

A Journey around My Room

and

A Nocturnal Expedition around My Room

Xavier de Maistre

Translated by Andrew Brown

with a foreword by Alain de Botton



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Contents

Foreword by Alain de Botton	v
Introduction	ix
A Journey around My Room	i
A Nocturnal Expedition around My Room	73
Note on the Texts	137
Notes	137

Foreword

In the spring of 1790, a twenty-seven-year-old Frenchman, Xavier de Maistre, undertook a journey around his bedroom, later entitling the account of what he had seen *A Journey around My Room*. Gratified by his experiences, in 1798, de Maistre undertook a second journey. This time, he travelled by night and ventured out as far as the window ledge, later entitling his account *A Nocturnal Expedition around My Room*.

Xavier de Maistre was born in 1763 in the picturesque town of Chambéry at the foot of the French Alps. He was of an intense, romantic nature, was fond of reading, especially Montaigne, Pascal and Rousseau, and of paintings, especially Dutch and French domestic scenes. At the age of twenty-three, de Maistre became fascinated by aeronautics. Étienne Montgolfier had, three years before, achieved international renown by constructing a balloon that flew for eight minutes above the royal palace at Versailles, bearing as passengers a sheep called Montauciel (“Climb-to-the-sky”), a duck and a rooster. De Maistre and a friend constructed a pair of giant wings out of paper and wire and planned to fly to America. They did not succeed. Two years later de Maistre secured himself a place in a hot-air balloon and spent a few moments floating above Chambéry before the machine crashed into a pine forest.

Then in 1790, while he was living in a modest room at the top of an apartment building in Turin, de Maistre pioneered a mode of travel that was to make his name: room-travel.

Introducing *A Journey around My Room*, Xavier's brother, the political theorist Joseph de Maistre, emphasized that it was not Xavier's intention to cast aspersions on the heroic deeds of the great travellers of the past, Magellan, Drake, Anson and Cook. Magellan had discovered a western route to the Spice Islands around the southern tip of South America, Drake had circumnavigated the globe, Anson had produced accurate sea charts of the Philippines and Cook had confirmed the existence of a southern continent. "They were no doubt remarkable men," wrote Joseph: it was just that his brother had discovered a way of travelling that might be infinitely more practical for those neither as brave nor as wealthy as they.

"Thousands of people who, before I came along, had never dared to travel, and others who hadn't been able to, and yet others who'd never even dreamt of travelling, will be emboldened to do so by my example," explained Xavier as he prepared for his journey. "Would even the most indolent of men hesitate to set off with me to obtain a pleasure that will cost him neither effort nor money?" He particularly recommended room-travel to the poor and to those afraid of storms, robberies and high cliffs.

The story is a giant proverbial shaggy dog. De Maistre locks his door and changes into his dressing gown. Without the need for luggage, he travels to the sofa, the largest piece of furniture in the room. His journey having shaken him from his usual lethargy, he looks at it through fresh eyes and rediscovers some of its qualities. He admires the elegance of its feet and remembers the pleasant hours he has spent cradled in its cushions, dreaming of love and advancement in his career. From his sofa, de Maistre spies his bed. Once again, from a traveller's vantage point, he

learns to appreciate this complex piece of furniture. He feels grateful for the nights he has spent in it and takes pride in the aptness of the colour of his bed. "I... advise any man who can do so to have a pink-and-white bed," he writes, for these are colours to induce calm and pleasant reveries in the fragile sleeper.

De Maistre's work springs from a profound and suggestive insight: that the pleasure we derive from journeys is perhaps dependent more on the mindset with which we travel than on the destination we travel to. If only we could apply a travelling mindset to our own locales, we might find these places becoming no less interesting than the high mountain passes and jungles of South America.

What then is a travelling mindset? Receptivity might be said to be its chief characteristic. We approach new places with humility. We carry with us no rigid ideas about what is interesting. We irritate locals because we stand in traffic islands and narrow streets and admire what they take to be strange small details. We risk getting run over because we are intrigued by the roof of a government building or an inscription on a wall. We find a supermarket or hairdresser's unusually fascinating. We dwell at length on the layout of a menu or the clothes of the presenters on the evening news. We are alive to the layers of history beneath the present and take notes and photographs.

Home on the other hand finds us more settled in our expectations. We feel assured that we have discovered everything interesting about a neighbourhood, primarily by virtue of having lived there a long time. It seems inconceivable that there could be anything new to find in a place which we have been living in for a decade or more. We have become habituated and therefore blind.

De Maistre tried to shake us from our passivity. In his second volume of room-travel, *A Nocturnal Expedition around My Room*, he went to his window and looked up at the night sky. Its beauty made him frustrated that such ordinary scenes were not more generally appreciated: “How few people... are now enjoying with me the sublime spectacle that the heavens spread out, in vain, for drowsy men!... Those who actually are asleep are one thing; but what would it cost those who are out for a stroll, or those others emerging in crowds from the theatre, to look up for a moment and admire the brilliant constellations that are shining down on their heads from every direction?”

The reason they weren't looking was that they had never done so before. They had fallen into the habit of considering their universe to be boring – and it had duly fallen into line with their expectations. We meet people who have crossed deserts, floated on icecaps and cut their way through jungles – and yet in whose souls we would search in vain for evidence of what they have witnessed. Wrapped in his dressing gown, satisfied by the confines of his own bedroom, Xavier de Maistre was gently nudging us to try, before taking off for distant hemispheres, to notice what we have already seen.

– Alain de Botton

Introduction

There is a man alone in a room. Maybe he didn't know how he got there, and starts to find the whole of his previous existence baffling, his memories of life outside the room tenuous and incoherent, his own sense of self-identity fraught and enigmatic: he could be one of the heroes of Beckett's *Trilogy*. Sometimes the man has been wandering through "the wilderness of this world" and has lighted in a certain place where he goes to sleep, and dreams of the City of Destruction and the path that leads from it, through Vanity Fair and past Doubting Castle, to the Celestial City: Bunyan's Pilgrim. Another man living alone in a room also goes to sleep, and sees his home town of Combray, and high-society life in Paris and apple trees on a rainy spring day in Normandy: Proust's Narrator. (Perhaps the *real* last words of *In Search of Lost Time*, accidentally omitted in all existing editions, are: "So I awoke, and behold it was a Dream.")

The ideas that visit a man in a room can have momentous implications. On 10th November 1619, a soldier returning to the army of Duke Maximilian of Bavaria from the coronation of Ferdinand II in Frankfurt was detained by the harsh winter weather and took up quarters near Ulm, in a room with a stove, where he found the leisure to think through some of the metaphysical perplexities that had been preoccupying him: the soldier was Descartes, and the result of his wintry, room-bound ponderings was the *Cogito*, inaugurating a new epoch in philosophy.

Xavier de Maistre's *A Journey around My Room* and its successor, *A Nocturnal Expedition*, are akin to all of these. Like Molloy and Malone and other of Beckett's almost immobilized but unstoppably loquacious protagonists, de Maistre finds that isolation from society, and the relative absence of stimuli from the world outside, lead him to question his identity (though in a much more relaxed and debonair way than in Beckett), make him reflect on the unstable flux of experience that the practical needs of "ordinary" life tend to conceal, and force him to supplement the paucity of events in the room by resorting to memory, imagination, daydream and storytelling – which sometimes seem to merge into one another. The dimensions of the room vary in accordance with his subjective moods: sometimes the four walls are a little claustrophobic, but more often the room suddenly turns out to be vast in its dimensions, as if the distance from his armchair to his desk suddenly constituted a huge and almost uncrossable terrain (shades of Beckett again: and anyone who has ever suffered post-viral fatigue will know just how he feels).

Like Bunyan, de Maistre euphemizes his time in the room: like Bunyan, he was in fact imprisoned there (de Maistre was confined to house arrest for forty-two days over a duelling incident). There is little of Bunyan's evangelizing fervour in de Maistre's dreams and visions, and yet in his work too there is a "city of destruction" in the background: the Paris of the French Revolution. Xavier de Maistre was the brother of that Prince of Reactionaries, Joseph de Maistre, whose writings (which Baudelaire, with a degree of irony that is difficult to judge, and possibly without any irony at all, claimed had "taught him how to reason") promoted an unflinching Papal

absolutism, a stubborn monarchism and a hair-raising cult of the sacramental significance of the death penalty (in the specific shape of the executioner), as the only authentic response to the ills of modernity. Xavier was less systematic in his politics than Joseph, but the charm of the *Journey* goes hand in hand with his conviction that Paris had, as a result of the events following 1789, become the capital city of the Antichrist, which he can contemplate with horrified fascination from the (relatively) safe haven of Turin. And Xavier's apparently desultory meditations not only turn his room (his prison) into the launching pad for some understated but insistent political opinions (quite the opposite of Bunyan's, of course); they also turn the microcosm of his seclusion into a macrocosm that ranges in epic (or mock-epic) style through time and space, and incidentally (and somewhat unexpectedly) includes some favourable comments on that very un-reactionary character, the Satan of Bunyan's contemporary, Milton.

Like Proust's Narrator, de Maistre finds that enclosure within four walls is a necessary precondition for writing about the life he lived outside them; and like Descartes, he concocts his own (much more whimsical) philosophical system, delightfully brief and refreshingly devoid of metaphysical angst (see Chapter 16 of the *Expedition*). On a rather more sustained note, he indulges in a fanciful reprise of Cartesian dualism, which is given two different variant forms in the *Journey* and the *Nocturnal Expedition*: the experience of being alone will naturally tend to lead to an obsession with "reflection" (indeed, in the *Journey*, with mirrors) and with the sense of doubling that is forced on anyone who can think but not act, or is obliged, for company, to talk to himself. (A paradoxical idea: when we

talk to ourselves, who is doing the talking and who is doing the listening?) But then, in all these cases, solitude in a room leads above all to writing, which is almost as odd (can I write without also reading?).

What do you write about, from inside your room? Both the *Journey* and the *Expedition* oscillate between inside and outside – between an examination of the author’s immediate environment and speculating about, or remembering, or anticipating what lies beyond it. An enumeration of the things in one’s room can be highly instructive. Nothing is more taken for granted, and yet nothing can say more about who we are than the things with which we have surrounded ourselves. De Maistre, being under house arrest, uses his enforced solitude to contemplate the artefacts and commodities around him, and makes them strange. All that was close – so close as to be almost invisible – becomes far: becomes, at times, a pretext for imaginative fugues that lead in all sorts of unpredictable directions.

De Maistre has had several successors in the art of “travelling around your room”: two of the more recent are Daniel Spoerri and Georges Perec. Spoerri’s *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* is a highly complex text which weaves commentaries of almost Talmudic detail around the objects lying at random (in so far as anything *is* random) on the table in his room, which thus become the pretext for associations of ideas, chains of memory, stories and anecdotes which in turn bristle with footnotes, and footnotes on footnotes, that mimic such earlier “encyclopedic” works as the seventeenth-century *Critical Dictionary* of Pierre Bayle. It is also faithful to the spirit of de Maistre in its digressions and parenthetical remarks and general

indifference to the straight line which (as Doctor Who and other sages have observed) may be the shortest way of getting from one place to another but is not necessarily the most interesting. (De Maistre pays explicit homage to another great exponent of the squiggle and the diversion and the sudden flight of fancy, also mentioned by Spoerri: the Sterne both of *Tristram Shandy* and of that “journey” which, despite its title – *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* – characteristically never gets any farther than Lyon.)

And Perec too refuses to indulge in contempt for what is familiar, and is happy (and sometimes alarmed) to find infinite space in a nutshell. His manic attention to the world’s visible surfaces, his love of objects – both as things and as the bearers of rich and mysterious meanings – were often brought to bear on his most immediate working environment. In *Espèces d’espaces* (literally, “types of spaces”) he meditates on the page on which he is writing, and then moves out successively to the bed (where, among other things, he has spent so much time reading), the bedroom, the apartment, the block, the street, the town, Europe, the world, space. This is reminiscent of de Maistre’s flights of cosmic fancy winging out from the confines of his cell, though de Maistre has none of Perec’s more sociological obsession with classification (how do we define the different spaces in which we live, and how are they related to one another?). Perec’s *Penser/Classer* (*Thoughts of Sorts*, literally “thinking/classifying”) foregrounds in its very title his more theoretical concerns, and at times restricts itself to an even smaller topography than his room – like Spoerri, he notes the objects that are on his work-table (the lamp, the ashtray, several stones, a lump of lead, etc. – though as he comments,

if you are going to make a list you must try your best to avoid the amnesia and impatience of an “etc.”) and ponders on the possibility of writing the history of some of them: how they came to be there, and what they might say about his habits or his changing tastes. This is similar to de Maistre’s cataloguing of the paintings on his walls – though again, there is a downbeat and ruminative tone to de Maistre which is quite different from Perec’s probing, intense, high-voltage gaze, obsessed with not leaving anything out, not forgetting a single thing: after all, the history from which Perec emerged – he came from a Jewish family, his father died in the early days of the Second World War, his mother was deported and almost certainly perished in Auschwitz – forced him to cling with grim tenacity to *everything*, since once you start forgetting a single detail, you are yielding to an amnesia that might swallow up even the most tragic and momentous events, such as the Shoah.

And this may put de Maistre’s *Journey* and *Expedition* in a slightly different light. It would, of course, be a shame to deprive them of the “charm” which many readers have quite rightly found in them. But like all those other men in rooms, writing about the things around them and using them as pretexts for ever-expanding musings, de Maistre is, after all, *in reality*, “cabined, cribbed, confined”. They are all prisoners (of time and history as well as place), forced to use their imagination to transcend the claustrophobia of their condition: by turning their gaze to their immediate environment, are they looking for a key to help them escape, or are they so resigned to seclusion that they are content merely, as it were, to decorate the walls of their prison cells? The question as posed sets up a false antithesis: maybe a close and scrupulous attention

INTRODUCTION

to the prison cell (or “the world”) is a way of escaping it, or a precondition for some change in circumstances that would be tantamount to an escape. But all of these writers make us reflect on the extent to which writing both connects with the world (the “outside”) and holds it at bay; can be both social – think of de Maistre’s kindness, however hedged about with the ironies of Shandean sentimentalism it may be, and the way he always seems to be *addressing* someone – and solitary, longing for a reality to which it constantly refers while at the same time dallying with the idea that its own imaginative musings may ultimately be more satisfactory (and perhaps even more real). The journey around your room may be as good as any trip around that slightly bigger but equally finite room, the world. De Maistre is glad to leave house arrest at the end of the *Journey*, but already nostalgic, too, for the paradoxical liberty it gave him – and all too happy to return, in the nocturne of the *Expedition*, to an exploration of that inner space. For the apparent inwardness and retreat of writing (what Erich Heller called “the artist’s journey into the interior”) may paradoxically be a better way of exploring, not just the great outdoors (hence the plethora of cultural references in de Maistre’s text), but a quite different dimension as well: the Great Outside.

– Andrew Brown

A Journey around My Room

I

In many a deep author of wisdom quite sublime
I've read that too much travelling is an utter waste of time.

*Vert-Vert**

WHAT A SPLENDID THING it is to embark on a new career, and to appear all of a sudden before the world of learning holding a book, in the same way that an unexpected comet flashes through space!

No, I will no longer keep my book to myself; here it is, gentlemen: read it. I have undertaken and completed a forty-two-day journey around my room. The interesting observations I have made, and the continual pleasure I experienced en route, filled me with the desire to publish it; the certainty of being useful was the decisive factor. My heart senses an inexpressible satisfaction when I think of the countless unhappy people to whom I am here offering a sure and certain resource against boredom, and an alleviation of the ills they endure. The pleasure you find in travelling around your room is safe from the restless jealousy of men; it is independent of the fickleness of fortune.

After all, is there any person so unhappy, so abandoned, that he doesn't have a little den into which he can withdraw and hide away from everyone? Nothing more elaborate is needed for the journey.

I am sure that any sensible man will adopt my system, whatever kind of character he may have, and whatever his temperament; whether he be stingy or prodigal, rich or poor,

whether he was born in a torrid zone or near the Pole, he can travel just as I do; finally, in the immense family of men who swarm over the surface of the world, there isn't a single one – no, not one (I mean of those who live in rooms) who will, after having read this book, be disinclined to endorse the new way of travelling that I am introducing into the world.

2

I COULD START TO SING the praises of my journey by saying that it cost me nothing; and this fact deserves to be pointed out. It means that it will straight away be lauded and fêted by those of middling wealth; and there is another class of men with whom it will be even more popular, for this same reason that it costs nothing. “And who can they be?” Ah, you mean you have to ask? Rich people, of course! Furthermore, what a grand resource this way of travelling will be for the sick! They won't need to fear the inclemency of the air and the seasons. As for the cowardly, they will be safe from robbers; they will encounter neither precipices nor quagmires. Thousands of people who, before I came along, had never dared to travel, and others who hadn't been able to, and yet others who'd never even dreamt of travelling, will be emboldened to do so by my example. Would even the most indolent of men hesitate to set off with me to obtain a pleasure that will cost him neither effort nor money? So, buck up then: let's be off! Follow me, all you who, because of some mortification of love, or a negligent friend, have been keeping to your apartments, far from the pettiness and perfidy of men. Let all the unhappy,

sick and bored people of the whole world follow me! Let all the lazy arise en masse! And you whose minds are brooding over sinister plans to reform your way of life or retire from it as a result of some infidelity; you who, in some boudoir, have renounced the world for good; you amiable anchorites of an evening, come along too. Take my word for it and leave those dark ideas behind; you are wasting time which you could be spending enjoying yourselves, and you are not thereby gaining any time for wisdom: be so good as to accompany me on my journey; we will travel in short marches, laughing all along the way at the travellers who have seen Rome and Paris; no obstacle will be able to stop us; and, yielding merrily to our imagination, we will follow it wherever it wishes to lead us.

3

THERE ARE SO MANY curious people in the world! I'm convinced that everyone would like to know why my journey around my room lasted forty-two days instead of forty-three, or any other space of time; but how can I tell the reader, since I myself don't know? All I can vouch for is that, if the work is too long for his liking, I wasn't in any position to make it any shorter; all traveller's vanity apart, I'd have been happy with a single chapter. I was, admittedly, in my room, with all the pleasure and comfort possible; but, alas! I wasn't free to leave it as and when I wished; I even think that, without the mediation of certain powerful persons who took an interest in my fate, and for whom my gratitude still glows strong, I would have had plenty of time to bring forth an entire folio

volume, so greatly were the protectors who made me travel in my room disposed in my favour!

And yet, reasonable reader, see how wrong those men were, and grasp, if you can, the logic of the argument I'm about to set forth to you.

Is there anything more natural and more just than to put an end to it all, aided by someone who inadvertently treads on your toes, or drops some rather pointed remark in a moment of irritation occasioned by your thoughtlessness, or, indeed, has the misfortune to seem attractive to your mistress?

You go to some meadow and there, as did Nicole with the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, you try to make a quart when he parries with a tierce;* and so that the vengeance will be sure and complete, you present yourself to him with your chest bared, and you run the risk of getting yourself killed by your enemy so as to be avenged on him. Obviously, nothing could be more logical, and yet you come across people who disapprove of this praiseworthy custom! But what is just as logical as all the rest is the fact that these same people who disapprove of it, and want it to be regarded as a grave crime, would treat anyone who refused to commit it even worse. More than one unhappy man has lost his reputation and his job so as to conform to their opinion; the result is that when you have the misfortune of having what is called *an affair of honour* on your hands, it wouldn't be a bad idea to draw lots to find out if you must conclude it in accordance with law or with custom, and since law and custom contradict each other, the judges could also play dice to decide on their verdict. And it is probably to a decision of this kind that we need to resort in order to explain how and why my journey lasted exactly forty-two days.

MY ROOM IS SITUATED on the forty-fifth degree of latitude, according to the measurement of Father Beccaria;* it stretches from east to west; it forms a long rectangle, thirty-six paces in circumference, if you hug the wall. My journey will, however, measure much more than this, as I will be crossing it frequently lengthwise, or else diagonally, without any rule or method. I will even follow a zigzag path, and I will trace out every possible geometrical trajectory if need be. I don't like people who have their itineraries and ideas so clearly sorted out that they say, "Today I'll make three visits, I'll write four letters, and I'll finish that book I started." My soul is so open to every kind of idea, taste and sentiment; it so avidly receives everything that presents itself!... And why would it turn down the pleasures that are scattered along life's difficult path? They are so few and far between, so thin on the ground, that you'd need to be mad not to stop, and even turn away from your path, and pick up all of those that lie within reach. There's no more attractive pleasure, in my view, than following one's ideas wherever they lead, as the hunter pursues his game, without even trying to keep to any set route. And so, when I travel through my room, I rarely follow a straight line: I go from my table towards a picture hanging in a corner; from there I set out obliquely towards the door; but even though, when I begin, it really is my intention to go there, if I happen to meet my armchair en route, I don't think twice about it, and settle down in it without further ado. It's an excellent piece of furniture, an armchair; above all, it's highly useful for every man inclined to meditation. During the long winter evenings,

it is sometimes sweet and sometimes sensible to spread out in it at your ease, far from the din of crowded assemblies. A nice fire, books, pens; how many resources against boredom! And what a pleasure it is, too, to forget your books and your pens and instead poke your fire, succumbing to a gentle contemplation, or arranging a few rhymes to amuse your friends! Then the hours slip away over you, and silently fall into eternity, without making you feel their melancholy passage.

5

ONCE YOU'VE LEFT MY ARMCHAIR, walking towards the north, you come into view of my bed, which is placed at the far end of my room: it's a most agreeable sight. It is situated in the most pleasant spot imaginable: the first rays of the sun come to disport themselves in my bed curtains. I can see them, on fine summer days, advancing along the white wall, as the sun slowly rises: the elm trees outside my window break up these rays in a thousand different ways, and make them sway on my pink-and-white bed, which sheds a charming hue of their reflections on every side. I can hear the indistinct twittering of the swallows who have taken over the roof of the house and the other birds who live in the elms: then, a thousand cheerful ideas fill my mind; and nobody, in the whole world, wakes up in such a pleasant and peaceful way as I do.

I must confess that I love to bask in these sweet moments, and that I always prolong as much as I possibly can the pleasure of meditating in the snug warmth of my bed. Is there any theatre which arouses the imagination more, or awakens more