Tour D’horizon Essay, Research Paper

Tour d’horizon The Art of Travel by Alain de Botton 272pp, Hamish Hamilton Alain de Botton, like many Londoners, finds himself staring up at passing aeroplanes with envy. There, high above the mundane artefacts and actions of our everyday lives, those great steel birds float gracefully down to earth. Mesmerised by their bulk, de Botton marvels that “above Slough is a plane that a few hours ago was flying over the Caspian Sea . . . the plane a symbol of worldliness, carrying within itself a trace of all the lands it has crossed.” De Botton ponders the gulf that exists between everyday reality and the imagined liberation that travelling abroad can bring. When he sets out to describe his own everyday reality, he writes eloquently and with finely tuned powers of observation. Recalling a wintry sky, de Botton likens it to something in a painting by Mantegna or Veronese, calling it “a perfect backdrop to the crucifixion of Christ or to a day beneath the bedclothes”. The Art of Travel seems to have a simple enough theme. What we seek by travelling may in fact be something we lack at home. De Botton is not the first to point this out, and he quotes many famous travellers who have discovered the pitfalls of seeking refuge, like Baudelaire, “Anywhere! Anywhere! So long as it is out of the world!” All too often the traveller who escapes desperately may find himself equally bored in an exotic location, something de Botton discovered on a painfully ill- advised trip to Barbados. He is not a writer who revels in the opportunity to impart a romanticised sense of the tropics, being far more successful when he evokes the misery of a cheap hotel room in Madrid, the view from an airport car park or the fluorescent glare of a motorway service station. Like many modern travellers, de Botton occasionally enjoys the sense of limbo we are granted on long train journeys. Here, as the countryside flashes by, the author is released from the everyday distractions of his life to think “with a rare lack of inhibition about the death of [his] father, about an essay [he is] writing on Stendhal, and about a mistrust that has arisen between two friends”. De Botton is sufficiently well read to treat us to his pick of some of the great early travellers and their thoughts on their craft. Gustave Flaubert’s obsession with the Orient, and his journey to Egypt in1849, receives fulsome treatment. Flaubert found the Egyptians’ earthiness and lack of affectation a welcome relief from his provincial upbringing in Rouen, something he famously pilloried in Madame Bovary . Flaubert spent nine months in Egypt, learning the language and dressing like a native. His was no casual dip into a foreign culture: on his deathbed 30 years later he said he was “gripped by the longing to see a palm tree standing out against a blue sky, and to hear a stork clacking its beak at the top of a minaret”. Flaubert joins Baudelaire, TS Eliot and Nietzsche in the cast of thinkers whose ideas de Botton examines. Then it is time for the artists to have their say: Van Gogh on Provence or Ruskin on the value of true observation when on the move. Edward Hopper, the American 20th-century painter famous for his desolate images of cafés and garages, is an artist after de Botton’s heart. A century before Hopper was riding around the US in a secondhand Dodge, capturing the loneliness of transient visitors as they ate and drank, the essayist Thomas Cole was capturing the spirit of the great outdoors. It is Cole whom de Botton quotes most effectively when discussing the effect of awesome spectacles of nature upon the human psyche. As Cole puts it, such views are “God’s undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things”. His phrase is so much more elegant than de Botton’s echo: “It is the vast spaces of nature that perhaps provide us with the finest, the most respectful reminder of all that exceeds us.” As one who makes their living from writing and travelling, I found this book frustrating. Anyone who has experienced the soulless nature of mass transportation and the glibness of guide books can understand and sympathise with what de Botton is saying. But nowhere among his themes do I see much evidence of any joy of discovery, any examination of what draws people to travel – the fear as much as the fun. There is no hungry soul behind his own quest for new shores, just a sense of intellectual guilt. Perhaps it’s a Francophone thing. De Botton makes much of the achievement of another French writer, Xavier de Maistre, who in 1790 wrote Journey Around My Bedroom . The conceit behind de Maistre’s work was the idea that by revisiting a familiar scene (his bedroom) he rediscovers its charms with fresh eyes. It is a mode of travel, he said, that might be “particularly suited to the poor, those afraid of storms, robberies and high cliffs”. In de Botton’s view, de Maistre becomes distracted from his task and spends too long digressing on subjects such as his dog, his sweetheart and even his servant. De Botton’s verdict: “Travellers in search of a specific report on room-travel risk closing Journey Around My Bedroom feeling a little betrayed.” One might say the same about The Art of Travel . · Tim Ecott is the author of Neutral Buoyancy: Adventures in a Liquid World (Penguin).