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CHILDHOOD AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN *THE LITTLE PRINCE*

1. OVERVIEW

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, first published in French and English in 1943, is widely regarded as a classic of children's literature or—as it might more properly be said—of literature for children of all ages. It is a novella, mainly a conversation between a lost aviator, whose plane has crashed in the African desert, and a boy, the ruler and sole inhabitant of a tiny planet called B612. The boy has come to Earth in a quest for enlightenment and wisdom. As the aviator attempts to repair his plane, and anxiously watches over his limited supply of water, they talk about the nature of human experience and the relationship of humanity to our environment. *The Little Prince* is a contemplative text that explores human engagement with nature through considerations of how we perceive the world, how we find ways of being-in-the-world and, perhaps most importantly, how we negotiate the relationship between the seen and the unseen (or, as the novella puts it, the visible and the invisible). These elements of layered meaning support the interpretation of *The Little Prince* as a text that advocates an environmental consciousness; it enables readers (either child-readers, or the children-in-adults) to consider their own relationships with and perceptions of the world.

Because of the intimacy and immediacy of its narrative style, reading *The Little Prince* feels very much like sharing in the storyteller's meditation, which draws us in to a focused contemplation of existence and truth. This process can be illuminated in environmental terms as offering a critique of institutionalized attitudes towards the environment that block more immediate and caring human engagement with the planet and the universe. Remarkably, the environmentalist outlook of *The Little Prince* has not previously been articulated. Yet environmentalism is central to *The Little*

Prince, both to the novel as a whole, and in terms of its advocacy for a holistic appreciation of humanity's place in the universe.

The Little Prince makes a case for appreciating nature by means of a broad understanding that gets to the heart of things through immersion in shared concerns of the moment. This approach is characterized in the book as "childlike" and "seeing with the heart," in contrast with an unimaginative and ossified "adult" view of the world. In expressing an environmentalist outlook, Saint-Exupéry draws heavily on conventional ideals of childhood—its innocence, its perceptiveness, its openness. The novella contrasts with the adult perspective and advocates ways of being-in-the-world that involve, first of all, *intensified perception*, or the ability to see both the visible (or surface) and the invisible (what lies beneath the surface, or is immanent); second, *responsibility*, or living up to the need for human stewardship of the environment; and third, *understanding*, or recognizing the relationships between things and being-at-home-in-the-world. On all three levels *The Little Prince* can be read as an environmental text that celebrates the value of an environmental ethic that guides one's actions and infuses life with greater meaning.

2. PERCEPTION

In his travels from planet to planet the prince attempts to understand the environment around him by conversing with those he encounters. He finds most exchanges with adults puzzling and limited. It is only when he comes to Earth and communicates with animals (the snake and the fox), and with the aviator, who is the most receptive adult he finds, that he has satisfying engagements. The fox and snake have clear and logical perceptions about themselves and their place in the world; the aviator, perhaps by virtue of his solitary profession and because his inner child remains alive despite the secret wounds it carries, is also able to accompany the prince in his attempts to see into the heart of things, to perceive the invisible in the visible, and to experience an enlightened, yet intuitive mode of being-at-home-in-the-world.

Ironically, given its desire to engage with being-in-the-world, the story is presented in a series of isolated locations. In its framing narrative, both the prince and the aviator are lost in the "nothingness" of the African desert, where they converse while the aviator attempts to fix his plane. Similarly, the prince's travels in space, from his tiny home planet to those of the king, the merchant, the lamplighter, the drunkard and the geographer, occur as

isolated stations in the expanse of the universe. Desert or space: both are examples of the literary device of choosing an isolated setting in order to concentrate the mind on the drama or narrative. Saint-Exupéry is doubtless influenced by moral fables such as Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the innocent-hearted hero travels through strange lands in quest of enlightenment. In the case of *The Little Prince*, the life-challenging expanse of the arid desert turns the encounter between the prince and the aviator into a landscape of the mind, which in turn sharply directs their awareness to the value parameters of existence. As James Higgins points out, "it is the nothingness of the desert that leads [the narrator] inevitably to the secret of everything."[1] In this sense, the characters' abandonment is a blessing in disguise for both of them. While the desert appears lifeless and inhospitable, it contains life-forms and possibilities for self-knowledge and personal growth.

The idea of seeing the invisible in the visible flows directly from this enriched view of the desert. This preoccupies the narrator and the prince (and also the fox), and is another version of seeing with the eyes of a child. In the story's well-known opening, the narrator recalls his childhood attempts to convey the invisible within the visible and recreates a drawing of a boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant—a drawing that, to the uncomprehending eyes of adults, resembles a lumpy hat. Then, to satisfy the prince's request, he draws a sheep in a box, which conveys to the prince exactly the kind of sheep he would wish to see on his planet. (The prince "gets it," whereas adults fail to do so.) The narrator's drawings (which are in fact Saint-Exupéry's), possess a charming naiveté, and they encapsulate a key theme: how to communicate inner experience through externals, and the limitations of seeing through the eyes in order to perceive what is hidden, immanent, or invisible. (The fox expresses this as seeing into the "heart" of things.)

As the prince explains his story to the aviator, he returns continually to this theme. From the relationship between the prince and a rose—which came to his planet as a seed—the narrator and the reader receive a plain message about tending one's garden and, by extension, minding one's planet and keeping one's life in order. As the prince indicates, seeds must be watched carefully, because they are invisible and thus hard to decipher:

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[1] James E. Higgins, *The Little Prince: A Reverie of Substance* (New York: Twayne, 1996),

> The good plants come from good seeds and the bad plants from bad seeds. But the seeds are invisible. They sleep in the secrecy of the ground, until one of them decides to wake up. Then it stretches and begins to sprout, quite timidly at first, a charming, harmless little twig reaching toward the sun. If it's radish seed, or a rosebush seed, you can let it sprout all it likes. But if it's the seed of a bad plant, you must pull the plant up, right away, as soon as you can recognize it.
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> …
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> "It's a question of discipline," the little prince told me later on.
>
> …
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> "You must be sure you pull up the baobabs regularly, as soon as you can tell them apart from the rosebushes, which they closely resemble when they're very young."[2]

This passage strikingly captures the interplay between the visible and the invisible, in which the secret, essential nature of a being, housed in the invisibility of seeds (like that of people), cannot be recognized until it wakes and shows itself. The prince's attitude toward the rose, which initially is a "sprout that was not unlike any of the others," is influenced by the experience of guarding his planet from the destructive baobab trees, which, if not kept in check, will overpower his small planet. He keeps a "close watch" over the rose seedling, but, in a leap of faith that shows him somehow perceiving the rose's essential inner nature, he intuits that "some sort of miraculous apparition would emerge" from the bud (22).

The relationship between the prince and his rose has its ups and downs, to be sure, but it doesn't take him long to learn "'[h]ow complicated this flower is," because he looks closely at the rose and understands her nature as an individual (23). Later, on travelling to Earth and encountering a garden full of roses, the prince is shaken to discover that his rose is not unique; as he matures he comes to appreciate that, even though—as a rose—she is not unique in the universe, he loves her, not only for how she beautifies his life, but also for how she is in herself (24–25, 63). Here emerges the theme of relationship—each being realizing itself in and through the other—that one

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[2] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Richard Howard (San Diego: Harvest Books/Harcourt, 2000), 14–15. Further page references will appear in parentheses within the text.

encounters repeatedly in the story. The best relationships require, or come out of, an ability to perceive and connect with the essence in others.

The prince's relationship with the rose introduces the notion of natural objects having value independent of human (or humanlike) interests, as well as having their own patterns of development and flourishing, each with corresponding requirements. These ideas have become cornerstones of certain kinds of contemporary environmental philosophy.[3] It is easy to assume and even to acknowledge that natural objects have instrumental (or use) value, whether as resources or as things that enrich our lives in intangible ways; what is relatively new in Western thought, however, is widespread acceptance of the notion that they can be of value in their own right, independent of human interests. And, of course, objects can potentially have both instrumental and intrinsic value. Discussion of these issues cannot avoid questions concerning the ontological status of value (whether it is an inherent, supervenient or relational property—something that "happens" in some kind of "space" between subject and object), and the locus of value (whether it is consciousness-dependent or independent). In terms of these distinctions (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive), *The Little Prince* would appear to project a belief in natural objects as having intrinsic value, but also non-resource instrumental value (aesthetic and psychological enrichment), and, most importantly, value that arises in a consciousness-dependent, relational way. Relational value, it might be argued, is the crux of the piece, but it is a relational value that requires perception of what is essential (and often invisible).

Late in the story, when the pilot-narrator and the prince find a well in the desert, the rose becomes the occasion for the above outlook to expand into one of connectedness with the universe as a whole—both the microcosm and the cosmos. Having been taught by the fox that personal relationships (instances of "taming") are the most important, and that what is directly manifest to the senses is not the real truth of things, the prince now explains that "'what [people are] looking for could be found in a single rose, or a little water'," and that "'eyes are blind. You have to look with the heart'" (71). A

[3] See, for example, Joseph R. DesJardins, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*, 5th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2013), esp. chaps. 5 and 6; Michael Allen Fox, "Anthropocentrism," in *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare*, ed. Marc Bekoff, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press/ABC-CLIO, 2010), vol. 1, 66–68.

few pages later there comes an exchange with the narrator that completes the picture. The prince speaks first and makes all the assertions and evaluations; the narrator merely confirms them.

> "The important thing is what can't be seen ..."
> "Of course ..."
> "It's the same as for the flower. If you love a flower that lives on a star, then it's good, at night, to look up at the sky. All the stars are blossoming."
> "Of course ..."
> It's the same for the water. The water you gave me to drink was like music, on account of the pulley and the rope... You remember .... It was good."
> "Of course ..." (76–77)

The flower contains a micro-world of meaning and significance and, because it is loved, the relationship between it and the giver of love creates a bond with the flower-like stars, that is, with the universe at large. Similarly, life-giving water has this capacity, its inherent goodness radiating outward to connect us with, or immerse us in, elements of our own world, and to turn us toward other worlds where things are no doubt growing and water is flowing. As Higgins points out, these experiences shared within the vastness of the desert teach not only the insignificance of humans and their concerns, but also that there is beauty (and life) to be found everywhere.[4] And where there is beauty, there is inherent value to cherish and respect.

3. RESPONSIBILITY/STEWARDSHIP

It is wonderful to realize that a fledgling piece of environmental philosophy woven into a fable for children can lead to the theme of rootedness or being-at-home in the overall scheme of things. How does this happen? First, the seen and the unseen come together through the prince's faith in the beauty and life-giving qualities of the desert, which were hitherto invisible. Then one comes to grasp how these aspects of perception and being-at-home raise questions about the kinds of human engagement that are possible in the natural world. And finally, once these important connections are established, the reader is called upon to take care of both individual things with their essential, precious or invisible qualities, and the environment, the web of

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[4] Higgins, *The Little Prince: A Reverie of Substance*, 47.

natural and universal connections that hold together the sphere of life. This responsibility can be conceptualized by invoking the idea of stewardship: the caretaking of living things and of the Earth.

The prince, we have discovered, is a caretaker not only of living, but also of non-living things. The latter can be seen in the daily routine on his home planet of raking out the three volcanoes (two active and one extinct) (25), which illustrates learning to live with forces of nature beyond our control, and a respectful tending of the geophysical matter on which life also depends. The prince has something significant to teach: that every day "'you must tend your planet'" (15). For instance, in his description of daily planetary chores we see him tending to nature, carefully "'washing and dressing'" his planet: "'It is tedious work, but it is very easy'" (20). This kind of attention seems more like a duty of stewardship than one of simple non-interference. Indeed, in his outlook it is a given that the natural world should be shaped and utilized by those beings dwelling in it who have the greatest means of doing so—but with the health of the environment as the primary motivation. The prince's daily routine indicates a controlled attitude of caretaking one's planet, not only out of self-interest, but also in the interest of other life-forms and non-living (abiotic) elements of the ecosphere. Stewardship is thus an important consequence of the perceptiveness characterized as "seeing with the heart."

Clearly the role of stewardship requires caring actions. But, if so, one immediately faces these questions: Does the prince fashion his environment at the same time as he takes care of it? Does he intervene in nature, or is his role simply holding nature in balance? The model of stewardship in *The Little Prince* indeed entails the normative precept that one ought both to shape and intervene in the natural world, but wisely, and in the interest of preserving the balance, integrity and flourishing of ecosystems. Comment could be made from a postcolonial studies perspective about the distinction between "good" plants (roses, radishes), and "bad" plants (baobab trees): The prince's planet might be considered a French garden, which seeks to ignore invasive African species (there is an obvious irony here). At a basic level, though, valuing some organisms that enhance human interests and devaluing the rest (as "invasive species," "weeds," "pests," or "disease germs," for example) is inconsistent with the belief that natural objects possess worth in their own right. And it may be question-begging to then argue that there are degrees of intrinsic value. But a more important point concerns the role of humans in tending to ecosystems on which they have placed their imprint.

Humans' place in the world, here, is to be necessary guardians or stewards, engaging in "benign human intervention" in the natural order. If they are "away from the world," as the prince expresses to the narrator, it may fall out of balance, and what is precious in it (such as the rose) may be destroyed, or elements of it may even destroy one another. This shift in consciousness entails that intrinsic value not be the only factor in decision-making about the environment, for consideration of the overall value of ecosystems can override it. Here the dilemma of human interests being present in the mix reasserts itself. But at least postcolonial thought opens a space for discussion of the intrinsic value of nature. The upshot is this: Since human presence on our planet cannot be without impact, there is an accompanying responsibility to design environments by the least harmful methods and always with respect for the developmental patterns of various parts within the whole system, and of the system as a whole.

The prince's lessons in environmental caretaking are illustrated as much by personal example as by didactic position-taking. A good deal has been written about the significance of his rose, on account of which he both exits his planet and later returns.[5] In terms of environmental responsibility, however, the rose is a good plant with which the prince has an intimate relationship and towards which he acknowledges a duty of care (80). This makes him concerned lest she be eaten by a sheep, and especially so because he considers her to be unique. He worries that she has but a few thorns to protect herself from predators and that the cold might kill her. The prince regards her fate as of equal importance to that of the pilot, who is struggling to mend his broken airplane and save himself from perishing in the desert (20–21). Seeing into the heart of things, seeing with the heart, seeing the invisible in the visible—all these elements of perception inform the prince's stewardship of the environment; they enable him to intervene in particular elements for the benefit of all. This process of stewardship can be witnessed in his uprooting baobab sprouts, tending his volcanoes, covering his rose at night, having the aviator draw a muzzle for his sheep to regulate its eating, and revitalizing the well in the desert, by which life-giving sustenance from the Earth is given.

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[5] See, for example, Joy D. Marie Robinson, *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (Boston: Twayne, 1984); Consuelo de Saint-Exupéry, *The Tale of the Rose: The Passion That Inspired The Little Prince*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: Random House, 2001).

While it is tempting to portray *The Little Prince* as pointing towards a coherent environmental ethic, this expects too much of the story. To begin with, specific problems derive from sources of contradiction in the book: privileging the inner life over externals, nature over culture, simplicity over complexity, poverty over wealth, home over away, and essence over perceived qualities. If *The Little Prince* assumes these hierarchies, proposing that living a natural, simple, essential inner life to be the best way of being in the world, it nevertheless shows a human controlling his world, as the prince does in his tending of B612. Furthermore, simplicity seems to clash with the need to appreciate and take account of ecosystem complexity in our actions. Finally, being-at-home doesn't seem to require subordination of the self to the environment, but rather an investment of the self in the environment, to the benefit of both. At the same time, it requires both the surrender of self and the domination of one's environment. These kinds of issues, as noted earlier, seem inescapable, and may well point to the limitations that beset all attempts to frame a complete and consistent ethics for the environment.

4. UNDERSTANDING AND BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

It is but a further step from stewardship of the environment to a more complicated relationship between the human and natural worlds, one that involves the role of understanding. This can best be grasped by considering the conversations between the prince and the snake and fox.

The fox is a wild creature who is also sardonically aware of the conventional nature of human relations with the world. He nevertheless requests the prince to "tame" him, to forge a symbolic relationship that transforms the fox's appreciation of nature, underscores the role of humanity in shaping (or controlling) the world, and suggests too that humans supply a focus of meaning that is otherwise lacking. This paradoxical episode, in which the fox weighs up what he will gain and lose from being tamed, accurately predicting that the prince will leave him once he has tamed him, is a variant of the idea of the human as steward of nature—here, a controlling humanity that bends nature to its will, transforming it into something with a consciousness rather than just a set of impulses. The fox gains a transformed consciousness, but he loses the prince. The French verb rendered as "to tame" is *apprivoiser*, but it has a wider range of meanings: to overpower, bring to submission, overcome, train, win over, embrace, make more sociable, domesticate, befriend. In the text it is also translated as to "create ties" (59). Interestingly, the fox stipulates

that as part of taming "There must be rites" (61), regular meetings that can be anticipated, for example. The ambiguity displayed by these various meanings mirrors the ambiguity of stewardship itself (nurturing and standing aside, yet intervening and controlling nature) and the vexed relationship between the tamer and the tamed (to which the tamer now owes something because of the ties she or he has established with the tamed).

In contrast, the prince's relationship with the snake suggests that there are parts of nature that cannot or should not be tamed, that possess a mythic power that humanity must give in to. Of course, the snake symbolises death and rebirth—for the prince to return to B612 (to ascend back to heaven), he must allow the snake to bite and kill him.

The various ambiguities and inconsistencies we've examined bring us to refocus on what has come to be known as humans' sense of "metaphysical homelessness" or "metaphysical uprootedness." Philosophers from Pascal to Heidegger have offered their "cures" for this condition, which is one of losing our way in the universe, our primeval grounding in being. Even Nietzsche, who thought the "death of God" to be a good thing on the whole, might be considered as addressing the problem when he counsels his readers (through his mouthpiece Zarathustra) to "remain faithful to the earth."[6] There is a strong theme of remaining faithful to the earth in *The Little Prince*; but equally prominent is the theme of remaining faithful to the imagination. Only if these two commitments are held jointly can the issue of "homelessness" or "uprootedness" be engaged constructively. Meditation is a method of quieting the inner chatter and busyness of the mind both for the purpose of deep relaxation and for attaining an openness and receptivity to new insights, such as those provided by the imagination. If *The Little Prince* serves as a meditative aid to achieving such ends, then it also provides a space for healing and responding to the kind of homelessness of which the philosophers have written.

Using a string of isolated settings for its series of one-on-one dialogues, the book is deceptively uncomplicated, almost fable-like, adding to its meditative qualities. This approach is mirrored by the also deceptively plain drawings scattered throughout. It is underscored too by the loosely episodic

[6] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Zarathustra's Prologue," in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press/Random House, 1954), pt. 1, "Zarathustra's Prologue," sec. 3, and pt. 1, "Zarathustra's Speeches," 22. "On the Gift-Giving Virtue," sec. 2.

construction of the work. Several aspects of *The Little Prince* come together at this point: the clarity (but also productive ambiguity) of the prose; the precision of the conversations; the isolation of the settings of space and desert. All of these contribute to a paradox of connected singularity, expressed through perception (seeing the essence of one being in order to connect to the web of the universe); through caretaking (considering, caring for or destroying individual elements of nature in order to keep the whole in balance); and through the understanding of being-in-the-world.

5. THE AVIATOR'S EPIPHANY

The aviator/narrator of *The Little Prince* has a life-transforming experience in the desert, and it is clear that the prince serves as a catalyst for this event. But what has this adult learned that is so special? To say that he has gotten in touch with himself, or his inner child, sounds like a cliché, and yet it comes closest to expressing the truth. For there is little doubt that the suppressed joy and creativity of childhood are wellsprings for the narrator's newfound self-understanding, just as the desert and the prince provide the occasion for it.

Heightened concentration is something else the narrator acquires by his experiences. This transformation is related to the meditation theme. Simply put, he learns the art of "being in the moment," which figures centrally in Buddhist instructional texts. What is meant here is an immersion in the present as a locus of illumination, where we put aside the many worries and associations with which the past and future weigh us down. This process, enhanced by the practice of meditation, is allied with the ability to see the whole in the minute parts of things, or things as tokens of totality. Certainly the prince sees his rose in this way, and we think the narrator comes to understand and practise this more probing kind of awareness, with the desert as an unchosen but conducive backdrop for its development.

Other things the narrator learns have to do with relationships. While in a sense the child within is fated to be cut off from the adult world, there exist times and places, rare though they are, where it can receive sustenance. There has to remain receptivity and openness to both kindred beings and to the natural world in order for nourishing mutuality to take place. In a lonely world, relationships are paramount, and one discovers oneself, if at all, as a function of the most important of these, both human and extra-human.

The narrator also apprehends the pleasure and saving grace of serendipity—illustrated, for instance, by his encounter with the prince, rediscover-

ing ways of communicating that had atrophied, and finding the well. And maybe he even learns to make peace with death. For he knows the prince will reside somewhere out in the heavens, and that looking up to the stars can bestow calm and a rejuvenating sense of everlastingness.

6. THE INNOCENCE OF CHILDHOOD?

The construction of *The Little Prince* exploits certain ideas of childhood in order to deliver its message of environmental perception, stewardship and connectedness. Because the prince *is* a child, this book has long been considered a classic text for children. Well-meaning adults buy this book for the children in their lives, perhaps because of its moral messages, but possibly more because the combination of childish pictures and the appealing figure of the prince, with his innocence and perceptiveness, conform to a host of received ideas about the nature and power of childhood.

To some degree the story offers readers fantasies that appeal to child-readers (and the child in all readers)—in particular, the empowering (but sometimes daunting) reverie of being alone and in charge. The prince appears to have no parents; he is master of B612 and evidently has dominion over or stewardship of his planet as he sees fit; he is able, too, to travel at will throughout the universe, and to command the attention of those with whom he wishes to converse. In contrast, the unnamed pilot-narrator of the story is temporarily suspended in space and time and thereby removed from his everyday concerns (that is, other than survival, which never seems to be a real issue in the story). As such, he is amenable to receiving illumination, and this is stimulated by a chance encounter with an enigmatic youth who appears out of nowhere.

The aviator and the prince converse as equals—the prince as a child wise beyond his years, the aviator as an adult whose inner child is still alive. Each is exiled from others like him—the prince from other children, the aviator from other adults. Both, too, are temporary exiles from space and time, who search for meaning or grounding in existence; their quest unites them, and together they create a special opening, a mental and spiritual terrain, in which their mutual yet unique explorations can occur. Because their mission to engage fully and satisfyingly with their environments is formulated in terms of the communion between a pair of inner children, questions arise about the use of the child as a symbol of environmental connectedness and being-in-the-world.

Saint-Exupéry seems to advocate that adults need to keep alive their inner child in order to perceive the world as it truly is; to shed the influence of external pressures; to avoid being distracted by the details of custom and institution, ambition or doctrine; and to become proper caretakers of the world. To see, as the fox suggests, the invisible in the visible requires a childlike simplicity and dedication. The innocence of childhood is, of course, as much of a cultural construct as anything the novella rejects; it is, too, an adult construct that freights childhood with a perhaps unreasonable set of expectations. Within this "innocence" view, the child, living harmoniously with nature, always knows what to do, whereas the adult can only recognise later what is right. This is an example of what we may call the naturalisation of ideology: Children, being "innocent," intuitively do what is "right." Saint-Exupéry's use of the child figure therefore promotes certain values and ideals that may not sit well with adults, because of their supposedly rigid and imposed assumptions about the world.

A child-reader, on the other hand, may well have the sense that the text gives the prince too much work to do—not so much literally, as in his work tending his planet, but metaphorically, as in carrying the burden of acquiring understanding. A child-reader might well see the prince as being unhappily isolated—he isn't completely so, of course, because he has his rose, and he has the ability to communicate with and be part of nature. A major thematic framework in children's literature is the orphan narrative, in which a parentless child faces the world alone. This is a kind of fantasy for child-readers, who recognize that their parents' protection prevents them from having the kind of dramatic narrative adventures of an Anne of Green Gables or a Harry Potter. Yet there is a peculiar kind of aloneness attached to the prince. While Anne Shirley and Harry Potter are orphaned, we know where they came from, and they find new families. The prince, on the other hand, remains an outsider figure of an unknown origin, apparently destined for solitary living.

This singularity, as mentioned earlier, is extremely important: *The Little Prince* is not a children's *Bildungsroman*; it is a moral fable or apologue. Narratively, the prince must remain singular, because he is the questioning subject in search of enlightenment, a sort of beacon of truth. The story's emphasis on dialogue adds to this effect. But because it is presented in a deliberately naïve style (partially an effect of the illustrations), and because the narrator foregrounds the difference between grown-ups and children,

between the grown-up surface exterior and the inner child, the idea of the child as enlightenment-seeker comes to the fore.

The Little Prince, in using the image of the child as the one who is able to be-at-home-in-the-world, makes childhood the period in which enlightenment is possible, in which the human is genuinely able to be part of the world (because the child has not yet learned to set him- or herself above or apart from nature, or to seek to gain mastery over it). These are quite conventional ideas about childhood (see Virgil's *Eclogue IV*; Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; Barrie's *Peter Pan*), whereby it is a pastoral space, distinctive from adulthood. But do such ideas stand up to scrutiny? To what degree do we need to separate out from the character of the prince the ideals (of environmentalism or of other matters) that are apparently promoted in *The Little Prince*, and through its chief protagonist? What is at stake in the perception and understanding of environmentalism, if it is presented through a naïf, a child or a supernatural being? What if the presentation merely isolates this attitude *in* childhood? What if the packaging of the philosophy, the meditation, the contemplation that the novella advocates, all serve to cordon off these important elements into childhood? In short, what if the very qualities of *The Little Prince* that make it so popular for children (and the children-in-adults), constrict its message?

Taking a long view of the popularity of the book—the way it has inspired everything from stories, plays and musical compositions, to a host of Little Prince products for sale on the Internet, to a French banknote, to the names of actual celestial objects, to a Museum of The Little Prince in Japan—one starts to wonder whether the message has been lost. Are all of these literary, cultural and economic continuations of *The Little Prince* part of an attempt to "see with the heart"? Or are they part of a larger cultural misunderstanding that the book aims to correct?

7. FINAL THOUGHTS

For anyone who cherishes *The Little Prince* and takes it seriously as a literary work with important moral messages, there accrues a responsibility to remain faithful to them. Given that the environmental themes in the book are not so much hidden as obscured by contingencies of authorial device (conventional ideas about childhood) and materialistic culture (commercial exploitation), they must be brought to the forefront of textual interpretation and appreciation.

Humans are part of nature, not apart from it. Because we are both able to shape and transform nature and, seemingly, internally driven to do so, we must strike a balance between dominance and stewardship, a balance that is not only in our own interest as denizens of the planet who depend on the health of its ecosystems, but also in the interest of other things—living and non-living—that need to flourish and to preserve their systemic integrity and/or their life-favouring natural conditions. And humans have heightened responsibilities for nurturing those parts of nature that we have established and with which we therefore have special connections, such as domesticated species and designated ecosystems (wilderness areas, urban parklands, agricultural acreage, gardens, and the like). Furthermore, many of these connections are invisible, intuitive or spiritual in character. They are felt more than expressed. A sound relationship with the living and non-living components of nature, in which we are immersed, also determines the sense in which we feel at home in the world, the universe and being as a whole. All of these precepts entail that we are called upon to recognize and affirm the many sources of value that permeate the natural world. While certain parts of nature are not suitable for "taming," this does not excommunicate them from the arena of value, since many things serve an essential function of which we may not be aware in the overall picture, or which we may not be disposed to celebrate, yet can still acknowledge as beneficial.

The environmentalism of *The Little Prince* has not been tapped into—by either readers or critics—in the seven decades it has been continuously in print. While this could be understood early on within the context of a world in which concerns over humans' neglectful treatment of the natural world hardly rose above the level of a murmur, it does not account for the general silence about the book's environmental message that has prevailed in more recent times. The best outcome that this essay can achieve is to stimulate further environmental readings of *The Little Prince*. For it is now more important than ever to mine the human imagination for solutions and new ways of living that will help us avoid ecological calamity and actualize the best that is in us.