided it in the original French, and then a 'prosy' translation of mine that is close to the original. I'll discuss this decision of mine to examine such a literal translation later in this essay.

To approach this poem, I want to consider the early years of my own intellectual life. Please indulge me.

When I was a freshman in college, taking a survey course in French, I fell in love with du Bellay's poem.

I think it had much to do with the struggle of my first years in college. A smart Jewish teenager from the suburbs, good in school but socially more than a bit naïve, I left home to go to the very conservative, traditional – which meant upper-class, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and also preppy – Hamilton College. It seems quaint to me now to point out that as I left home and entered a wider world, one of the great struggles of my life was with the question of bourgeois culture.

I had to cope at Hamilton with a dominant WASP culture which enshrined prep-school standards of what masculinity should entail. (That preppy WASP culture looked down on bourgeois values as, well, bourgeois.) I had to cope with my own legacy of the Holocaust: my parents and my grandparents were refugees from Hitler, and I grew up in a largely refugee community. At the time, the Civil Rights movement was beginning: what, as the son of people who had been outcast and demeaned and destroyed, should I do in the face of an American prejudice which appeared as large and deep as Nazi anti-Semitism, but directed against black people rather than Jews?

To me all these cohered into the question of being bourgeois, to acknowledging certain of my parents' middle-class values as shaping my life. I spent a great deal of time and mental energy consumed with the question of bourgeois values and what they meant for me.

What does it mean to prize comfort, security and safety over the pursuit of other (for me often 'nobler') values? What does it mean to go the way so many others go, rather than live an isolated life on the margins of what is acceptable? I was consumed by these questions about 'being bourgeois' or rebelling against the values into which I felt I had been born. [My friend, the fine scholar Dennis Mahoney, has pointed out to me that a translation of a 'bourgeois' into German would render it as a 'Burger.' Still, the same values, enumerated below, of comfort, but also a connotation of 'citizen,' as 'citizen of a town (Burg)'. To be bourgeois, then, might also mean to have the interests of citizenship at heart.... An interesting thought, as I look back on my youthful concerns.]

Underlying these questions were deeper ones: Should one see oneself as the vanguard of society, or as a member of the bourgeois world? Did acceptance of middle-class values mean somehow that one accepted segregation and societal prejudice? Most improbably, did rejection of middle-class values come all-to-easily to the son of parents who had fled dictatorship and destruction in order to raise a family and live with a modicum of security and happiness?

As I wrestled with these questions, I came upon du Bellay's great poem. There was more in it than I knew even as it spoke to my inner dialogues and arguments so cogently. But that is how it is with great poems: they speak deeply to us, more deeply than we recognize. That is one reason we need poems: As William Carlos Williams wrote, trenchantly, in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower:"

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

His contemporary Robinson Jeffers wrote that "pained thoughts found/The honey of peace in old poems."

This poem before us is an old poem. Old. Du Bellay lived in the sixteenth century and published this poem in 1558. He wrote the poem while he was a secretary to a French Cardinal posted in Rome. To du Bellay, the posting to the papal court was a form of exile. The poem appears to express his longing for a return to France. 'Appears,' because poems are made of words, and the words in them create a fiction. "I believe in nothing but the heart's holiness and the truth of the imagination," Keats wrote magnificently in a letter. "Only the imagination is real," Williams declared a century and a half later. And Williams' friend Wallace Stevens wrote,

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

The poem is always a fiction, even when it says what is true: perhaps especially when it says what is true. So, yes, this poem longs for a return to the poet's home. But it says more than that.

Let's start with basic considerations. The poem is a sonnet. It is written primarily in alexandrines, the French 'standard' line of twelve syllables. (France, not being an inflected language like English, is not hospitable to counting stresses, so the French count syllables. We in English tend to count both: iambic pentameter denotes a line of five stresses and ten syllables.)

As a sonnet, it has an octet (its first eight lines) and an answering sestet of six lines. The two stanzas of the octet rhyme ABBA (the same rhymes govern

both) while the sestet rhymes CCD D'D'D, where D' indicates a slant rhyme. There are repetitions which bind the lines together: 'reverrai-je,' when 'will I see?' appears twice in the second stanza. Four of the six lines of the sestet begin with "plus," 'more,' while the final line uses "plus" as its second term, following an 'and.' If I were to go on, examining all the words of the French original, we would find aural connections and echoes throughout. Take my word for it, since we are not about to plow through the French. (That various translators – four translations will come in a following email – strive with varying degrees of success to follow du Bellay's rhyming and sound patterns warps, unfortunately, any adherence to what the poem actually says).

I have taken an easy way out: I have translated what the poem says, and have not attempted to reproduce the sound patterns which govern and shape the poem. Yet the particular way in which the poem is said is essential, and in not paying enough attention to that I, too, have warped the poem.

We start, then, despite my cumbersome prose translation, by recognizing that this sonnet is very, very well made. The artistry needs stressing, since what the sonnet tells us could verge on the trite: it would be very nice to be home, even if things are fancier abroad. Nice to be back where my parents live, and their parents lived before them. Nice to be in my simple house even though I've seen palaces; nice to see my local hills, my local stream, breathe the air I breathed when I was a child. As I said, kind of trite: 'Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.' Yet even if the 'stuff' of the poem appears simple and trite, it is worth paying attention to.

To my divided and constantly debating freshman mind, this poem was an answer and a comfort. Good to be back in the long-familiar, even if other places hold such allure. Simple bourgeois culture and values are good to return to.

But there is more in the poem, as we shall see when we go through it line by line. Part of the poem is prescient, foreseeing an aesthetic and philosophy that had not yet been articulated. (Although I am aware that François Villon, who wrote a century before du Bellay, had embodied part of what we will be looking at...)

Happy is he who, like Ulysses, has made a glorious voyage,
Or like Jason who won the Golden Fleece,
And then returned, full of wisdom of the world,
To live amongst his parents for the remainder of his life.

The first stanza is all about the pleasure of returning home. It begins with two similes from classical literature, of figures who returned home after long voyages abroad. Ulysses, in the *Odyssey*, returned to his house, his wife, his son and his dog after magnificent – if challenging – adventures on a very long voyage back from Troy. Jason, who captured the Golden Fleece, ultimately arrives back in Iolcus after his adventures with the Argonauts. (It is one of the ironies of du Bellay’s poem that Jason does *not* remain at home: he wanders endlessly after returning to Iolcus...) Du Bellay says Jason returns, filled with experience and mature reason, to live with his parents. Wishful thinking. Ah, to live with one’s parents: for me, college was an escape from them and their milieu, the world I had grown up in. Yet like all college students, I had a longing for what I had left behind.

When will I see again, alas, the smoke rise
From chimneys in my small village, and in what season
Will I see again the small plot around my poor old house
Which to me is an entire province, and even more?

This second stanza is a dream of a lost paradise. (This is where the poem is most recognizably a fiction.) The smoke rises from the chimney of his family home, an index to the warmth within. As we all recognize, this small and “poor” house is to the child a magical kingdom, as large as a province, or even larger. To the child, his world is the world. The boundaries of the familiar are not constraining, but enclose a vast and empowering territory.

More it pleases me, this place my forefathers built
Than Roman palaces with their gorgeous facades;
More than carved hard marble, the simple slate of home.

More my Gallic Loire than the illustrious Roman Tiber,
More my small hill than the Palatine Mount,
And more than sea-salted air the sweetness I breathed in Anjou.

In the sestet the poet speaks of values: there are five comparisons, all prefaced by ‘more.’ The house of his parents is more pleasing than the palaces of Rome. Local slate is better than the hard marble of which those palaces are constructed. He is happier with the French river in whose valley he grew up than the magnificent Tiber along whose banks Rome was built, just as the local hill of his childhood is warmer in memory than the Palatine hill of Rome, with all its magnificent structures. All the comparisons say the world of childhood, the world

of family, are better than all the glories Rome has to offer. Even the sweet air he breathed in childhood is better than the bracing sea air he confronts in Rome.

Nostalgia, yes. But something – actually two things – pulses beneath the nostalgia. One is important but, to me, not particularly noteworthy. We see here an augury of Romanticism, where going back to childhood, to simpler values, is a way of rooting oneself as one confronts the complex and alienating world of modernity. In this Romantic vein, there was for France the writer François-René de Chateaubriand, with his celebration of nature, and the poet Alphonse de Lamartine (whom I love, although his poetry is a gentler version of Romanticism – quite pastoral – even as he celebrates the return to the landscape of his childhood). Rising above both was the British poet William Wordsworth, who found salvation for his confused and wounded consciousness in a triple regression, to childhood, to nature, and to a naïve primitive life with its deep-rooted values. (It is this last that, in the French tradition, hearkens back to François Villon....)

But we see this anticipation of Romanticism only in hindsight, knowing what followed du Bellay a century and a half later. Had Romanticism not emerged, I am not sure that this aspect of the poem would be one worth noting.

What is worth attending is the esthetic that the sestet propounds. For ‘pleasing’ we might substitute ‘the beautiful,’ for one important way of defining ‘the beautiful’ is to acknowledge that it refers to what pleases us most deeply. Seen from this perspective, the esthetic that du Bellay puts forward privileges the simple and solidly built over the impressively constructed (“palaces”), native slate over durable marble, local settings over mythic ones, and one’s tender childhood breeze over the brisk winds of the wider world.

In American prose, I have several favorite passages. One is from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The American Scholar” of 1837. It is a clarion call. In his address to the students at Harvard, Emerson challenged them (and generations of American writers and thinkers) to make an *American* literature:

Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized. That which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for **long journeys** into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts.... **I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.** Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future

worlds. **What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;**—show me the ultimate reason of these matters... and the shop, the plow, and the ledger referred to the like cause by which light undulates and poets sing;—**and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order....**

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. [my bolding]

Emerson, close to two hundred years later, is channeling du Bellay. Art should be built of native stuff; as Emerson's friend Thoreau put it in *Walden*,

If your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country affords, **purely native products**, much ice and pine timber and a little granite, always **in native bottoms**. These will be good ventures. [again, my bolding]

Emerson insisted that if we want to understand and celebrate who we are, it is imperative that we accept and not reject our local context. For Thoreau, sticking to one's own "native products" allows for meaningful "ventures."

I don't think I understood that esthetic when I was a first-year student in college. I was enamored of Plato and Homer, of Milton and Shakespeare. Of world-historical writers. But I would come to value the local. Sometimes we do not know what is incipient within us. I treasure a glorious line in Wordsworth's *Prelude* when he experiences "all the beauty of a common dawn" as he walks through the countryside after an all-night dance.

I made no vows, but vows
Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
A dedicated Spirit.

I myself have been most attracted to poets who acknowledge and celebrate the local: William Carlos Williams, but also Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson before him, and Wordsworth before them. But I did not know how important the local was then, in my first enthusiasms of college, and only learned of my allegiance to everyday life as I read more and thought more.

For the local and every-day is what commands du Bellay's allegiance in this sonnet. He tells himself (and us, his readers) that art should be made of what we know, not what we admire, that it should celebrate the lives we live and have lived and not the seductive world of esthetic brilliance.

But this, although it is a central aspect of the poem and a sign of its boldness and enduring worth, is a byway to what I started out writing about. To my collegiate self, du Bellay affirmed that it was alright to be bourgeois, to prize safety and homely comfort in a world which was strange and could instantly become hostile and destructive.

So where did my conflict about bourgeois values come from? I am not trying to celebrate bourgeois values here: they still make me uncomfortable, with their easy acceptance of the status quo, their willingness to glide over racism and sexism (and anti-Semitism), their uncritical welcome to capitalism and its emphasis on competition and winners and losers. To, as has often been said, 'going along to get along.' Yes, there is much to reject in bourgeois values. I knew it then, in college, and I know it now.

Still, the question remains: where did this discomfort with the bourgeois come from? Where this need to reject our values continually and find new ones? To answer that, one must leap forward three centuries from du Bellay to the middle of the nineteenth century. Still in France. The writing of a poet of even greater stature than Joachim du Bellay. I speak of Charles Baudelaire.

Baudelaire took drugs, he had a mistress (of mixed race), he slouched through Paris looking at it as an outsider-artist, a *flaneur*. His poetry was shocking. I have written about one of his most shocking poems [here](#). He wrote poems about boredom ("*ennui*"), about life in a modern city (for him, Paris), about unmentionable fringe populations like whores and gamblers.

Baudelaire initiated, more than any other figure, our deep discontent with the lives we have been born into. He insisted we move beyond the confines of the familiar to find new ways of being and experiencing. He is the god, if I may be permitted to say so, who rules over our deep need to transgress and find new values to live by

I think Baudelaire's greatest poem is the concluding poem of his monumental work, *Les Fleurs de Mal*, or as it is called in English, *The Flowers of Evil*. I've read the poem many times and am not sure I understand it fully. But it

is intimately connected to du Bellay's poem. Called "Le Voyage¹," it is long, eight sections, although one section is surely the shortest poem ever published: Section Five, in its entirety, reads "E puis, et puis encore?" "And then, and then, what else?" It points backward toward boredom, boredom with what existence has to offer. But it moves in an opposite direction to the sonnet by du Bellay, which dreams of returning home after a voyage. Baudelaire points toward a voyage: in the poem, an ever-continuing voyage. Not returning home, but constantly setting out.

So, as I thought about writing about du Bellay, I realized I should pair his poem with Baudelaire's. One poet longs for home; the other speaks about how we must ceaselessly voyage onward. Surely, surely, Baudelaire knew he was responding to du Bellay's famous sonnet. One poem is yoked to the other, a call and response of sorts. Between the two, we learn a lot about ourselves: about the longing for the long-familiar, and the opposing longing to break free and voyage outward and onward in the world. We all too easily follow Baudelaire, while du Bellay seems to offer the more nostalgic course. Baudelaire, more than we like to admit, rules our desires and dreams and shapes the lives we think we want to live.

For those who care to challenge themselves, the French text followed by a brilliant translation by Robert Lowell— he called it an 'imitation' since it takes imaginative license with the actual text – can be found on the pages cited in the footnote. Here are some sample passages from "The Voyage:"

I

But the true voyagers are those who move
simply to move — like lost balloons! Their heart
is some old motor thudding in one groove.
It says its single phrase, "Let us depart!"

They are like conscripts lusting for the guns...

Baudelaire recognizes that we must be moving, always going onward. As those of you who have read all of my emails know, I am not a great admirer of T. S. Eliot. But he understood Baudelaire, deeply, and appreciated him. Here are some of the best lines Eliot ever wrote, the conclusion to "East Coker," one of his *Four Quartets*:

Old men ought to be explorers

¹ The whole poem in French, with several translations including the one by Robert Lowell that I cite, IS available [here](#).

Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

That is what it is to be human: To keep moving, to keep going forward into the future. Even as, especially as, we grow old and see death before us, we must keep sailing onward. Baudelaire understood this. So did Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who unlike du Bellay saw Ulysses as ever-voyaging, not content to have returned home. He wrote these lines in “Ulysses” in 1833, published them in 1842, and so pre-dates Baudelaire:

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off.... that which we are, we are;
.....strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

But back to Du Bellay. He voyaged, living in Rome and longing for France, while paradoxically Baudelaire wrote of voyages (and made them, imaginatively) but lived in Paris and did not travel. Du Bellay more than Baudelaire understood that voyages wear us out, although Baudelaire understood that also.

III

We want to break the boredom [*l'ennui*] of our jails
and cross the oceans without oars or steam —
give us visions to stretch our minds like sails,
the blue, exotic shoreline of your dream!

Tell us, what have you seen?

Ah, Baudelaire says, we must travel because we are trapped in *ennui*. Always looking for something new instead of what we already have, which is — well, all too boring.

What the ensuing lines in section four show us is that we are driven by ‘desire,’ that we voyage because we are always seeking:

IV

No old chateau or shrine besieged by crowds
of crippled pilgrims sets our souls on fire,
as these chance countries gathered from the clouds.
Our hearts are always anxious with desire.

(Desire, that great elm fertilized by lust,
gives its old body, when the heaven warms
its bark that winters and old age encrust;
green branches draw the sun into its arms.

Why are you always growing taller, Tree —
Oh longer-lived than cypress!)

Desire pushes us on, like a great tree rooted in lust: we want, we want, we want, and so we are always moving to try to satiate our wants, our desires. No use. Why?

Section seven tells us, depressingly, that what we see when we voyage is not all that different from what we have already seen: we want to break out of our lives, but all we get is a repetition of what we have already experienced.

VII

How sour the knowledge travellers bring away!
The world's monotonous and small; we see
ourselves today, tomorrow, yesterday,
an oasis of horror in a desert of ennui!

.....

And even when Time's heel is on our throat
we still can hope, still cry, "On, on, let's go!"
Just as we once took passage on the boat
for China, shivering as we felt the blow,
so we now set our sails for the Dead Sea,
light-hearted as the youngest voyager.

This a vision of hell, seen by Baudelaire and yet experienced by all of us in our trampled-on modernity: "an oasis of horror in a desert of ennui!" Yet

even if what we encounter is ceaselessly “monotonous and small,” even as we feel life and Time crushing us so that we cannot breathe, we still hold out the hope that if we journey onward, we will find something else, something besides or beyond horror and *ennui*.

Here is the concluding section, which we will look at closely:

VIII

Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre!
Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort! Appareillons!
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,
Nos coeurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons!
Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*!

VIII

It's time, Old Captain, lift anchor, sink!
The land rots; we shall sail into the night;
if now the sky and sea are black as ink
our hearts, as you must know, are filled with light.

Only when we drink poison are we well —
we want, this fire so burns our brain tissue,
to drown in the abyss — heaven or hell,
who cares? Through the unknown, we'll find the new.

I've said Lowell's translation is brilliant, and it is. But in capturing repetitive sounds – especially Baudelaire's rhyme scheme – something is lost. Since I have no compunction about rhymes, here is what I encounter in the first two lines of the section as I turn Baudelaire into English, being more literal than Lowell and (hopefully) more rhythmic:

Death, old captain, it is time! Lift anchor!
This country bores us, O Death! Cast off!

Baudelaire's rhythms are great. One sees here that he is writing directly about the need to escape boredom, *ennui*. But line five in this stanza is a little too simple in Lowell.

Pour us your poison so that it can comfort us.

Ah, but let us proceed with the poem, this last section of “The Voyage.” In the first stanza the poet commands (note all the imperatives, indicated by the five exclamation points in Baudelaire’s original) what the heart wants to be commanded: Leave all behind and embark on a voyage into the dark. Onward! (So opposite to du Bellay!) Yet even if all is darkness, our hearts are filled with light. Even as Death captains our ship, even as we voyage toward the unknown and our ultimate destination, we get to leave the all-too-boring present behind us: we are embarked on a trip to leave the known world behind. Inspired by light, filled with light, we feel a need to set out on a journey.

Only when we drink poison are we well —
we want, this fire so burns our brain tissue,
to drown in the abyss — heaven or hell,
who cares? Through the unknown, we'll find the new.

This final stanza recognizes that the need, the desire, to move ever onward is a poison, fatal to us even as it offers the comfort of escaping boredom. We are, in a sense, heedless of where we are going, plunging into darkness, drowning in the abyss. Heaven? Hell? “Who cares?” Let me repeat what Baudelaire writes: “Who cares?”

So needful are we of escape from our lives that we will embrace any voyage, be its destination heaven or hell or – with certainty – endless night and ultimately death. We want to find something new, something different. Something not boring, something other than (as Wallace Stevens put it in the afore-quoted “Asides on the Oboe”) “what had been so long composed.” We must voyage onward.

The imperative of life in the modern age is to move onward, ever outward, hoping to find something new, something other than what we have known as the world. That search for the “new” which Baudelaire saw in us – and which we each, in our own way, feels pulling at us to move onward – is very contrary to what impelled du Bellay to write about how happy he would be to return home. Baudelaire needed to ‘épater les bourgeois:’ to shock the bourgeoisie. He needed to go beyond, and destroy, the conventions which govern modern life.

I felt I needed, in college, to be like Baudelaire, moving onward, leaving the known world behind. I did not have his acute sense that what one might find is more of what one already knows; I did not realize that voyaging was a “poison,”

even as it was a needful poison. And yet at the same time as I wanted to embrace being at the forefront of culture, always voyaging outward, I wanted the comfort and the rootedness of returning home, of accepting slate instead of incessantly admiring marble, of seeing the smoke rising from my own home's kitchen chimney rather than voyaging into the dark night that surrounds us.

Although I wanted to be in a poetic-intellectual vanguard, I also realized, somehow, that to be in that vanguard meant denying and abjuring my Jewish and middle-class roots. To be what I wanted to become, I had to deny a significant part of what I was. So, although Baudelaire was (and is) often held up as the vanguard of a new age, he also could be upheld as a paragon by those very WASPs who thought it was *outré* to be suburban and Jewish and bourgeois.

Does the dialectic between home and voyaging ever end? I don't think so. I saw it, long ago, as a dialectic between the bourgeois and the visionary. Now I see it as a longer, deeper struggle, one that is never resolved. Do we live in Baudelaire's world of incessant voyaging? Yes. Do we need to recognize and not reject the world du Bellay envisions of wanting and needing to return home? The answer is also, yes.

Du Bellay, I recognized in college, offered an alternative to our incessant need to voyage out of our daily lives and reject the narrow confines of home. He himself lived abroad, lived in the wider world. Yet he saw how we long not just to break out, but to return to some place where there is a deep comfort. Let me quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins' late great sonnet, "My own heart let me more have pity on," where in the octet he laments,

I cast for comfort I can no more get
By groping round my comfortless....

only to recognize in the sestet that we need to

leave comfort root-room; let joy size
At God knows when to God knows what...

Du Bellay looks backward for such comfort. Home allows "comfort root-room," space to grip down in and anchor a self which must incessantly face the world.

"Heureux qui, comme Ulysse" remains one of the most popular poems of all time. I think that is because it speaks to things that run very deep in us.

