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CHILDHOOD AND “GROWN-UP” HOMES. HOME-LEAVING AND HOME-COMING IN ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY’S *COURRIER SUD* AND *LE PETIT PRINCE*

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ДОМОВЕ НА ДЕТСТВОТО И ЗРЕЛОСТТА. ОТПЪТУВАНЕ И ЗАВРЪЩАНЕ В РОМАНИТЕ „ЮЖНА ПОЩА“ И „МАЛКИЯТ ПРИНЦ“ НА АНТОАН ДЪО СЕНТ-ЕГЗЮПЕРИ

From *Courrier sud* to *Le Petit prince*, Saint-Exupéry’s literary quests have not changed much of their focus, but have yielded more refined and simplified insights. Both novels employ pairs of protagonists (one of whom is the narrator) who are constructed as versions of each other – an older and a younger self. The older self (the narrator) is passive and grown-up or earth-bound (in *Courrier sud*), while the younger one is “aerial”, adventurous and homeless. The “younger” perspective dominates the texts and operates as a source of revelation, inspiration and mentorship for its “older” counterpart – Bernis and the little prince’s home quests enlighten and invigorate their more rational and skeptical companions.

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Ключови думи: дом, бездомен, късен романтизъм

Although written at a considerable temporal distance from each other – *Courrier sud* (*Southern Mail*) being Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s first acclaimed work, *Le Petit prince* (*The Little Prince*) – the last one (*Citadelle* (*Wisdom of the Sands*), his lifetime’s book, was published posthumously), both are genetically linked and share a common source of inspiration – desert experience (most memorable and lasting during his stay at Cape Juby) and intense homesickness. The books were conceived and accomplished under entirely different circumstances – *Courrier sud*, Schiff observes, was written on “a door balanced on two oil drums” in a wooden shack in western Sahara (Schiff 1994: 3); *Le Petit prince* had its birth in the living room of Silvia Reinhardt’s apartment in New York during the writer’s two-year retreat to the US on the eve of World War II. Paradoxically, Saint-Exupéry would measure his American period by greater alienation and barrenness than the isolation he

experienced at Cape Juby, claiming that his desert dwelling was “the home he most loved” (Schiff 1994: 30).

Courrier sud and *Le Petit prince* can be read as “twinned” stories or as variations on Saint-Exupéry’s favourite plot: the pilot’s home-coming, trials and home-leaving. The stories which make the draft of *Courrier sud* - “L’Aviateur” and “L’Évasion de Jacques Bernis” introduce key elements of the protagonist Bernis’s quest: his service as a pilot, return to the place of his childhood from where he feels estranged, home-leaving and death. Alienation, trials and death are cornerstones of the plot of *Le Petit prince* as well. Both narratives stage twinned protagonists – Bernis and his anonymous friend the narrator, the nameless aviator-narrator and the Little prince, respectively. One of the critical readings of *Courrier sud* suggests boldly (but not ungroundedly) that Bernis is the narrator’s alter self: “The narrator serves a variety of functions in the novel, perhaps the chief one being to play the part of Bernis’s ‘alter ego’. Their long-awaited meeting at Cape Juby is symbolic of a coming face to face with the man he has so far been, and of self-rejection” (Parry 1974: 306). If we adopt the view that Bernis is the narrator’s “younger” self in the narrative, then we might read the whole novel psychologically as a narrative of self-exploration which stages identity splitting and an attempt at reconciliation of two conflicting identities (Bernis’s and the narrator’s). Although such a complicated design would hardly have been Saint-Exupéry’s intention, it testifies to the therapeutic effect the writing of the novel had on his own coming to terms with a traumatic love relationship, and his attempt to leave a hurt ego behind. A similar integrity forms between the pilot-narrator and the Little prince in *Le Petit prince*. A minor, but interesting detail helps us assume that the homesick Prince is patterned after Bernis – his planet, an asteroid, bears a name that coincides with the inscription on Bernis’s plane – number B 612. Significantly, the Little prince’s death and return to his planet in the star-lit nocturnal sky are variations on Bernis’s death in the desert, which, as the narrator comments wistfully, helps him reintegrate with the stars of the Southern Cross, the “source” of his homesickness. These instances of convergence between the two narratives help us establish tighter and stronger relations between them. If we read *Le Petit prince* as a fairy tale only (as Saint-Exupéry intended it to be a children’s book), we will easily distinguish between the familiar fairy tale positions of the miraculous boy, descended from the magical world, and that of the unbelieving down-to-earth and sad grown-up aviator (a gloomy representative of adulthood), who is benevolently allowed to synchronise his deteriorated vision with that of superior childish wisdom. This manner of reading the story is classical and, by no means, out of focus. However, it does not provide a sufficient ground to reflect on Saint-Exupéry’s lifelong refinement of his recurrent themes, images and language in search of ultimate simplicity and wisdom. The writer’s quests, which begin with *Courrier sud*, re-emerge with enhanced intensity in *Le Petit prince* (by virtue of the story’s closeness to the writer’s death and the intensity of his wish for childhood), and pivot on alienation from childhood and attempted return.

Itineraries of home-leaving and home-coming in *Courrier sud* and *Le Petit prince*. Late imperial romance routes

Courrier sud tells the story of Jacques Bernis who is flying his way south into Africa after his attempt at homecoming in Paris fails and he leaves back his childhood dream of love, home and settling. While in Paris, as his letters to the narrator tell us, he meets Geneviève with whom he has been in love since his childhood. Unhappily married, she is pleased to see Bernis. When her only child suddenly falls ill and dies, Geneviève turns to him for comfort. In an effort to escape her agony, she allows him to take her away, but on the drive out of Paris she realises that leaving everything, she cannot combat her inner disintegration and falls sick. Bernis returns her home, having passed but one night nursing her through her fever. He wanders in Paris and overhears a sermon in Notre Dame that he finds full of words empty of faith. Bernis attempts more bodily satisfactions but the experience with a prostitute is equally empty. On his way back south he stops by to visit Geneviève who has retreated to her childhood home and finds her dying. He continues his dangerous flight across the Sahara, lands at the narrator’s outpost where he tells him his story, then one more time at a farther outpost managed by a lonely sergeant – “shepherd of the stars” (De Saint-Exupéry 1994: 142-3),¹ then his plane crashes (an attack by dissident tribes is implied) and his body is found lying in the sand with arms spread cross-like and face turned to the sky.

The plot of the world-famous *Le Petit prince* focuses on a stranded aviator’s encounter with a little boy from another planet who happens to land on Planet Earth. Their meeting, which takes place in the desert, follows the aviator (and narrator)’s remembrance of a bitter childhood drawing experience in which none of the grown-ups would discern his pictures correctly, always figuring out a hat instead of an elephant engulfed by a boa constrictor. This discouraging experience prompts him to study more “serious” subjects, such as mathematics, geography and physics, and become a pilot instead of an artist. In the course of his conversation and experience with the Little prince, however, he restores some of his previous skills and draws a series of pictures of the Prince’s tiny planet – the planet itself, comprising one active and a few sleeping volcanoes, a chair on which he sits to contemplate sunsets, the rose, the baobabs that threaten to entwine the planet with their roots and explode it, the Little prince’s journey – his leaving and visits to a succession of other planets till he reaches the earth. The gallery of pictures (Saint-Exupéry’s own drawings which he produced for the book) provides a narrative within the narrative, a story that confirms and complements verbal narration. Apart from entertaining his younger audience, the story-in-pictures introduces the perspective of the narrator’s younger self who re-emerges to claim what adulthood robbed him of – childhood’s clearer and wiser perspective.

¹Quotes by Saint-Exupéry’s works and their translations will henceforward be referenced with page numbers only.

Gradually, the Little prince tells the narrator the story of his journey – the planets he visits prior to the earth, his frustration with solitude and his quest for human presence in the desert, his conversations with the snake and the fox, the rail pointsman and the trader of thirst-quenching pills. The Prince finds himself beside the narrator in the last week of his stay on earth. They both suffer from thirst and go on a quest of a water source. Once found, it becomes the source of unspeakable joy in them and confirms the fox's words that the most essential is invisible to the eyes. After exposing himself willingly to a snake-bite, the Prince dies and returns to his planet, leaving the aviator in the assurance that the boy is safe at home and his laughter can be heard if the pilot listens to the stars.

The protagonists' home-leaving and their attempted home-coming constitute the central discourses in both works. The moment of departure is the starting point of their entrance into the outside world of adventure where they make discoveries, attempt conquests and undertake domestication. Both narratives likewise assert the uniqueness of the domestic world (but also its problematic accessibility) by moving the trajectory of the protagonists' quests circularly and promising a return home. Home-coming is, however, admitted less categorically than home-leaving – in *Courrier sud* Bernis finds his death in the desert while the Little prince is transported back to his planet by snakebite.

As a sequence of the protagonists' departures and their growing up, the domestic world, which they inhabit prior to their leaving, undergoes transformation. It changes either in a movement towards closure (Geneviève's marriage to Herlin introduces her to the routine practices of stagnant domesticity, Bernis discovers a stagnant, prison-like world in his frequently attempted returns); or, as a spectacular alienation of the domestic place from the home-seeking subject (the Little prince cannot cross the distance back to his planet alive). Both Bernis and the Little prince's homes are variations on Saint-Exupéry's biographically defined domestic world – the former, closer to the prototypical Saint-Maurice de Rémens; the latter, more likely to combine elements of overflowed non-European lands (baobabs from Africa, volcanoes from Punta Arenas, flowers) and European garden elements (a rose – from the gardens of Saint-Maurice). Their domestic worlds are, therefore, symptomatic of the metropolitan (in the first case) and wider colonial (in the second) range of empire, its processes and transformations. The Little prince's planet, in particular, appears as a refined version of Saint-Exupéry's dreams of domestication and colonisation in *Terre des hommes*: the Prince is a gardener par excellence – every day he plucks baobab weeds, cleans the sleeping volcanoes, cooks his meals on the only active one. Significantly, the pernicious elements in his planetary world are imported from the unexplored zones of the earth and form part of a fairy tale, a childish drawing's world of distorted proportions: the baobabs are tiny stalks, the volcanoes are knee-high. The rose (an European garden element) dominates the Little prince's planet. Her emergence is the central event in his planetary life – she becomes his time-consuming horticultural project and main concern. To guarantee

her safety, he shelters her from the wind, removes the pernicious baobab shoots and dusts the volcanoes (the non-European elements in this horticultural parable). The effect of miniaturisation in the construction of the Little prince’s domestic world draws on the synthesis of two major visual angles at work in Saint-Exupéry’s fiction – the aerial perspective (which projects a small-size world) and the childlike vision, which refers to the serious things as “playthings”. Both the diminutive effect of the “view from above” and the diminutive childlike sight are employed to construct a short-size and manageable world, easy to maintain and keep in check. Both are visual strategies that enable the imperialisation of space in Saint-Exupéry’s narratives.

Apart from its biographical underpinnings, the association of home with childhood in Saint-Exupéry’s fiction likewise shares in the frustration of imperial romance writers with the increasingly rationalised imperial world and their nostalgia for the early, “childhood” days of empire. In John McClure’s words,

It [imperial romance] requires a [...] wild and mysterious, dramatically dangerous [world] [...] The ultimate enemies of romance [...] are not the foreign foes confronted on the field of battle in the text itself, but the foes held at bay by these essential antagonists: the banal, quotidian world of calculation and compromise from which the heroes of romance are always in flight, and the globally routinized world [...] a world utterly devoid of romantic regions (McClure 1994: 3).

I suggest that Saint-Exupéry’s works under discussion partake of the quests and concerns of (late) imperial romance in that they register anxieties produced by anticipations of global gridding and routinization. The life-course patterns in his narratives are based on a contrastive juxtaposition of childhood-adulthood, the latter being the “degraded” member in this opposition. Compared to the worlds of childhood, the worlds of adulthood are dominated by mediocre rationality, oppressive facticity and disappearing mystery. Apart from being concerned with the protagonists’ personal quests, his works reflect on the “aging” of the imperial world, its calcification and loss of vitality.

Home-leaving forms a major itinerary of “aging” in both texts. In *Courrier sud*, flying enables Bernis to “discover” and “conquer” unknown places:

Tanger, cette petite ville de rien du tout, c’était ma première conquête. C’était, vois-tu, mon premier cambriolage. Oui. A la verticale, d’abord, mais si loin [...] Deux minutes plus tard, debout sur l’herbe, j’étais jeune, comme posé dans quelque étoile où la vie recommence [...] Et puis, tu me connais, cette hâte de repartir, de chercher plus loin [...], car j’étais ce sourcier don’t le coudrier tremble et qu’il promène sur le monde jusqu’au trésor (36-7).

[Tangier, that one-horse town, was my first conquest. My first theft. Vertical at first, and from so far [...] Two minutes later, standing on the grass, I felt young, as though put down on some star where life begins anew [...] And then – you know how I am – that haste to be off again and to search elsewhere [...] For I was that diviner whose forked branch trembles and which he carries over the wide world until the treasure is found (29)].

His hunger for the unknown, his nomadic life of a modern-day “crusader” and subsequent homelessness configure the late imperial romance explorer’s tribulation which consists in the desire for conquest and the anxiety that once conquered and logically explained, the spaces of mystery and adventure would disappear.

The Little prince’s flight from his planet likewise involves experiences of demystification. He finds out that the extraordinary rose, baobabs and volcanoes on his planet have their ordinary counterparts – a rose garden, ordinary trees and high-rising mountains in the adult aviator’s world. The latter appears as a rationalised counterpart of the Little prince’s childhood abode - there is only one sunrise and sunset on earth to mark the day and night (in comparison with the numerous sunsets on his planet), the landscapes are dry, angular, hard and solitary, people are preoccupied with mechanical activities (the switchman directs the speedy pointless passage of trains; the tradesman sells thirst-quenching pills that supplant the mystery of water-quests). Descending into a world of routine practices and rational vision, the Little prince finds himself disconnected from the sources of mystery and adventure on Planet Childhood. Their deficit prompts him to embark upon his earthly quests, experience frustration with routinised metropolitan life and, finally, journey to the desert where he enters a world “in the making” and undertakes domestication and taming.

Home-leaving in *Courrier sud*

Courrier sud begins retrospectively with Bernis’s outbound flight to Dakar and introduces the reason for his leaving – Geneviève’s death and his failure to return home. The narrator is willing to remember and tell the story of Bernis and Geneviève in order to pay homage to their love and as a therapeutic act in order to free himself from the sadness of his memories:

Je dois revenir en arrière, raconter ces deux mois passés, autrement qu’en resterait-il? Quand les événements que je vais dire auront peu à peu terminé leur faible remous, [...] le monde de nouveau me paraîtra sûr (31);

[I must go back and tell of those past two months, for otherwise what would be left of them? [...] when the emotions they aroused in me [...] have been dulled, then all will once again seem right with the world (25)].

The story of Bernis’s attempted return is preceded by a summary of his previous departures and arrivals that establish the generally pessimistic mood of his experience of returns: since he started his nomadic pilot’s life, he has been haunted by a sense of stagnation, imprisonment and sameness of his native place. Compared to the fluid and shape-shifting desert landscapes, the narrator observes, French country landscapes are hard and clear-cut, they are part of an immobile, postcard-like, prison-like world. The peace, transparency and permanence of its forms are void of life “like a dead Jerusalem that spreads before a belated pilgrim”: “J’étais pareil a ce pèlerine qui arrive une minute trop tard à Jérusalem. Son désir, sa foi venaient de mourir: il trouve des pierres” (36); [“I was like the pilgrim who reaches Jerusalem

one minute too late. His yearning, his faith having died, all he finds are stones” (28)]. Bernis’s encounter with grown-up Geneviève upon one of his returns promises re-enchancement with the past childhood world and anticipates home-coming. The world she presently inhabits, however, thwarts such prospects – it lacks the elasticity and vitality of her former bond with the expanse of mystery and adventure. She lives with Herlin who is the first one of Saint-Exupéry’s bureaucrat-like protagonists (vain, self-absorbed and inactive), and her domestic place is shaped by rituals that suggest demystification and ensure safe, but stagnant existence “on the surface”. Geneviève’s maternity seems to keep the vitality of her “aged” home as her son belongs to the mysterious world of childhood. Upon his birth, she feels reintegrated with the spring and trees –

Elle s’était sentie [...] liée à tout et faisant partie d’un grand concert [...] Les arbres visaient, montaient, tiraient un printemps du sol: elle était leur égale. Et son enfant près d’elle respirait faiblement et c’était le moteur du monde et sa faible respiration animait le monde” (54-5).

[She had felt [...] sure of herself, linked to everything, part of a universal concert [...] The trees were alive and soaring, sucking up the springtime from the ground. She was their equal. Her child by her side was breathing ever so faintly, and this faint breath was the pulse and motor of the world (39)].

Conversely, the child’s death, which coincides with Bernis’s arrival, signifies the ultimate calcification of Geneviève’s domestic world, its passage from womb to tomb and loss of the forward motion that ensures permanence (the living house should transport generations in time (85)).

Bernis’s childhood quest of the buried treasure is then recast in his pursuit of “buried” Geneviève. His itinerary reintroduces him to the enchanted space of the childhood world with its dark recesses and subterranean regions. His love for Geneviève is Orphic – his attempt to “unearth” her out of the tomb of her home is configured by routes of descent, common to myths, chivalric romances and classical texts such as the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Chrétien de Troyes’s *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (where Gawain descends into the land of death, Gorre, in search of captured Guinevere), Dante’s *Inferno*. The pattern of descent, as Frye observes, brings the subjects of a higher world down to a “ ‘prison-house’, corruption or confusion” (100), “In the descent there is a growing isolation and immobility [...] [the] hero or heroine are trapped in labyrinths or prisons” (129). Bernis’s attempt to reach Geneviève leads him into a chaotic maze-like subworld: he transports her through dark empty streets at night to a hotel where he nurses her in her fever. There he finds out that she cannot get disconnected from her domestic surroundings – she asks him to take her back to Paris: “Elle était cramponnée à ses draps blancs, à son été, à ses évidences, et je n’ai pas pu l’emporter” (134-5); “She clung to her white sheets, her summer, her “realities”, and I could not tear her from them” (88)]. Bernis

sees her for the last time when she retreats to the ancestral home of her childhood, which suggests the ultimate closure of the domestic world before him.

Geneviève's dying house likewise prefigures his frustration with the immobile and prison-like orderliness of the wider land of the metropolis, which he overflies as he takes off for the desert. From above, he describes the European world in terms of fixed, ordered forms or, viewed from higher altitude, as a place of mineral solidity: "Un coup de palonnier: le paysage entier dérive. Cette lumière est minérale, ce sol apparaît minéral: ce qui fait la douceur, le parfum, la faiblesse des choses vivantes est abolit" (16); ["A kick to the rudder-paddle and the entire landscape tilts. A steely light above a mineral earth: gone, abolished is all that makes for the softness, the scent, the frailty of living things" (16)]. His view suggests alienation and willingness to disconnect himself from Europe as it has become a place of stagnation, loss and disillusionment for him. By contrast, his desert route unfolds in accelerated motion. The pilot is actively engaged with Nature's menacing forces – he struggles with poor visibility and desert storms, manages to "conquer" them and tries to "domesticate" desert landscapes. Like the pilot in *Terre des hommes*, Bernis is looking for places where the world is still "pliant" and he can experience mystery and adventure. A late imperial romance assertion of non-European territories as places of re-enchantment with adventure, is once again made in Saint-Exupéry's novel.

Entering the desert, Bernis attempts to contain its space by drawing lines of order. After disclosing his recollections of dying Geneviève to the narrator who awaits him at a desert outpost, he takes off again and fragments of his memories seem to reappear in his imaginative reconstruction of the African coastline. In his imagination the desert landscape takes shape in the already established pattern of images which he conjures up to describe the view from Geneviève's ancestral house: "Par la fenêtre il se pencha vers la campagne. Elle était tendue sous le soleil, avec des lieues de route blanche à parcourir" (129, 130); ["He peered through the window at the countryside. It lay stretched out before him, with long leagues of [white] country roads" (85)]. Bernis seems to observe the shoreline from the same vantage point as that which Geneviève's window had offered him, and "Le sahara de sable jaune [qui] mord sur une mer bleu comme un trottoir interminable [... et] l'éclatante blancheur de ce territoire insoumis" (136), ["The yellow sands of the Sahara [which] curbed the blue sea like an interminable pavement [... and] the dazzling whiteness of this lawless wilderness" (89)] are projections of his vision of the "miles of white road" stretching into the country (129). Having already dwelled on the organic unity of Geneviève and her dwelling-place, we can read the implication of her house in the desert as an instance of "sexualising the African landscape" (Stiebel 2000: 134). However, in this particular case the desert is more likely to stand for Geneviève's barrenness and death, and Bernis's sexual quest is partially transferred onto the landscape as a projection of his desire and the restlessness of its impossible fulfilment.

Home-leaving in *Le Petit prince*

As in *Courrier sud*, home-leaving in *Le Petit prince* is an occasion for the protagonist to discover that the worlds of adulthood are solitary and prison-like: he visits a sequence of planets (prior to the Earth) dominated by pointless routine and stagnation. All the inhabitants of the succession of asteroids – a king, a vain man, a businessman, a geographer, a drunkard, with the exception of the lamplighter, are passive and self-sufficient figures. The lamplighter, though involved in absurd, pointless activity, differs from the others by virtue of the vigour and dedication with which he fulfills his duties. As John Harris observes,

The king allows the universe to work as it will and deludes himself into thinking that he has decreed its every motion [...] The vain man self-indulgently bows to imaginary applause, while the drunkard shuts down even the imagination’s delusive powers [...] The businessman, like the king, relishes a kind of authority so abstracted from the real world that its lines of force do not send the slightest ripple into the stars which he claims to own [...] The geographer doesn’t leave his desk and busies himself recording sterile facts of no interest to anyone (191).

The passage quotes a number of character types and occupations some of which (the king, the businessman, the geographer) have pivotal role in the administration and economy of empire. Disengagement, false motion, self-applause are the defining marks of these activities that produce slumber-like comfort. Like Bernis in *Courrier sud*, who finds himself “before a dead Jerusalem”, the Little prince descends into ossified, inelastic worlds that conjure up forms of metropolitan stagnation.

The final one of his interplanetary journeys, which help the Prince measure his homelessness and prepare him for his encounter with the earth, leads him to the desert where he meets the first one of the earthly inhabitants – the snake. Saint-Exupéry’s choice of the snake as a gate-keeper of the terrestrial space is most likely influenced by Biblical mythology: he might have employed the serpent as the most appropriate speaker for the world of the grown-ups who have been tempted out of childhood’s Eden; or appointed it to break the “wisdom of the sands” to the heavenly visitor (being the most cunning of earth’s animals, according to the Bible). The snake tells the Little prince that his home-quest will fail because the earth is granite-hard and he comes from a frail star, but assures him that he can easily be transported back home by a single one of its bites: “Tu me fais pitié, toi si faible, sur cette terre de granit. Je puis t’aider un jour si tu regrettes trop ta planète” (62); [“I feel sorry for you, so frail on this Earth of granite. I can help you if you ever find yourself missing your planet too much” (59)].

The Little prince’s experience on Planet Earth fulfills the snake’s prediction. Like Bernis, who becomes disappointed with finished structures, the Prince is frustrated with the rationally ordered, “civilised” world, reduced to facts and figures. He longs for places where he can practise taming, the art he learns from the fox, and finds such in the desert. The fox himself is not European (although his taming takes

place close to a rose garden). As Schiff observes, he was patterned after a desert fennec, the animal Saint-Exupéry himself attempted to tame (not that successfully) for his sister while at Cape Juby. In both *Courrier sud* and *Le Petit prince* (as in *Terre des hommes* (*Wind, Sand and Stars*)) the desert and its inhabitants are constructed as figures of otherness that invite taming. At the same time, taming is represented as a bilateral process in which the “tamer” in turn becomes “tamed”, i.e. changed by his/her encounter with otherness. Saint-Exupéry’s fiction configures desert experience mostly in terms of disorientation: in *Courrier sud*, the desert is chaotic and vertiginous; in *Terre des hommes* it is a source of creation and destruction; but in *Le Petit prince* these aspects are refined and cast in Platonic imagery – the desert is beautiful, because it conceals an invisible water-well. The desert well itself is not the typical African well – a hole dug in the sand. It is an elaborate construction with a wheel, rope and a pail – and is, most probably, modeled after a French village well. Strangely incongruent with the unfamiliar desert space, this element of European orderly life suggests domestication, which is further enhanced by the pilot’s remembrance of his childhood house and the treasure buried in it, “Lorsque j’étais petit garçon, j’habitais une maison ancienne, et la légende racontait qu’un trésor y était enfoui [...] il enchantait toute cette maison” (78); [“When I was a little boy I once lived in an old house and there was a legend that treasure was buried there [...] it put a spell on the whole house” (71)]. Like a negative image of the childhood house, where the buried treasure erodes the stability of the house’s bearing beams, the desert is imagined to hold a buried well which solidifies its crumbling landscapes and offers a point of orientation in its vast expanse. Genetically linked in the dreams and memories of Saint-Exupéry’s desert-stranded protagonists, the desert and the childhood house operate symbiotically. The water source in the desert is a major topos of this symbiosis that enables imaginative reconstruction of childhood domesticity with its treasure-quests and adventures.

If we abstain from reading the story as a fairy tale only, we may assume that the protagonists’ meeting and subsequent journeys in the desert unfold an itinerary of self-discovery in which the adult pilot (and narrator) recollects his younger self in desert isolation. Enhanced introspection is a major strategy of confronting desert emptiness and resurgence of memories should be expected there. If on the fairy tale level the Prince’s return to his planet makes his friend on earth grieve, on a symbolic level his grievance may signal a nostalgia for inaccessible childhood. What matters to our reading of the novel is the organic relationship between childhood and desert established in the novel. While the world of adulthood seems to occupy the gridded and ordered space of the earth (where the Little prince encounters busy grown-ups and absurd matter-of-factness), the desert (and wilderness) are allowed to function as “portals” to more appealing worlds (the narrator’s childhood and the Little prince’s planet). Like Bernis’s desert routes, the Prince and his companion’s journey in the desert is likely to imply the assertion of a “younger” world of mystery and adventure (located in the colonies) over the “grown-up” and rational European world.

Home-coming in *Courrier sud* and *Le Petit prince*: the desert

I suggest that employed this way, the topos of the desert serves as a reminder of the protagonists’ homelessness and works against the discourses of triumphant home-coming in popular imperial romances. Reading Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”, McClure observes that the hero of the novella undertakes a similar kind of physical and mental excursion that reaffirms his homelessness, “Marlow [the protagonist of Heart of Darkness] casts himself [...] as a belated imperial explorer, with no place to go, no [...] territory to claim” (1994: 14). Like Marlow’s quest, Bernis, the Little prince and the aviator’s desert routes make them aware of the rationalisation and closure of the world they presently inhabit.

After his epic struggles with sandstorms, night and oppressive memories, Bernis is finally overcome by the desert. His death is represented as the focal point of a geo-stellar, cosmic perspective. Drawn by the constellation of the Southern Cross, he seems to fall upwards, rather than on the ground, and his dead body with hands spread to embrace the sky forms a star-like figure:

Sur cette dune, les bras en croix et face [...] aux villages d’étoiles, cette nuit, tu pesais peu de chose ... [...] Un vertige t’a pris. Dans l’étoile la plus verticale a lui le trésor ... (153).

Upon this dune last night you lay, your arms spread out as you faced [...] those villages of stars. How lightly then your body weighted! [...] Suddenly you were seized with vertigo. High in the zenith, in the most vertical of stars, the treasure glimmered [...] (100-1).

The scene abounds in symbols of openness. The star-riddled sky and the expanse of sand are contrasted with the tininess of the pilot’s body and the sense of immensity is intensified by the magnifying effect of the mirror imagery of sand and stars. Immensity is further asserted by Bernis’s choice of itinerary - rather than choosing to follow the Polar Star that, according to the narrator, points to constancy and stability (but also to gridded patterns of existence), he opts for the Southern Cross, the sign of crucifixion, but also resurrection and renewed quest of adventure – “La vie paisible, l’amour fidèle, l’amie que nous croyons chérir, c’est de nouveau l’étoile polaire qui les balise ... Mais la Croix du Sud balise un trésor” (150); [“The simple life, one’s abiding love, the girlfriend we think we cherish – the North Star is once more there to light the way. But the Southern Cross lights up a treasure” (98)]. The choice of directions once again favours the route of the domestic treasure-hunt, extending it to the measures of cosmic adventure. Bernis’s death is, thus, evident of what McClure calls “loss” in immensity, the failure to affirm the European subject’s superiority over the zones of disorder (1994: 12).

Bernis’s homewish and desire to get restored to a “younger” world of mystery is subject to reformulation in *Le Petit prince*. There the narrator-protagonist couple (the stranded aviator and the Little prince) mirrors almost completely that of the narrator and Bernis in *Courrier sud*. Both narrators experience tragic disconnection from their friends, both the Prince and Bernis wish for a star and “fall upwards”

towards the sky. Within the fairy-tale mode of narration, the Little prince's death is experienced less tragically, as it signals his return home. The narrator, however, is overburdened by grief not only for his little friend's disappearance, but also because he remains confined to adulthood – the world of facts and figures. To overcome this impasse, imagination is of help – the Little prince confers to him the secret of the fox, telling him that he will be able to see him even on a distant and invisible planet. Restoration of childhood vision in the adult pilot is the outcome of their meeting, which promises to open inward, spiritual routes of adventure when no such are left on earth.

Conclusion

From *Courrier sud* to *Le Petit prince*, Saint-Exupéry's literary quests have not changed much of their focus, but have yielded more refined and simplified insights. Both novels employ pairs of protagonists (one of whom is the narrator) who are constructed as versions of each other – an older and a younger self. The older self (the narrator) is passive and grown-up or earth-bound (in *Courrier sud*), while the younger one is “aerial”, adventurous and homeless. The “younger” perspective dominates the texts and operates as a source of revelation, inspiration and mentorship for its “older” counterpart – Bernis and the little prince's home quests enlighten and invigorate their more rational and skeptical companions. I suggest that the interplay of “younger” and “older” versions of self suggests a late imperial romance concern for the growing gap between “younger” (significantly, non-European) worlds of mystery and adventure and a “grown-up”, aged imperial world.

I also dwelled on how decay and destruction are configured as sources of mystery and adventure in Saint-Exupéry's articulation of domesticity. Bernis's childhood home with cracks in the roof in *Courrier sud* and the Little prince's planet infested with pernicious baobab seeds are variations on the old crumbling house which is a biographically defined recurrent topos in Saint-Exupéry's fiction. A parallel was drawn between the crumbling house and the desert as sources of disorder that keep their inhabitants constantly involved in ordering and home-making. I likewise observed that the admission of forces of erosion within the familiar, known and, by common definition, “safe” boundaries of home represents one of the late imperial romance strategies of addressing the waning prospects of adventure in the mature days of imperial Europe.

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