The Art of Travel

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALAIN DE BOTTON

Swiss-born British essayist Alain de Botton is best known for his efforts to bring philosophy to a broader audience. His books engage the intersection between great European thinkers and the problems of work, love, and leisure that dominate contemporary people's everyday lives—in his words, de Botton wants to offer "a philosophy of everyday life" that aims to "bring elite culture into the wider culture." He moved to England at a young age and attended boarding school in Oxford before studying History at Cambridge University and Philosophy at King's College in London. He quit his PhD program in Philosophy at Harvard to write for a popular audience and has since published 15 books of both fiction and nonfiction. His essays cover a wide variety of topics, but particularly emphasize love and relationships. He has also founded the School of Life, an international organization that seeks to teach emotional intelligence through nontraditional classes, therapy sessions, and a video series on YouTube. De Botton's work has polarized critics since he first published the novel *Essays in Love* in 1993. Many have considered his books important efforts to connect the public with the world of academic philosophy, which delves deeply into essential questions about human existence and happiness but remains too esoteric and complex for a general audience. Many philosophers, however, have criticized de Botton's work as pompous and condescending, prone to stating the obvious and bastardizing central figures of the Western literary and philosophical canon by oversimplifying their work in an attempt to convince a reader whose intelligence he underestimates. Nevertheless, De Botton claims to write for the "bright but impatient" reader and remains critical of the academic establishment, which he believes betrays the philosophers and writers it studies by treating them as incorruptible idols from the past rather than valuable sources of information about how to live better in the present.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *The Art of Travel* focuses largely on de Botton's 21st-century travels, it also covers those of famous literary white men throughout history. In this vein, Europe's relationship to the rest of the world from the 16th through 20th centuries is an essential undercurrent to de Botton's writing, for some of the figures he cites—including French writer Gustave Flaubert, who visits Egypt to experience the mystical "Orient" about which he has always dreamed, and German polymath Alexander von Humboldt, who ventured to South America to study its plants, animals, people, geology, and more—traveled as part of colonial expeditions to the global periphery. The unequal power dynamic of colonizer to colonized (whether in the present or past) is thus inextricable from these travels. British poet William Wordsworth and Irish philosopher Edmund Burke were both interested in how people could sustain connections to nature as more and more Europeans moved to cities. Finally, the painter Edward Hopper, who de Botton writes about, was largely motivated by the early 20th-century advent of transportation infrastructure on a mass scale in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Alain de Botton has written on the relationship between happiness and architecture (*The Architecture of Happiness*), work (*The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*), art (*Art as Therapy*), and the judgment of others (*Status Anxiety*). His two most famous books of essays are *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (which combines an autobiography of the eponymous writer, a literary analysis of Proust's famous *Remembrance of Things Past*, and de Botton's signature variety of scrupulous self-help), and *The Consolations of Philosophy* (which suggests how philosophers from the European tradition might help contemporary people better deal with their frustrations and inadequacies). He has also written widely on love, from his first book, the philosophical novel *Essays in Love*, to books like *How to Think More About Sex*, *The Course of Love*, *Kiss and Tell*, and *The Romantic Movement*. Works cited in *The Art of Travel* include J.K. Huysman's influential *À rebours*, whose protagonist plays a central role in de Botton's first chapter; Gustave Flaubert's satirical *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, which lampooned the French aristocracy's snobbishness; the body of William Wordsworth's Romantic poetry; Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; the English critic John Ruskin's wide range of writings on art history and drawing; and Xavier de Maistre's notorious *Journey Around My Bedroom*. In collaboration with the technology company Airbnb, de Botton also republished this book as *The New Art of Travel* in 2015.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Art of Travel
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Essays, Philosophy, Self-Help, Travel Writing
- **Setting:** Various: London, Barbados, Amsterdam, Egypt,

Madrid, South America, the English Lake District, the Sinai Desert, Provence, Airports, Trains, Hotels, Rest Stops

- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Family Complications. Alain de Botton's father, the Egyptian-born multimillionaire financier Gilbert de Botton, donated heavily to the arts and dabbled in philosophy himself (he was particularly fond of the 16th-century French aristocrat and essayist Michel de Montaigne), although he remained critical of his son's career choice even after Alain achieved widespread literary success. De Botton has accused his father of being emotionally distant and violent throughout his childhood, and he has even suggested that many of his books are motivated by an attempt to make up for this early lack of love. Famously, his father also left a trust fund of at least £50 million, although the author claims he cannot access the money and would never think of dipping into it.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Art of Travel*, essayist Alain de Botton reflects on the philosophical dimensions of travel: he sees travel as a reflection of the human search for happiness and wonders *how* and *why* people should travel, not merely *where*. To this end, in each of the book's nine essays, de Botton juxtaposes his own travels with those of canonical Western artists and writers (all are European men from the 18th and 19th centuries, besides one 20th century American man, painter Edward Hopper). De Botton argues that travel teaches people about their own character, values, and potential by exposing them to places that they may discover they prefer to home, landscapes and art that teach them about beauty and humanity's limited perspective, and a travel mind-set that allows them to find a sense of wonder in the places where they already live.

In his first essay, "On Anticipation," de Botton explains why travel so often disappoints: people tend to expect serenity and continuous joy on their vacations, which they conceive as breaks from their everyday lives, but then become surprised to discover that they only find moments of happiness and cannot let go of their everyday problems. De Botton recalls his own vacation to sunny Barbados, inspired by a brochure that promised palm trees and sea while he was caught up in the dreary London winter. When he arrived, de Botton quickly tired of the beach and got into an argument with his girlfriend M., which made him realize that travel cannot offer people aesthetic or material joy until they first meet their basic psychological needs. He compares his trip to that of the Duc des Esseintes, the protagonist of J.K. Huysman's novel *À Rebours*, who becomes enamored with the idea of visiting London after reading Dickens but decides to turn back once he reaches the train station. Whereas des Esseintes came to believe that travel was better in the imagination than in reality, which he thought diluted places' distinctive qualities with ordinary images, de Botton insists that travel can differ from people's expectations without being a failure.

De Botton's next essay, "On Traveling Places," expounds the virtues of the airport, service station, shipyard, motel, and train car, in conversation with French poet Charles Baudelaire and American painter Edward Hopper. De Botton finds a poetic loneliness in a fluorescently-lit roadside restaurant and a promise of happiness in watching planes take off and land at London's Heathrow airport. He remembers Baudelaire's ambivalence toward travel—the poet cut short a trip to India when he found that the voyage did not heal his depression, but he continued dreaming about traveling "anywhere! anywhere!" and waiting at the docks to watch ships "set sail for happiness." Baudelaire believed that "poets" who could not find satisfaction in conventional society were destined to travel in search of something better, and de Botton sees Edward Hopper's paintings of pensive, lonely characters in American traveling places as odes to such poetic wanderers.

In "On the Exotic," de Botton recounts the French novelist Gustave Flaubert's obsession with the Middle East (or, as 19th-century Europeans called it, "the Orient") and compares Flaubert's ecstasy at visiting Egypt to his own intense pleasure at the cultural differences between Amsterdam and London. From the peculiarities of Dutch vowels to the narrow brick houses that prioritize order over ornamentation, de Botton comes to feel more at home in Dutch culture than his own, just as Flaubert comes to adore the chaos and irreverence he sees in Egypt. In finding the foreign exotic, de Botton argues, a traveler can learn about their own aesthetic sensibilities and discover how these elements of the exotic can contribute to their own personal fulfillment.

The fourth essay explores curiosity—namely, the German polymath Alexander von Humboldt's abundance of it during his scientific expedition to South America at the turn of the 19th century, which contrasts with de Botton's utter lack of it during a trip to Madrid that he immediately and profoundly regrets. Once he drags himself out of bed, de Botton cannot bring himself to appreciate the glut of dates and measurements his tourist guidebook throws at him, and he finds its insistence on ranking tourist attractions by their historical importance particularly distasteful. Whereas Humboldt insisted on studying everything he could get his hands (and scientific instruments) on in South America, de Botton says that there is little left for travelers to discover in the 21st century. Using German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's distinction between collecting new facts in a "quasi-scientific" way and learning existing facts for the sake of personal enrichment, de Botton argues that tourism can only be meaningful for travelers if it helps them connect their experience to the deeper questions

that lie at the core of human existence.

In "On the Country and the City," de Botton retraces the famed poet William Wordsworth's path through the English Lake District. Wordsworth insisted that people from the city could overcome many of their anxieties and learn to act more virtuously if they experienced nature in a mindful and reflective way. As the 18th-century English literary community increasingly accepted Wordsworth's ideas, the public began to flood from cities into the countryside. De Botton follows them to the Lake District, where he starts to notice trees, animals, and landscapes in more detail and even imagine their perspectives on the world. He learns to hold onto memories of moments in nature, which Wordsworth called "spots of time," as a therapeutic stress-relief tool when he returns to his life in London.

In his sixth essay, De Botton loses himself in the Sinai Desert as he reads Irish philosopher Edmund Burke's treatise on the beautiful and the sublime. Burke argues that vast and overwhelming landscapes like the Sinai can remind people of their insignificance before nature's infinite power. In fact, de Botton suggests that such a feeling may inspire belief in God, and he recalls the Book of Job from the Old Testament, in which God tells the inauspicious Job that he "cannot fathom" the universe's logic by pointing to the sheer enormity and force of nature. By experiencing the sublime, de Botton concludes, people can learn to accept the limits of their will and become more humble before the world.

In the next essay, de Botton takes up the relationship between art and travel by tracing landmark Post-Impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh's path through Provence in southern France. While de Botton initially cannot understand why so many travelers consider Provence uniquely beautiful, after studying van Gogh's life and works he begins to notice the region's particularly favorable weather and healthy plant life, which together produce the richly-colored landscapes that van Gogh's work so famously depicted. While van Gogh broke with artistic tradition by focusing on color and motion over line and form, de Botton argues that the Dutch painter did not reject realism (the notion that art should accurately reflect what an observer sees) but rather focused on realistically portraying the *psychological* effect of being in Provence. De Botton thinks that all artists must make choices about what to include and hide in their work, and van Gogh shows him how these choices can influence how artists' audiences see the world in new ways and direct their attention when they travel.

In his penultimate essay, de Botton asks how travelers might move from appreciating the beauty of places they visit and sights they see to truly understanding and "possessing" that beauty. Following the 19th-century art educator John Ruskin, who spent much of his life giving drawing lessons to working-class English people, de Botton explains how travelers can learn to "notice rather than merely look" by drawing a place, as opposed to merely photographing or passing through it. De Botton tries his hand at drawing a window and a tree, affirming that he begins to see the details that make them beautiful to him and understand the aesthetic principles that shape his perception of beauty more fundamentally.

In his closing essay, "On Habit," de Botton asks how people might bring the mind-set of travel back home. Summarizing the French writer Xavier de Maistre's pajama-clad *Journey around My Bedroom*, de Botton suggests that people can discover novelty and beauty where they already live by learning to pay attention to their environments and explore without the frantic sense of purpose that they often carry in everyday life. This mind-set, de Botton concludes, is travel's ultimate gift to those who choose to undertake it: it enriches life because it helps people become receptive to their environments and humble before what is novel, beautiful, and surprising in the world.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Alain de Botton – The author and narrator of the book. De Botton is a Swiss-born British essayist famous for his controversial pop-philosophy self-help books that explore canonical European thinkers' relevance to a wide variety of topics in everyday life (particularly relationships and love). In *The Art of Travel*, he compares the travels of such artists and writers to his own travel experiences in Barbados, Amsterdam, Madrid, the English Lake District, Provence, and his home neighborhood of Hammersmith, London. His writing focuses on his own reactions to encountering new cities and landscapes, and although he is initially disappointed by his trip to Barbados, by the end of the book he learns to freely employ the "travel mind-set" (receptivity to and humility before the world) even at home in London. In particular, he believes that travel can offer people important lessons about their personal character, aesthetic values, overall well-being, and sense of direction in life.

M. – Alain de Botton's girlfriend and traveling companion in Barbados and the Lake District. M. spends much of their vacation in Barbados reading on the beach before the couple gets in a heated argument over dessert at a restaurant. Their conflict dredges up underlying issues in their relationship, and although they make up later that evening, this incident proves to de Botton that the serenity promised by vacation and aesthetic pleasure he finds in Barbados are ultimately contingent on his fulfilling more fundamental, psychological needs (like the health of his relationship).

Duc des Esseintes – The protagonist of J.K. Huysmans' famous novel *À Rebours*, the Duc des Esseintes is a wealthy, decadent French nobleman who loves imagining voyages to foreign lands. After becoming enamored with Dutch painting, he travels to

Holland, but becomes disappointed when he realizes that the images he saw in art were merely mixed with other elements of the landscape. Later, after reading a Dickens novel, he decides to travel to London. While still in Paris, he buys a guidebook, visits an English bar and then a tavern, and heads to the train station, where he quickly decides that he would rather not deal with the discomfort of traveling and heads back home. He never leaves his estate again, but he continues to daydream about traveling abroad and surrounds himself with travel memorabilia like ship schedules. Des Esseintes' disappointment reflects the gap between people's expectations of travel and its reality, as well as the seeming purity of foreign cultures in art and the imagination.

Charles Baudelaire – The famous 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, whom de Botton profiles in his second essay, grew up as something of a misfit in French society: he did not get along with his family, schoolmates, or peers in the aristocracy. He always dreamed of traveling and loved spending time around ships, which he saw as elegant marvels of human ingenuity, in part because their departures reflected the promise of a better life elsewhere. He once left on a trip to India but forced the ship's captain to turn around halfway after they reached Mauritius and Baudelaire realized he was just as miserable as he used to be in France. He praised "poets" who sought fulfillment outside of ordinary society, and his ambivalent relationship to traveling reflects the disappointment of realizing that foreign places will not relieve one of one's fundamental problems, as well as the thrill that de Botton shares in anticipating and imagining travel.

Edward Hopper – The early 20th-century American artist Edward Hopper was famous for painting traveling places, from hotels and gas stations to trains and roadside cafeterias. To de Botton, who presents a series of these paintings in his second essay, Hopper's work offers viewers a chance to explore their own grief and loneliness through subjects and environments that echo their sense of unbelonging.

Gustave Flaubert – A deeply influential 19th-century French realist novelist, best known for *Madame Bovary*. From a young age, Flaubert was frustrated with the social codes of the French aristocracy and dreamed about leaving his home city of Rouen for "the Orient" (which, at the time, referred to what is now called the Middle East). When his father died and left him an inheritance, Flaubert traveled with his friend Maxime Du Camp to Egypt, where he quickly immersed himself in local customs, started learning Arabic, and became completely enamored with the chaotic way of life that he saw as irreconcilable with (and much better suited to himself than) the rigidity of Europe. Although he was ultimately disappointed in some ways with his trip (he remained depressed at times and found Egypt's temples mind-numbingly repetitive), Flaubert never forgot his trip to Egypt and began to consider himself a citizen of the world, as it were. For de Botton, Flaubert's journey to Egypt demonstrates the often-deceptive allure of the exotic as much as its power to revolutionize travelers' lives by revealing possibilities they could never have imagined at home.

Alexander von Humboldt – A German polymath (an expert in many subjects) who traveled in South America from 1799 until 1804 and wrote thirty volumes about the broad range of scientific discoveries he made there. From an early age, Humboldt was captivated by massive questions about the human and natural worlds—for instance, he was curious about why different things grew in different places, and he spent much of the rest of his life paying close attention to where certain species could be found. For de Botton, the curiosity about the unknown that drove Humboldt's trip to South America is largely unavailable to contemporary travelers, who generally travel to destinations where there is nothing more to be discovered. But Humboldt's tireless efforts to improve science demonstrate both travelers' timeless fascination with nature and how the things they become curious about during travel often reflect their underlying commitments, character, and sense of personal purpose.

William Wordsworth – An English poet who lived his whole life in the Lake District, Wordsworth transformed the British public's attitude toward the countryside by arguing that people from the city needed to spend time in nature in order to rediscover the virtues of nature and heal their psychic wounds. He often wrote about phenomena he encountered on his daily walks through his region's mountains and lakes, and famously subtitled his poems with the precise place where they were conceived in order to preserve the moments of natural beauty he experienced as "spots of time." While other writers and critics initially lampooned his poetry, by the end of his life Wordsworth was one of Britain's most esteemed writers; because of his influence, tourists from cities suddenly flooded the Lake District. De Botton contemplates Wordsworth during his own trip to the Lake District in the fifth essay, "On the Country and the City."

Edmund Burke – An 18th-century Irish philosopher and statesman whose *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* revolutionized European thinking on the concept of the sublime. He argued that, whereas beautiful things please the senses through their sensible qualities, sublime things create a sense of awe by demonstrating humans' inadequacy in the face of forces that infinitely exceed them and cannot be controlled by them.

God – De Botton sees the sublime as pointing to the existence of a higher power. He calls this God, referring to the traditional Abrahamic God who supposedly performed many of his greatest acts in the Sinai desert and appears in the Biblical book of Job, but also to the very idea of a supernatural creator with absolute power over the Earth.

Job – A Biblical character who suddenly loses his immense

wealth and good fortune when most of his livestock are stolen, his eldest son is killed, and he becomes covered in sores. He asks God what he has done to deserve this fate, and God replies that Job has no right to question the logic of the universe or the power of the almighty, which infinitely exceeds him. De Botton uses the Book of Job to demonstrate how encountering the sublime can lead people to acknowledge the limits of the human will and accept the inevitability of human insignificance in the universe.

Vincent van Gogh – A 19th century Dutch Post-Impressionist painter who remains one of the most influential artists in Western art. He lived the last three years of his life in Arles, in French Provence, where he produced the majority of his most famous work—about 200 paintings and 100 drawings—during just 15 months. After a series of eye-opening encounters with the work of writers and other painters, van Gogh became convinced that he could portray the South of France in a way that no previous artist had before, and, accordingly, teach people to see the region in an entirely new light. Although van Gogh abandoned the classical ideal that painting should "render on canvas an accurate version of the visual world," Alain de Botton does not see this shift as a rejection of artistic realism but rather as a new, innovative form of it, one that foregrounded the colors and motion of Provence's landscape—which van Gogh took as its true essence—rather than its proportions and lines. A series of plaques in and around Arles memorialize van Gogh's life and work, and in his seventh essay de Botton follows this "van Gogh trail" on a quest to see Provence's beauty, which was previously hidden from him.

John Ruskin – A 19th-century British thinker and critic famous for the drawing classes he offered to English commoners. During his privileged childhood, Ruskin's parents cultivated his interest in art, but he believed that people of all social classes should learn to draw—not in order to become artists, but rather in order to learn how to truly see the world around them. He believed that, to truly possess the beauty one sees, one must come to understand what makes something beautiful. He argued that drawing and word-painting, unlike photography, made that understanding possible by forcing people to notice the details that compose larger wholes and pay sustained attention to the world around them. After reading Ruskin, Alain de Botton takes up drawing and word painting in his eighth essay.

Xavier de Maistre – A 19th-century French aristocrat, military man, and writer whose book *Journey around My Bedroom* Alain de Botton analyzes in his final essay. De Maistre did travel extensively for his military duties, but de Botton thinks that *Journey around My Bedroom* offers a promising alternative theory of travel: it is more about a traveling mind-set than a destination, and people can undertake satisfying voyages in the places they already call home. While "traveling" in his pajamas, de Maistre notes the beauty of his furniture before losing focus and daydreaming about his dog and crush; de Botton follows his lead by taking a walk around his neighborhood of Hammersmith with an eye to the area's beauty rather than simply an immediate practical goal (usually, getting to the train station).

Friedrich Nietzsche – A prominent 19th-century German philosopher whom Alain de Botton frequently quotes throughout his book. He argued that travel can be valuable because it allows people to learn information that they can use to enrich their own lives, rejected the notion that painters can ever merely reproduce the world exactly as it is, and appreciated Xavier de Maistre's ability to "make much of little."

Blaise Pascal – A 17th-century French scientist, mathematician, theologian, and philosopher whose most famous work, *Pensées* ("Thoughts"), Alain de Botton frequently cites throughout *The Art of Travel*. Most importantly, John Ruskin's arguments for the virtues of drawing echo Pascal's earlier belief that people often admire paintings and other representations of real objects instead of admiring the objects themselves.

MINOR CHARACTERS

J. K. Huysmans – The pen name of Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans, a 19th-century French novelist and civil servant. He is best remembered for the decadent novel *À Rebours* ("Against Nature"), whose main character, the Duc des Esseintes, de Botton profiles in his first essay ("On Anticipation").

Maxime Du Camp – Gustave Flaubert's extremely practical friend and traveling companion in Egypt from 1849-1851. Later, he wrote a book critical of Flaubert, whose literary success outshone his own.

TERMS

Traveling Places – This is **De Botton**'s term for spaces inhabited by those in transit, from the roadside rest stop he visits between London and Manchester to the planes, ships, and trains that travelers use to reach foreign lands. He argues that such liminal (in-between) spaces can offer the excitement of anticipated travel as well as a poetic, comfortable loneliness, in which a traveler is surrounded by other people who feel the same isolation and an atmosphere that mirrors that sentiment.

The Orient – A European term, now generally considered archaic and often pejorative, that ordinarily denotes all of Asia but has been associated with different nations and regions throughout history. In the mid-1800s, a body of European Orientalist literature and poetry emerged, with a focus on the Middle East. The idea of the exotic, mystical, chaotic "Orient" inspired **Gustave Flaubert** to visit Egypt (of which, notably, only a small and sparsely-inhabited portion actually lies within Asia). Later, the term became more closely associated with East Asia.

The Exotic – That which is both new and valuable. Conventionally, the word is employed by Europeans identifying something that captivates them about non-European cultures, but **Alain de Botton** also uses it to describe his fascination with Amsterdam.

Spots of Time – Poet **William Wordsworth**'s term for scenes from nature that people can relive in order to help them gain perspective and overcome problems that they face in their daily lives (and particularly issues like frustrations over social status that are specifically tied to life in cities).

The Sublime – A term that denotes the feeling of awe people experience when they encounter vast, awe-inspiring power like that of certain natural landscapes. Irish philosopher **Edmund Burke**, perhaps the most prominent theorist of the sublime, argued that *beautiful* things are often pleasant and diminutive, weaker than and therefore subject to the human will, but *sublime* things evoke a sense of human insignificance and impotence by putting the human subject in contact with a force that vastly exceeds them. This experience often inspires faith in **God** and allows people to more easily accept their failures and inadequacies, which is why 18th century critics often conceived of the sublime as both pleasurable and morally good.

Word-Painting – **John Ruskin**'s term for the linguistic counterpart to drawing, word-painting allows viewers to capture the psychological impact that a beautiful scene or object has on them and hopefully notice the aesthetic reasons they find it beautiful. Word-painting stands opposed to dry, everyday forms of description that fail to capture the experience of encountering something beautiful: for example, whereas many British people (to Ruskin's frustration) simply call the weather "wet and windy," Ruskin finds this shallow description frustrating, and instead word-paints the weather with descriptions like "dawn purple, flushed, delicate. Bank of grey cloud, heavy at six. Then the lighted purple cloud showing through it, open sky of dull yellow above—all grey, and darker scud going across it obliquely, from the south-west—moving fast, yet never stirring from its place, at last melting away."

Aesthetic – Developing an aesthetic means gaining the "capacity to assert judgments about beauty and ugliness." For **de Botton**, art and travel are valuable in large part because they allow individuals to notice what they find beautiful, exciting, and suited to their own disposition. This is also why art can inspire travel and travel art—both are fundamentally valuable to de Botton because of their subjective, aesthetic dimensions. By paying attention to their intuitions about beauty and ugliness, de Botton hopes, travelers can begin to understand their interior aesthetics by grasping the mental associations and rules of beauty to which they react. "Aesthetic" can also be used as an adjective (something involving beauty).

Traveling Mind-Set – **De Botton**'s term for the way that travelers approach new places with a receptiveness to the environment and a humility before foreign cultures and unexpected phenomena. He argues that this mind-set, rather than simply a departure from home, is what truly separates travel from everyday life. Accordingly, in his final essay, de Botton tries to view his own neighborhood of Hammersmith as though it were foreign by adopting the travel mind-set as he wanders through it, attending to the beauty he sees in its details by drawing and word-painting.

THEMES

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THE FAMILIAR AND THE FOREIGN

In *The Art of Travel*, the philosophical writer Alain de Botton draws from his own experiences abroad, as well as those of distinguished artists, thinkers, and fellow-travelers throughout history, to explore the essential allure of travel. The book's nine loosely-connected essays juxtapose his own voyages with the travels and travel-related musings of men of European literary and artistic fame. The central motivation for de Botton's travels—and, he thinks, for most travelers' journeys—is the desire to escape the familiar and experience the foreign. In one way or another, travelers tend to become enchanted with (or, at worst, fetishize) the places they plan to visit—they crave knowledge of places they imagine as irreconcilably different from home. This ultimately reflects less the superiority of other places than it does people's deteriorating ability to see beauty in the places where they already live. Although de Botton emphasizes the benefits of travel, he thinks those benefits are also available to travelers at home, so long as they are willing to view the familiar as though it were foreign.

People's attraction to the foreign and curiosity about difference are perhaps *the* primary motivation for travel, de Botton claims. In his chapter "On the Exotic," he uses the travels of influential French novelist Gustave Flaubert to illustrate this point. Growing up, Flaubert was obsessed with the prospect of visiting the Middle East (or, as 19th-century Europeans like him called it, "the Orient"). "In Flaubert's mind," writes de Botton, "the word *happiness* became interchangeable with the word *Orient*." His infatuation with the idea of the "Orient" (an imaginary construct that encompassed about as much territory as Europe) led him to move to Egypt after his father's death. When he arrived, he dwelt on particular moments of beauty that reflected his high hopes: his first glimpse of the "Oriental"

shoreline, the chaotic soundscape of Alexandria's markets, the exoticism of camels, and the unfamiliar idioms of Egyptian Arabic. Similarly, the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt visited South America out of a desire to learn as much as possible about the unfamiliar continent. He studied its plants, animals, people, mountains, rivers, and climate (among other things)—his absolute curiosity about the unknown driving him to dive wholeheartedly into a foreign land. And, in his own travels, de Botton himself consistently notices and derives pleasure from the differences between the places he visits and his native London—for instance, in Amsterdam, he dwells on the differences between English and Dutch architecture, language, and transportation infrastructure. When he first sees the sign reading "uitgang" ("exit") in the Amsterdam airport, de Botton is overwhelmed with the excitement of cultural difference, which he attributes to the underlying belief that one might discover something abroad that one could never have learned at home. At worst, de Botton suggests, the allure of the foreign is based merely on its sense of novelty; at best, however, it points to elements of other cultures that travelers can learn from and use to enrich their own lives.

But, for de Botton, this bias toward the unfamiliar often emerges more fundamentally from people's boredom with the places where they already live. When de Botton vacations to Barbados in the first chapter, his primary motivation is the desire to escape London's dreary winter for the Caribbean's tropical sun. Similarly, Flaubert loved the idea of the Middle East because he imagined it as uninhibited and passionate, a better fit for him than his boring, bourgeois, and bureaucratic hometown of Rouen. Although it ultimately fails to meet his expectations, the "Orient" serves as an imaginary counterweight to the drudgery of French aristocratic life throughout Flaubert's work. De Botton also suggests that French poet Charles Baudelaire was obsessed with the prospect of traveling "anywhere! anywhere!" simply because he wanted to escape his own boredom in France. Each of these men appears to recognize that their impulse to travel and obsessive interest in foreign lands come fundamentally from their sense of having exhausted what they already know.

But, ultimately, de Botton thinks that people can learn to approach everything—the familiar and the foreign alike—with the curiosity and receptivity that make travel so rewarding. In the final chapter, de Botton profiles the French writer Xavier de Maistre, who managed to find enough detail in his bedroom to write two lengthy travelogues about journeying through it. De Maistre's book, although it parodies conventional travel literature, also points to the possibility of traveling mindfully through the spaces where one already travels thoughtlessly: de Maistre puts on his pajamas and treks across the room to his sofa, where he reminisces about the hours he has spent curled up there and admires its elegant construction in detail. Like de Maistre, de Botton learns to see the immense beauty and diversity that fill the neighborhood where he lives his often monotonous and unsatisfying life in London; through his travel mind-set, he learns to notice features of his own environment that, like Amsterdam's bicycles and unadorned windows, he can adopt to enrich his own life. Many of de Botton's other "travelers" also traveled within the places they called home—for instance, William Wordsworth found daily joy in the natural features of England's Lake District even though he was born there. For de Botton, travel is liberating because it teaches people to take pleasure in the details of the world around them and take control over their subjective relationship with that world. This mind-set of receptivity to the world and humility before its unconquerable vastness can lead people to "notice what we have already seen."

For de Botton, the difference between the familiar and the foreign is fundamentally a difference in mindset, which means that travel can teach people to appreciate the uniqueness and beauty of places with which they are already familiar. Whereas travelers often approach new places with fresh eyes, they expect repetition and boredom at home—and, of course, they see what they expect, because they fail to truly look around their hometowns. De Botton concludes that "the pleasure we derive from a journey may be dependent more on the mind-set we travel *with* than on the destination we travel *to*." The travel mind-set—which is governed by a receptivity to the world and a humility before novel experiences, sights, and cultures—can lead people to view the familiar as foreign, bringing travel's expanded sense of possibility back home to transform their own options and more effectively pursue their own happiness.

EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

Although many who travel (including the author himself) begin with high hopes for an exclusively positive or life-changing experience, de Botton laments that the actual act of travel often fails to meet these expectations. While a prospective traveler may admire the images of pristine beaches they see online or an article about intriguing cultural differences in a travel magazine, in reality such experiences form only a miniscule portion of a traveler's experience abroad. Often this leads travelers to disappointment, preventing them from enjoying travel's benefits because they become disillusioned to realize that they also have to bring *themselves* (and all their problems) with them abroad. Yet the expectation of travel is itself a valuable experience for de Botton, and he thinks that travelers can overcome disillusionment by perceiving the continuity between their travels and their everyday lives, as well as expecting the unexpected (rather than the perfect fulfillment of their expectations).

People often set high expectations for travel, in part because they see it as an escape from their everyday lives. At the

beginning of the book, de Botton discusses a trip to Barbados and recalls that he was motivated to go "by nothing more than the sight of a photograph of a palm tree gently inclining in a tropical breeze." He traveled to fulfill a single mental image that promised an escape from his often-dreary life in London. Like his imagination, de Botton suggests that travel writing also often ignores the boredom of traveling itself: sitting on trains, checking into hotels, and finding oneself with nothing to do in paradise. Confronted with the dreariness and monotony of transit, rooms, and crowds, travelers can quickly become demoralized and forget the reason they went abroad in the first place.

Ultimately, unrealistically high expectations can lead travelers to disappointment because they forget that conspicuous moments of travel necessarily take place only within the broader context of their lives. De Botton uses 19th-century French novelist J.K. Huysman's fictional character, the Duc des Esseintes, to illustrate travelers' tendency toward disappointment. The wealthy and reclusive Duc des Esseintes seldom leaves his estate in France. When he reads a Charles Dickens novel and decides to travel to London, he sets out on a grand journey, but ultimately turns around as soon as he reaches the train station and realizes that sitting all day on the train would be too much of a bother. In his second essay, de Botton recalls how French poet Charles Baudelaire once canceled his trip to India halfway through, upon finding that he "could not shake off a feeling of lethargy and sadness" that he brought with him from France. Similarly, de Botton is himself disappointed when he actually goes to Barbados, where he gets into a fight with his girlfriend M. and complains about unanticipated encounters with a customs officer, an ashtray, and a stray dog. When he finally reaches the pristine beach he had envisioned, he realizes that he had not anticipated having to stare at that same beautiful image for days straight; instead, he begins to mull over his personal problems. He concludes that "I had inadvertently brought myself with me to the island," for while anticipating his trip he had not expected that these everyday anxieties would travel with him. In all these cases, characters prone to frustration and boredom find themselves surprised when they get frustrated and bored in the destinations they always dreamed about.

Despite the seemingly-inevitable mismatch between expectations and reality, de Botton argues that it can still be valuable to merely anticipate travel, even if one never undertakes the voyage in question: there can be a thrill in the desire to travel and the process of transit itself. Des Esseintes, who gives up on traveling after visiting Holland and nearly boarding his train to London, nevertheless continues to daydream about traveling because he finds his armchair adventures so entertaining. Similarly, de Botton writes that Baudelaire dreamed of traveling to various exotic places he never ultimately reached—he simply wanted to go "anywhere! anywhere!" Even though he seldom did it, traveling was an important part of Baudelaire's mental life. De Botton, too, cites his "psychological pleasure" in watching the ground recede as he takes off in a plane; he sees modes of transportation (especially trains) as "the midwives of thought" because the "flow of the landscape" offers a series of images that can spur thought. The process of transit, no matter where one is going, can be an intellectually valuable experience for de Botton because it can free people from their normal contexts, enabling an introspection that brings them "back into contact with emotions and ideas" that deeply influence their lives, but they might ordinarily forget during the daily grind.

To avoid the dangers of unmet expectations in travel, de Botton does not want travelers to expect disappointment, but rather to take a realistic view. They should recognize that travel does not dissolve their problems, and should open themselves to the possibility of unexpected experiences. De Botton's first solution is to anticipate travel more realistically: people should not imagine their coming travels as instant sources of happiness or absolute remedies to their problems. Rather, de Botton cites the "ancient philosophers who walked away from prosperity and sophistication" because they realized that "happiness could not be material or aesthetic but must always be stubbornly psychological." This is part of why he opens his book with a chapter on anticipation and disappointment: he likely suspects that readers are looking for advice on how to travel in a way that meets their highest expectations, so instead he confronts the implausibility of those expectations head-on. He does not want travelers to think that unmet expectations make a trip a failure. His second solution is to approach travel with a mindset of *receptivity*: the ability to appreciate and respond to the unexpected. He sees the true joy of travel as experiencing "an interval in which we achieve receptivity to the world around us, in which positive thoughts of past and future coagulate and anxieties are allayed." Rather than simply meeting people's expectations, successful travel exceeds and transforms those expectations by putting people in touch with things they could not have expected in the first place.

Ultimately, although de Botton recognizes that many people travel in the hopes of escaping their problems and everyday lives, he realizes that indulging these expectations might lead people to disappointment. Instead, he offers a more realistic view of the joy that travel can bring: this joy comes in moments of communion with the world and the perspective that unanticipated experiences can offer.

ART, TRAVEL, AND THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

As his book's title implies, Alain de Botton is deeply concerned with travel's relationship to art, both literary and visual, as well as aesthetic experience more broadly. Artists and writers are de Botton's traveling

companions throughout this book, because he thinks that their travels (and those of the characters they have created) can offer contemporary tourists valuable insight into the places they visit and, more importantly, the *how* and *why* of traveling. He thinks not only about the process of traveling as a form of art, but also about art that depicts and influences travel. Art and travel are ultimately deeply similar because both fundamentally hinge on the relationship between the subjective observer and the objective world, and as such their value relies on an individual's aesthetic sensibilities. Ultimately, de Botton suggests that aesthetic experiences—like those that inspire and emerge from both art and travel—play a core role in human happiness.

Art inspires travel and travel inspires art. Throughout the book, de Botton travels in response to art and literature (in addition to using such works to interpret his own travel experiences). A photograph inspires him to travel to Barbados, William Wordsworth's poems lead him to England's Lake District, and the only thing he can bring himself to appreciate about Provence is its physical beauty, as depicted by Vincent van Gogh. Art also inspires many of de Botton's historical or literary subjects to travel: the Duc des Esseintes decides to travel to London when he reads Charles Dickens and to Holland after he sees Dutch paintings, and Gustave Flaubert decided to visit the "Orient" after reading novels and poems about it. Travel also leads artists, writers, and thinkers to produce some of their most valuable work. Flaubert consistently evokes the "Orient" in his novels, van Gogh was at his most productive after he first arrived in Provence, and Xavier de Maistre decided to write his most famous book, *Journey around My Bedroom*, only *after* he traveled extensively throughout the world and came to think of travel as a mindset. De Botton suggests that this close relationship stems from a fundamental similarity between art and travel: the value of each is aesthetic, which means that travelers and artists alike chase what they find beautiful, new, and transformative.

Not only does art inspire travel, de Botton claims, but travel is itself an art: it is a means to both shape and interpret one's vision of the world. De Botton argues that both art and travel are eye-opening because they foreground certain images and experiences while erasing others from view. For instance, van Gogh's paintings of Provence are significant in the history of art, according to de Botton, because they allowed people to see the region through new lenses. In fact, after learning about van Gogh, de Botton notices Provence in an entirely new way because he begins paying attention to the aesthetic features that van Gogh emphasized.

Because travel is not a science, for de Botton, rigid travel is meaningless travel. In the essay "On Curiosity," he tours Madrid with the assistance of a guidebook that he finds utterly boring—it offers him a predetermined series of directions and factoids, declaring what is important without giving the traveler any room to pursue their particular interests. He contrasts this guidebook, which forced established information down the traveler's throat, with Alexander von Humboldt's 18th century voyages to South America, which were fruitful specifically because his own curiosity led him to a discover a wide variety of previously unknown laws governing the natural world (like ocean currents and the altitude where flies live). Travel also introduces people to new stimuli, letting them use the facts they discover and places they encounter to enhance their lives. When he arrives in Amsterdam and notes curious cultural differences, de Botton sees these differences as promising that the Netherlands "may in critical ways prove more congenial than my own to my temperament and my concerns." Indeed, he sees travel as a means for people to discover ways of life that suit them better than their current ones. In this way, beyond helping a traveler interpret the world around them, travel can ultimately reveal the traveler to themselves.

De Botton suggests that aesthetic experiences like art and travel do not merely help people develop this aesthetic self-knowledge, but also become more valuable the more they develop it. In his first chapter, de Botton argues that "few activities reveal as much about the dynamics of [the human quest for happiness]—in all its ardour and paradoxes—than our travels" because such travels reveal people's "understanding of what life might be about, outside of the constraints of work and the struggle for survival." Such an understanding is inevitably subjective, for it concerns the meaningful dimensions of one's life that are not rooted in the activities all people necessarily share; in travel, people can choose to do nearly anything in nearly any place (within reason), so what they choose reflects what they fundamentally value as individuals. If traveling reflects an individual's sense of purpose and calibration to their environment, then this explains why a shift in mindset—i.e. a shift in that purpose and calibration—can turn the familiar environments of home into sources of unexpected joy. This is why, in his final chapter, de Botton learns to re-experience his home neighborhood of Hammersmith, London, by viewing it as an aesthetically saturated environment with the capacity to surprise him rather than the unexciting, empty space in which his everyday life takes place. While art and travel might not be completely necessary for humans to achieve happiness, de Botton thinks they offer people important lessons about what they are, desire, and have the potential to become, but also that they become more fulfilling the more one figures out the answers to these questions.

Ultimately, to de Botton, both art and travel contribute to the human quest for joy because they demonstrate people's distinctive perspectives on and agency in the world; one person's successful trip is another's failure, just as one person's masterpiece is another's dud. Travel and art are natural bedfellows because they both reflect—and force people to reflect on—the role of individual aesthetic judgment in the

human quest for meaning.

THE RECEPTIVE SELF

In *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton argues that travel's greatest gift to those who undertake it, the travel mind-set, centers on a receptivity to one's environment. By engaging with foreign environments, both urban and natural, de Botton believes that travelers can gain new perspectives on the world and their individual role within it. To de Botton, a receptive attitude to the natural world can teach travelers humility and patience, which can help them overcome the suffering they experience in their ordinary lives, and travelers can investigate the important questions at the center of human life by linking their curiosity about these questions to the places they visit. But these benefits of receptivity do not come through osmosis: rather, travelers must actively pursue and cultivate receptivity by learning to pay better attention to, and ask the right questions of, the places they visit.

During their travels, de Botton and many of his subjects heal themselves in various ways by immersing themselves in nature. William Wordsworth thought that trips to the countryside could remedy city-dwellers' vices by reminding them of nature's virtues. Trees and mountains suggested "sanity, purity and permanence," flowers showed "humility and meekness," and animals "were paragons of stoicism." During his own trip to the Lake District, where Wordsworth lived, de Botton begins to imagine a sheep's perspective on the world and ponder the virtues Wordsworth preached. Similarly, in the following essay, de Botton travels to the Sinai Desert in search of the sublime, a feeling of human insignificance usually tied to standing before vast natural expanses like mountain ranges, oceans, night skies, and deserts. To philosopher Edmund Burke, this feeling helps people recognize their own insignificance, but in a productive way: the power of the sublime inspires awe and can lead people to accept the limits of their will and inevitability of natural forces. De Botton suggests that sublime landscapes can therefore help people accept their failures and put their relatively minor human worries into perspective. And in his chapter on traveling places, de Botton argues that taking off in an airplane can feel liberating because it allows people to remove themselves from their concerns on the ground and imagine that they might "surge above much that now looms over us." In all these cases, the traveler's receptivity to the environment leads them to a humility before nature and a perspective beyond the limited one that dominates their everyday lives.

Becoming receptive to their environment also allows travelers to pursue their curiosity and cultivate their own *individual* perspectives. Gustave Flaubert's curiosity about Egypt led him to intensively study the local language, social customs, history, and religion, all of which influenced his later life, fiction, and self-image. De Botton's chapter "On Curiosity" tackles this most directly, contrasting Alexander von Humboldt's boundless curiosity with the natural world with de Botton's own lack of interest in his guidebook about Madrid. The secret to making the environment relevant to people's curiosity, he concludes, is tying the details travelers see to the bigger questions at the heart of human existence. Upon visiting a church, a traveler should not focus on the date it was built or the height of its ceilings (unless they happen to be intensely interested in such things). Rather, de Botton thinks that people should consider why people build churches at all, or believe in God in the first place. He thinks that human curiosity naturally extends out from these big questions to the more minor details of everyday life.

De Botton cites the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to make the analogous argument that people must connect details and big questions to their purpose in order to truly fulfill their curiosity. Art educator John Ruskin thought that drawing's value was in its ability to help people notice the detailed parts that make up beautiful and visually interesting objects; in turn, the ability to notice these parts was valuable because it helped people understand the general aesthetic rules that determine what they find beautiful and ugly. As he starts paying closer visual attention to the world around him, de Botton uncovers rules like "it is better for light to strike objects from the side than from overhead," which are valuable because they can guide his search for beauty in the future.

However, achieving receptivity to the environment is not as easy as going somewhere new and passively waiting for insights to strike; it also requires the traveler to actively cultivate their own abilities, both in the moment (by actively attending to the world rather than absentmindedly floating through it) and in the longer term (by learning how to pay attention in the first place). In his first essay, de Botton finds himself disappointed in part because he falsely blamed his unhappiness on London's weather and believed that simply going to Barbados would solve his problems. He suggests that many travelers share the same unrealistic belief, for they suppose that they will simply absorb the energy of wherever they travel. Accordingly, they fail to look around and reflect on what they see or address the fundamental problems that follow them on vacation. Although de Botton's happiest moments in Barbados are nevertheless those when he loses himself in the sun and air, he also recognizes that he can only do so during moments of deliberate attention and reflection. In fact, even imagining nature's perspective and processing the sublime require a deliberate thought and reflection that may not come naturally for humans. De Botton interprets the Biblical Book of Job as a lesson in appreciating the sublime, for Job only learns about the sublime significance of the desert and the mountains after God asks him questions he cannot answer.

People who so often proceed through their normal lives in a

state of partial blindness to the world around them have much to gain from a receptive attitude in travel, but they also need to learn receptivity in the first place, whether by reflecting on the central questions of human life to the point where their travels can impact their broader sense of personal meaning or by learning to think through the implications of nature's indifference to human problems. While de Botton seems to find it easier for people to achieve humility through nature than to satisfy curiosity through a built environment—since the former extends from an immediate feeling and the latter requires people to ask the right questions—both these fruits of travel require an active investment in and engagement with the world, rather than the passive attitude that the word "receptivity" might misleadingly suggest.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CLOUDS

Alain de Botton and his fellow travelers have sublime encounters with clouds throughout *The Art of Travel*, and these encounters demonstrate the overwhelming force of nature in addition to the myriad ways people can learn from and heal through their relationships to nature. In his second essay, after de Botton drives "alone with clouds" through the English countryside, he declares it incredible that airplanes can fly over clouds and cites a Baudelaire poem that proclaims a person's love for the clouds. As people identify with the clouds, they join a realm far beyond the seemingly-petty concerns of everyday human life and can experience a tranquil unity with the natural world. Similarly, de Botton later recalls William Wordsworth's poem "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," when the sight of a storm cloud stops him in his tracks; this cloud distracts him from his concerns over social status and reminds him about the "redemptive power of natural forces." Indeed, Wordsworth believed that spending time in nature could allow people from the city to rediscover virtue, in part because doing so allowed them to take in the stoic resilience of things like trees, mountains, and clouds. Finally, John Ruskin word-painted clouds, seeing them as a source of beauty in everyday life and imagining them "compelled by an unseen power" that suggests their incomprehensibility and indifference to human affairs. Although de Botton does not return to the sublime in this passage, Ruskin's description here clearly connects it to clouds by suggesting that they go on inexplicably, with or without humans, and evoking the common view of God as an "unseen power" who directs the universe.

In all these cases, people learn to escape their narrow perspective and shortsighted focus on immediate problems by recognizing something as seemingly common and normal as the clouds, which can lead them back to a humility before the natural world. Clouds thus represent both the sublime and the banal, a universal connection with the mysteries of nature that can be found anywhere in the world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Art of Travel* published in 2002.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Readers who would have been capable of scepticism and prudence in other areas of their lives reverted, in contact with these elements, to a primordial innocence and optimism. The longing provoked by the brochure was an example, at once touching and bathetic, of how projects (and even whole lives) might be influenced by the simplest and most unexamined images of happiness; of how a lengthy and ruinously expensive journey might be set into motion by nothing more than the sight of a photograph of a palm tree gently inclining in a tropical breeze.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

As he looks at a deceptively promising brochure about Barbados on a dreary day in London, Alain de Botton realizes how often people travel for the wrong reasons: they are, for instance, persuaded by advertising that promises instant gratification through decontextualized images of a place that offers something that home cannot. De Botton himself goes to Barbados because of this brochure, and he quickly realizes that his trip has done little to resolve the underlying anxieties and personal conflicts that continue to plague him.

The brochure's incredible power demonstrates both the enormous sway that unexamined aesthetic objects can have on people—this is part of why de Botton spends much of his book teaching the reader how to more actively and critically engage with the beautiful and meaningful things they discover in their travels—and the fact that people travel primarily to pursue whatever they believe will truly make them happy—which much traveling, like de Botton's trip to Barbados, fails to achieve.

If our lives are dominated by a search for happiness, then perhaps few activities reveal as much about the dynamics of this quest—in all its ardour and paradoxes—than our travels. They express, however inarticulately, an understanding of what life might be about, outside of the constraints of work and the struggle for survival. Yet rarely are they considered to present philosophical problems—that is, issues requiring thought beyond the practical. We are inundated with advice on *where* to travel to, but we hear little of *why* and *how* we should go, even though the art of travel seems naturally to sustain a number of questions neither so simple nor so trivial, and whose study might in modest ways contribute to an understanding of what the Greek philosophers beautifully termed *eudaimonia*, or 'human flourishing.'

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton believes that travel is relevant to everyday life because of its connection to the broader human quest for happiness. Because people travel "outside of the constraints of work and the struggle for survival," it seems that vacation is one of the few domains where people have a relative freedom to choose what they want and pursue what will make them happy. Throughout his book, de Botton ties people's encounters with new cultures, information, and forms of beauty back to this fundamental quest for happiness. But he finds that, without approaching foreign places mindfully, travelers can easily prioritize distraction over their desires and escapism over self-improvement. This is why he thinks travelers sorely need a philosophical travel guide.

I had inadvertently brought myself with me to the island.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

After he recalls a beautiful morning on the beach in Barbados, de Botton steps back to inform the reader that his memory was at best an imperfect version of events; in reality, he knows that he spent that morning largely absorbed in his own head, daydreaming about his future and worrying about problems he faced back home in London. When anticipating his trip, he notes, he seemed to forget that he had to actually go to Barbados, bringing his own body and mind with him—instead, he simply imagined the scene he saw in the brochure, as though he could merge with the sea and sand in pure serenity.

Whereas people often travel expecting breaks from their everyday lives, de Botton realizes that they actually bring those everyday lives with them and may have trouble letting go if they expect travel to automatically give them complete, uninterrupted enjoyment. This passage also comments on the workings of memory, imagination, and anticipation, all of which—like art—function by selectively emphasizing and erasing features of experience. While this partially explains why aesthetic encounters can be so transformative for de Botton, this is also part of the reason that travelers often set unrealistic expectations before setting out.

Des Esseintes conclude, in Huysmans's words, that "the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience." Actual experience where what we have come to see is always diluted in what we could see anywhere, where we are drawn away from the present by an anxious future and where our appreciation of aesthetic elements lies at the mercy of perplexing physical and psychological demands.

Related Characters: J. K. Huysmans, Alain de Botton (speaker), Duc des Esseintes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of his first essay, de Botton summarizes the knowledge he gleans from the French novelist J.K. Huysmans' protagonist in *À Rebours*, the Duc des Esseintes. After he finds a trip to Holland unsatisfying because he found the images of Dutch culture he saw in the museum swimming in the environment of everyday life rather than displayed on a pedestal, the Duc des Esseintes only attempts one more trip in his life but turns around once he reaches the train station. He concludes that it is better to imagine traveling than actually do it; whereas the imagination selectively focuses on the best aspects of an experience, allowing armchair travelers to appreciate the beauty of one image after another without interruption, in real travel voyagers find their way from one place to the

next, sift through the boring elements of the world to reach the interesting ones, and often daydream about what they will do next.

The Duc des Esseintes sees travel's disappointment as a sufficient reason to give up on it, but de Botton has more faith: he thinks that the "perplexing physical and psychological demands" that can take over a traveler's mind even in the most beautiful of places are not a nuisance but rather a sign that people tend to neglect their most basic needs both when they travel and in their normal lives; travel is still valuable even if it is not perfect, he argues, and insofar as people must confront their physical and psychological needs one way or another, travel is also an effective way to do so. In part, this explains why he develops a view of travel as a therapeutic act, one that can truly and sustainably relieve people of their anxieties and worries, throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"Life is a hospital in which every patient is obsessed with changing beds: this one wants to suffer in front of the radiator, and that one thinks he'd get better if he was by the window."

Related Characters: Charles Baudelaire (speaker), Alain de Botton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

French poet Charles Baudelaire was afflicted by a curious variation on wanderlust: after an early trip that he abandoned after finding that his usual depression did not improve, Baudelaire never traveled but always dreamed of doing so. He recognized that actual travel would never fulfill his fantasy by erasing all his problems and offering him a fresh start, but he nevertheless dreamed constantly about doing it—so constantly that he seldom thought about the same destination for long before another one caught his eye.

The metaphor of wanting to suffer in the right part of the hospital, beyond reflecting Baudelaire's pessimistic view of the human condition, captures the common feeling among prospective travelers that the grass will absolutely be greener on the other side, that escaping home will absolutely resolve one's problems. De Botton recognizes in his first chapter that this is seldom the case, but his other essays try to explain how travel can enrich human life and comfort patients in Baudelaire's metaphorical hospital, even if it can never be a cure-all. He suggests that even daydreaming about travel, as Baudelaire does, can offer a productive solution at times, even if only because it reminds people that there are other, perhaps more satisfying, possibilities for their lives.

The twenty-four-hour diner, the station waiting room and the motel are sanctuaries for those who have, for noble reasons, failed to find a home in the ordinary world—those whom Baudelaire might have dignified with the honorific *poets*.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Charles Baudelaire , Edward Hopper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton summarizes the beauty he sees in the transient places of travel, which Edward Hopper depicted in his paintings of American life on the road. Places like diners, motels, and station waiting rooms exist only to help people transition from one place to another—it is as though they are not true places in themselves but merely stops along the road from point A to point B. The people one finds there—and whom Hopper paints—are accordingly themselves in a state of transition, and de Botton suggests that these traveling places thus often reflect travelers' solitude and uncertainty. He concludes that such places can allow communion among the isolated because they are familiar to none and foreign to all; travelers anticipating changes in their lives or running from unhappiness can find comfort in the fact that, although they have not achieved their goals yet, they are nevertheless taking the first step and seeking a better place for themselves in the world. Baudelaire's term for those who wander abroad because they do not feel at home where they live was "poets," because he saw such travelers as relentlessly pursuing their own ideals in a world that will never live up to them.

Chapter 3 Quotes

What we find exotic abroad may be what we hunger for in vain at home.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Gustave Flaubert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In his essay about "the exotic," de Botton suggests that travelers often seek out reflections of themselves in foreign places: they want to immerse themselves in cultures that better match their personalities or, at the least, that offer experiences and attitudes they cannot find at home. Accordingly, de Botton suggests that the feeling of the "exotic," at its best, points not only to a pleasure in novelty but also to a promising cultural phenomenon of this sort. For instance, de Botton suggests that Flaubert finds Egypt's chaotic noise and comfort with bodily functions exotic because each matches a dimension of his own character: he believes that chaos, including bodily functions, is the natural way of human life and should be embraced rather than sublimated into order. Similarly, de Botton finds Amsterdam's streamlined aesthetic exotic in relation to London's ornamented beauty because he realizes he would prefer to live in a Dutch house rather than a British one. In this way, the feeling of the exotic can reveal a traveler to themselves, showing them what they truly miss in their everyday lives and maybe even showing them how to bring those missing pieces back home.

> Yet none of this meant that Flaubert's original attraction to Egypt had been misconceived. He simply replaced an absurdly idealized image with a more realistic but nevertheless still profoundly admiring one, he exchanged a youthful crush for a knowledgeable love.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Gustave Flaubert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Despite his enthusiasm for the "Orient," Flaubert was surprised to find himself bored by the endless temples and uniform landscapes he encountered on the Nile in Egypt. De Botton concludes that, even though Flaubert was partially disappointed, in fact everything he learned about Egypt vastly overwhelmed his dashed expectations. Flaubert's ample curiosity about the Egyptian people, religion, language, and environment led him from "a youthful crush" based on his Orientalist fantasies to "a knowledgeable love" for Egypt that he carried through the rest of his life. De Botton suggests that travelers might do the same by prioritizing their curiosity about things they actually encounter in a place to the quest to meet their pre-travel expectations. This contrasts with the Duc des Esseintes' disappointment, since it prevented him from ever traveling again after Holland failed to meet his mental image. Flaubert demonstrates that travel's true benefits are the unexpected encounters and lessons it fosters, rather than experiences that precisely match what one imagined beforehand.

> We are all of us, without ever having any say in the matter, scattered at birth by the wind onto various countries, but like Flaubert, we are in adulthood granted the freedom imaginatively to re-create our identity in line with our true allegiances.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Gustave Flaubert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton sees a profound freedom in Flaubert's defiant and somewhat melodramatic insistence on identifying as a camel, a woman, and Chinese (among other things). Flaubert did not literally believe he had transformed to match these identities, but he meant instead to underline people's freedom to choose their own commitments and identity. Instead of automatically cheering on France in its North African wars, Flaubert felt just as much sympathy for the Arabs as the Frenchmen; he believed that individuals should define themselves through personal choice rather than letting their preexisting membership in a familial, national, or perhaps even species community define them. After visiting Egypt, Flaubert continued to feel a strong attraction to the country, which he found more representative of his true identity than the country where he happened to be born. In other words, he thought that the familiar and the foreign were chosen, not given, and argued that people should be able to selectively cultivate themselves through encountering and retaining what they liked from a variety of different worlds, aesthetics, and ways

of life.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The guidebook might have added, "*and where there must be something wrong with the traveller who cannot agree.*"

111

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Friedrich Nietzsche, Alexander von Humboldt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton mocks his moralistic guidebook to Madrid, which insists on telling him which attractions to visit and which may not be worth his energy. The book imposes specific, rigid expectations on the traveler, which de Botton feels prevents him from truly engaging with the city or pursuing his own curiosity about various buildings and cultural norms he encounters there. It offers a slew of facts and measurements about various tourist attractions, but de Botton cannot see why these matter, for they have already been discovered (unlike the facts Alexander von Humboldt sought out on his trip to South America) and have little bearing on his own life.

De Botton asks what tourism would look like if, instead of a guidebook claiming to act as the objective authority on a place, people followed their own instincts and questions through a city, focusing on the dimensions of a place they find fascinating, beautiful, or exotic; he thinks that this model of travel would encourage tourists to be receptive to their environments and learn meaningfully from the places they visit, rather than simply scouring through a sea of irrelevant facts for anything interesting. As German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche advocated, de Botton wants factual expeditions to enrich people's lives by teaching them meaningfully about their own place and purpose in the world.

Chapter 5 Quotes

What though the radiance which was so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind.

Related Characters: William Wordsworth (speaker), Alain de Botton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton's girlfriend and traveling partner M. recites these lines from Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" after they arrive in the Lake District to retrace the poet's walks through the area. In the poem, Wordsworth laments the ephemerality of his childhood and the time he spent in nature when growing up. Though these experiences are "for ever taken from my sight," he still manages to find "strength in what remains behind" by remembering old moments of serenity and continuing to appreciate nature.

Although de Botton does not introduce Wordsworth's concept of "spots of time" until later in this chapter, the poem M. recites foreshadows Wordsworth's argument that, by retaining memories of particularly beautiful and fulfilling moments in nature, people can heal themselves with a dose of the innocence they find in the countryside (and their childhoods) even when they are caught up in worldly anxieties in the city. Indeed, M.'s memory of this poem, which she declares one of her favorites even though she also calls Wordsworth an "old toad," offers a spot of time from her past, and she recites it with great satisfaction. Ultimately, this poem shows how both experiences in nature and works of art can sustain people spiritually long after people first encounter them.

One of Wordsworth's poetic ambitions was to induce us to see the many animals living alongside us that we typically ignore, registering them only out of the corner of our eyes and feeling no appreciation for what they are up to and want: shadowy, generic presences such as the bird up on the steeple and the rustling creature in the bush. He invited his readers to abandon their usual perspectives and to consider for a time how the world might look through other eyes, to shuttle between the human and the natural perspective. Why might this be interesting, or even inspiring? Perhaps because unhappiness can stem from having only one perspective to play with.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), William Wordsworth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton summarizes Wordsworth's desire to offer humans an alternate perspective to their usual worldview by putting them in touch with animals and nature. This explains de Botton's curious encounters with a sheep and then a rustle in the bushes, during which he asks himself what these animals must think and begins to briefly distance himself from his own all-consuming human worries. Similarly, throughout the book, de Botton focuses on the mind-expanding potential of finding a new perspective to work with, whether it is the bird's eye view on humanity he himself finds out of an airplane window or the foreign perspective on his own culture that Flaubert finds in Egypt. In all these cases, travelers open their minds to new possibilities and unearth new paths to happiness by discovering a new perspective.

However, adopting nature's perspective requires a deliberate force of will, which illustrates why receptivity to the environment requires active effort rather than a mere immersion in new places. And ultimately, the crucial dimension de Botton discovers in travel is its mind-set, which allows him to view his neighborhood with a fresh perspective and respond to the beauty he sees in its environment instead of continuing to trudge through it with the same blind desire to reach the subway station.

Chapter 6 Quotes

The value of landscapes would henceforth be decided not solely on the basis of formal aesthetic criteria (the harmony of colours, for example, or the arrangement of lines) or even economic or practical concerns, but rather according to the power of places to arouse the mind to sublimity.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Edmund Burke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

As 18th-century critics increasingly turned an eye to the sublime, de Botton explains, they began to reconsider the way they judged a landscape's value for the human observer: a landscape became great because of its psychological effects on people, and not merely because of any objective beauty standard. Just as Wordsworth's poetry has brought centuries of English city-dwellers to the Lake District and Nietzsche argued that visiting Florence might teach people about a few dedicated artists' disproportionate impact on the course of history, the notion of the sublime forever transformed public concepts of aesthetic value and demonstrates the core role such concepts play in governing human decisions and behavior. Similarly, Vincent van Gogh's paintings strove to represent the psychological impact of Provence's landscape over its actual appearance, and De Botton echoes this shift from objective to subjective, psychological standards of value throughout his book: he focuses on how people can uncover the rules that govern what they find beautiful by actively engaging with the world's visual details. In turn, discovering these aesthetic rules can lead people to better understand and perhaps even reformulate their personal quests for happiness.

The world may appear illogical to you, but it does not follow that it is illogical per se. Our lives are not the measure of all things: consider sublime places for a reminder of human insignificance and frailty.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Job, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In his discussion of the Book of Job from the Old Testament, this is how de Botton summarizes God's ultimate lesson to Job. After Job lost most of his possessions and his eldest son to a string of natural disasters, he asks God what he could have possibly done to deserve his fate, but God tells him that he cannot fathom the workings of the universe and, as proof, asks him to ponder the vast wonders of nature that later became associated with the sublime.

De Botton sees God's message as reflecting the universal truth that humans have much less control over the world than they wish and can never gain complete knowledge of its workings; the sublime, then, serves to remind people of their will's limits as well as the inevitability that they will fail in some of their endeavors. This demonstrates the therapeutic value of receptivity to sublime places, which can potentially help people accept the unlucky hands the universe deals them.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Because we find places to be beautiful as immediately and apparently spontaneously as we find snow to be cold or sugar sweet, it is hard to imagine that there is anything we might do to alter or expand our attractions. It seems that matters have been decided for us by qualities inherent in the places themselves or by hardwiring in our psyches, and that we would therefore be as helpless to modify our sense of the places we find beautiful as we would our preference for the ice creams we find appetizing.

Yet aesthetic tastes may be less rigid than this analogy suggests. We overlook certain places because nothing has ever prompted us to conceive of them as being worthy of appreciation, or because some unfortunate but random association has turned us against them.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Vincent van Gogh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

As he wonders why he (unlike so many "sensible people") does not find Provence particularly beautiful, de Botton asks whether people's aesthetic senses are truly inherent or can be affected by learning, effort, and circumstance. While he acknowledges the appeal of believing that people simply like things or do not, and that they therefore lack any real control over what they will feel in any given place, he rejects this thesis and maintains his faith in people's ability to adopt new perspectives on beauty.

De Botton's insistence that aesthetic standards are mutable foreshadows the lessons he learns from van Gogh: after reading a book on the painter, he can suddenly see the flickering quality of cypress trees in the wind and the "profusion of colors" that infects Provence in the day and night alike. But this idea is also essential for the next chapter, in which he agrees with John Ruskin that drawing lessons can teach people to see details and forms of beauty that they previously missed. Indeed, it is only because aesthetic taste is mutable that de Botton is so concerned throughout *The Art of Travel* with teaching people to deliberately develop theirs; because he thinks that travel and art are both aesthetic experiences, they cannot be decided formulaically before the fact but rather require travelers to deliberately engage with and reflect on what they find beautiful and enticing.

❝ It was for van Gogh the mark of every great painter to enable viewers to see certain aspects of the world more clearly.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Vincent van Gogh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Van Gogh decided to move to Provence because he wanted to help people see what no other artist had seen in the region before: its people, its seasons, and especially its rich colors. But his faith in art's ability to change broader social perspectives on the world stemmed initially from his encounters with other artists, who allowed him—just as he allows de Botton—to see details and forms of beauty in the world that he had never noticed before. For instance, he notices that Arles's restaurants have the color of a Carvaggio painting and connects the dots, realizing that the artist also lived in a place where people closed the shutters during the day's dry heat.

Van Gogh's own encounters with art led him to travel, and the art he produced in Provence taught others precisely to travel with a different perspective. His faith that aesthetic

standards could be influenced and he could see something new in Provence led him to fundamentally transform those aesthetic standards for the entire art world, and offer travelers a new lens through which to experience the world around them.

> *'Completely true to nature!'—what a lie:*
> *How could nature ever be constrained into a picture?*
> *The smallest bit of nature is infinite!*
> *And so he paints what he likes about it.*
> *And what does he like? He likes what he can paint!*
>
> Nietzsche 188

Related Characters: Friedrich Nietzsche (speaker), Vincent van Gogh, Alain de Botton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzche's reflections on artistic realism justify de Botton's defense of Vincent van Gogh against critics who thought the Dutch painter misrepresented the reality of Provence. Van Gogh focused on color and contrast, which he thought captured the true psychological impact of being in Provence and therefore the essence of the region's visual character. But classical ideologies of representation focused on line and form, which van Gogh was willing to sacrifice. Nietzsche argued that there were various "real" views of any particular object, and that therefore the classical version could not have been considered any "truer" to the world than a perspective like van Gogh's psychological realism. Any picture, he argued, necessarily "constrained" the world's infinite variety by forcing it into a frame, and it is precisely this process of selection in which he and de Botton find the subjective value of art.

This connects to de Botton's earlier arguments about memory, the imagination, and anticipation, in which he saw the same process of selective foregrounding and deletion: all offer different views of an infinite reality in which any detail can offer an infinite depth of meaning and an infinite variety of different meanings, depending on the observer. If learning to appreciate beauty simply meant learning to apply received criteria to an object, then the observer's identity and personal commitments would not matter; rather, for de Botton, aesthetic judgments are always a dialogue between the observer and the object, which is why novel perspectives like van Gogh's can so powerfully transform people's view of new places and their own lives.

> A few years after van Gogh's stay in Provence, Oscar Wilde remarked that there had been no fog in London before Whistler painted it. Surely, too, there were fewer cypresses in Provence before van Gogh painted *them*.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Vincent van Gogh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Oscar Wilde's witty claim about the British painter James McNeill Whistler, who was famous for his depictions of the London fog, exemplifies how artistic representation can open observers' eyes to new features and forms of beauty in the world. De Botton suggests that van Gogh's unique depiction of cypress trees, which he noticed looked like "a flame flickering nervously in the wind," transformed visitors' interest in the trees and led to their being considered a distinctive feature of Provence's landscape.

When an artist like van Gogh so completely captures the popular imagination of a place (as Wordsworth did with the Lake District, for example, or Dickens did with London, which led the Duc des Esseintes to travel there), their impact can influence the expectations with which people enter a place: if nobody had painted the London fog as richly as Whistler, it would surely still exist, but it might not seem remarkable to anyone. This demonstrates how aesthetic standards depend on people's mental and cultural associations; together, these associations and aesthetic biases determine what people attend to in the environment. This shows how art can help travelers achieve receptivity to the beauty that surrounds them, especially when they are not sure what to pay attention to.

Chapter 8 Quotes

> A dominant impulse on encountering beauty is to wish to hold on to it, to possess it and give it weight in one's life. There is an urge to say, "I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me."

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), William

Wordsworth, John Ruskin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

De Botton suggests one important mechanism that translates the experience of observing beauty into the incorporation of that beauty into oneself, or what John Ruskin called the "transfer of goodness from without to within." Clearly, this is an essential part of travel because it determines whether people can truly learn and benefit from the things they see abroad. And, throughout *The Art of Travel*, this metaphorical ingestion of beauty must be psychological: Wordsworth's moments in nature are valuable because he preserves them as spots of time, encounters with the sublime help people overcome their troubles only if they can remember their insignificance before the natural world, and people can gain from their curiosity about new places only if they learn information that they can tie to the big questions that stand at the center of the human quest for purpose. Accordingly, how one can hold onto the beauty one sees and bring it back to improve one's familiar life at home is perhaps the most important question for travelers beyond the question of how to move beyond the familiar and see beauty in the first place. John Ruskin's surprising answer to this question, which de Botton summarizes in this chapter, is learning to draw.

"The camera blurs the distinction between looking and noticing, between seeing and possessing; it may give us the option of true knowledge, but it may also unwittingly make the effort of acquiring that knowledge seem superfluous. It suggests that we have done all the work simply by taking a photograph, whereas proper eating of a place—a woodland, for example—requires that we pose ourselves a series of questions such as "How do the stems connect to the roots?" "Where is the mist coming from?" "Why does one tree seem darker than another?" These questions are implicitly asked and answered in the process of sketching.

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), John Ruskin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

If the question of how to "eat" a place (or retain the beauty of a place after encountering it) is so central to de Botton's quest to make the reader a better traveler, then photography is a true danger to the search for happiness through travel. This is not because it necessarily prevents people from seeing beauty—Ruskin, after all, liked to make daguerrotypes (an early kind of photograph), and if observers pay close attention to their photographs as art works, they may have to notice the details in the frame *before* capturing them with a camera. But, whereas truly capturing beauty requires incorporating it into one's mind, the camera often leads people to merely capture beauty in the physical form of a photograph, which de Botton and Ruskin see as a cop-out solution: instead, by reconstructing a place, sketching forces people to attend to the detailed parts that make up beautiful wholes and, hopefully, notice exactly why they are inclined to find something enticing. Mindless travel photography often fails to enrich life because it fails to include the observer in an aesthetic dialogue with the environment, in which their personal tastes play a central role and they actually look at (rather than merely capture) a place.

"I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love nature, than teach the looking at nature that they may learn to draw."

Related Characters: John Ruskin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Ruskin has no great desire to create better artists through his classes; rather, he wants to create happier people who know how to observe their environment, a mission that closely parallels de Botton's in this book. Ruskin teaches drawing because he recognizes that learning to draw can teach people to see, but his ultimate goal is to "teach the looking at nature." As with Wordsworth and de Botton's theorists of the sublime, nature seems to hold the ultimate key to beauty and happiness: for Ruskin, it lies in visual details' effect on the observer, and so drawing is valuable because it teaches people the ability to be moved by the natural environment, which echoes de Botton's argument that receptivity to the world is the most important

dimension of traveling.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room"—Pascal, *Pensées*, 136.

Related Characters: Blaise Pascal (speaker), Xavier de Maistre, Alain de Botton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Pascal's prophetic words in the 17th century foreshadow Xavier de Maistre's thrilling adventure around his bedroom more than a century later: de Maistre manages to find boundless enjoyment staying quietly in his room (although, in truth, de Botton never mentions that he was on house arrest during the whole endeavor, which might account for his decision to try out "room travel"). Nevertheless, Pascal suggests that something like curiosity, wanderlust, or the desire to experience the foreign is a driving cause behind human unhappiness; were people to appreciate what they have, or perhaps simply let go of their desire to discover better places and lives, they might not feel such a persistent dissatisfaction.

In a way, then, Pascal's quote bolsters de Botton's notion that people should merely learn to view the familiar as they view the foreign; on the other hand, Pascal also may be suggesting that the entire premise of de Botton's project, the search for a better life through travel, is futile in the first place. Either way, the promise of happiness in one's room contrasts with Baudelaire's insistence in the second chapter that he might achieve happiness simply by going "anywhere! anywhere!"

One important figure missing from this picture—and, indeed, from this entire final chapter—is de Botton's original room traveler, the Duc des Esseintes, who finds (relative) happiness at home through his imagination. While his refusal to attend to the environment might frustrate de Botton or de Maistre, his satisfaction with the virtual world he could find in his head seems as though it may satisfy Pascal.

The reason people were not looking was that they had never done so before. They had fallen into the habit of considering their universe to be boring—and their universe had duly fallen into line with their expectations.

1111

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), John Ruskin

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

Ruskin argues that drawing is an invaluable corrective to people's usual failure to look: they become complacent and bored with their familiar lives, and so they do not even seek out the details and experiences that might cure their boredom. Just as Flaubert thought that people should choose what is familiar and foreign to them, here Ruskin suggests that familiarity is more a set of expectations and preferences than a quality of any particular place: being familiar somewhere merely means expecting (and so refusing to see) anything new there.

But Ruskin and de Botton think that a receptivity to the environment, and especially an attention to its aesthetic dimensions, can cure these self-defeating expectations. By learning to replicate the world's details through drawing, one can see for the first time things that were in plain sight all along; this allows people to discover novelty through a deeper receptivity to and engagement with what they already have. Whereas, at the beginning of the book, de Botton explained that travelers often expect the novelty of a new place to infect them with excitement but never learn to actually grasp that novelty when it does not meet their expectations, by the end of the book he shows how novelty and value are potentially embedded in everything (if only one knows how to look for them). De Botton seems to think that people are capable of—and would be better off—traveling all the time, even during their normal lives, in places they have come to find unremarkable.

On entering a new space, our sensitivity is directed towards a number of elements, which we gradually reduce in line with the function we find for the space. Of the four thousand things there might be to see and reflect on in a street, we end up being actively aware of only a few: the number of humans in our path, perhaps, the amount of traffic and the likelihood of rain.

1101

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker)

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, de Botton explains how a foreign place becomes familiar and loses charm: at first, a person might notice all kinds of exciting and beautiful features in a place, but as they get used to seeing those features they not only stop looking at them but also stop seeking out new ones. Moreover, once a place becomes instrumental to a personal goal—as is the sidewalk for de Botton when he is rushing to the train station—people cease experiencing it as a place at all, but rather bypass it as though it were empty and exhausted of value. People's frustration with familiar places, which so often pushes them abroad throughout this book, emerges when they give up on seeing anything new or beautiful at home, whether because they believe they can no longer find new beauty or because they are too focused on immediate objectives to pay any attention.

Expectations are crucial because they mediate between the self and the environment: if a person expects their neighborhood to be boring, they cut off their receptivity from the world and cease to see the interesting things going on there. But, since travelers expect excitement and novelty abroad, they often find disappointment when only *some* of what they encounter is new and exotic. Therefore, traveling through life with a mindset of receptivity can help people take full advantage of the valuable sights, cultural experiences, and people they encounter, while also tempering their unrealistic expectations abroad.

In an autobiographical note written in 1801 in South America, Alexander von Humboldt specified his motive for traveling: "I was spurred on by an uncertain longing to be transported from a boring daily life to a marvellous world." It was this very dichotomy, "boring daily life" pitted against "marvellous world," that de Maistre had tried to redraw with greater subtlety.

1111

Related Characters: Alain de Botton (speaker), Alexander von Humboldt, Xavier de Maistre

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

While de Botton's book started with the dichotomy between (dreary, boring) familiar places and (thrilling, but ultimately disappointing) foreign ones, by its end he attempts to "redraw" this distinction using de Maistre's insistence that even his bedroom can be a fulfilling travel destination.

It seems there are three kinds of travellers for de Botton in this book. The first is bored and unreceptive at home, but expects so much from their travels abroad that they do not stop to notice what they actually encounter, but merely lament that the places they went did not match up to their mental images. Like the Duc des Esseintes and de Botton himself in Barbados, such travelers never manage to achieve receptivity to the environment, even abroad. The second sort, like Humboldt or Flaubert, is painfully bored at home but pursues their curiosity and aesthetic sense abroad enough to find meaning in foreign lands. They have no receptivity to the world at home, but do achieve it abroad.

The third and most enriching mind-set, for de Botton, is de Maistre's: one can be receptive at home and abroad, and therefore find value in the familiar and foreign alike. By refusing to expect one's daily life to be "boring" and truly engaging with the "marvelous" worlds both at home and abroad, travelers can learn the most about themselves, truly appreciate the places they go, and enrich their lives by capturing the beauty of the meaningful objects, people, and ways of life they encounter abroad.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: ON ANTICIPATION

"It was hard to say when exactly winter arrived" in London, the book begins. Temperatures start to fall and rain gradually overtakes the city until "an ominous steel-grey sky" hangs over every day, like something out of a Renaissance painting of the crucifixion. Alain de Botton remembers spending the previous summer in the neighborhood park that is now "a desolate spread of mud and water," feeling his bare feet in the grass and "as much at home in the world as in my own bedroom." But in the winter, "the park was foreign once more," and the "sodden dark-red brick buildings and low skies" only fed de Botton's sadness.

From the start, de Botton establishes his dissatisfaction with the place he lives, which has gone from comfortable and familiar to threatening and foreign—somehow, the winter has made London no longer home. By interpreting the dreary weather through the lens of Renaissance paintings of the crucifixion and suggesting that the buildings and sky reflect his own mood, he shows how (even at home) his physical surroundings both determine and respond to his emotional states.

The weather made de Botton "intensely susceptible" to a travel brochure that he received in the mail, which depicted palm trees on an immaculate beach before clear waters. It reminds him of paintings of Tahiti brought back with Captain James Cook in the late 1700s, and he notes that these early depictions "continued to provide a model for subsequent depictions of tropical idylls."

Already, de Botton wonders about the brochure's aesthetic choices and their particular history, which is rooted in the idea of travel to exotic locales during the European colonial era. Clearly, his interest in the brochure mostly stems from his dissatisfaction with London's weather.

De Botton suggests that the brochure's authors "insulted the intelligence and contravened any notions of free will" by pushing "a primordial innocence and optimism" on those who received it. "The simplest and most unexamined images of happiness" can determine people's major decisions and entire lives—including de Botton's own, for he decides to visit Barbados anyway.

Although de Botton sees that the brochure manipulates its readers by selectively foregrounding images that promise relief and relaxation to people caught in the unforgiving London winter, this understanding does not prevent him from also falling victim to this enticing promise.

De Botton argues that "our lives are dominated by a search for happiness," and travels reveal much about this search because they show what people decide to pursue once they can focus on goals beside "the struggle for survival." But people seldom think about *why* and *how* to travel, despite travel's philosophical implications.

The author lays out the stakes of his book: he sees travel as a crucial component of the human experience and happiness, but also a distinctively individual endeavor, one that reflects and reveals the traveler's personal taste and purposes. Whereas the brochure stands for the way that most people seek happiness through travel by blindly pursuing the promise of a beautiful escape, de Botton suggests that people should travel with a reflective awareness of their own expectations, goals, and personal preferences.

"The relationship between the anticipation of travel and its reality" is an important philosophical question that J.K. Huysmans addresses in his novel *À Rebours*, de Botton says. Huysmans's protagonist, the "effete and misanthropic" Duc des Esseintes, lives alone on his estate, reading books constantly because he hates most of the people he has met. One day, a Dickens novel inspires des Esseintes to travel to London, so he immediately goes to Paris for his train. While he waits, he buys a guidebook about London, visits an English wine bar, and then eats a stereotypically English dinner at a tavern.

Literature and the imagination inspire des Esseintes to travel; he only pursues a real-life voyage to fulfill the exciting promises he holds in his mind. Huysmans' novel shows how literature and art, in part by selectively foregrounding and hiding certain elements of other cultures, can lead people to a kind of curiosity about exotic places that can lead them to impulsively set out for elsewhere.

But, as he prepares to board the train towards London, des Esseintes thinks of "how wearing it would be actually to make the journey" and laments, "what was the good of moving when a person could travel so wonderfully sitting in a chair?" He changes his mind, takes the first train back home, and never leaves again.

Des Esseintes' old self quickly catches up with him: he had forgotten that he had to actually go to London; it seems as though he expected London to simply come to him. He gives up on actual travel because the allure of imagining foreign lands is enough to sustain him.

Whereas a traveler like des Esseintes might find the reality of travel *disappointing*, de Botton finds it "truer and more rewarding to suggest that it is primarily *different*." When he lands in Barbados with M., his travel partner, he immediately notices "a revolution in the climate" and realizes that actually "nothing was as I had imagined it, which is surprising only if one considers *what* I had imagined": beach and sun, a pristine hotel room, and a blue sky.

The "revolution" de Botton was hoping for—a warm and sunny climate—is much less satisfying than he would have hoped, and he begins to realize how limited his initial mental image of the place truly was. Whereas the Duc des Esseintes settles for imaginary travel, de Botton sees how unfaithful the imagination can be to an actual place.

De Botton recognizes that, while imagining his travels, he had selectively ignored everything about the island except the three images on which he remained fixated. But, when he arrives, all the signs of normal life—from the British Petroleum storage facility to the customs officers to the taxi drivers—"made it strangely harder for [him] to *see* the Barbados [he] had come to find." He had imagined nothing between the plane and his promised hotel room.

Like the Duc des Esseintes, de Botton realizes that real travel can never live up to the imagination's instantaneous movement from one scene of pure beauty to another. Although the sun, hotel room, and sky he wanted in Barbados did exist there, he saw the normal human contexts that accompanied these images as a source of irritation rather than possible enjoyment.

De Botton argues that art and the imagination both operate basically through the "simplification or selection" of certain images and principles at the expense of others. While a travel book might say that "the narrator journeyed through the afternoon," this language never reflects the way people actually travel: rather, that phrase hides hours of tiny details pertaining to travelers' (in)attention, thoughts, comfort, hunger, emotions, or gaze out the window. Of course, this kind of endless and comprehensive description would be tedious in literature, even though it is the way people live their real lives.

Because art and the imagination both provide partial, optimistic views of travel, they can lead people to unrealistic expectations and eventual disappointment. Clearly, de Botton's book foregrounds the often boring, neglected minutiae of travel. He does this not just because he wants to remind the reader of travel writing's limits, but also because he believes that these unanticipated details often hold more of travel's value than the bold scenes travelers anticipate encountering.

De Botton credits this fact—that books and art erase the dull parts of life—with the consequence that anticipating travel through art or the imagination can make the "valuable elements" of travel more vivid and straightforward. Memory works the same way, as de Botton discovers lying in bed his first night in Barbados, when he begins to forget the day's drudgery. Whereas the present is like "a long-winded film," de Botton suggests, memory and anticipation are like snapshots that compress narratives and their meanings.

De Botton's lifelong interest in Marcel Proust's novels probably influences his attention to time and memory here. The difference between the anticipation or memory of travel and the experience of it in the present hinges on the relationship between thought and experience, which is grounded in the flow of time. Whereas viewers can choose how (and how long) to gaze at a photograph or read a story, they have little control over the flow of time in a movie or everyday experience.

De Botton recalls that the Duc des Esseintes always wanted to visit one other place: Holland. After viewing Dutch paintings of "patriarchal simplicity and riotous joviality, quiet small brick courtyards and pale-faced maids pouring milk," he visits Holland and is sorely let down. All those images are really present there, but des Esseintes is frustrated that "the promised gems were blended in a stew of ordinary images" that "diluted" his experience. He concludes that he is closer to the essence of Dutch culture in a museum than in the actual Netherlands.

Paradoxically, the Duc des Esseintes sees a museum as more quintessentially "Dutch" than Holland itself, because he bases his concept of what is "Dutch" more on the distinctive traits he imagines than the actual country he experiences. For des Esseintes, art not only helps determine and represent travel, but also supersedes it as the source of "true" culture. In contrast to the classical notion that art should faithfully represent the world, des Esseintes sees the world as an imperfect reflection of art.

In the morning in Barbados, de Botton walks out onto his hotel room's veranda and climbs across the railing onto the beach. He remarks that "nature was at her most benevolent" here, as though the beauty she created in this spot was a way "to atone for her ill temper in other regions." Noting the air's "enveloping, profound warmth," he sits by the water, hears the sounds of the birds and sea, and gazes out upon the view he remembers from the brochure.

Although de Botton was initially disappointed with Barbados, in this passage he seems to find the serene beach scene and close connection to nature that he originally sought when planning his trip in London. It seems that his trip has *met some of his expectations, after all.*

But "this description only imperfectly reflects what occurred within me," de Botton admits as he remembers his state of distraction and worry throughout that morning. He declares, "I had inadvertently brought myself with me to the island." At home in London, he had forgotten that the eyes with which he saw the brochure "were intimately tied to a body and mind that would travel with me," despite the eyes' wish to simply enjoy the scenery. And neither his sickly body nor his anxious, bored mind is a good travel companion.

De Botton admits that Barbados only seems to have met his unrealistic expectations when he forgets the mundane experiences that filled the time separating all of his moments on the beach that morning. Paradoxically, because people experience the present so differently from the future and the past, the embodied experience *of travel can fail to meet one's previous expectations, even while the* memory *of travel later succeeds in doing so.*

Happiness during travel, de Botton argues, is brief and "apparently haphazard" rather than continuous and predictable. It comes when a traveler can "achieve receptivity to the world," and it seldom takes more than ten minutes before they return to their usual self and problems, as the environment's beauty recedes into the background. While home and foreign lands may be radically different, travelers unfortunately remain the same people no matter where they are.

Although travel seldom matches up with the traveler's usually unrealistic expectations, this does not render it a failure; one should be satisfied with moments of serenity or inspiration rather than expect complete fulfillment due to a mere change of scenery. While the environment influences an individual's mindset and feelings, it seldom completely determines it. But travel is still most valuable during the moments when a traveler can truly become absorbed in the world (de Botton's "receptivity").

As M. and de Botton sit outside their beach hut later that morning, M. begins to read and de Botton worries about whether lunch is included with the cost of their room. Later, he "left [his] body" again to think about an upcoming work project. He wonders whether there is "a vital evolutionary advantage" in worrying about the future rather than savoring the present, and laments that "the first thing to disappear from memory" is precisely how much of the past we spend caught up in anticipation.

De Botton depicts daydreaming about the future as a disembodying *practice because it involves losing a sense of the embodied present; he tries to comfort himself by suggesting that this makes him a more prudent decision-maker. The same reminiscence and anticipation that he said can lead people to misrepresent the experience of travel before and after the fact are also an important* part *of that experience.*

On the bright side, "the place itself is allowed to stand out" in memory—travelers can sustain a greater "fidelity to a place" where they are not currently standing. De Botton suggests that part of the problem is that he had never tried to "stare at a picture of Barbados for any length of time" before going there.

Travel, de Botton again notes, may be more rewarding in anticipation and hindsight than in the present because expectation and memory focus on exciting snapshots rather than following the course of time.

Near the end of their trip, de Botton and M. drive around Barbados and stop in an enormous colonial mansion that has been converted to a restaurant. They eat, chat about colonialism and sunblock, and order two crèmes caramel for dessert. When the desserts arrive, M.'s is "large but messy" and de Botton's is "tiny but perfectly-formed." She tries to take his plate, which leads to "infantile rounds of bickering" underlain by "mutual terrors of incompatibility and infidelity." For the rest of the day, neither can enjoy the beautiful landscape because of the animosity between them.

Barbados's history of slavery under British colonial rule lurks in the background of de Botton's description of the plantation restaurant, and while he could have easily told the reader about what he learned and saw during his long drive around the island, he instead focuses on his argument with his girlfriend M. to demonstrate how a traveler's emotional state can lead all the wonders of and questions raised by their trip to fade into the background.

De Botton notes that, before people can enjoy the beauty of the places to which they travel, they need to meet a "more important range of emotional or psychological needs." People tend to misunderstand the basis of their moods and conveniently blame things like dreary weather or ugly buildings. This confirms the wisdom in "those ancient philosophers" who rejected material wealth and status to make the point that human happiness is fundamentally psychological at its base.

Travel's value does not come from its separateness from everyday life, but rather relies on people's satisfaction with their everyday lives. De Botton self-deprecatingly references his own original motivations for travel: he blamed London's rain and ugly buildings for his sadness, but travel has led him to realize that the causes were deeper, and probably also related to his relationship with M.

After his trips to Holland and the Paris train station, Huysman's protagonist the Duc des Esseintes never tries to travel again. Instead, he surrounds himself with images, objects, and documents that symbolize travel, like ship itineraries and an aquarium. He wholeheartedly commits to imagination above actual experience, which "is always diluted in what we could see anywhere" and caught up with personal anxieties. While de Botton sympathizes with des Esseintes' concern, he nevertheless continues traveling.

Des Esseintes solves his disappointment with travel in the most disappointing way possible: by giving up. While de Botton recognizes that real-life experience will never live up to decontextualized mental snapshots, he wants the reader to see that this inevitability does not necessarily make travel a failure.

CHAPTER 2: ON TRAVELING PLACES

"A single-storey glass-and-redbrick service station" with a sign advertising breakfast foods stands by the highway between London and Manchester. Arriving late in the day, De Botton notices the restaurant's bright lights and garish photographs of food before bringing his chocolate bar and orange juice to a table by the wall. No one is speaking in the nearly empty restaurant; a sense of sadness and introspection is palpable despite the "upbeat music." The building is "architecturally miserable" and reeks of the restaurant's oily food, but something it moves de Botton, who begins to think of "other equally and unexpectedly poetic traveling places—airport terminals, harbours, train stations, and motels."

The service station is at once a foreign and familiar place: its décor tries to evoke a sense of homely comfort, but its atmosphere is nevertheless decidedly cold and antisocial. It is a place between places, one that would not exist unless people needed to stop on their way from one city to another, and so for de Botton it represents and evokes the emotions tied up in the act of traveling itself.

From his childhood onwards, de Botton writes, the 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire never quite fit into any social environment: he hated his family, got expelled from "a succession of boarding schools," and felt, in his words, "destined to lead an eternally solitary life." He always wanted to travel far away, but after an early trip to India—which he abandoned halfway through, when he reached Mauritius and "could not shake off a feeling of lethargy and sadness"—he remained ambivalent about traveling for the rest of his life.

Like de Botton in London, Baudelaire was deeply dissatisfied with France, and this boredom at home turned his focus outward to the prospect of traveling abroad. Yet, like de Botton and the Duc des Esseintes in the last chapter, Baudelaire was disappointed to find that simply leaving home would not cure the loneliness and melancholy he felt there, so he gave up on travel once he realized it would not meet his unrealistic expectations.

Baudelaire's apprehensive desire to travel appeared frequently in his poetry and writing, and he admitted that he tended to believe "I'll be well where I am not." He would dream of one place after another, wishing only to go "'anywhere! anywhere! so long as it is out of the world!'"

Baudelaire remained less concerned about where to travel than simply traveling for its own sake: although he never went, he saw the promise of leaving his life behind as a sufficient motivation for dreaming about travel, and just as for the Duc des Esseintes, imagining travel was better than actually going.

Baudelaire saw travel as the distinctive mark of "poets," people whose dissatisfaction with home led them abroad, and who he saw as forced "to live in a fallen world while refusing to surrender their vision of an alternative, less compromised realm." Baudelaire also flocked to "harbours, docks, railway stations, trains, ships, and hotel rooms," transient traveling places that filled him with the nostalgia and thrill of departure.

While Baudelaire expressed his ambivalence about travel through poetry, he also saw something artistic about the disposition that led people to travel in the first place: he saw an intimate connection between art and travel in both directions, for it is the creative "poet" who travels, and the emotions evoked in travel are best expressed through art.

De Botton says that he often goes to Heathrow airport when he feels sad, and finds comfort in "the ceaseless landings and takeoffs of aircraft," just as after a breakup Baudelaire used to watch ships dock and depart at a quayside, promising to "set sail for happiness." From the parking lot, de Botton sees a plane from Singapore approach the runway and thinks about all the places it must have passed as it comes closer, into sharper focus. It serves as "an imaginative counterweight to feelings of stagnation and confinement." A plane takes off for New York on the next runway, and four more sit at Terminal 3 destined for "Canada, Brazil, Pakistan, Korea." At each plane, men unload baggage and passengers disembark in "a choreographed dance."

Like the Duc des Esseintes, de Botton and Baudelaire derive pleasure from the mere idea of travel. The means of travel themselves—airplanes and boats—come to symbolize this greater human tendency for wanderlust and people's potential to transform their circumstances. Even if one does not travel (and face the inevitable disappointment it brings), imagining that the grass is greener elsewhere can still have emotional benefits, as it reminds frustrated people that there is something worth struggling for.

The airport terminal's unassuming departure and arrival screens condense the "emotional charge and imaginative allure" of travel elsewhere, like the last line (or byline) of Irish author James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses*: "Trieste, Zurich, Paris." The screens promise that, if one were to "walk down a corridor and onto a craft," one could soon find oneself somewhere new "where no one knew our name." There is always a plane going "anywhere! anywhere!"

De Botton continues to find comfort in the notion that he could easily slip into anonymity somewhere foreign, far away from his boring and miserable life in London: the unadorned names of places give the imagination absolute power to picture ideal, alternate worlds just a few hours' flying time away.

In addition to traveling places, Baudelaire also loved "machines of motion," and especially ships, which he found a technological wonder representing "all the signs and ambitions of humanity." De Botton feels the same way about airplanes, whose "agility" and "self-possession" set them apart from buildings, the other greatest products of human engineering. As one takes off in an airplane, the familiar world begins to fade, and "an immense horizon opens up across which we can wander without impediment."

Ships and airplanes have the potential to be liberating machines, ones that can break people out of their familiar frustrations and bring them into the vast expanses of sky and sea where the imagination can run wild.

The experience of takeoff lets people "imagine analogous, decisive shifts in our own lives" and the possibility of "surg[ing] above much that now looms over us." From above, the logic in the human landscape below becomes apparent, and airplane engines appear stoic and untroubled at their work.

The new perspective that air travel offers people on the manmade environment in turn promises to offer them a new perspective on their own lives by distancing them from what is familiar.

De Botton finds it remarkable that "*we are flying over a* **cloud**," which would have shocked great thinkers from the past. Even terrible airplane food tastes okay when one eats it among the clouds, which begin to look more like mutating steam than the "horizontal ovoids" people see from the ground. Baudelaire wrote about the clouds in his poem "The Outsider," asking, "what *do* you love, you strange outsider? / I love the clouds … the clouds that pass by … over there … over there … those lovely clouds!" The clouds' tranquility and indifference to human affairs are all the more obvious from an airplane window.

Beyond the wonder in technology that allows people to fly among the clouds, air travel also gives people a new perspective on them. Baudelaire's character's love for clouds represents his desire to transcend the human realm, and joining the clouds on an airplane similarly can allow people to transcend their everyday problems and worries by instead attending to the timeless beauty of the natural world.

Back at the service station by the highway, de Botton notes that no other road leads to this place, which belongs "to some third, travellers' realm" rather than the city or country. Inside, the overly bright lights and chairs contrast with the patrons' silence, which reinforces this sense of isolation. De Botton enjoys his loneliness here because it matches his environment, and also because it reminds him of the American painter Edward Hopper, whose works "allow the viewer to witness an echo of his or her own grief" and feel better.

Like the airplane, the service station is a traveling place between here and there, one that invites reflection by removing the traveler from any familiar location or social group: it is equally foreign for everyone passing through. But, while the airplane is a human wonder, the service station is more like a human farce, one that seems to recognize the empty gestures made by its décor.

Hopper actually read Baudelaire throughout his life, which de Botton finds understandable given their "shared interests in solitude, in city life, in modernity, in the solace of the night and in the places of travel." Hopper drove around the United States for months every year, painting the places he encountered: hotels, roads and gas stations, diners and cafeterias, trains and views from them. Loneliness is the central theme in his work, for his characters often "seem far from home," looking "vulnerable and introspective" as though they are searching for something, usually in the night.

Like Baudelaire and de Botton, Hopper sees something poetic in environments designed for transit, places foreign to everyone and therefore suited to people who feel foreign to conventional society. The places he paints reflect their inhabitants' dreariness and isolation, much like the service station where de Botton spends much of this chapter. But the loneliness that pervades Hopper's paintings also points to his subjects' quest for happiness through travel—isolation is another form of discomfort travelers encounter along the road to a potentially better life.

Hopper's painting *Automat* (p. 50) depicts a woman drinking coffee alone at night, seemingly saddened, "self-conscious and slightly afraid" in an establishment that suggests "a common isolation." Here, the viewer can feel empathy for the woman, who seems to have "knocked against a hard corner of the world" and found herself without "a home in the ordinary world," like Baudelaire's "*poets*."

This painting exemplifies Hopper's attention to the uncertainty of travel as a process: the woman appears to have broken an unsatisfactory thread in her life, and given up on the "ordinary world" in order to find somewhere better suited for her. The cafeteria's air of shared loneliness seems to extend outward, as Hopper encourages viewers to consider their own relationships to the worlds of everyday life and transient traveling places.

Passing through empty roads in the woods at night, a car's lights illuminate meadows and trees with "a clinical white light" until it reaches a gas station in a clearing—this is Hopper's 1940 painting *Gas* (p. 53). At the station, the manager seems to have gone out and a radio may be playing. This painting also makes isolation seem "poignant and enticing," contrasting the dark woods with the brightly-lit station that seems like a "last outpost of humanity," where companionship may emerge more easily than in a bustling city.

De Botton offers a plausible narrative behind Hopper's painting, told from the perspective of the viewer—there is no car in the painting itself, and indeed only one figure stands by the gas station. By inserting the reader into Hopper's scene as a fellow traveler in the desolate in-between space of the gas station, de Botton suggests that the artist offers not a portrait of loneliness but rather an encounter that anticipates some form of communion between the man and the viewer.

Hopper saw a "dreaminess" in trains, where thought flows more freely and people can access memories they might not otherwise recall. He depicted them in paintings like *Compartment C, Car 293* (p. 55), and de Botton agrees that "journeys are the midwives of thought" because the "flow of the landscape" distracts part of the mind and opens the rest to more uninhibited reflection. He thinks trains are the best thinking aid because people can discern an endless series of objects in the landscape that provide "brief, inspiring glimpses into private domains" of others' lives.

Trains offer a continuous flow of images that one can latch onto or quickly forget, and those images—like the brochure de Botton receives about Barbados—allow travelers to project themselves into others' lives and foreign landscapes. Indeed, the glimpses of private life one sees from trains, much like Hopper's paintings, let viewers secretly relate to others' experiences and feel a sense of community despite their isolation.

During his own train journey, de Botton thinks about his father's death and an essay he is writing, an argument among friends, and, when he hits a barrier to thought, the things he sees out the window. He argues that "hours of train-dreaming" can bring people "back into contact with emotions and ideas" that matter to them and they would have otherwise forgotten amidst the unchanging furniture of their ordinary lives. Hotel rooms, too, spur reflection by inserting people into unfamiliar contexts.

De Botton's story illustrates how trains can facilitate thought; daydreaming's essential function here, like de Botton's daydreaming on the beach in Barbados, is to remind travelers about deep interests, values, and commitments that they might otherwise forget during the chaos of everyday life. This is one way that travel reveals people's particular variations on the human quest for happiness.

Critic Raymond Williams traces contemporary people's attraction to the experience of traveling back to "a broad shift in sensibilities" two centuries ago, after which "the outsider came to seem morally superior to the insider." Williams said that outsiders represent "nature and community against the rigours, the cold abstinence, the selfish ease of ordinary society." De Botton agrees, seeing traveling places as an alternative to the routine drudgery of contemporary everyday life.

The elevation of outsiders above insiders is historically important because it marks a generalized interest in foreign ways and the possibilities for self-transformation that they evoke. De Botton addresses this theme head-on in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3: ON THE EXOTIC

When he disembarks in the Amsterdam airport, de Botton is immediately fascinated by the exotic exit sign he sees overhead: the sign's simplicity and peculiar Dutch vowel combinations give him "genuine pleasure," acting as "a symbol of being abroad" by reminding him of his own country's conventions. He sees "another history and mind-set" in the sign, as in the other accoutrements of everyday life in the Netherlands, and thinks of the "openness toward foreign influences" and "Calvinist aesthetic" that play a prominent role in Dutch history.

De Botton is immediately captivated by the Dutch sign's foreignness, and his fascination is above all aesthetic*: he notices how the language is formed and the sign is organized, and his pleasure stems from his momentary lapse into another mindset about what is beautiful and practical in a place with a different history and mindset.*

The sign proves "a simple but pleasing idea: countries are diverse, and practices variable across borders." Moreover, this diversity feels like "an improvement on what my own country is capable of"—the exit sign seems to promise de Botton new possibilities of happiness.

The sign also confirms de Botton's suspicion that the Netherlands will be radically different from—and perhaps radically better for him than—his home country of England. This demonstrates how travel can reveal new, fruitful ways of life to travelers who can then bring what they learn abroad into their lives at home.

De Botton recognizes that "the word *exotic* has traditionally been attached to more colourful things than Dutch signs," and notes that it "became synonymous with the Middle East" in the early 1800s. Writers like Victor Hugo wrote extensively about "the Orient," and Europeans became so fascinated with the Middle East's seemingly-exotic customs that they even started to imitate them—for instance, obelisks became an architectural staple of public space in European cities.

The controversial history of white men's fetishism for the Middle East demonstrates how travelers' obsession with foreign and exotic peoples can transform their own culture and sense of beauty at home. Art was the key mechanism for translating travelers' experiences of the Middle East into popular fervor, which illustrates how art and travel work together to effect broader transformations in public aesthetic values.

As a young boy, the French novelist Gustave Flaubert was one such European captivated by the idea of the Orient. He hated his "sterile, banal and laborious" life in the city of Rouen, wrote about the Middle East's allure in some of his earliest stories as a teenager, and lamented that he was destined to a "monotonous, sensible, stupid" life as a lawyer, like most of his peers in France.

Like de Botton, Baudelaire, and the Duc des Esseintes, Flaubert began searching for another place to go when he found himself profoundly bored with home. He both came to know the Orient and expressed his attachment to it through art, and the images he received through art set his high expectations for travel.

Flaubert's father died when he was 24, leaving him a great sum of money. Flaubert quickly set out for Egypt with his friend Maxime Du Camp. Flaubert recalled his "first sight of the Orient" as his ship approached the Egyptian shore, and he was thrilled to find himself amidst "Negroes, Negresses, camels, turbans, cudgellings to right and left, and earsplitting guttural cries" when he arrived.

Flaubert is ecstatic at the opportunity to finally immerse himself in the exotic world he dreamed about. The people and cultural differences he immediately notices represent his perception of his liberation from the stifling aristocracy of Rouen.

Back in Amsterdam, de Botton books a hotel room, eats lunch in a café, and then sets out on a walk around the city. He sees "the exotic" in the city's brickwork, narrow apartment buildings, affinity for bicycles, and grid system, among other things, all of which he contrasts with the London cityscape.

De Botton, too, finds "the exotic" in the small details of everyday life that mark a place's underlying patterns of thought, ways of feeling, and aesthetic values. His own aesthetic judgment and receptiveness to the environment allow him to notice these details.

In front of one door, de Botton "felt an intense longing to spend the rest of my life there." He notices an apartment without curtains, and wonders how "something as small as a front door in another country" could so profoundly capture his imagination, before remarking that details can be "rich in meaning" in people's everyday lives as well as abroad. For de Botton, the building's "modesty" and "honesty" contrast with the try-hard pretentiousness of London architecture—it is "modern in the best sense, speaking of order, cleanliness and light."

De Botton realizes that the Dutch aesthetic seems to fit his temperament better than the British one, which explains his sudden desire to give up his life in London for this little apartment in Amsterdam. Again, a minute detail indexes the possibility of an entirely different (and potentially more satisfying) way of life.

In its "fugitive, trivial" sense, "exotic" often simply denotes the pleasure people take in novelty. But de Botton sees a "more profound pleasure" in the exotic: it points to how the norms of a foreign country can better match one's "identity and commitments" than those of one's home country. He sees his own attraction to this particular Dutch house as a sign of his desire for the "modernity and aesthetic simplicity" that London lacks.

The exotic's appeal to one's "identity and commitments" in turn points to its value for human happiness because it shows the viewer an improved way of life for them. This effect is fundamentally subjective and aesthetic, since it depends on what the traveler finds attractive about particular features in the environment.

Just as de Botton's own attraction to Amsterdam relates to his dissatisfaction with London, Flaubert's hatred for the French bourgeoisie was what drove him to obsess over the "Orient." He found France's "extreme prudery, snobbery, smugness, racism and pomposity" so obscene that he wrote a satirical *Dictionary of Received Ideas* cataloguing its absurd attitudes. De Botton quotes from this work at length, and argues that the Middle East was "temperamentally a logical fit" for Flaubert's personality and values.

Flaubert's Dictionary *illustrates his thorough disdain for France, and (more importantly) for the social values and aesthetic taste that underlie French society. His disaffection for home was primarily aesthetic, just like de Botton's for London, and the author thinks Flaubert's travel was meaningful because he sought not a break from his normal life but rather a meaningful, happier alternative to it.*

First, Flaubert loved the "chaos, both visual and auditory, of Egyptian life." He wrote of its soundscape, marked by yells and animal noises from all sides, its tendency to bold colors and architectural ornamentation, and its inhabitants' flamboyant manner of speech. Chaos, he thought, was the natural flow of life; order was a misplaced attempt to censor the human condition. In this vein, Flaubert complained to his mistress about Europeans' desire to keep their cemeteries "neat and tidy," while Egyptians' cemeteries were "run-down, ravaged, in ruins," as they should be.

Egypt's chaos (in Flaubert's perception) contrasts with the rigid social hierarchy and moral codes of aristocratic France, which Flaubert thought limited the wide range of possible human experiences and paths to happiness rather than embracing them to the fullest extent. Beyond his personal aesthetic, then, Flaubert's attraction to Egypt was also based on a deeper, more general belief about what kind of lives and environments were natural for humans.

In one of Cairo's cafes, Flaubert wrote about "a donkey shitting and a gentleman pissing in a corner," which no one found out of the ordinary. The second reason Flaubert's personality aligned with Egypt was that he believed that people "were not simply spiritual creatures but also pissing and shitting ones," and he appreciated that Egyptians acknowledged the lower, impure functions of human life as well as the higher, pure ones. People belched in restaurants and "the most virtuous and respectable women" had no qualms about speaking indecently.

Whereas all interaction was subject to codes of decency and respectability in Flaubert's France, he is delighted to see that Egyptians embrace the bodily dimensions of human life rather than shunning them. The café excites him because the donkey and man in the corner do not seem to pollute the establishment's respectability, but rather coexist with (or perhaps even bolster) it.

Thirdly, Flaubert loved camels above all else, writing that "nothing has a more singular grace than this melancholic animal." In de Botton's eyes, Flaubert loved the camel's "stoicism and ungainliness," its humble and awkward strength that contrasted with Europe's showy optimism.

For Flaubert, Europeans wrongly focused on outward appearances over actual experiences—he in fact critiques the French emphasis on aesthetic over practical matters. Like the Dutch front door for de Botton, in Flaubert's mind, the camel stands for all that is superior about Egyptian life.

In Amsterdam, de Botton sees a woman, who seems to belong there, pushing a bicycle whose basket contains her groceries and includes a carton reading "*Goodappletje*." While she would find nothing exotic about the image of herself, de Botton claims, he feels a need to understand everything he can about her life. Similarly, on a boat in France, Flaubert spotted a beautiful woman and wrote of his obsessive curiosity about strangers, whose lives (and naked bodies) he so loved imagining.

De Botton immediately connects his voyeuristic obsession with the woman to her foreignness—she seems to embody the Dutch culture to which he is drawn, and he feels that being with her would allow him to merge with it. Just as Edward Hopper's paintings evoke curiosity about and communion with strangers by offering glimpses into their private lives, travelers often become curious about strangers they momentarily encounter because such snapshots of foreignness inspire them to imagine possible ways of life beyond their own range of experience.

The exoticism of a foreign country adds to attractive people's appeal, de Botton argues, and perhaps one's attraction to those from another place is part of one's attempt to capture that culture's values. In a town on the banks of the Nile, Flaubert visited a famous courtesan (she was not merely a *prostitute*, de Botton assures the reader, for her role in society was far more dignified). Flaubert recalls her body, and then the feeling of sharing a bed with her. He hopes that she will think of him "more than of the others who have been there." And the second time he visits her, he feels an "infinite sadness" that never subsides.

The courtesan's social status and the inadequacy of the term "prostitute" reflect the vast, untranslatable social differences between Egypt and France. It's suggested that the kind of relationship Flaubert had with her—which was at once sexual and emotional, yet did not lead to a long-term social bond—was not possible in France, but Flaubert's hope that she remembers him suggests that he may have still operated within the mindset that romance would lead to commitment, and perhaps hoped that he would seem exotic to her as well.

De Botton wonders whether Flaubert's interest in Egypt was merely an ideal fantasy he projected onto it. However, he did spend nine months intensively studying its language, culture, and history, and in fact his dark features and adoption of Egyptian dress often led him to pass for native. People even began to call him "Abu Chanab," or "Father of the Moustache."

Since de Botton has argued throughout that travelers are often motivated by a distaste for home, he must consider whether this motivation corrupts travel entirely by preventing people from seeing the true character of the places they visit. By learning so much about Egypt, Flaubert demonstrates that it does not.

That said, Flaubert was also ultimately disappointed by Egypt in many ways. As his traveling companion Maxime Du Camp explained long after the fact, Flaubert became "quiet and withdrawn" while traveling down the Nile, just as he had been in France, and he quickly found the landscape too uniform for his taste. Flaubert wrote about his boredom with temples, his inevitable slip back into depression, and his continued frustration with Europeans (like the British man who carved his name into a pillar in Alexandria).

Although he seemingly got to know the true Egypt, Flaubert still had unrealistic expectations about what he would encounter and found those expectations broken—like de Botton, Baudelaire, and des Esseintes, Flaubert found that his previous disposition followed him on his travels and discovered that leaving a place where he was unhappy would not satisfy him, but rather merely leave him unhappy abroad.

Yet de Botton insists that Flaubert "exchanged a youthful crush" on Egypt "for a knowledgeable love" of it. Although it did not precisely meet his expectations, he claimed to have "few illusions" and even wrote to his mother that the Orient "extends far beyond the narrow idea I had of it."

Flaubert's disappointment with aspects of Egypt did not mean his travel failed; rather, this was a prerequisite for its success, which lay in its ability to show him dimensions of human life that he could never have anticipated in the first place.

Leaving Egypt devastated Flaubert, who thought about his trip constantly until the end of his life, and even spoke of it on his deathbed. This lifelong fixation, de Botton argues, "seems like an invitation to deepen and respect our own attraction to certain countries."

Flaubert's lifelong interest was decidedly not just an adolescent daydream but rather an enduring sign of the particular affinity between his personality and Egyptian ways of life.

In fact, Flaubert contended that nationality should follow this attraction rather than the contingencies of one's birth—at times, he identified as "in truth a woman, a camel, and a bear" and thought he was "as much Chinese as I am French." He felt as loyal to Arabs as to his countrymen and declared himself "a soul brother to everything that lives." Like Flaubert, de Botton argues, all people are "scattered at birth by the wind onto various countries," but gain the means in adulthood to "re-create our identity in line with our true allegiances."

Flaubert's belief that citizenship should be chosen rather than predetermined reflects his understanding that people can find places and ways of life that suit their own temperaments through travel; he felt just as loyal to the foreign as to the familiar, and arguably broke down the boundary between the two. De Botton argues that travel can offer everyone a similar freedom to selectively cultivate themselves through contact with different worlds.

CHAPTER 4: ON CURIOSITY

De Botton goes to Madrid for a conference and decides to stay through the weekend, although he does not tell the hosts who booked his hotel. On his way back to his room on Friday night, he decides not to eat dinner alone in a restaurant, lest he become "an object of curiosity and pity," so he eats some crisps from the minibar and goes to bed. He feels "an intense lethargy" the next morning as he peruses the hotel's travel magazines and two guidebooks that he brought from home, which "conspired to suggest that an exciting and multifarious phenomenon called Madrid was waiting to be discovered outside." But he feels disgusted at his own lack of enthusiasm for a city that many tourists would be eager to visit.

Contrary to the chapter's title, de Botton has little curiosity about Madrid and is reluctant to think of himself as a tourist: for the first time in the book, the reader encounters a traveler with few expectations and little excitement about the prospect of seeing a new place. Whereas the guidebooks try to set expectations for travelers, de Botton wants nothing of it—in fact, perhaps because of his realizations in the last few chapters, the guidebook seems to turn him off—and yearns for the familiarity of London.

The German Alexander von Humboldt sailed from Spain to South America in 1799. Well-educated in the sciences and history, Humboldt "had been looking for opportunities to travel to someplace remote and unknown," and managed to convince the king of Spain to fund a trip to South America. He returned in 1804, when he moved to Paris and wrote a 30-volume book, *Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, summarizing his scientific findings.

Humboldt was motivated by a radical and universal curiosity about everything he could discover—like Baudelaire, he merely wanted to go "anywhere!" and set out convincing the king to fund his travel because of his intense draw to the foreign as such. The length of his writings demonstrates the fruits of his journey and the depth of his dedication to science.

When Humboldt set out for South America, Europeans knew little about the continent. Humboldt collected hundreds of new species, redrew maps of the continent and its rivers, made important discoveries about the Earth's magnetic fields, studied indigenous peoples, and discovered sea currents. He had an "extraordinary curiosity" about the Earth and everything on it.

De Botton attributes Humboldt's wide-ranging and influential findings to his sheer curiosity about everything unknown. Unlike in contemporary tourism, Humboldt's fact-finding expedition was continuous with his life's work rather than a break from it—unlike most travelers, then, his trip's purpose was determined from the outset.

After a maid interrupts de Botton in his hotel room three times, he decides to get up and moving to avoid further interruptions. He eats breakfast and goes to Old Madrid, the medieval history of which his guidebook chronicles in detail. As tourists stop by to take photographs, de Botton anxiously wonders, "What am I supposed to do here? What am I supposed to think?" Humboldt, on the other hand, undertook an "unambiguous" quest to learn as much as possible and undertake scientific experiments. He obsessively measured water temperatures on the trip over, and spent weeks cataloguing plants on the Venezuela coast before trekking into the New Andalusia mountain range and measuring the altitude and water temperature there.

De Botton only manages to leave the hotel room once he is too irritated by the maid to stay—just as he leaves London from frustration with its weather, he only leaves the comfort of his hotel room because he can no longer stand it. Unlike in Barbados, in Madrid nothing outside truly appeals to him. He does not understand the point of taking photos, which foreshadows his later essay on drawing, for he feels no need to document his experience and nothing about Old Madrid quite catches his eye. Humboldt's quest is driven by its novelty, but de Botton finds Madrid's tourist attractions stale and their importance overplayed.

Unlike South America, everything about Madrid "was already known." The guidebook emphasizes the dimensions of plazas and statues to the point where it "occasionally seemed impatient in presenting its facts," as in its detailed description of the Pontificia de San Miguel, a church that de Botton finds hideous.

De Botton finds the guidebook frustrating because it insists on cataloguing facts that have no impact on his life, his travel experience, or his personal curiosity.

De Botton ties his boredom and lack of curiosity to the difference between tourism and factual expeditions. Facts are useful, so others take an interest when a traveler learns them for the first time—Humboldt was "besieged and feted by interested parties" when he returned to Europe, and he gave lectures to scientists across the continent about his discoveries. All the knowledge he sought out "must have been guided by a sense of others' interests," and luckily for him, "almost every existing fact about South America was wrong or questionable"—even the location of Havana's Naval base on the map.

Whereas everything de Botton saw in Madrid had already been learned, everything Humboldt saw in South America was novel to Europeans, which meant his efforts always implicated a broader community and human scientific project. But now, as travelers are unlikely to make new scientific discoveries on their trips, the reader is left to wonder how casual tourism can truly enrich human life.

De Botton quickly realizes that "new factual discoveries" are now impossible, however, and his guidebook confirms this with its maddening attention to details that he finds irrelevant. His learning only matters if it is "life-enhancing." But German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche actually found this kind of learning more important than "sterile" factual quests for science. Nietzsche quoted the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity."

The guidebook seems to expect travelers to be surprised and enriched by specific measurements and dates, but de Botton suggests that such information is often useless for tourists because it does not affect their own lives; Nietzsche takes this further, seeming to suggest that even voyages like Humboldt's are "sterile" unless they can speak to everyday human experience.

For instance, Nietzsche thought that a traveler could go to Italy and realize that "the Italian Renaissance had in fact been the work of only a few individuals" who transformed European society forever through their effort. This might inspire the traveler to attempt the same, and recognize "that the life of man is a glorious thing." Similarly, by learning history, Nietzsche thinks that a tourist could "acquire a sense of continuity and belonging" and justify their own existence by understanding the history and culture that made it possible.

Nietzsche may not necessarily disapprove of de Botton's guidebook: rather, he wants the traveler to look past the mere facts they learn about places and instead understand the deeper historical and cultural processes that create such places in order to grasp the underpinnings of the present world. The implicit goal of this learning is to help the tourist pursue their own happiness by showing them how they can contribute to the human collective.

De Botton takes another look at the Palacio de Santa Cruz and wonders whether the kinds of architectural innovation it exemplifies could still be possible in the contemporary world. He hopes that "we might return from our journeys with a collection of small, unfeted but life-enhancing thoughts."

De Botton learns to reinterpret his guidebook's boring string of facts about architecture in a way that teaches him something meaningful about the present. Whereas the Palacio de Santa Cruz's measurements or dates of construction will not stick with de Botton, the "life-enhancing thought" that architecture can change the world might.

The historical "explorers" who presumably wrote de Botton's guidebook also took it upon themselves to decide what mattered and what did not. Tourist attractions in the city are ranked with stars, like hotels or restaurants, and this has the "pernicious" effect of telling visitors how enthusiastic to be about visiting each place. De Botton feels he is expected to agree with the "official enthusiasm" that a certain monastery is "*the most beautiful convent in Spain*" and imagines that the guidebook may as well have added, "*there must be something wrong with the traveler who cannot agree.*" Humboldt never had to deal with this kind of pretension, for nobody told him what mattered and did not; he got to decide for himself what was interesting and worth studying.

De Botton sees the star rating system as dangerous because it sets rigid expectations for travelers, prescribing what to feel instead of letting them react naturally and personally to the places they encounter—for instance, it tells the reader what counts as "the most beautiful," which is a fundamentally subjective aesthetic judgment that is only meaningful when it describes an observer's feelings about a place. The rating system suggests that travel is about collecting historically important facts rather than learning personally from one's encounter with the environment.

De Botton wonders what "an uninhibited guide to Madrid" based on his own subjective rankings would look like: he is more interested in Spanish food's lack of vegetables, Spanish people's long names, Spanish men's small feet, and the prevalence of modern architecture. This would have determined his path through the city rather than "the unexpectedly powerful force field of a small green object by the name of *The Michelin Street Guide to Madrid*."

The alternative to prescriptive guidebooks is for travelers to follow their own preferences and predilections: the details that capture de Botton's attention and make Spain seem exotic are cultural differences unlikely to appear in the guidebook because they cannot be deliberately sought out by tourists. Again, de Botton's emphasis on such differences suggests that he finds something exotic about Spain.

While climbing the stunning Mount Chimborazo in Peru, which at the time Europeans thought was the world's highest peak, Humboldt noticed seemingly minute features of the landscape, like the heights where he found lichens, moss, a butterfly, and a fly. De Botton wonders about the origin of this curiosity, and suggests that these minor details mattered because they implicated broader questions.

Humboldt's curiosity seems peculiar: he is surrounded by a breathtaking landscape yet focuses on details that most mountaineers would find irrelevant. The details that Humboldt picks up on reflect the underlying curiosities that drive his personality and character.

De Botton thinks of curiosity as "made up of chains of small questions extending outwards, sometimes over huge distances, from a central hub composed of a few, blunt, large questions," like "Why is there good and evil?" and "How does nature work?" By building outward from these questions, people start to care about smaller ones, like how high on mountains flies can live. Humboldt's big question was "Why don't the same things grow everywhere?" and he had investigated it relentlessly since age seven. At base camp below the mountain, he immediately began drafting an essay about the altitudes at which various plants and animals could be found.

Humboldt's lifelong fascination with the differences in flora and fauna across landscapes recalls Flaubert's lifelong obsession with Egypt: in both cases, travelers' deep attunements to particular places and questions reflect fundamental truths about their character, which supports de Botton's idea that travel can reveal and reflect people's purpose in life and suggest a path toward personal happiness.

Humboldt's example demonstrates "the importance of having the right question to ask in the world"—but most things do not "come affixed with" the right questions. For instance, the Michelin guidebook's passage on one Madrid church simply described its walls and chapels, but "gave no hint as to how curiosity might arise." The traveler would have to connect the guidebook's bare facts to the "large, blunt questions" at the center of curiosity. De Botton suggests that a tourist visiting the church might want to ask about why people build churches in different styles, or worship God at all.

People cannot find a sense of purpose through travel until they recognize the connection between the things they notice and the broader meaning in their lives. This is one reason why it might be important for travelers to follow their own subjective interests rather than following a prescribed path through a new city: it can help them recognize their deeper areas of curiosity and the big questions that drive them in life. In his 2014 exhibit "Art as Therapy" at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, De Botton brought to life the idea that questions should come affixed to tourist attractions.

De Botton warns about the danger "that we may see things at the wrong time, before we have had an opportunity to build up the necessary receptivity" to the environment to truly connect our observations with greater questions. Geography makes this harder, for relics from one era or group so often stand next to others that bear on vastly different questions and dimensions of curiosity. In Madrid, the 18th century Royal Palace stands next to a gallery of 20th century art, but if someone wanted to focus on learning about the former they might be better off visiting the palace and then taking off for other European cities with similar architecture. Travel's geographical logic is as superficial as a course reading list based on the length rather than content of the books.

Travel requires a certain amount of preparation to yield its greatest fruits; de Botton argues that people must move deliberately through the environment, seeking out their own enlightenment, and this requires a certain degree of self-knowledge about one's values, interests, and aesthetic biases at the outset. Travel requires people with a sense of their particular subjective relationship to the world, for geography and guidebooks alone will not make a trip personally relevant.

Later in his life, Humboldt lamented that people complained he was "curious about too many things." De Botton lauds this wide-ranging curiosity, but also hopes the reader will be sympathetic for travelers who "have occasionally been visited by a strong wish to remain in bed and take the next flight home."

De Botton values Humboldt's encyclopedic curiosity, which reflects his deep commitment to revealing the world's truths, while also pitying his own aversion to touristic travel, which tells him only meaningless information about the world. It is unclear how de Botton ultimately responds to Nietzsche's preference for personal over scientific facts.

CHAPTER 5: ON THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY

Planning to take an afternoon train out of London, de Botton meets M. in Euston Station, where he finds it "miraculous" that he can find her in the crowd. The train heads into the countryside as night falls, and de Botton is thrilled by the swaying train cars and "the prospect of eating something cooked in a moving train." They disembark at the Lake District's Oxenholme Station around nine in the evening along with a few other travelers, and de Botton wonders about all those on the train for whom his stop is unexceptional, just "one stop among many." Near the empty station, de Botton and M. rent a car.

As in his second essay, de Botton feels a palpable thrill at the prospect of train travel. His suggestion that his station may have been just "one stop among many" for the other travelers both recalls the anonymity of traveling places and suggests that equally rich experiences might await at all the places train travelers only experience as signs in a station; again, traveling reminds de Botton of the endless possibilities he can encounter away from home.

De Botton sees his motivations for traveling to the Lake District as at once personal and historical, harkening back to the late 18th century, when people from the city first started to visit the countryside "to restore health to their bodies and, more important, harmony to their souls."

De Botton's explanation suggests that there is no strict division between the historical and the personal; indeed, as Nietzsche suggested at the end of the previous chapter, travel can help people understand the historical underpinnings of the world they live in.

De Botton and M. arrive at their mediocre hotel and wondered about an owl they hear outside the window. William Wordsworth was a crucial impetus for de Botton's trip; the author read the poet's *Prelude* in bed as M. declared Wordsworth "an old toad," although she later recited lines from his "Intimations of Immortality" that she claimed "moved her perhaps more than anything else that she had ever read": *"What though the radiance which was so bright / Be now for ever taken from my sight / Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower; / We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind."* De Botton cannot bring himself to continue reading after he finds an old guest's hair in the headboard, so he goes to sleep amidst the owl's cries.

The owl's cry confirms that M. and de Botton have transitioned from the city to nature but also underlines their discomfort in the country. As de Botton continues to discover throughout the chapter, nature (here, the owl) is indifferent to their presence. M.'s ambivalence toward Wordsworth reflects the poet's simultaneous ridicule and praise from critics in his own time. And the poem she recites foreshadows the "spots of time" that de Botton explains at the end of the chapter: although "the radiance" is "taken from my sight," Wordsworth can "find / Strength" through memory.

Wordsworth was born in 1770 in the Lake District, where he spent his childhood "running wild among the Mountains" and went on to live his entire life. He walked vigorously in the mountains or by the lake every day despite—as one acquaintance put it—his hideous, insect-like legs. During these walks, he wrote short poems about nature, a subject that previous poets had often neglected.

Although Wordsworth lived in the same place his whole life, he nevertheless found constant novelty and fulfillment there, which suggests that he may have something to teach travelers who are bored with the places where they live.

De Botton excerpts Wordsworth poems about the lively mountains, a sparrow's nest and a nightingale's song, behind which he sees "a well-developed philosophy of nature" that claims that the countryside "was an indispensable corrective to the psychological damage inflicted by life in the city."

Wordsworth attempted to translate his meaningful encounters with the natural world to a broader reading public through his poetry, which reflects art's power to spread aesthetic values to a wider audience.

While critics from the poet Lord Byron to the editors of the *Edinburgh Review* ridiculed his naïve wonder at nature, and others even began parodying his work in literary journals, Wordsworth was not fazed, and continued to hope that his work would brighten the lives of "the young and the gracious of every age," making them "more actively and secretly virtuous" by showing them the beauty in nature.

Wordsworth gave his critics little credence, which suggests that his strategy—communing with nature in order to overcome city-life's obsession with status—was working. He saw nature as providing a more reliable and purer conduit for virtue than people could, and his poetry aimed to reflect natural beauty rather than win him literary fame.

While Wordsworth did not expect his readers to come around to his side during his lifetime, within 20 years he was a literary star—readers frequently memorized his poems, and tourists began flooding the Lake District. He was named England's poet laureate and, by his death in 1850, his belief in the curative properties of nature had successfully entered British public opinion.

Just as M. declared Wordsworth "an old toad" before admitting that she loved his poetry, his critics quickly had a change of heart once he converted the English reading public to his way of thinking. The fact that numerous readers (M. included) chose to memorize *Wordsworth's poems suggests that they managed to bottle the beauty of nature for later use, as it were.*

While Wordsworth lamented urban congestion and poverty, his true complaint was "the effect of cities on our souls," for he thought that cities led people to an obsession with social status and "relentless desire for new things" that they did not truly need. He thought that this began eroding the quality of human relationships, and lamented that neighbors in London did not know one another's names.

For Wordsworth, cities eroded the soul because (paradoxically) the more people surrounded themselves with others, the less they acknowledged those others as human and the more they focused on their own personal advancement. People in cities seemed to narrow their expectations and desires, becoming unreceptive to their environments.


Feeling "afflicted by a few of these ills" as he walks out of a gathering in London one day, de Botton becomes infatuated with the sight of a **cloud** overhead, and begins to calm down as he recites part of Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" to himself: *"... [Nature] can so inform / The mind that is within us, so impress / With quietness and beauty..."*

As when he flies on airplanes, a cloud—a common reminder of nature's transcendence of and indifference to human life—draws de Botton out of his petty anxieties and reminds him of the "quietness and beauty" that Wordsworth so prized. Notably, clouds suggest that people can find serenity through nature even while they live their normal lives in cities.

Walking through the Welsh Wye Valley with his sister in 1798, after a difficult few years, Wordsworth had a revelation and wrote this famous poem while sitting under a tree. Its subtitle is "On revisiting the banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798," and it emphasizes the opposition between city and countryside. A later portion of it reads: *"How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee / O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods, / How often has my spirit turned to thee!"* Elsewhere, like in *The Prelude*, he also wrote about nature's ability to help him survive the emotional turmoil of city life.

Wordsworth's highly specific subtitle suggests that he wants to remember a particular moment in nature, rather than simply the Wye's beauty as such. While he translates this beauty through his poetry, then, he continues to emphasize the observer's physical presence in and active engagement with nature.


De Botton asks why nature would have this healing effect, and turns back to his own trip, when he and M. eat breakfast in their hotel while their landlord promises that the pouring rain will stop. They drive through the bustling little town of Ambleside to the Great Langdale Valley, "where nature was more in evidence than humans."

Again, the city-dwellers head deeper into nature, although de Botton does not yet seem to fully grasp Wordsworth's defense of it. Unlike with his previous trips, de Botton seems to have relatively fewer expectations for his trek in the Lake District—while he goes having read Wordsworth, he does not seem to anticipate any life-changing realizations or complete serenity, as he did in Barbados.

Huge oak trees line the path, and de Botton notes the orderliness of their branches and leaves, which he contrasts with other kinds of trees. The heavy rain "gave us a sense of the mass of the oaks," which represent "ordered complexity" and patience to de Botton. Wordsworth liked to sit beneath trees, and similarly lauded their "patience and dignity," which he argued represented "*a temperate show / Of objects that endure*." This would presumably lead people to seek "whate'er there is desirable and good."

Although de Botton's lengthy description of the oak trees might seem unnecessary, he wants to illustrate how the transformations that Wordsworth promised require an active attention to and reflection on the things one sees. This foreshadows his arguments in the final two essays. De Botton also teases out the "patience and dignity" Wordsworth saw in the oaks by noticing how they relate to other features of the environment—the rain and the soil that feed them—which suggests that he is beginning to see the interconnections among elements of nature (and perhaps also beginning to see humans' entanglement in it).

De Botton notes that Wordsworth's argument relies on the premise that human identity can change "according to whom—and sometimes *what*—we are with." He suggested that natural objects like mountains and trees could influence people, although they are not conscious, by "suggest[ing] certain values to us" and inspiring virtue. In particular, he thought of "sanity, purity and permanence."

While in previous chapters de Botton tried to explain how new places often fail to change or enticingly fit a person's character, he now asks how travel can help shape *that character. His model of travel is not that of an individual who moves through an inert place, but rather an individual* in dialogue with *the environment.*

To Wordsworth, flowers suggested "humility and meekness" and animals "were paragons of stoicism." He was inspired by a bird that sang near his house and a pair of swans that moved nearby. After the rain passed, de Botton and M. hear a group of birds calling out and then see another, a black-eared wheatear, fly off around the valley. A sheep comes down to the path and chews grass, and the sheep and de Botton stare at each other—the author wonders, "what makes me me and him him?"

Again, to translate nature into virtue, people must actively attend to *and* reflect on *the environment rather than merely immersing themselves in it. De Botton's dialogue with the sheep, although it may seem inane, reflects the conflict between his immediate receptivity to the animal that stares him in the eyes and his knowledge that the sheep's perspective may be completely irreconcilable with his own.*

From a bush by a stream ahead, de Botton hears "a noise like the sound of a lethargic old man clearing his throat after a heavy lunch" and then a rustle in the bushes, after which whatever animal hides there realizes "that it has company" and goes silent. De Botton considers it "a *contemporary*, a fellow sleeping and breathing creature alive on this singular planet in a universe otherwise made up chiefly of rocks and vapours and silence."

Although he does not see the animal in the bushes, de Botton nevertheless attends to it and finds it fascinating precisely because he knows nothing about it besides its fellow presence on Earth. He begins to hint at why nature's unknowability contributes to its value for humans, which he explores in more depth in the following essay.

Wordsworth himself wanted people to notice animals more deeply, to "abandon their usual perspective" and see the world from both "the human and the natural perspective." De Botton suggests that confinement to a single perspective might be a source of unhappiness. In one of his books, Wordsworth expressed his wish that the "arrivals and departures of birds" would be tracked in newspapers and perhaps offer psychic relief.

Just like when traveling to foreign countries and experiencing another perspective on the world, imagining the perspective of nature can comfort humans by expanding their universe of concern. Wordsworth's suggestion that bird migrations are newsworthy exemplifies what it would mean for humans to fully integrate the natural perspective into their everyday lives.

The poet Samuel Coleridge thought Wordsworth's writings could direct the mind to the novelty in everyday things, awaken people to the wonders of the world, and perhaps, de Botton suggests, "encourage us to locate the good in ourselves."

As with the exotic, the benefits of nature come from seeing the layers of depth and meaning behind things that others might ordinarily find banal.

After three days, M. and de Botton head back to London and notice the very temporary character of nature's psychological benefits. Wordsworth would have disagreed, however, as he remarked after a walk in the Italian Alps that "*scarcely a day of my life* will pass in which I shall not derive some happiness from these images." He thought particular scenes from nature could give people "both a contrast to and relief from present difficulties," and he called these scenes spots of time. This explains Wordsworth's "unusually specific" subtitles, which usually name a location and an exact date.

While the immediate benefits of time in nature are short-lived, Wordsworth's "spots of time" allow people to preserve nature for later use, as it were. These "spots of time" call back to de Botton's first chapter, in which he argues that memory (in addition to anticipation and imagination) selectively emphasizes the most striking parts of a trip while erasing the mundane experiences that connect them (like transit or sights one might encounter at home).

De Botton had a "spot of time" too, when he and M. ate chocolate bars near Ambleside and he noticed a group of trees with stunning "health and exuberance," indifferent to the travails of human life. The author says he "was tempted to bury my face in them so as to be restored by their smell." He was only receptive to the scene for a minute and did not even remember it until, during a traffic jam in London, he suddenly returned to the trees and stopped feeling anxious about his upcoming meeting.

Just as de Botton's trips in Barbados and Amsterdam are worthwhile because of momentary details he remembers, his trip to the Lake District leaves him with a single—but immensely valuable—spot of time that helps to heal his frustration and anxiety at the traffic jam.

Beside a lake near where de Botton and M. stayed, Wordsworth saw daffodils "dancing in the breeze" and kept them alive as a spot of time, writing: *"For oft when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood. / They flash upon that inward eye… / And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the Daffodils."* De Botton agrees that images like this can help relieve the pain of city life, and signs his chapter: "*On Travelling in the Lake District, 14-18 September 2000.*"

Wordsworth, too, uses spots of time to heal his weariness and bring a dose of beauty back home with him. Indeed, his poems are similar in this function to the word-painting of John Ruskin, which de Botton discusses in his eighth essay. The author signs his chapter in the style of Wordsworth's captions, although his model usually referenced a particular moment (or spot of time) while de Botton references the entire duration of his trip.

CHAPTER 6: ON THE SUBLIME

Proclaiming his lifelong affinity for deserts, de Botton decides to visit the Sinai Desert from the Israeli resort town of Eilat. On the plane ride, he reads Pascal's *Pensées*, including a passage where the philosopher writes: "*When I consider … the small space I occupy, which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there.*"

The passage from Pascal was published a half-century before the sublime became an important aesthetic concept, but still foreshadows it by describing a combination of fear, pleasure, and awe in humans' smallness. The connection between this feeling and the previous chapter is already clear: the traveler immerses themselves in nature and adopts a perspective from which their ordinary concerns are meaningless.

De Botton goes to the desert "so as to be made to feel small." While people do not usually want to feel small, de Botton thinks there is "another and more satisfying way" to do so in "barren, overwhelming" places like mountain ranges and deserts.

The kind of smallness that de Botton does not want to feel is likely a humiliation before other people, which is fundamentally different from feeling small before nature, because nature appears indifferent *to human affairs.*

After two days in the Sinai, de Botton's group of travelers approach a barren valley with mountains "like naked Alps" and gashes that mark the Earth's tectonic activity. These mountains seem infinite on the horizon, and beyond them lies a "featureless, baking gravel pan" that the area's nomadic Bedouins call the "Desert of the Wandering."

The Sinai's endlessness, uniformity, and striking beauty seem to swallow up the human observer—it has no discernible center, exit, or response to the people who are there responding to it. In other words, the desert imposes itself aesthetically on the people who cannot impose their will on the landscape.


Usually, de Botton says, emotions that people feel in particular places require "awkward piles of words" rather than single labels, but in the early 18th century, people began describing their reactions to "precipices and glaciers, night skies and boulder-strewn deserts" as a sense of the sublime.

The sublime is that meaningful feeling of insignificance de Botton has focused on so far in this chapter. He continues to note how personal feelings and experiences in travel are nonetheless influenced by particular cultural histories that the traveler may not understand at the outset but can gain profoundly from learning about.


After an ancient Greek treatise on the sublime was retranslated into English in 1712, writers began taking an interest in it as "an identifiable feeling that was both pleasurable and morally good." Suddenly, people began valuing landscapes based on their power to "arouse the mind to sublimity." Writers noted their stunned reactions at encountering vast spaces of untamed nature, and one even called the Alps "pregnant with religion and poetry."

During the 18th century, critics started to value places because of their psychological effects on people, rather than seeing aesthetic value as embedded in beautiful objects themselves. This parallels de Botton's insistence that people must develop their personal, subjective aesthetic sense and curiosity through encounters with new sights and places.


In comparison to dawn in the Sinai desert, which is millions of years in the making, "man seems merely dust postponed," weakened and rightly intoxicated by the power of natural forces. In his bag, De Botton has brought the work of Irish philosopher Edmund Burke, who argued that things were sublime (as opposed to merely beautiful) when they suggested human weakness by showing a power that exceeds and threatens people. Burke compared beautiful landscapes to an ox—they are powerful but "innocent and not at all dangerous"—but sublime landscapes to a bull—they are overwhelming, do not bend to the human will, and often seem infinite because of their repetitive elements.

De Botton's description of people as "dust postponed" reminds the reader that they, too, are part of the natural world and will eventually recombine with it. Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful hinges on the difference between objects that a human being can construct or control with their own will (which are beautiful) and those that seem to affect human beings through their own sheer power (which are sublime). Sublime things seem to force humans into a state of receptivity to their environment precisely through this immense power.

Why, de Botton asks, do people seek out the sublime and derive pleasure from it? He first responds that "not everything that is more powerful than us must always be hateful to us." The noble power of a sublime landscape does not humiliate the human observer, reminding them of their inadequacy, but rather leaves them in awe, resignifying their inadequacy "in a new and more helpful way" by presenting it "in grand terms" rather than in the vicious ones of everyday life. Sublime landscapes lead people to accept—and perhaps even to worship—forces that exceed them.

Again, the sublime's power yields pleasure because nature is indifferent to humans rather than hateful or personal—like taking off in an airplane, visiting sublime places can help people come to terms with their problems by dislodging them from their confined perspectives. As with traveling places, sublime places are undefined, neither here nor there for humans, and provide a reflective solitude that can help people consider the deep sense of purpose that de Botton hopes travel can cultivate.

Accordingly, de Botton argues, "it does not seem unusual to start thinking of a deity in the Sinai," whose monumental landscape suggests that something greater than humans built the Earth. According to the Abrahamic religions, God supposedly spent significant time there—and de Botton thinks that any traveler in the desert there would suspect that it was created by a force greater than "mere 'nature,'" which he finds an unlikely explanation for landscape features like a "sandstone valley rising towards what appears to be a giant altar, above which hangs a slender crescent moon."

Despite his invocation of God here, de Botton is a committed atheist. By gesturing to the Sinai's role in the Abrahamic religions, de Botton suggests that the sublime plays a deep and important role in human cultural history, perhaps even accounting for early believers' faith in God.

Indeed, many early theorists of the sublime saw it as proof of God's existence, and de Botton sees a connection between the rise of the sublime as a cultural phenomenon and the 18th century's decline in traditional religiosity. Sublime landscapes gave secular people "an emotional connection to a greater power" without trapping them in the particular dogmas of organized religion.

Both the sublime and religious faith bring humans to awe by demonstrating an immense power that people could never hope to match. De Botton sees the sublime as a possible basis for the sort of universal, atheist religion he defends in his other works; more broadly, he seems to think that travel and art can expand people's minds in much the same way as organized religion, and perhaps without religion's pitfalls.

One Biblical book particularly connects God to the sublime; in it, "a righteous but desperate man" asks God why he suffers, and God directs him to ponder sublime landscapes. This is the Book of Job, which Burke considered the Old Testament's most sublime; Job is incredibly wealthy but suddenly loses nearly all his livestock and his oldest son in a series of natural disasters. He finds himself weeping at home, covered in sores that he scratches with a pottery shard.

Job's fate demonstrates the indifference of nature to the human will: he suddenly falls from unrivaled success to complete destitution, just as a person illustrious at home (like bestselling author de Botton) might find themselves equal to others before nature's immense power and sublimity.

Job's friends tell him that his sin caused his misfortune, but Job denies that he has sinned. God replies, showing Job his ignorance and impotence through questions like "where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" and references to the enormity of nature. As de Botton puts it, God tells Job, "do not be surprised that things have not gone your way," because "the universe is greater than you" and "you cannot fathom [its] logic." Humans are not the center of the universe, but rather an insignificant and feeble component of it who can never fully grasp its logic. This limit to human understanding implies that people "must continue to trust in God's plans for the universe."

Job's sin seems to be precisely his ignorance about the limits of his own power in comparison with God and nature; indeed, his demand that God explain himself suggests that he oversteps his place as a human being. Just as Wordsworth thought nature could remind humans of virtue, the sublime can remind people about the limits of their understanding and power, which promises to liberate them from many of their everyday concerns about status and success.

De Botton thinks that God's answer to Job also holds value for secular people, for the sublime can still lead them to see that certain problems are insurmountable and certain events inexplicable for humans. Sublime places can lead people to acknowledge their limits and take their failures in stride by reminding people that the world "will inevitably return us to dust."

Again, de Botton argues that the Book of Job's logic applies more generally to everyone, regardless of whether they believe in God or not. He implies that learning to accept failure can be a valuable step along the path to happiness because it encourages people to relinquish control where they do not have it, stop expecting fortune to favor them, and refocus their energies on the future rather than dwell on the past.

CHAPTER 7: ON EYE-OPENING ART

Some friends invite de Botton to a farmhouse in Provence, in the South of France. He admits that Provence is not appealing to him because he thinks it won't suit him, although "sensible people" usually consider it exquisitely beautiful. He rents a car at the Marseilles airport, briefly gets lost at an oil refinery, and then decides to pull off the road before his destination to seek out beauty. He lets his eyes wander around the landscape, but cannot bring himself to see Provence's beauty—it reminds him of southeastern England, and he misses certain important features, like the limestone hills and poppies growing beneath some trees. Yet, when he arrives at the farmhouse, he tells his hosts that Provence is "simply paradise."

As in Madrid, de Botton begins his travels with pessimistically low expectations. He believes that Provence (unlike Amsterdam) has nothing to offer his temperament, and ponders its scenery in terms of the familiar image of southeast England. Although he tries to see it as beautiful, he is clearly not aesthetically attuned to Provence's landscape in the way more enthusiastic observers seem to be, but in mentioning his inability to see the limestone and poppies, de Botton implies that he later does learn to see them—to view Provence through a new and more fruitful aesthetic lens.

People react instantaneously to the beauty of new places, so they might think that their aesthetic attractions are hardwired and inalterable. But de Botton disagrees, suggesting that a failure to see something as worth appreciating or an accidental negative association can lead us to find things unattractive, yet these preferences can be changed as people make way for new associations.

De Botton argues that outside factors, dependent on the observer and their preconceptions, often determine whether one finds a place beautiful—to an extent, people see what they expect to see, but deliberately cultivating an aesthetic can help people respond to the environment in a new way.

Studying art is one way of "enriching our sense of what to look for in a scene." Works of art can lead a person to notice new features of the environment and change their sense of beauty, "like a person around whom a word has been mentioned on many occasions, but who only begins to hear it once he or she has learnt its meaning."

Although people usually consider art a reflection of life, for de Botton, life can also reflect art, since exposure to art can help people develop the aesthetic sensibilities that lead them to see the world in novel ways.

In 1888, Vincent van Gogh came to Provence at age 34, early in his painting career, after he had failed to become a teacher or priest and spent two years living with his art dealer brother in Paris. He arrived in the town of Arles amidst heavy snow, moved into his hotel, and soon began painting at breakneck speed in what was "generally agreed to have been his greatest" period of work. He painted the city's scenes through the seasons and, come summer, began to paint the harvest; he exclaimed that he wished he had discovered Arles a decade before.

Van Gogh's circuitous path to Arles and frustration at his earlier career problems dovetail nicely with de Botton's emphasis on pursuing psychological above material happiness: although he may have considered himself a failure, van Gogh became successful only once he found an environment that inspired him to create art. What de Botton does not mention here is that van Gogh committed suicide shortly after this period, at the age of 37, so his work in Provence was his last as well as his greatest.

Van Gogh's professed motivations for moving to Arles were that he wanted to paint and help others "see" the South of France. Underlying this was his belief that artists could open others' eyes to a part of the world they previously did not see, and this belief was based on his own experience reading French novelists and looking at the Spanish painter Velásquez's delicate attention to light and use of grey. Indeed, van Gogh noticed "something utterly Velázquezian" about the grey walls in Arles's small restaurants, which often closed their shutters during the day. Each great painter, for van Gogh, illuminated aspects of the world through their distinctive style and attention to detail.

Van Gogh is an excellent example of how art can influence people's understanding of their ultimate purpose and lead them to in turn create art out of their own lives. Van Gogh's underlying belief about what art could teach people led him to flout representational conventions and, as a result, secure an influential place in the history of Western art. Here, others' art inspired van Gogh's travel and his travel inspired his own art. Art and travel offer similar aesthetic experiences that can reinforce one another, and for de Botton the human search for purpose is similarly aesthetic.

But van Gogh also thought that previous artists "completely missed the essentials" in Southern France: Arles's "middle-aged middle-class women" and farm workers had never appeared in over a century of Provençal painting, all of which followed "the classical and until then relatively undisputed notion that their task was to render on canvas an accurate version of the visual world." But van Gogh thought they all failed to truly capture the visual reality of Provence.

Much as the Duc des Esseintes imagined Holland to be defined by particular images that he was ultimately frustrated to find in a sea of ordinary ones, van Gogh had a distinct and unusual concept of what truly defined the essence of Provence. However, whereas the Duc des Esseintes gave up on reality and withdrew into his imagination, van Gogh decided to change the way others perceived reality by painting his own view of it.

This is because different artists can realistically depict the same place or scene in different ways—each artist must choose which features to highlight and disregard, for no painting can capture the entirety of reality, as Nietzsche knew all too well: *"'Completely true to nature'—what a lie: / How could nature ever be constrained into a picture? / The smallest bit of nature is infinite!"*

Again, de Botton sees the ability to shift perspectives as a crucial tool for humans. Nietzsche's declaration that "the smallest bit of nature is infinite!" recalls how de Botton digs into particular details and uncovers deep meanings, as when he fell in love with a front door in Amsterdam.

Someone who appreciates an artist's work therefore merely agrees that the artist has chosen to paint a scene's most important elements. Sometimes these artistic choices are so powerful that "they come to define a place" for future observers. If one complains about a portrait, they are saying that the painter has focused on the wrong elements; "bad art," de Botton argues, "might thus be defined as a series of bad choices about what to show and what to leave out."

De Botton turns judgments of beauty from absolute statements about the worthiness of art into subjective statements about the relationship between the observer and the art object. He argued in the first essay that memory, imagination, and anticipation—like art—function by selectively emphasizing and erasing particular elements to create an emotionally charged image, which attests to the shared aesthetic basis of all four.

In the farmhouse, de Botton reads a book on van Gogh because he cannot fall asleep and then, the next morning, anxiously eats three *pains au chocolat* after learning that his hosts have already awakened and left home. He notices two cypress trees in the garden and thinks back to van Gogh's sketches of cypresses from his time in Arles. In particular, van Gogh noticed that their unusual proportions led them to dance in the wind, as de Botton puts it, like "a flame flickering nervously in the wind."

De Botton immediately begins to notice elements of the environment that would never have stood out the day before: he only learns to pay attention to the cypress trees because of van Gogh's sketches of and writings about them. Clearly, van Gogh's art can translate not only a landscape but also an entire way of seeing *for his audience.*

Similarly, although he had dismissed Provence's olive trees as uninteresting the previous day, now de Botton notices the "ferocity" of their branches and the "alertness and contained energy" of their leaves. He also sees the unique colors of Provence, which stem from special climactic features that leave the skies cloudless and the vegetation lush. Van Gogh picked up on Provence's rich primary colors, but earlier painters did not, so he broke with tradition by maximizing their contrast. De Botton learns to see this too, and not only the bright colors of the day but also the "profusion of colors" that van Gogh noticed in Provence's night sky.

Like he did in the Lake District, here de Botton achieves receptivity to the natural environment in paying close attention to visual details he might ordinarily skim over; the connection between van Gogh's art and Provence's particular climate shows how the forces of nature deeply influence aesthetic standards and movements, just as they did for Wordsworth. By emphasizing color, van Gogh articulated his belief about what made Provence beautiful through his art.

Arles's tourist office is unassuming and conventional, offering the usual maps and pamphlets, but it emphasizes van Gogh and especially the "van Gogh trail" built 100 years after the painter's death, which memorializes the places he painted with plaques around the region. When de Botton brings his hosts to the trail, they happen upon a guided tour of it, led by a Sorbonne graduate student studying van Gogh.

Van Gogh's influence on the way people see Provence has been inscribed into the region's landscape: people can now travel to where the art that made them travel in the first place was inspired. As de Botton returns to the role of tourist, the reader is left to wonder whether the "van Gogh trail" will let visitors pursue their own curiosity or simply shove facts down their throats, like de Botton's Madrid guidebook.

According to the tour guide, in May 1888, three months after he arrived in Arles, van Gogh moved from his hotel to a building called the "Yellow House" and insisted that the interior be painted in Provence's bright primary colors, "with everything from the chairs to the pictures having character." Unfortunately, the house was destroyed during World War II.

Van Gogh wanted his house to reflect the beauty he saw in Provence, as though he wanted to completely surround himself with the region's exotic colors and make himself part of the environment. Like Gustave Flaubert in Egypt, van Gogh tried to assimilate into the place he came to love.

Next, the tour goes to fields where van Gogh used to paint, and the group compares the scenery to his work. One Australian woman declares, "well, it doesn't much look like that." De Botton notes that van Gogh faced similar criticism during his lifetime, for he sacrificed features like proportion and shadow for the sake of color.

The Australian woman seems to represent both the classical notion of artistic representation and the unreflective tourist who does not want to try on other perspectives: she has little interest in seeing the region as van Gogh did, but rather wonders why van Gogh did not see it like she does.

De Botton sees this as a justifiable artistic choice, however, for—as Nietzsche said in the earlier quote from this chapter—art can never capture the entirety of reality. For van Gogh, capturing the salient part of reality actually meant distorting and omitting other parts of it. De Botton states that "he was willing to sacrifice a naïve realism in order to achieve realism of a deeper sort," and compares the difference between van Gogh and traditional realists to that between poets and journalists writing about the same phenomenon.

Van Gogh's alternative form of realism, which emphasizes the way that people experience a place like Provence by exaggerating its most distinctive features, echoes the historical shift toward a psychological concept of beauty that de Botton summarized in the last chapter, which occurred after critics started writing about the sublime and insisting that the personal effect of a landscape was more important than its physical appearance.

Indeed, as van Gogh wrote to his brother, he decided to "use colour more arbitrarily, in order to express myself forcibly." While some saw paintings like his *Poet* and *The Night Café in Arles* as "caricatures," van Gogh was simply trying to express truths about the places he went in ways that traditional standards of artistic representation could not have accommodated.

In the expanded role he saw for art, van Gogh empowered artists to depict a much wider range of truths than merely the images that first meet the eye. De Botton conceives his perspective-widening mission in this book similarly, for he seeks to help travelers pursue their personal truths in foreign places rather than settle for the official version in the guidebook.

While de Botton, like most of the people on the walk, finds himself newly enthusiastic about van Gogh and Provence's landscape, he also thinks of a distressing quote from Pascal: "how vain painting is, exciting admiration by its resemblance to things of which we do not admire the originals." De Botton thinks that, although van Gogh's painting did excite him, Pascal forgets two things. First, painters do more than simply reproduce objects visually, but rather foreground certain features of reality. Secondly, "our capacity to appreciate can be transferred from art to the world," so in admiring paintings people do not necessarily fail to admire the world. De Botton has also visited other places, like German industrial areas and English shopping malls, after seeing art that featured them. Indeed, art's potential to inspire travel is a longstanding cornerstone of the tourism industry.

Although de Botton ends up disagreeing with Pascal's quote, the notion that people admire resemblances but ignore reality foreshadows John Ruskin's arguments against photography, which de Botton summarizes in the next chapter. De Botton responds to Pascal by reminding the reader that art and real life are in a constant dialogue—art influences what people observe but the way people observe also informs art, which is why art and travel can be mutually enriching. Art can teach receptivity, which can lead people to try on other perspectives and even produce more art, just as van Gogh learned from other painters how to depict a place in a new, eye-opening way.

Until the late 18th century, British people seldom appreciated the countryside—when they traveled they went abroad (and especially to Italy, in large part because of poetry and painting about Rome and Naples). But as British poets and painters began turning their focus to the British landscape, people began to flood into the countryside. While art cannot generate interest out of nothing, it nevertheless can inspire and guide tourists in their quests for beauty.

De Botton implicitly references Wordsworth's immense influence on early tourism to the British countryside, again emphasizing how art can translate other perspectives to its viewers and then lead those viewers to go take in the new perspectives for themselves by traveling.

CHAPTER 8: ON POSSESSING BEAUTY

Even if most places have little lasting effect on the viewer, de Botton explains, a few "possess a quality that might clumsily be called beauty." He has encountered many beautiful sights throughout his travels: a train that seemed to float through Madrid as apartment-dwellers settled down for the night, a crumbling brick wall in an Amsterdam courtyard, the endless sea off Barbados's eastern coast and the endless hills that rolled through England's Lake District.

After the fact, de Botton selectively remembered particular moments of his trips to Barbados or the Lake District; here, he again returns to the few, momentary images from travel (or perhaps Wordsworthian "spots of time") that disproportionately capture places' beauty and personal value to him.

Upon seeing beauty, people often strive to possess it and bring it into their lives, as if trying to say, "I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me." Yet beauty also evades people, residing in places to which they may never return or coincidences that are unlikely to recur. One way to capture such beauty is photography; another is trying to "imprint ourselves physically on a place of beauty" by, say, carving a name into it, like the Englishman whose name Flaubert found carved into a pillar in Alexandria; a third is to buy souvenirs.

De Botton again asks how to bring the wonders of the foreign back into the familiar, often dull places where people live their everyday lives. In other words, he wants to make memory as effective as possible as a tool for retaining the lessons of travel. Yet photography and carving one's name into a place are merely physical reminders, ones embedded in objects but without a foothold in memory.

John Ruskin, born in 1819 in London, focused largely on this question of how to possess places' beauty. From a young age, he was extremely sensitive to visual details, and his parents encouraged his interest. Ultimately, he concluded that beauty resulted from complex psychological and visual reactions. He also concluded that humans naturally react to and want to possess it. Ruskin argued that the only proper way to possess beauty is to understand it by discovering which factors create it, and that drawing and writing about beautiful places are the best ways to gain such an understanding.

Ruskin's sensitivity to visual details recalls the receptivity that de Botton has gradually built up throughout his book and encourages his readers to pursue. And Ruskin's emphasis on understanding the basis of beauty parallels de Botton's insistence in Madrid that people use facts they encounter for deeper personal enrichment—in both cases, travel enriches life only when people start to question why *what they are learning matters to them and gain a more fundamental understanding of themselves in doing so.*

Ruskin's preoccupation from 1856 until 1860 was teaching drawing, which he found more important (and more neglected) than writing. He wrote books and delivered lectures on the subject before dedicating himself to teaching craftsmen to draw. He believed that drawing was universally beneficial, and everyone should learn to do it, regardless of their social class or degree of artistic talent. He wanted to create not better artists, but simply happier people.

Ruskin suggested that artistic training should not be reserved for the elite classes that could afford it, but rather could help everyone better pursue their happiness. De Botton sees his mission as a writer in an analogous way: through this book, he wants to help everyone travel with (as he might put it) the cultivated refinement of those from his own class background, which has gained him as much criticism as praise.

Ruskin believed drawing was productive for people regardless of their talent because it taught them "to notice rather than merely look," to break an object into its components and remember it more completely. He taught drawing in order to teach *seeing*; he lamented people's general blindness to detail, and particularly hated the variety of tourist who tried to cover as much territory as fast as possible. He valued "thought and sight, not pace," and thought that people could take pleasure in their environments if they could pay sustained attention to the world rather than simply pass through it.

Ruskin, to an even greater extent than Wordsworth or van Gogh, believed that visual details held the truth of beauty. In a way, much of de Botton's careful looking over the previous few chapters has anticipated this argument from Ruskin. His distaste for fast-paced travel follows from his insistence that merely going to a place does not allow one to capture its beauty; rather, one captures the beauty of what one pays attention to—or, in de Botton's terminology, becomes receptive to.

Ruskin shouted down a group of Manchester industrialists in 1864, accusing their railroads of trying to infect every peaceful corner of the world. He saw that technology made it no easier to possess beauty, even if it made beautiful things easier to visit. While he did not despise photography—indeed, he loved making daguerreotypes, one of the earliest kinds of photograph—he also noticed that visitors often took photographs instead of paying attention to their environment, as though "photography automatically assured them possession of" the world's beauty.

Although photography might seem to immediately solve the problem of how to bring beauty back home, de Botton reminds us that it is at best—like van Gogh's paintings—an art form reliant on subjective decisions about what to emphasize and erase. This can be a problem when tourists do not reflect on what they choose to capture and fail to see important details of something because they assume they have the whole picture. Photography is not inherently counterproductive to the aim of capturing beauty, but the promise it holds tends to encourage people not to look in the first place—just as Pascal feared about painting.

Ruskin saw drawing as the outgrowth of a human instinct—like eating and drinking, it was based in the "transfer of goodness from without to within." Indeed, he remembered looking at grass as a child and wanting to eat it, but deciding to draw it instead. Photography, on the other hand, gives people the illusion of possessing beauty, but prevents them from asking meaningful questions about what is in front of them.

For Ruskin, this "transfer of goodness" requires deliberate training and effort, like learning to imagine an animal's perspective in the Lake District, to ask the right questions about Madrid's churches, or to see the distinctive colors in Provence's landscape.

Following Ruskin, de Botton decides to try drawing. He tries to draw the window of his bedroom at the inn in the Lake District, and ends up with "a predictable yet instructive disaster." He goes from a vague sense of an object's makeup "to precise awareness of its component parts and particularities." The window's panes are not exactly square and its paint not exactly white, for instance; he concludes that "drawing brutally shows up our previous blindness to the true appearance of things." As Ruskin predicted, de Botton found that he only truly learned the structure of tree branches after trying to draw them.

Although de Botton's drawing is a "disaster," this does not make it a failure: rather, it reveals his previous insensitivity to visual detail and points to the amount of beauty he ordinarily fails to see. Its inadequacy teaches him how to be more receptive to the environment by showing him what he failed to notice.

Drawing can also cultivate "a conscious understanding of the reasons behind our attraction to certain landscapes and buildings." It lets people develop their "aesthetic," which is a "capacity to assert judgments about beauty and ugliness." People can move from a generalized appreciation of a scene to the appreciation of specific elements, and in turn to the derivation of general aesthetic rules, such as "it is better for light to strike objects from the side than from overhead." The "conscious awareness" cultivated by drawing can also help people preserve memories more strongly.

This three-step process, from noticing beauty to seeing what about something is beautiful to understanding why that feature is beautiful according to general rules, shows how an observer can move from merely appreciating beauty to learning about themselves through the things they find beautiful. For de Botton, then, this is a crucial example of how learning to appreciate art can reveal a traveler to themselves.

Ruskin summarized his mission as an attempt to "direct people's attention accurately to the beauty of God's work in the material universe." He imagined two people, one a sketcher and one not, going on a walk. They would see the scene differently; the sketcher would "penetrate the minutest parts of loveliness" in the scene, but the non-sketcher might not even remember or have anything interesting to say about it.

Just as sublimity seemed to prove God's existence to 18th-century philosophers, beauty seems to prove God's existence for Ruskin. The parable of the sketcher and the non-sketcher demonstrates, in de Botton's terminology, the difference between moving through a new place unreflectively and traveling with a receptivity to the environment.

Ruskin wanted people to not only draw but also "word-paint." De Botton notes that people often lack the language to describe beautiful places, but Ruskin thought this inability was the product of laziness and insufficient reflection. By asking pointed questions about *how* and *why* things are beautiful, Ruskin thought people could produce word paintings "motivated by a search for an authentic representation of an experience." Throughout his life, Ruskin hated English people's nondescript, monotonous complaints about the weather. Instead, he tried to "bottle" the skies through word-painting, writing extensive descriptions of mornings and sunsets.

Like drawing, word-painting is intended here as a source of personal enrichment more than a way of creating art; in both cases, de Botton sees art as a means to better travel and gain a more precise awareness of one's aesthetic rather than an end in itself. The "search for an authentic representation" recalls van Gogh's desire to capture the psychological impact of Provence's environment and de Botton's injunction for travelers to cultivate their own authentic personal aesthetic as part of the search for happiness.

Ruskin's word-paintings were about places' psychological effects as much as their aesthetic qualities. He personified **clouds**, seeing them "as if they were *animated* by an *inner will*, or compelled by an unseen power." Similarly, he saw trees in the Alps as "quiet multitudes" that stand "comfortless" and proud amidst the rocks. For Ruskin, psychological descriptions of this sort allowed sketchers to understand their own reactions to a place and more consciously grasp why they loved it.

Just like de Botton in the second and fifth essays, Ruskin sees clouds as evidence of a higher power indifferent to human concerns; his personification of the environment closely recalls Wordsworth's strong feelings that a mountain, flower, or animal suggested particular virtues. In both cases, the observer is supposed to understand that the feelings they project onto the environment reflect their own actual or desired mental states.

De Botton steps back and describes a man parked on the side of the road near some office buildings, acting in a confusing manner—he alternates between staring into space and scribbling on a notepad. The man is de Botton himself—it is 11:30 at night, and he had been driving home from watching the last flight take off at London City Airport when he stumbled upon the giant, out-of-place office buildings at the West India Dock.

The man in the car appears to be de Botton word-painting, but by describing himself in the third person the author self-deprecatingly remarks on how strange he looks surrounded by office-buildings. Foreshadowing the final chapter, de Botton has already started practicing his travel skills at home in London.

De Botton then felt a desire to possess the buildings' beauty, and he began word-painting them in psychological terms. During the day, they were normal, he felt, but at night they were out of place, for the darkness and fog threatened the "bureaucratic vision of seriousness" that the buildings embodied. The fog led de Botton to reminisce about his days in university.

De Botton notices not merely features of the building itself but more importantly how it contrasts starkly with the environment: the night and fog seem to turn the familiar office building into a foreign, imposing aberration.

De Botton concludes that, despite his word-paintings' middling quality, he nevertheless pursued Ruskin's two goals for art: "to make sense of pain and to fathom the sources of beauty." When looking at his students' "misshapen drawings," Ruskin himself claimed that "the sight is a more important thing than the drawing," for drawing's purpose is to teach people to love nature.

Like Wordsworth and van Gogh, Ruskin sees a close connection between learning to notice details and learning to appreciate nature; both require setting aside one's own concerns to immerse oneself in the unexpected, foreign, or exotic details of a landscape that one does not know.

CHAPTER 9: ON HABIT

Returning from Barbados to London, de Botton discovers "that the city had stubbornly refused to change." London is "unimpressed," still grey and raining, which reminds de Botton that the world is indifferent to what happens in its inhabitants' lives. De Botton feels as though there is nowhere worse on the planet than London.

Whereas the indifference of clouds, mountains, and oak trees to human life is a source of pleasure for de Botton, London's continued dreariness is a source of anxiety; he returns expecting the dreadful boredom of what is familiar, and he immediately hopes to escape it again.

De Botton again quotes Pascal's *Pensées*: "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."

As in the chapter on the sublime, Pascal foreshadows this essay's focus. De Botton also recalls Baudelaire's endless desire to travel elsewhere, simply for the sake of escaping the familiar.

Nine years before Alexander von Humboldt set out for South America in 1799, the French writer Xavier de Maistre published a book about a *Journey around My Bedroom*. In 1798, he took a second such trip, which resulted in *Nocturnal Expedition around My Bedroom*. Whereas Humboldt's mode of travel required an enormous amount of resources and equipment, de Maistre's only needed his "pink-and-blue cotton pyjamas." The "intense, romantic" de Maistre loved French philosophy and paintings of domestic scenes as a child; at 23, he took an interest in aeronautics and planned unsuccessfully to fly himself to America in a paper plane. He then invented "room travel" and wrote *Journey around My Bedroom* from his small apartment in Turin.

Humboldt's extravagant journey required vast resources, expertise, and ambition—de Maistre needed only his clothing (and not necessarily even that) to undertake his own explorations. While his travel within confinement might recall the Duc des Esseintes' daydreaming about foreign places, de Maistre does not give up on travel but rather insists, after a lifetime of it, that it can be done anywhere. His attempt to fly across the Atlantic in a paper plane, however, shows his later mission's satirical undercurrent.

Introducing *Journey around My Bedroom*, de Maistre's brother Joseph wrote that Xavier did not mean to disparage the great travelers of the past, but rather to offer a more practical and cost-effective travel option. Xavier particularly recommended it to the cash-strapped and cowardly.

Joseph de Maistre's vaguely satirical defense of travel for all underlines people's power to control their mind-set in relation to their environment; for de Botton, travel's most important element, receptivity, is entirely free.

De Botton declares that de Maistre's trip "did not get very far." De Maistre changes into his pyjamas and travels to his sofa, which he sees "through fresh eyes" and admires nostalgically, thinking back to the time he spent daydreaming on it. He looks back at his bed, appreciating its complexity and his sheets' color coordination with his pyjamas. But he "may be accused of losing sight" of his travel's purpose soon thereafter, as he begins to ponder his dog and women.

De Botton acknowledges that de Maistre fell into a daydreaming of the sort des Esseintes lived by, but he insists that the bedroom traveler's initial fascination with the details of the place where he spent so many hours demonstrates everyone's potential to become receptive to any environment, including the most familiar ones.

But de Botton sees de Maistre's book as founded on the "profound and suggestive insight" that travel's mind-set often matters more than its destination. By viewing familiar places through the travel mind-set, he thinks, people might find their home places just as interesting as exotic destinations like Humboldt's South America.

De Botton breaks down the barrier between the familiar and the foreign, the tired and the exotic, and the mundane and the beautiful or sublime: by conceiving travel as a mind-set, he suggests that people have control over their attunement to their environments and can gain knowledge and virtue even without breaking from their normal lives.

De Botton states that receptivity, which leads people to approach places without pride or unrealistic expectations, is the most important characteristic of the "travelling mind-set." People can revel in what they might consider "unremarkable small details" about the places where they live, and learn to notice "the layers of history beneath the present." People tend to assume they have discovered everything at home and become blind to everything new that happens there; de Maistre's goal was to "shake us from our passivity." In his second book, he admires the night sky and laments that so few people take the time to do so, for they have begun to expect that their universe might be boring.

De Botton finally offers a unified argument about receptivity's essential role in fostering a reflective attitude toward life and helping people take control of their lives, which seem to be his ultimate goals in this book. Throughout, de Botton has found layers of meaning in details that others might find superfluous, like Amsterdam's brickwork or the shape of the Lake District's trees. Just as Ruskin thought people's failure to appreciate the weather was a product of laziness rather than the weather's actual mundanity, de Botton argues that people's failure to appreciate the places where they live is a product of their rigid perspective rather than the dreariness of home.

De Botton's bedroom is too small for a real voyage, so he decides to instead travel around his neighborhood of Hammersmith, London. He feels strange wandering outside "with no particular destination in mind," noticing a family and a double-decker bus pass by on the usual route to the Underground station that he has ceased to see as "anything other than a means to my end." The people he encounters on the way to the station have been invisible since he first moved to Hammersmith.

The familiar space between de Botton's house and the underground station is usually empty to him, a distance to walk in order to reach his goal. While it is uncomfortable at first for him to walk there without a destination, he quickly begins to scale back his preconceptions and return to the mindset with which he first moved to the neighborhood.

Usually, when entering a new place, people direct their attention widely, to diverse phenomena. But, over time, they start to focus on the elements of the space that bear on whatever function they hope to perform there, until they pare their sensitivity down to just a few things like—during de Botton's walk to the train—"the number of humans in our path, perhaps, the amount of traffic and the likelihood of rain." By imposing his own "grid of interests" on the area, de Botton had lost the ability to reflect on the neighborhood's particular sort of architecture or people.

This theory that attention converges on people's goals helps explain why people end up with rigid perspectives after living repetitive lives. One's goal, de Botton argues, quite literally narrows or broadens the scope of one's attention and receptivity to the environment, so that most commuters end up blind to the worlds they travel through.

During this walk, however, de Botton wants to "reverse the process of habituation, to dissociate my surroundings from the uses I had previously found for them." He tries to view Hammersmith as if it is new and foreign for him, and soon "objects released latent layers of value" as he begins noticing things that previously passed invisibly, like a shop's peculiar pillars and a restaurant's fascinating patrons. On the bus, he begins to imagine the other riders' private lives and wonders whether one corporate manager complaining about others' inefficiency recognizes his own shortcomings. For de Botton, the neighborhood "began to collect ideas" as he reflects on why he finds certain features beautiful and striking.

As he begins to view the familiar as foreign, de Botton puts to use all the tools he has gathered from his traveling companions throughout the book. He speculates about other riders' lives, much as he speculated about the people Edward Hopper painted; he wonders whether the man on the phone is projecting his own psychological issues onto whomever he is talking with, just as Ruskin and Wordsworth saw travelers diffract their own emotions and virtues through their descriptions of the environment; and he follows his curiosity, tying details to bigger questions, as he learned from Humboldt in Madrid.

De Botton explains that he prefers to travel alone, because others can often shape people's expectations, personality, and interests on a trip, constraining their ability to follow their curiosity to its fullest extent. He embraces his "freedom to act a little weirdly" that day as he sketches a shop window in Hammersmith.

De Botton thinks that travel can be most personally enriching when the traveler is free to chart their own path through new territory, because this lets them stage an uninterrupted dialogue between the environment and their values and aesthetic preferences.

Xavier de Maistre was "also a great traveller in the classic sense"—he fought military campaigns in Italy and Russia. Whereas Alexander von Humboldt traveled to escape his "boring daily life" and discover a "marvellous world" overseas, de Maistre rejected the dichotomy between these two universes.

De Botton assures the reader that de Maistre's affinity for bedroom travel did not stem from a lack of adventurousness or aversion to transit; rather, he saw that the travel mind-set is all one needs to re-enchant the familiar world, seeing the beauty and meaning that one previously ignored.

After reading de Maistre, Nietzsche remarked that "some people know how to manage their experiences" and learn to "become an arable soil that bears fruit three times a year," while other people who witness incredible events "always remain on top, bobbing like a cork." The former are a minority, "those who know how to make much of little," and the rest "know how to make little of much." While some have ventured to deserts, ice caps, and jungles without leaving any mark of their travels on their souls, de Botton concludes, de Maistre wanted people, "before taking off for distant hemispheres, to notice what we have already seen."

Nietzsche's quote reinforces de Botton's thesis that the traveler is the ultimate measure of all things: just as a trip to sunny Barbados does not solve the author's relationship problems and Baudelaire and Flaubert find themselves tired and depressed abroad, it is unrealistic for travelers to expect that they can simply absorb a place's benefits. Rather, the crucial factor in travel's success is one's own active engagement with the world and willingness to be moved by it.

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