

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



ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS
an imprint of

ALMA BOOKS LTD
3 Castle Yard
Richmond
Surrey TW10 6TF
United Kingdom
www.almaclassics.com

A Journey around My Room first published in French in 1794
A Nocturnal Expedition around My Room first published in French in 1825
This translation first published by Hesperus Press Ltd in 2004
First published by Alma Classics Ltd in 2013. Reprinted 2017

Cover image © Øivind Hovland

Introduction and Translation © Andrew Brown
Foreword © Alain de Botton

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84749-308-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

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

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

tender ideas, than this piece of furniture in which I sometimes lose myself? Modest reader, don't be alarmed – but couldn't I be describing the happiness of a lover embracing a virtuous wife in his arms for the first time? An ineffable pleasure, which my evil destiny condemns me never to enjoy! Isn't it in a bed that a mother, overwhelmed with euphoria at the birth of her son, forgets the pains she has suffered? It is here that fantastic pleasures, the fruit of imagination and hope, come to arouse us. Finally, it is here, in our delightful beds, that we can forget, for one half of life, the sorrows of the other half. But what a host of thoughts both agreeable and melancholy come thronging into my brain all at once! An amazing mixture of terrible and delightful situations!

A bed witnesses our birth and death; it is the unvarying theatre in which the human race acts out, successively, captivating dramas, laughable farces and dreadful tragedies. It is a cradle bedecked with flowers; it is the throne of love; it is a sepulchre.

6

THIS CHAPTER IS MEANT for metaphysicians, and for them alone. It will shed the greatest light on the nature of man: it is the prism through which it will be possible to analyse and decompose the faculties of man, separating out his animal vitality from the pure rays of the intelligence.

It would be impossible for me to explain how and why I burned my fingers when I took my first steps at the start of my journey, unless I explained to the reader, in the greatest detail,

my system of *the soul and the beast*. This metaphysical discovery has indeed such a profound influence on my ideas and my actions that it would be extremely difficult to understand this book if I did not give you the key right at the start.

I have come to the conclusion, by way of various observations, that man is composed of a soul and a beast. These two beings are absolutely distinct, but so closely fitted together, or one on top of the other, that the soul must have a certain superiority over the beast to be in a position to draw a distinction between them.

I hold it on the authority of an old teacher (as far back as I can remember) that Plato called matter *the other*. All well and good; but I would prefer to give this name first and foremost to the beast that is joined to our souls. It is really this substance that is the other, and which teases and torments us in so strange a fashion. Everyone is more or less aware that man is double; but the reason – they say – is that he is composed of a soul and a body; and they accuse this body of I don't know how many things, but quite irrelevantly, I can assure you, since it is just as incapable of feeling as it is of thinking. It is the beast that is behind it all – that sensitive creature, perfectly distinct from the soul, a real *individual*, which has its separate existence, its tastes, its inclinations, its will, and which is higher than the other animals only because it is better brought up and endowed with more perfect organs.

Ladies and gentlemen, be as proud of your intelligence as you want; but beware of the *other*, especially when the two of you get together!

I have experienced I don't know how many times the union of these two heterogeneous creatures. For example, I have