

A Week at the Airport

A Heathrow diary

September 20-21, 2010

A. de Botton

There is a romanticism associated to a train station, especially if it is a large one, monumental and imposing, situated in the center of a big town. It puts you in touch with the world around you, and travel by train is a truly dignified way of moving around. The train heralded the advent of the modern world, and it did so already by the mid of the 19th century. The grand era of the train thus lasted no longer than a century or so, by the mid 20th century it was being replaced by air-travel. Initially exclusive but by the 70's and 80's assuming a huge volume as it started moving the masses around. Technologically, flight is a far more spectacular means of transportation than the mundane travel along tracks tied to the ground that a locomotive supplies. To fly with a huge 747 certainly is a defying of gravity that is such a wonder that it ceases to amaze people, they simply take it for granted, or rather, flying becomes a temporary leave from reality. The airport is the modern equivalent of the train station, but the spectacularity of the technological feat of flying does not translate into excitement on the ground. Airports are often non-descript buildings situated far away from city centers and encircled by free-ways. The newly erected terminal 5 of Heathrow is supposed to be a vary daring building in design (and so was the new terminal at de Gaulle until the roof collapsed in 2004) but the point is that no one really notices or even cares. Airports take the romance out of travel, to the flying passenger the world becomes a set of discrete points with little relation to each other. You need to arrive in good time, pass through some tedious routines of check-in, in recent decades there are the security-checks becoming progressively more and more elaborate, but instead of adding drama to the trip, they supply nothing so much as more tedium and humiliation. Then there is the dreary wait in the lounge, a wait distracted by shopping-malls. As the author remarks, this waiting for a flight is also potentially your last time on earth (at least in one piece). A stay at an airport is never a relaxing or rewarding experience. It is something that makes an empty gap in your life, you are simply being processed. Final arrival makes the point. Once at your destination your one impulse is to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. There is no temptation to linger around, in fact there is no possibility. Once you are done with the only lingering, which waiting at the conveyor imposes on you, there is no longer any place for hanging around.

Alain de Botton has been invited to spend a week at Heathrow, or more specifically at Terminal 5, as a writer, or maybe even a poet, in residence. His assignment to write about the place bringing forth aspects which are ordinarily never thought of or noted by hurrying travelers or functionally focused designers and administration. The result is vintage de Botton, supplemented by the pictures of an accompanying photographer. Had the book been more ambitious in size, we would have the quintessential coffee-table tome, instead it is modest in proportions, and if not quite to the point of fitting into a snug

pocket. Maybe this is the ideal book to devour between flights (in particular at terminal 5), or maybe better at moments when you dream of taking off and flying again as a well-needed antidote. When all is said and done, nothing very much happens at an airport.

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