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Claustrophilia and Exalted Imagination: Fictional Responses to a Pascalian

Problem in the Works of Xavier de Maistre and Jan Potocki

Marius Warholm Haugen

This article explores the topics of confinement and claustrophilia in Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1795) and *Expédition nocturne autour de ma chambre* (1825), and in Jan Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* (1791–1814). These works resonate with ideas put forward by Blaise Pascal in the *Pensées*, more precisely with the reflections on man's need for constant diversion, represented though the image of his incapacity to stay alone in a room. The fictions of de Maistre and Potocki have in common that they stage literary prison scenes where the characters experience confinement as stimulating for their creativity, giving way to a specific freedom of the imagination. The article argues further that, if the claustrophilia advocated by de Maistre and Potocki appears as responses to the problem of man's restlessness as examined by Pascal, these responses depend on a Rousseauist understanding of the notion of exalted imagination.

In one of the most famous passages of Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician identifies the cause of man's unhappiness as his restlessness, illustrated by the image of him being incapable of staying quietly in a room: "Quand je m'y suis mis quelquefois à considérer les diverses agitations des hommes et les périls et les peines où ils s'exposent, dans la cour, dans la guerre, d'où naissent tant de querelles, de passions, d'entreprises hardies et souvent mauvaises, etc., j'ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre" (86). For Pascal, man's agitated form of existence stems from the fact that he finds it intolerable to be left alone to contemplate his own condition, an impulse that leads him to seek out constant diversion. This is why "la prison est un supplice si horrible" (87). Pascal's apology for the Christian faith, constructed through analyses of the human condition, reveals the key elements of the latter to be "inconstance, ennui, inquiétude" (84). Man's happiness is precluded by his dual nature, which demonstrates a longing for movement and the need for rest and repose. Boredom is a constant of the human condition; without diversion, man "sent alors son néant, son

abandon, son insuffisance, sa dépendance, son impuissance, son vide” (85). Pascal’s reflections on man’s relationship to boredom and his constant need for diversion have fascinated thinkers and writers for centuries. A particularly interesting example of this fascination appeared at the turn of the eighteenth century, when two aristocratic and eccentric authors, Xavier de Maistre and Jan Potocki, seemed to engage with the Pascalian image of man’s incapacity to stay quietly in a room, and replied to it by way of fiction. Their responses can be best described as *claustrophilic*, pertaining to the love of confinement.¹

This article argues that Xavier de Maistre’s two imaginary journeys, *Voyage autour de ma chambre* and *Expédition nocturne autour de ma chambre*, and Jan Potocki’s encyclopaedic novel *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* resonate with Pascal’s philosophical exploration of boredom and diversion. Given they confront problems that can be described as Pascalian, de Maistre’s imaginary journeys and Potocki’s novel—two of the most playful bodies of fiction that this period produced—might thus constitute some of the most interesting, profound and, certainly, amusing responses to questions raised in the *Pensées*.

In their common appreciation for the closed room as a space that inspires creativity and movements of the imagination, the works of de Maistre and Potocki seek to unite two opposites that the French historian Daniel Roche has identified as the “two values of civilization” dominating early-modern European history: the sedentary and the nomadic. Roche describes these as respectively “Pascalian” and “Rousseauist”: “Deux valeurs de la civilisation s’affrontent ici: celle de la pensée de Pascal—‘Tout le malheur de l’homme vient d’une seule chose qui est de ne savoir demeurer au repos dans une chambre’—et celle du plaidoyer de Rousseau pour un nomadisme pédagogique” (9–10). De Maistre’s and Potocki’s fictions point towards a fusion of these binary states, a paradoxical blend of the mobile and the sedentary. As we will see, Jean-Jacques Rousseau plays a key role in this, for if the questions are Pascalian, the solutions might be said to be Rousseauist, made possible by a shift in the

understanding of the notion of imagination that occurred as a result of Rousseau's works and their influence on European ideas.

De Maistre and Potocki were writing in a period that witnessed an important development in the reception of Pascal. From the middle of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, from Voltaire to Chateaubriand, reactions to Pascal's work ranged from hostility to dispassionate interest and finally to panegyric. For the Enlightenment philosophers in their pursuit of the foundations of human happiness, the problems posed by the seventeenth-century philosopher certainly remained relevant. As Robert Mauzi writes in his influential work on the notion of happiness in the eighteenth century, for the *philosophes*, "[l]es maladies de l'âme se réduisent à deux symptômes opposés: l'ennui et l'inquiétude" (27). Pascal's reflections on this matter were of great interest to eighteenth-century thinkers. However, most of them responded to this Christian apologist in a manner that was at best ambivalent. In general, the eighteenth-century reception of Pascal's fragmentary text was caught up in its apologetic argument and allegedly misanthropic basis. The attacks on Pascal's religious philosophy came both from the Jesuits, hostile towards its Jansenism, and from Enlightenment thinkers, led by Voltaire (Straudo). As Antony McKenna notes, "the violent rejection of Pascalian religious philosophy [...] was to be a characteristic trait of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*" (McKenna 262). A significant shift occurred with the Romantic generation, whose writers rekindled interest in Pascal's religious philosophy (see Straudo and Demorest). This "rehabilitation" is best illustrated by Chateaubriand and his praise of Pascal in the *Génie du Christianisme* (425–30).

As Arnoux Straudo has convincingly argued, the eighteenth century also saw a reception of Pascal that derived from an isolated interest in the anthropological aspects of his works (449–50). Although this interest manifested itself less explicitly, it was nonetheless apparent even in materialists such as La Mettrie and Helvétius, who would "adapte[r] certains fragments pascaliens à leurs univers conceptuels" (450). If we are correct to interpret the fictions of de Maistre and Potocki as responses to Pascalian problems, such an interpretation would be in keeping with a tradition that circumvented

religious philosophy in order to identify certain elements of Pascal's analysis of the human condition. Moreover, their texts would thus also be in keeping with the Enlightenment practice of using novels and stories as philosophical laboratories.

Xavier de Maistre (1763–1852) was a Savoyard nobleman, author, soldier, painter, and the younger brother of the more noted political philosopher and counter-revolutionary ideologue, Joseph de Maistre. In 1795, Xavier published what was to become one of the bestsellers of the early nineteenth century, the comical and imaginary *Voyage autour de ma chambre*.² He would continue his literary career by publishing two novels, an essay, and a sequel to his *Voyage*, entitled *Expédition nocturne autour de ma chambre*, written between 1798 and 1800, but not published until 1825. As an explicit appropriation of Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* that also contains references to *Tristram Shandy*, de Maistre's imaginary *Voyage* self-consciously places itself in the burlesque, comical and anti-novelistic tradition going back to Cervantes, Scarron, and Sorel, via Sterne and Diderot.³

In light of this lineage, it is perhaps surprising that de Maistre's two peculiar texts would have anything to do with Pascal's *Pensées*. And yet, these imaginary journeys can be read as light-hearted, humoristic, and epicurean responses to the problems that Pascal presents with regard to diversion, boredom, and the human condition. For Florence Lotterie, the *Voyage* is "une sorte de variation parodique autour de la notion pascalienne de 'divertissement', telle qu'elle s'exprime dans la pensée fameuse qui porte ce titre" (21n2), that is, the passage on the room. It is, admittedly, difficult to establish with absolute certainty any form of direct connection between de Maistre's texts and the *Pensées*. We might, therefore, restrict ourselves to claiming that de Maistre is simply playing with ideas that were circulating in his era, even if the origin of those ideas ultimately lies in Pascalian philosophy.

Despite the many formal and aesthetic similarities, de Maistre's peculiar fictional travelogues establish a thematic structure that, at the level of content, places them at some distance from the eighteenth-century literary tradition from which they emerged. If we are to believe Daniel Roche, this

thematic structure points even further back in time, towards the great thinkers of the seventeenth century, noticeably Pascal and Descartes. For Roche, de Maistre's texts question the enthusiasm of the Enlightenment for "la mobilité constructrice" and "la sociabilité enrichissante", by offering arguments in favour of solitude. In Roche's interpretation, these arguments simultaneously illustrate "[le] retrait cartésien, nécessaire pour la réflexion" and "l'exil pascalien, bénéfique pour le salut" (125). In this view, Pascal's claim that man is incapable of staying put in a room presents itself as a relevant intertext, if not the very challenge to which de Maistre's narrator is responding.

The narrator of the *Voyage* is forced to stay in his room for forty-two days, during which he will set out on a journey that is imaginary, but also, in a certain way, overtly physical, as he lets his gaze wander around the room, describing the objects and the living beings it encounters. In a humorous nod to the extremely popular genre of the non-fiction travelogue, de Maistre's narrator sets out to describe what he observes along his "way": "J'ai entrepris et exécuté un voyage de quarante-deux jours autour de ma chambre. Les observations que j'ai faites, et le plaisir continuel que j'ai éprouvé le long du chemin, me faisaient désirer de le rendre public" (*Voyage autour de ma chambre* 41). Through the narrator's minute descriptions of the room, along with the reveries caused by his observations and the different incidents that occur throughout the forty-two days, we as readers are taken along on a highly eccentric journey marked by an aesthetics of zigzags and digressions.⁴ The narrator makes claim to having invented a new form of travelling, one particularly adapted to "les malheureux, les malades et les ennuyés" of the universe (43). When the theme of unhappiness and boredom is thus developed through the motif of the closed room, it resonates with the *Pensées*, where the room and the isolation it symbolizes is used by Pascal as a proof of man's fundamental restlessness.

A few paragraphs later, we find a passage that adds force to the Pascalian resonance, when the narrator argues for the "democratic" character of his new form of travel. In the *Pensées*, Pascal uses the figure of the king to show that man's restlessness and need for diversion are universal in nature, and that the condition of boredom and anxiety is common to everyone. One would think that royal dignity

would be enough both to make the king happy, and to set him apart from the commoners, who need diversion (91). However, Pascal argues that this is not the case, for it is only the constant diversion created by his courtiers that keeps the king from being unhappy: “Et c’est enfin le plus grand sujet de félicité de la condition des rois, de [ce] qu’on essaie sans cesse à les divertir et à leur procurer toute sorte de plaisir. Le roi est environné de gens qui ne pensent qu’à divertir le roi, et l’empêcher de penser à lui. Car il est malheureux, tout roi qu’il est, s’il y pense” (87). Even a king would be miserable if he were abandoned by his courtiers and left alone to ponder his own existence, “un homme plein de misères” (91). De Maistre turns this argument on its head. Just as the king is potentially as miserable as the rest of us, so is the new form of travelling created by his narrator available to everyone, regardless of wealth, birth or age:

Le plaisir qu’on trouve à voyager dans sa chambre est à l’abri de la jalousie inquiète des hommes; il est indépendant de la fortune. Est-il, en effet, d’être assez malheureux, assez abandonné, pour n’avoir pas un réduit où il puisse se retirer et se cacher à tout le monde? Voilà tous les apprêts du voyage. Je suis sûr que tout homme sensé adoptera mon système, de quelque tempérament; qu’il soit avare ou prodigue, riche ou pauvre, jeune ou vieux, né sous la zone torride ou près du pôle, il peut voyager comme moi; enfin, dans l’immense famille des hommes qui fourmillent sur la surface de la terre, il n’en est pas un seul—non, pas un seul (j’entends, de ceux qui habitent des chambres)—qui puisse, après avoir lu ce livre, refuser son approbation à la nouvelle manière de voyager que j’introduis dans le monde. (41–42)

All men are potentially miserable when left alone in a room, Pascal writes. De Maistre’s narrator retorts that since practically all men have access to a room, they can all make use of the existential relief this specific form of travelling offers, which becomes “un adoucissement aux maux qu’ils endurent”—a “ressource assurée contre l’ennui” (41) that is available to everyone.

If the narrative style of the text is characterized by an aesthetics of zigzags and digressions, this mirrors the fundamental character of the method of travelling proposed by the narrator. The imaginary

journey that he presents to the reader takes on a specific form, that of wandering, movement characterized by sinuosity rather than linearity: “Il n’en est pas de plus attrayante [de jouissances], selon moi, que de suivre ses idées à la piste, comme le chasseur poursuit le gibier, sans affecter de tenir aucune route. Aussi, lorsque je voyage dans ma chambre, je parcours rarement une ligne droite” (48). His ideas are to the immobile traveller what the prey is to the hunter, the chase going in every possible direction. The narrator suggests that the best imaginary journeys come from letting go of all control of one’s thoughts and ideas, and so this new form of travel appears as an immobile *flânerie*. The passage thus bears a similarity to the ideas developed by Rousseau in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, where the Swiss philosopher promises to tell the reader “ce que j’ai pensé tout comme il m’est venu et avec aussi peu de liaison que les idées de la veille en ont ordinaire avec celles du lendemain” (41). What de Maistre’s narrator is praising is in fact the pleasures of *rêverie*, developed through the metaphor of travel.

The motif of the hunt in this passage is interesting in itself, as it resonates with a passage from the *Pensées* that appears in the same section as the image of solitary confinement. Pascal portrays hunting as an act emblematic of man’s tendency to avoid reflecting on his own condition:

Voilà tout ce que les hommes ont pu inventer pour se rendre heureux. Et ceux qui font sur cela les philosophes, et qui croient que le monde est bien peu raisonnable de passer tout le jour à courir après un lièvre qu’ils ne voudraient pas avoir acheté, ne connaissent guère notre nature. Ce lièvre ne nous garantirait pas de la vue de la mort et des misères, mais la chasse—qui nous en détourne—nous en garantit. (87)

For Pascal, it is the act of hunting, rather than its result, which enables man to escape boredom. The hunt constitutes the opposite of the solitude of the room, and is thus emblematic of man’s constant willingness to be distracted from the contemplation of his own existence. De Maistre’s narrator, for his part, unites these two opposites by humorously claiming that an erratic, imaginary hunt can be performed in solitary confinement. Thus, the Savoyard author underscores two of the main elements

that in Pascal's view make man miserable, namely inconsistency and boredom. The closed room, which is associated with boredom and the existential anguish stemming from man's encounter with his own emptiness, is presented as a privileged starting point for creativity and imagination; at the same time, this very journey takes on a form associated with agitation and anxiety, that of sinuous wandering.

An initial reading of the two authors—the sombre Christian apologist and the light-hearted epicurean—would perhaps lead us to the conclusion that the latter is circumventing in a playful manner the existential problem posed by the former. One might argue that de Maistre is simply creating a new form of diversion that can be performed within the boundaries of a room. A closer reading shows, however, that de Maistre's response to the Pascalian problem is subtler than might at first appear. A key word in his response is imagination, a notion which, as we will see, plays a central role in Pascal's philosophy. The specificity of de Maistre's method of travelling lies in the role of the imagination, which is, so to speak, the privileged means of transport. Imagination makes it possible for the narrator to transcend the boundaries of the closed room and access an infinite space in which to wander freely. But the closed room is not only that which is transcended; it is also the very thing that lays the groundwork for imaginary wandering. As Andrew Brown argues, the “isolation from society, and the relative absence of stimuli from the world outside” allow de Maistre's narrator to wander off into the infinite realm of the imaginary (xi). The narrator is thus capable of finding “infinite space in a nutshell” (xiv).

For de Maistre, physical confinement, prison, becomes the very condition of a particular form of freedom that is understood as imaginary wandering:

Charmant pays de l'imagination, toi que l'Être bienfaisant par excellence a livré aux hommes pour les consoler de la réalité, il faut que je te quitte. C'est aujourd'hui que certaines personnes, dont je dépends, prétendent me rendre ma liberté, comme s'ils me l'avaient enlevée! comme s'il était en leur pouvoir de me la ravir un seul instant, et de m'empêcher de parcourir à mon gré le

vaste espace toujours ouvert devant moi! —Ils m’ont défendu de parcourir une ville, un point; mais ils m’ont laissé l’univers entier: l’immensité et l’éternité sont à mes ordres. (132–33)

Confinement is beneficial in that it establishes physical boundaries that have the paradoxical effect of providing the narrator with immense freedom and power. Physical mobility, which people in the outside world associate with freedom, appears to be a poor substitute for the freedom that resides in the mobility of the imagination. Thus, the notions of punishment and exile are subverted and shown to be futile: “Eh! que ne me laissait-on achever mon voyage! Était-ce donc pour me punir qu’on m’avait relégué dans ma chambre?—dans cette contrée délicieuse, qui renferme tous les biens et toutes les richesses du monde? Autant vaudrait exiler une souris dans un grenier” (133). There are two essential elements in these passages: first, the idea of imaginary freedom through physical confinement; and second, the idea of confinement paradoxically giving access to “l’immensité et l’éternité,” to the infinite space of the imagination.

These ideas connect the works of de Maistre with one of his contemporaries and likely acquaintances, the Polish count, adventurer, and writer Jan Potocki (1761–1815).⁵ Admittedly, Potocki’s long, encyclopaedic novel, *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, probably written between 1791 and 1814, is very different in size and complexity to de Maistre’s two short imaginary journeys.⁶ Nevertheless, the fictions of Potocki and de Maistre share a common fascination with the creative potential of confinement, coupled with the theme of wandering. This fascination is represented through a literary style characterized by playfulness and a “sinuous” aesthetics.

Potocki’s novel recounts the journey of the young Walloon officer Alphonse van Worden through the mountain range of Sierra Morena, where he is detained for 61 days by a mysterious Muslim clan led by the sheik of the Gomelez. The sheik’s minions test the courage of van Worden by exposing him to a series of terrifying and troubling masquerades, and, most importantly, by having him listen to a set of stories which form a narrative labyrinth that doubles Alphonse’s physical wanderings in the Sierra Morena.⁷ The novel is structured in days and “decamérons,” something that immediately places

it in the tradition of Boccaccio's *Decamerone* and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*. This connection is further strengthened by the fact that Alphonse is exiled in the Sierra Morena (*Manuscrit [1810]* 113–14), a trope we also see in the frame narratives of Boccaccio and Marguerite de Navarre, and with the imprisoned narrator of de Maistre's *Voyage*. Moreover, the principal setting of the novel is a closed space in which an imaginary world opens up: the characters of the frame narrative assemble every evening in a cave, where they tell stories (143). It is primarily from within this closed space that the narrative labyrinth of the novel is developed;⁸ physical enclosure and immobility are elements that ultimately facilitate wanderings of the imagination.

De Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* does not stage a group of people gathering to tell stories, but it may nonetheless inscribe itself into the same tradition through the motifs of exile and confinement. According to Florence Lotterie, "[...] le *Voyage autour de ma chambre* s'insère dans la tradition de ces récits d'enfermement dans des lieux préservés des misères et des laideurs du monde, à la manière du *Décameron* de Boccace ou de l'*Heptaméron* de Marguerite de Navarre. La chambre est ce *locus amœnus* dont on ne sort qu'à regret, 'charmant pays de l'imagination' (chapitre XLII)" (29–30). Whereas Boccaccio's characters escape from the plague, and Marguerite de Navarre's characters seek refuge from a storm, the imaginary journey of de Maistre's protagonist can be read metaphorically as an escape from the terror of the French Revolution. The narrator's room creates a closed space of epicurean tranquility (Lotterie 30) which terror cannot penetrate, and where wandering and exile take the shape of a joyful reverie that replaces the sorrows and desperation of escape. One could ask if this is not also true of Potocki's novel: the exile and wandering of the protagonist within the isolated space of the Sierra Morena could be seen as expressing the need to escape the upheaval and political terror of the early 1790s, the period in which Potocki started writing his novel.⁹

Furthermore, both Potocki and de Maistre establish in their texts a setting of confinement, which is presented as a prerequisite for imaginary journeys. If the setting of the frame narrative in Potocki's novel is not explicitly claustrophilic in the same way as de Maistre's *Voyage*, there are,

nonetheless, specific episodes in the text that clearly explore the creative potential of confinement. Interestingly, the most striking of these episodes is a direct reference to the biography of Pascal. The protagonist of this episode is the eccentric, absent-minded, and brilliant mathematician don Pedro Velasquez, a quintessentially Pascalian figure. Potocki scholars have identified in the childhood story of Velasquez the allusion to an anecdote from the life of Pascal, as told by his sister Gilberte Périer (see Rohrbasser 320–21 and *Manuscrit [1810]* 468n1). According to Périer, at the age of twelve, after his father refused to teach him mathematics before he learned Latin and Greek, the young Blaise discovered certain fundamental laws of geometry by tracing figures on the tiles of his room with a piece of coal:

Mais cet esprit [Blaise] qui ne pouvait demeurer dans ces bornes, dès qu'il eut cette simple ouverture, que la mathématique donnait des moyens de faire des figures infailliblement justes, il se mit lui-même à rêver, et, à ses heures de récréation, étant venu dans une salle où il avait accoutumé de se divertir, il prenait du charbon, et faisait des figures sur les carreaux, cherchant les moyens, par exemple, de faire un cercle parfaitement rond, un triangle dont les côtés et les angles fussent égaux, et d'autres choses semblables. Il trouvait tout cela lui seul sans peine; ensuite il cherchait les proportions des figures entre elles. Mais comme le soin de mon père avait été si grand de lui cacher toutes ces choses qu'il n'en savait pas même les noms, il fut contraint lui-même de s'en faire. (5)

Similarly, in Potocki's novel, the twelve-year-old Velasquez single-handedly discovers the binominal law by counting windowpanes after his father forbids him from becoming a mathematician and insists he learn more mundane skills, notably dancing. Ironically, it is precisely this imprisonment by his father—the punishment for refusing to comply with his educational plan—that leads to Velasquez's mathematical efflorescence:

Accoutumé comme je l'étais à la plus grande liberté, la prison me parut d'abord insupportable: je pleurai longtemps et tout en pleurant, je tournais les yeux vers une grande fenêtre carrée, la

seule qu'il y eût dans cette salle basse, et je me mis à en compter les vitres qui étaient petites et carrées [...]. Je multipliai les carreaux de la hauteur par ceux de la base et je vis avec surprise que j'avais le nombre général de mes vitres. Mes sanglots furent moins fréquents, ma douleur moins vive. Je refis mon calcul en omettant tantôt une bande de vitres, tantôt deux, soit de la hauteur, soit de la base. Je compris alors que la multiplication n'était qu'une addition répétée et que les surfaces pouvaient se mesurer aussi bien que les longueurs. (*Manuscrit [1810]* 467)

In the pages preceding this domestic imprisonment, the young Velasquez is portrayed as an innately curious boy, one who takes great pleasure in wandering ceaselessly around the island where they live (464). His confinement is therefore a particularly harsh punishment, even though it has the opposite effect of what his father intended: it stimulates the boy's imagination and natural talent for mathematics, revealing in him a young genius that evokes the figure of Pascal. This episode from Potocki's novel borrows the structure of Gilberte Périér's anecdote in which the father's attempt to control and restrict the intellectual development of the son has the ironic effect of stimulating it. In both cases, the father's immediate reaction is one of joy at discovering the genius of his son, despite the latter's disobedience (Périér 6; *Manuscrit [1810]* 469).

If the final result of confinement in the story of Velasquez is an ironic reversal of the father's intention, there is perhaps another ironic reversal at play in the way Potocki combines the Pascalian figure with the motif of confinement. By juxtaposing the allusion to the anecdote from Pascal's childhood with the motif of the closed room, Potocki can be seen as responding to the philosopher's famous passage on diversion and boredom. The text depicts the positive side of boredom, thus revealing how the restrictions of confinement can actually be beneficial for the creativity of the subject. Moreover, the episode is one of three prison scenes in Potocki's novel that explore the potential of the closed room for making way to movements of the imagination. In addition to Velasquez, the two characters Diègue Hervas and the marquis of Torres Rovellas experience episodes of imprisonment that have positive and stimulating effects, creating cognitive and affective movements (334–35 and 442).¹⁰

Set in a novel otherwise dominated by the motifs of travel and wandering, these scenes reveal to us a text which, like Xavier de Maistre's imaginary journey, entertains a dual interest in claustrophilia and wandering. Although initially paradoxical, there seems in fact to be an underlying logic to this dual preoccupation, namely a hidden affinity between the enclosed space and the open spaces of wandering (see Haugen 142–45). Indeed, in a passage from one of Potocki's travelogues, the Polish author unites the topics of wandering and inconstancy with that of visual uniformity:

Je vous avouerai que ce n'est pas sans plaisir que je me suis retrouvé en pleine mer. Ce spectacle uniforme du ciel & de l'eau qui afflige tant de voyageurs, ne produit point cet effet sur moi. Au contraire, il me semble que la vue de cet espace illimité allume l'imagination, & y élève plus vivement le désir de le parcourir. Tout me plaît dans cet élément, jusqu'à son inconstance. J'aime à penser qu'elle peut facilement déranger tous mes projets de voyages, & qu'il suffit d'un coup de vent, pour me porter sur les côtes presque inconnues de Guriel ou de Mingrèlie, ou chez les féroces Abassas. (*Voyage en Turquie et en Égypte* 16)

In one sense, the uniformity of the maritime landscape implies the same "relative absence of stimuli" (Brown xi) that we find in de Maistre's closed room. The maritime horizon, uniform and unlimited at the same time, stimulates Potocki's imagination. As with de Maistre, this idea is combined with the notion of wandering: the Polish adventurer praises the inconstant nature of the ocean. In fact, for Potocki, the ocean is a privileged place that inspires reverie and movements of the mind: "Mais qu'avec bien plus de délices, ma pensée se reporte au temps où étonnée de sa force naissante, elle n'étoit jamais plus active que lorsqu'elle ne s'occupoit d'aucun objet en particulier, & que facile à s'égarer, d'un élan elle se portait au-delà de toutes les choses existantes; & c'est alors que j'abitois des vaisseaux" (*Voyage en Hollande* 75). Xavier de Maistre depicts something similar in his imaginary journey in the *Expédition nocturne*, explicitly establishing a link between the room and the maritime landscape:

En outre, aucun objet extérieur ne pouvait me distraire. Semblable à ces navigateurs qui, perdus sur le vaste Océan, ne voient plus que le ciel et la mer, je ne voyais que le ciel et ma chambre, et les objets extérieurs les plus voisins sur lesquels pouvaient se porter mes regards étaient la lune ou l'étoile du matin: ce qui me mettait dans un rapport immédiat avec le ciel, et donnait à mes pensées un vol élevé qu'elles n'auraient jamais eu si j'avais choisi mon logement au rez-de-chaussée. (93)

Here too, the enclosed space and the maritime horizon share a uniformity that has the effect of stimulating the imagination. In the case of Potocki's novel, we can see how, for the Gypsy chief Avadoro, the most prolific of the novel's narrators, the privileged *locus* of storytelling is the cave where the characters assemble in the evening to listen to the accounts of his adventures. This particular cave is described as combining the notion of enclosure with the dual characteristics of extension and uniformity that characterize the maritime landscape: "[...] une grotte dont la vue s'étendait fort au-delà de la portée de nos sens, c'est-à-dire que l'horizon y était si éloigné qu'il semblait se confondre avec le ciel" (143). In recreating the conditions of a prehistoric oral culture where man seeks refuge in caves, spending his time telling and listening to stories, Potocki shows how confinement and uniformity can encourage creative storytelling, thus paving the way for the infinite extension of the imagination.

Uniformity, however, in the confinement of a room as well as in the traveller's contact with the infinity of the horizon, also has the capacity to cause unrest. This is what Pascal refers to when using the image of the room, and what Potocki observes in travellers tormented by the uniform view of the sky and water (*Voyage en Turquie et en Égypte* 16). In both cases, man is confronted with an emptiness that is not purely positive, as it can produce anguish. While Pascal perceives this emptiness as a fundamental problem of human existence that only the Christian faith can remedy, Potocki and de Maistre embrace emptiness, finding in it the very starting point of a creative process, one that is portrayed in their writings as the wanderings of an exalted imagination.¹¹

This combination of the notions of exalted imagination and wandering indicates a Rousseauist influence. As Matthew Maguire has shown in his book on imagination from Pascal to Tocqueville, Pascal's *Pensées* represent a decisive moment in the development of the idea of the exalted imagination; but it is only with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that this idea is combined with the notion of freedom, and associated specifically—both in the *Confessions* and in the *Rêveries*—with physical and mental wanderings, and with a form of writing that reflects the notion of “imaginative flux” (Maguire 137). As such, the works of Potocki and de Maistre clearly belong to what we might call a “post-Rousseauist paradigm” of imagination, as they both associate the imaginary wanderings of their characters with creative freedom.

The problem that Potocki and de Maistre seek to resolve remains nonetheless fundamentally Pascalian, as they are also trying to strike a compromise between agitation and repose, activity and rest. As already indicated, the conflict between man's need for repose and his constant restlessness was a key problem for the seventeenth-century philosopher:

Ils croient chercher sincèrement le repos, et ne cherchent en effet que l'agitation. Ils ont un instinct secret qui les porte à chercher le divertissement et l'occupation au-dehors, qui vient du ressentiment de leurs misères continuelles; et ils ont un autre instinct secret, qui reste de la grandeur de notre première nature, qui leur fait connaître que le bonheur n'est en effet que dans le repos, et non pas dans le tumulte. (Pascal 88–89)

As Maguire writes, “for Pascal, human beings can hold neither to rest nor to agitation, but only to the prospect of repose from within agitation” (47). In the face of this apparently irresolvable dilemma, it is the imagination alone that offers the possibility of resolution.

Certainly, for Pascal, imagination is a medium that sustains pride, the ultimate spiritual disorder. If it is a medium through which man can find happiness, this form of happiness is illusory and incomplete in comparison with the happiness of faith, which lies at the heart of his apologetic argument. However, for readers uninterested in, or even oblivious to, this religious argument, Pascal's

reflections on the nature of the imagination have their own value, independent of the apologetic conclusion:

For a reader within the world of an exalted imagination, without an experience of Pascal's faith, Pascal's own writing suggests a duality within temporal experience, with the benefit of imagination and without it. For this reader, the Pascalian dual condition of humanity in its greatness and wretchedness would not rest on the conflict between his natural existence and his supernatural origin, but between the 'real' world of uncertainty, chaos, ignorance, arbitrary law and morality, and death, and the world of imagination and illusion, in which confidence, hope, action, assured conviction, and happiness are possible. This reader would think in Pascal's terms, but towards ends radically distinct from Pascal's. (Maguire 45–46)

In Maguire's interpretation, Pascal posits the prospect of a form of human happiness in which imagination takes a leading role. This happiness can only be achieved, however, through a paradoxical act: "the imagination must find a kind of repose in agitation, and agitation in repose" (48).

It seems that this paradoxical act is precisely what both de Maistre and Potocki are striving towards. By ignoring the apologetic conclusions of Pascal, or rather by concerning themselves more with temporal as opposed to religious happiness, these writers are seeking a resolution to the existential dilemma of boredom and anxiety, of repose and agitation, through a paradoxical compromise: mental wandering and creativity born out of confinement and physical repose. For these two writers and great travellers, whose works are haunted by the duality of claustrophilia and the spirit of restless wandering, this compromise is realized through the affinity between the closed room and the radically open, even infinite, space of the imagination.

For de Maistre, this compromise takes literary form in the motif of confinement, which is the prerequisite for imaginary travel. Potocki takes a similar approach to his contemporary with the imprisoned characters of his novel. However, the Polish count also gives another literary form to the

compromise through the Gypsy storyteller Avadoro, a character that incarnates both the desire for physical wandering and the need for repose:

[J]'ose vous assurer qu'il serait presque impossible de trouver un homme plus inconstant que je l'ai toujours été. J'ai été inconstant jusque dans mon inconstance, car l'idée d'un bonheur tranquille et d'une vie retirée m'a toujours suivi dans mes courses vagabondes, et le goût du changement m'a toujours arraché à la retraite. [...] [M]e connaissant enfin moi-même, j'ai mis fin à ces inquiètes alternatives en me fixant dans cette horde de Bohémiens. C'est bien une espèce de retraite et de vie uniforme, mais au moins n'ai-je pas le malheur d'avoir toujours devant les yeux les mêmes arbres, les mêmes rochers ou, ce qui me serait encore plus insupportable, les mêmes rues, les mêmes murs et les mêmes toits. (*Manuscrit [1804]* 122)

Potocki's *errant* actively seeks a compromise that may solve this Pascalian problem, not directly through physical immobility, but rather by restraining his wanderings to a specific, circumscribed area. Interestingly, the landscape of this area is portrayed in the novel as being uniquely adapted to the act of storytelling, an act in which Avadoro not only excels, but to which he also gives a strikingly sinuous expression, as his stories constantly bifurcate into new, embedded narratives. Thus, the notion of imaginary, sinuous movement is united with the compromise of agitation and repose through this specific character.

None of these compromises, neither those of de Maistre nor those of Potocki, would have been possible without the influence of Rousseau, or, for that matter, without the philosophical and literary reflections of the Enlightenment on the prerequisites of human happiness. However, both the problem and the prospect of its resolution as it appears in the works of these two writers, are to be found in Pascal's *Pensées*. While Xavier de Maistre and Jan Potocki's fictional appropriations address only an isolated part of the *Pensées*, they are nonetheless able to provide a subtle, secular, and humorous response to the existential problem of man's restlessness.

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¹ Gilbert Durand has described de Maistre's literary production as presenting a "double image obsédante de la pérégrination et de la claustrophilie" (77).

² Precisely how famous the *Voyage autour de ma chambre* became in the early nineteenth century may be illustrated by the following quotation from Victor Hugo in 1829, thirty-four years after de Maistre's text was first published: "Il y a surtout deux ouvrages qu'il est impossible que vous n'ayez pas lus et que je vous présenterais comme offrant une frappante analogie avec mon livre, si son principal mérite à mes yeux n'était pas d'être sans modèle. C'est le *Voyage autour de ma chambre* et le *Sentimental Journey* de Sterne. Jamais livre, jamais roman ne se sont plus vendus que cela" (419).

³ On the relationship between de Maistre and this tradition, see Sangsue 163.

⁴ This places de Maistre's texts in line with an eighteenth-century novelistic tradition that Jean Rousset has described as being characterized by an aesthetics of the "ligne sinueuse", associated with writers such as Marivaux, Fielding, Sterne, and Diderot (Rousset 88). It also places de Maistre in line with an aesthetic tradition that followed after him, represented by Rodolphe Töpffer and Théophile Gautier and their humourist and imaginary travels in "zigzag" (*Voyage autour de ma chambre* 46n3).

⁵ According to Potocki's biographers, the Polish count regularly visited Joseph de Maistre, Xavier's brother, in St. Petersburg in 1807, where he is also likely to have met Xavier (Rosset and Triaire 176, 401).

⁶ Potocki never saw the publication of a complete version of his novel. Two fragmentary versions were printed in Paris in 1813 and 1814. The surviving manuscripts indicate that Potocki wrote at least two distinct versions. One was written in the period between 1804 and 1808, but was then abandoned before it came to a conclusion. This unfinished work has been published in a modern edition as the "1804 version." Reworking the novel, Potocki brought it to a conclusion with what today is known as the "1810 version." For more on the history of the text, see François Rosset and Dominique Triaire's introductions to the Peeters editions of the novel.

⁷ I take the liberty of referring to chapter 1.8. of my own book, where I analyse the labyrinthine narrative structure of Potocki's novel (Haugen 96–117).

⁸ One might note the exception of the Wandering Jew, whose restlessness forces him to tell his story during the daytime wandering of the characters in the frame narrative (*Manuscrit [1804]* 384).

However, with the disappearance of the Wandering Jew as a narrator from the 1810 version of the novel, the cave becomes the primary *locus* of storytelling within the frame narrative.

⁹ When Potocki left for the Caucasus in 1797, he expressed great joy at escaping a “Europe livrée aux troubles,” hoping instead to “[se] reposer dans la tranquille et paisible Asie” (*Voyage à Astrakan et sur la ligne du Caucase* 141). On the setting of the Sierra Morena as an isolated space in *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, see Rosset 227.

¹⁰ For an extensive analysis of these prison scenes, see Haugen 146–47. For more on the notion of imprisonment and “désir claustrophile” in the eighteenth-century novel, see Berchtold 36. The story of Hervas, who like Velasquez is a scientist, might in fact also be read in reference to Pascal. His last words before committing suicide can be seen to constitute a parody of Pascal's famous wager on God's existence, which posits that one gains infinitely and loses nothing from believing in Him (Pascal 113–116). Potocki's atheist appears to subscribe to this idea, pronouncing a final, precautionary, and half-hearted belief in God: “— Ô mon Dieu, s'il y en a un, ayez pitié de mon âme, si j'en ai une” (*Manuscrit [1810]* 349).

¹¹ In his travelogues, Potocki is quite consistent in his praise of vast and monotone landscapes, such as one finds on the open sea or in the Caucasus, where “la plaine bleu[âtre] se perd au loin et se confond avec un ciel de la même couleur” (*Voyage à Astrakan et sur la ligne du Caucase* 124). In his imaginary journeys, the Savoyard de Maistre expresses a more ambiguous feeling towards the notion of emptiness and open space, at least if we are to take at face value the sentiments expressed in the *Expédition*

nocturne. For de Maistre's narrator, the open plains are comparable to a "femme sans visage qu'on ne saurait aimer, malgré toutes ses bonnes qualités" (128).