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How Baudelaire Reveals the Identity of his Voyagers

In Charles Baudelaire's *The Voyage*, a sensuous and vertiginous poem opens with a rhetorical statement. Baudelaire highlights a universal child: "For the child, in love with maps and engravings, the universe is equal to his vast appetite." The reader does not notice the rhetoric because of the engaging idea, a narrator viewing an iconic childhood from a distance. This child, an embodiment of a general statement, finds an imagistic nest in the following rapturous exclamation, "Ah! how great the world is by lamplight!" The specific imagery of warm light and yellowed maps floods the imagination of the reader, but Baudelaire returns to a rhetorical statement in the next line, and reinforces the distance of the narrator before embarking on the eponymous voyage of the poem: "How small the world is in the eyes of memory!" The reader does not yet know for sure that this imaginative child is the true voyager at the heart of the poem.

Baudelaire begins the next stanza with a deictic (One morning...) that signals a fracture. The reader discovers and believes that the opening stanza is little more than an epigraph to a seemingly narrative poem. The reader thinks of *The Odyssey* while reading, "One morning we set off, our brains full of passion, hearts swollen with rancour and with bitter desires, and we go, following the rhythm of the waves, rocking our infinity on the finite seas..." The compound complex sentence has a rhythmical quality that mirrors the seaward push described by the poet. Even at the end of the stanza, Baudelaire refuses to pause with a period, and instead he introduces a colon for the subsequent stanza. At the same time, the first conjunctive part of the stanza is an appositive describing the emotional qualities of the voyagers without actually

identifying or naming them. In this way, emotion suffuses the stanza, but the characters remain little more than silhouettes in the reader's imagination.

Even with the colon introducing the list in the following stanza, the reader still must puzzle through the identities of the characters on the rocking boat. Just as in the prior stanza, no names exist; at first, only a vague "some" identifies the numberless voyagers. They are identified only by their emotions. Baudelaire sets up the expectation of parallel structure in his list, but his syntactical juxtapositions disorient the reader: "Some, glad to leave an abhorrent homeland; others, the horror of the cradles, and some, astrologers drowned in the eyes of a woman, tyrannical Circe with the dangerous perfumes." The presumably present-tense emotions in the first two parts of the sentence parallel a past participle action verb, *drowned*, and this slanted parallel contributes to a vertiginous first reading. Structurally, the stanza is like a wine glass—the numberless voyagers narrow to the more specific astrologer-navigators; then, the stanza closes with a singular figure, Circe, the nefarious Greek Goddess. The reader, educated in the classics, dreads this last drop in the metaphoric wine glass. In *The Odyssey*, Circe lures sailors with her perfumed beauty, but then drugs them, changes them into pigs, and attempts to devour them.

The following stanza is highly sensuous and figurative: "They get drunk on space and light and fiery skies; the ice that bites them, the suns that bronze them, slowly efface the traces the kisses." This also continues the narrative introduced in the previous, vertiginous stanza; to diffuse the odor of Circe's perfume, the sailors metaphorically relent to nature's seductive elements. The long-term corrosive effects of the sun actually preserve them, bronzing their skins as if they were sculptures.

Baudelaire then leaves the narrative voyage in the poem and returns to a more expansive aphorism: "But the only true travelers are those who leave for the sake of leaving; with hearts

light as balloons, they never deviate from their destiny and, not knowing why, they always say: Let's go!" The closing *Let's go!* matches the buoyancy of the balloons; diction follows image.

The poem closes by finally defining these aphoristic travelers as dreamers. Baudelaire writes, "Those whose desires have the form of clouds, and who dream, as conscript dreams of cannon, of vast, shifting, unknown pleasures, whose name the human mind has never known!" By introducing an odd military simile, Baudelaire keeps the poem from drifting away like so many diaphanous balloons. At the same time, he tethers modern desire, with its unnamable, elusive connotations, to the Greek concept of fate, embodied in Homer's poems of wandering and war. One surrealist poet slept with a sign on the bedroom door that read *Poet at work*; here, he has worthy partners in the Greek heroes of war and odyssey, who come to life again in the hallucinatory, oracular realms of poetry.