

SURREALISM AND SAINT EXUPÉRY'S ILLUSTRATIONS FOR *THE LITTLE PRINCE*

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REZUMAT. *Suprarealismul și ilustrațiile din Micul Prinț a lui Saint-Exupéry.* Considerată ca fiind una din cele mai bine vândute cărți a tuturor timpurilor, faima *Micului Prinț* nu se datorează doar poveștii ci și ilustrațiilor. Lucrarea de față propune o cheie de lectură suprarealistă pentru imagini, argumentată în primul rând dintr-o perspectivă istorică – discutate fiind proximitatea și dialogul dintre Saint-Exupéry și membrii ai mișcării suprarealiste – cât și printr-o analiză de istoria artei. Analizele formală, stilistică și tematică vor indica trăsăturile comune ale expresiei vizuale folosite de Saint-Exupéry și cea a unor artiști ca Dalí sau Magritte. Utilizarea unui limbaj vizual suprarealist în combinație cu o capodoperă literară non-suprarealistă este unul din motivele principale ale persistenței popularității acestei cărți până în ziua de azi.

Cuvinte cheie: *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Micul Prinț, ilustrații de carte, artă multimedia, Suprarealism, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte*

ABSTRACT. *Surrealism and Saint-Exupéry's Illustrations for The Little Prince.* Considered one of the bestselling books of all time, *The Little Prince's* fame is not only due to its story, but also to its illustrations. This essay proposes a surrealist reading of the images which will be argued from a historical perspective – discussing the proximity and the dialog between Saint-Exupéry and members of the surrealist group – correlated with an art history analysis. A formal, stylistic and thematic analysis will point out the common traits in Saint-Exupéry's visual expression and the works of artist such as Dalí and Magritte. The use of a surrealist visual language, combined with a literary masterpiece that is not surrealist is one of the main reasons for the persistence of this book's popularity up till today.

Keywords: *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince, Book illustrations, multimedia art, Surrealism, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte.*

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We find that many artworks, objects of mass-consumption or forms of entertainment that seem to be suited only for children are very much appreciated by adults as well. The number of adult lovers of Disney movies is on the rise and so is the number of adults that play on the computer. The visual design on day to day objects is often similar to the ones created for or by children and ever more companies use games, toys and play as a strategy to mold its employs. One of the most famous objects that seems to be for children but is highly appreciated by adults is Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's book, *The Little Prince*. Critics have often discussed the literary part of this book, but this essay will focus on the illustrations. In order to explain what is behind their childish appearance I will argument in the favor of a surrealist reading of these images.

The risks of this analysis are foremost derived from the interdisciplinary approach demanded by the topic. Methodologically speaking, this essay will foremost be one of art history and art theory, analysis which will be correlated to a historical context showing chronological, topological and factual arguments. With the necessary precaution of an amateur, literary criticism and French literature history are also invoked, not only because of the dual nature of *The Little Prince*, but also because of the dual nature of the style called Surrealism and the differences between its literary version and its visual version. In order to solve some of the contradictions regarding the two types of Surrealism, an incursion in semiotics is also be necessary.

It is a certain fact that Saint-Exupéry is not a surrealist writer. His prose is most often discussed next to that of François Mauriac, Henry de Montherlant and Albert Camus, "the moralists"². At the same time Saint-Exupéry was writing his prose, the face of poetry was being changed by André Breton's surrealism, while the revival of the French novel during the '30 was being done by André Malraux, Geroges Bernanos and such others³. Although there are examples of surrealist prose, this traditionally "bourgeois" genre was secondary to poetry from the surrealist perspective⁴.

The Little Prince, written in 1943 – although classifiable as an allegorical work with a moralizing premise – represents an exception in the works of Saint-Exupéry, and in order for us to correlate its illustrations with Surrealism, some detailing regarding this visual-literary style is necessary.

Surrealism is symbolically born with André Breton's (1896-1966) *Surrealist Manifesto*⁵ written in 1924. The main goal of Surrealism is liberation on all fronts⁶.

² Henri Mitterand (ed.), *Litterature. Textes et documents. XXe siècle*, Edition Nanthan, Paris 1989, p. 167.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 332-333.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

⁵ Georges Décote, Hélène Sabbah (ed.), *Itinéraires Littéraires XXe Siecle. 1900-1950*, Hatier, Paris 1991, p. 303.

⁶ Henri Mitterand, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

It is founded on Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism⁷ and the primary method proposed by it is psychic automatism⁸: the pure and spontaneous expression of thoughts from dreams, the subconscious, childhood, madness etc; The *Manifesto's* author remained open to all sources of expression, but the surrealist movement started off primarily as a poetical one, shortly after, attracting visual artist such as Max Ernst, Man Ray, Juan Miró or Yves Tanguy⁹. The group unifies and their center of activity becomes Paris. After the painters joined in, Breton will write *Surrealism and Painting*¹⁰. The surrealists placed a lot of importance on political activism, more precisely Marxist-Communist activism. Initially regarded with suspicion by The Party, and deemed incompatible with its principles, members of the group such as Breton, Argon and many others officially joined the French Communist Party in 1927¹¹. The political drive of some of the surrealists was less than satisfying for Breton. This determined him to exclude some of the members and write *The Second Surrealist Manifesto* in 1929, which strongly focuses on undermining traditional forms of patriotism, family and religion¹². After the Nazi occupation of France and the inauguration of the Vichy government, part of the surrealist group, including Breton, will move to America in 1940¹³. E.L.T. Messens and René Magritte will fund a surrealist group in Belgium¹⁴. The later will move to Paris in 1927 and join Breton for a few years. During the '30 the surrealist movement will gain an important member: the Spaniard Salvador Dalí.

The meeting between the Saint-Exupéry and the surrealists will take place after the author moves to America and it won't be an amiable one at all. In 1941 Saint-Exupéry arrives in New York. From the beginning, the author was not very keen on the New York scene, despite the fact that he was received with great enthusiasm and shortly after, was awarded a literary award for *Wind, Sand and Stars*¹⁵. The stay will quickly take an unpleasant turn, as his image will suffer greatly, after accusations of collaboration with the Vichy government appeared in the press. The writer had made his position very clear: he did not trust the Gaulist faction or the Vichy

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

⁹ Dawn Ades, Matthew Gale, "Surrealism", in Jane Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 30, Grove, New York 1996, p. 19.

¹⁰ Henri Béhar, "André Breton", in Jane Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 4, Grove, New York 1996, p. 753.

¹¹ Dawn Ades, Matthew Gale, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁵ Alban Cerisier, Delpine Lacroix, *The Wonderful Story of The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*, RAO, București 2013, p. 8.

government¹⁶ and that he thought France should continue fighting. Even so, the Vichy government made him a member of the council without his knowledge¹⁷. This brought him a lot of criticism, public disbelief and a strong public attack from anti-militarist André Breton. To this, Saint-Exupéry responded with a letter.

I will point out that next to those excluded from the surrealist movement after *The Second Manifesto*, there were many tensions and feuds inside the group. The most famous of them all is between Breton and Dalí. The founder started distancing himself from the Spanish painter during the '30 and eventually rejects him completely¹⁸. Obviously, being on bad terms with Breton does not make Saint-Exupéry a surrealist. I mentioned the break-up between the surrealist group and Dalí (the most famous surrealist) to point out that unlike in the case of other artistic movements where we categorize works stylistically by looking at visual traits and types of images, the surrealist movement seems to have a more fluid composition.

The conflict between Breton and Saint-Exupéry proves that the two were in contact, that they were aware of each other's persona and work. Other surrealists frequented places Saint-Exupéry did as well: Dalí (who came to New York in 1940) spent a lot of time in the studio of Barnard Lamotte, artist and good friend of Saint-Exupéry who often housed him¹⁹. Many illustrations from *The Little Prince* were made in this studio. Also, Dalí, Breton, Miró, Yves Tanguy and Marcel Duchamp often frequented Saint-Exupéry's wife's house²⁰, Consuelo, who came to New York in 1942. The spouses lived separately, but their houses were close to each other²¹. All these possible meeting places never led to some special friendship, but they do open the possibility for stylistic influence by simple exposure to works of art. The surrealists were quite active, artistically speaking, during their time in New York, organizing a series of exhibitions²².

The main problem with arguing that Saint-Exupéry illustrations are surrealist is that their author never considered himself a surrealist. On the plus side, he never considered himself a visual artist of any kind.

¹⁶ Hubert Hardt, "Saint-Exupéry (Antoine de) 1900-1944", in *Encyclopedia Universalis France, Copus 20*, Paris 1922, p. 503; Olivier Odaert, «Saint-Exupéry et le fascisme: Pour une poétique de l'idéologie», *RiLUnE*, n. 1, 2005, p. 81.

¹⁷ ***, *Cahiers de Saint-Exupéry*, vol. 3, Gallimard, Paris 1989, p. 9.

¹⁸ Robert Descharnes, *Salvador Dalí 1904-1989. The Paintings*, vol. 1, Taschen, Köln 2007, p. 243.

¹⁹ Alban Cerisier, Delpine Lacroix, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

²⁰ Nathalie Des Vallières, *Saint-Exupéry: l'archange et l'écrivain*, Gallimard, Paris 2013, p. 37.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²² Dawn Ades, Matthew Gale, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Saint-Exupéry adopted a naïve style, representing objects in a synthetic manner, often reduce to basic geometric forms. Unlike children's drawings, his illustrations maintain more accurate proportions (although some body parts, especially the heads, are sometimes oversized) and the naturalness of gestures and movements is sometimes very well handled, like in the case of the leaning businessman. Some characters have a caricature aspect, like the huntsman whose head's size is a third of his body.

Pencil or pen outline his characters, outlines that remain visible in the final stages of his work. For coloring he will use watercolors and crayon-watercolors. Often we can see two or more primary colors used with an abrupt transit between them, done through the black pen contour, without a gradient. The colors (watercolor pencils or watercolor) aren't too bright and they maintain the specific transparency of watercolors. Some of the images are reproduced black and white. Referring strictly to the visual aspect of the images, Saint-Exupéry can be compared to Henri Rousseau or the naïve art and the primitivists that followed²³, but Rousseau dies in 1910 and all the artists that followed simply adopted a child-like style even though their artistic education would have allowed for a more realistic aspect of their works. What we see in every edition of *The Little Prince*, the aspect, proportion and placing of images, is all Saint-Exupéry work²⁴.

The author used to do spontaneous sketches - mostly portraits - even before writing *The Little Prince*. He decided to illustrate his own book after the suggestion and encouragement of friends²⁵. He took out his sketches and work tools whenever and wherever he felt inspired, sometimes asking his friends to pose or taking inspiration from various elements of his environment. Silvia Hamilton recounted how her dog, a small boxer, became the model for the tiger represented in the book²⁶.

Saint-Exupéry did not isolate himself in a studio, but went to his friends' homes to paint in their presence²⁷. The shapes and images that resulted were not photographic imitations of the environment and people, but products of his imagination, that was stimulated by places and people. Seeing a small boxer, he drew a tiger threatening a rose. We can compare this process with the paranoiac-critical method used by Salvador Dalí²⁸. This involved gazing persistently at those

²³ Karl Ruhrberg, *L'Art au XX^e siècle*, vol. 1: Peinture, Taschen, Köln 2005, pp. 96-98.

²⁴ Alban Cerisier, Delpine Lacroix, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 33-39.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 33-40.

²⁸ Robert Descharnes, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

non-figurative forms until they began to resemble real figurative objects. The principle behind this method is similar to the Rorschach test. The surrealist artist grew up in Figueres, a city on the coast of Spain, where he will return to live during his adulthood, after he became famous. The area is full of large red rocks shaped and molded by the waves. These forms can be found in a large number of Dalí's paintings. They become figurative elements. We can easily distinguish Dalí's self-portrait in *The Persistence of Memory* and *The Great Masturbator*. The method was intended to reveal the images in the artist's subconscious and it fit the tradition of psychic automatism proposed by André Breton.

Even so, famous surrealist painters like Dalí and Yves Tanguy, were often criticized by scholars and the literati of the same movement for the fact that their work was thoroughly processed in the studio and composed sometimes "too harmonious" (compositionally and color-wise), thus losing touch with the principles and ideals of Surrealism. Pierre Naville, an important member of the surrealist movement has even said that, due to the nature of this form of art, there can be no surrealist painting²⁹.

We find that the criticism aimed at famous surrealist artists does not apply to Saint-Exupéry. Great surrealist painters, as opposed to their abstract expressionist contemporaries, will reinstate painterly illusionism. We can see the practice of perspective in order to suggest spacial depth; shadows and textures of materials mimic reality and the objects from the painting resemble recognizable objects from the outside world. All these forms will be placed in contexts and combinations that do not obey natural laws. In surrealist paintings we have collages of objects that resemble real objects but, if combined, depict a "surreal" world that defies natural laws. Saint-Exupéry will paint the illustrations from *The Little Prince* in a stylized manner, similar to the way children draw. Surrealist paintings – because of the technique they involved – were not entirely spontaneous, although in theory that was their intention. Creating an illusionistic oil painting requires time, sketches, layers, and so on and each time, the picture changes a bit. If we look at the first sketches for *The Little Prince*³⁰ we can see that these pictures are the same as what we can see in the published book. The material that Saint-Exupéry choose - watercolor - does not allow corrections, add-ons and redoes as oil does.

All the illustrations are done with *précis couture* and the shapes are sketched. The watercolor is either used with the full potential of its transparency or as a compact surface of color that does not fill a shape but hits at the color of the imagined object. The later mentioned technique is often used in landscapes. Along the horizon,

²⁹ Dawn Ades, Matthew Gale, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

³⁰ Alban Cerisier, Delpine Lacroix, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-72.

drawn with a black line we can often see a colored line underneath that indicates the color of the surface but does not fill it from top to bottom. Often, the colors of represented objects do not match the real equivalent, like violet fields or blue tree trunks. The images do not copy reality, but are spontaneous, creative introspections.

When the color does fill an entire form, the even blocks of color do not blend and mix. Such an example is "the best portrait" of the little prince. The element that dominates this image is the coat. Its lower part opens width in the form of fish tail. The shape and the size of this part emphasize the blue and the magenta that describe it. Next to the use of drawing and color, this image possesses another special property: optical illusionism. Most of the characters in the illustrations are represented on the ground, either on the spheres of their planets or on hills or fields generically describe by two intersected curved lines. In the first part of the book, most of the drawn characters are suspended in an undefined medium (with one exception representing the little prince on a cliff). "The best portrait" seems to be in the same category, but in this illustration the enlarged part of the coat creates the illusion of a horizon, with the little prince standing on the edge of it. If we cover up the middle section of the portrait, the lower part of the image seems to be a hill, while the little prince's head looks like a shining sun framed by two stars.

Opting for optical illusions is a characteristic practice of surrealism, the most famous example in this case being René Magritte. Unlike Dalí the main focus of this artist weren't the hidden corners of the subconscious, but the mysteries of reality. We can recognize Magritte's paintings by the visual games he often opts for: the juxtaposition of objects represented in a realistic manner. When combined, these objects form unreal worlds that do not follow the laws of physics. In one of Magritte's most famous paintings, *The Son of Man*, we instinctively presume that the rules of perspective are being followed since the entire image is constructed following the rules of illusionistic representation. Because the apple in the painting is covering up almost all of the character's face, we presume that the fruit is further in front of the character and it is probably about to fall on the ground. An issue with this is that both the man and the apple are clearly visible, fact which confuses the eye that expects a photographic type of image. Since the apple isn't blurry, it looks more like it is floating and not falling. The title of the painting is one of the recurring names given in the Bible to Jesus. In the painting we see a typical man, whose individuality is hidden by an apple, the symbol of sin. As with any painting by Magritte, our curiosity is drawn to the hidden part, in this case, the hidden face. The painting is often read as an image of Christ's transfiguration, the real face of man. If, however, we take into account that this painting is considered

a self-portrait (a small fraction of the features can be distinguished), we read "son of man" as referring to all children of Adam, including the artist, whose real face is hidden by the original sin. Human existence on earth appears as an illusory state, a part of reality. In another painting of the artist *Man with bowler hat*, we have the same character, whose tie is not red, but white. We can see less of his body, unlike the character in *Son of man*, whose hands were fully visible (and who's left one seems to be turned backwards at the elbow). The character, that can be interpreted as a "revealed" son of man, does not show us his human face with eyes, lips and nose, but is covered again, this time not by an apple but a white dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit appeared in the scene of Jesus' baptism. Absolution from the original sin does not leave man in a void of freedom, but transposes him in a Christian existence. Magritte's Christianity, or at least the Christian spirit he adopts is an exception among the surrealists, but this feature should be seen in conjunction with the fact that Belgium has a stronger Catholic tradition, more so than France. Magritte cannot be called a religious painter, but it is certain that all his paintings point to the idea that the visible world is mysterious in itself, that something is always hidden from the eye. Although in his paintings we have references to what Magritte thought was hidden behind the visible, the mystery itself, the concealment itself is what seems to have fascinated Magritte the most. Despite the simplicity of the message, these images are undoubtedly full of visual charm.

At least on a secondary level, Magritte's paintings are also a discourse on the nature of painting and mimesis. In *The Human Condition*³¹ the artist depicts a window seen from the inside of a room. Through the window we can see a landscape with fields and a sky with scattered clouds. Inside the room, in front of the window is a painted canvas resting on an easel. The image in the painting inside of the painting is a landscape that seems to photographically imitate the outside scenery. At first glance, it is hard to figure out where the canvas ends and where the window begins. When we distinguish the border we start questioning the "sincerity" of the painting on the easel: whether it's showing us what is seen through the window or an invention, a new image that is hiding the real one. The picture, as the title tells us, is a discourse on the limits of perception and knowledge, and again we could draw a parallel between the image and the Christian faith. In this picture, the ideas that may be extracted about the art of painting are numerous and vague, but they all revolve around the fact that painting is not a copy of the visible, even in the most impressive *trompe l'oeils*.

³¹ Jacques Meuris, *René Magritte 1898-1967*, Taschen, Köln 1992, p. 42.

Although there are similarities between Magritte's paintings the discourse regarding the visible and the invisible in *The Little Prince*, several nuances differentiate the two. In Magritte case the mystery veiled in his paintings seem to have a claim to universal truth. As we have seen, the veiled truth may sometimes be similar to Christian ideas. In this regard I go back to the detail regarding the absence or presence of the earth in the illustrations from *The Little Prince*. In the first picture of the asteroid B612, the place that is "home", the "grounding" of the characters is introduced, which is also suggested by the mere appearance of the little prince. Still, there is no evidence to suggest that *The Little Prince* is built on traditional symbolic structures: that the earth, the planets or stars are meant to send us to a particular significance. They are not intended as symbols that the reader/viewer must decipher by a code known beforehand. With regard to this essay, a great digression in semiotics is not need, but it is enough to keep in mind the two most common meanings of the word symbol: "a sign or object accepted as recalling, typifying or representing a thing, quality or idea // a character mark or sign standing for some process, idea or quality" ³² and „Term used to describe certain types of sign that are designed to extend the realm of representation, particularly so as to incorporate abstract ideas"³³ The symbol fulfills its function of communication on the basis that it has a cultural default meaning and therefore "everyone" knows in advance what is referred to by it. But this feature is not necessarily required. The symbol can be a complex sign whose meaning is inferred by thought and study. Cautiously, we refer to a type of symbol whose meaning is accessible to a person who does not belong to the cultural group that created the symbol and perpetuated it by consensus.

The Little Prince puts a lot of emphasis on the distance between people, which sometimes makes any form of real communication impossible. It speaks not only of cultural differences (for example, the Arab astronomer) but the human inability to keep the line of communication with his fellow man open in "adulthood". "The grownups" are a world apart from "the child" and each other. Between them is a gap that apparently cannot be overcome, because they cannot understand each other's symbols - if we refer to the first definition of the word. The characters in the book feel alone because of this, but finally manage to overcome the crisis by realizing that what is essential is invisible to the eye, that symbols are not explicit. The whole book focuses on the idea of creation of meaning, filling with sense as

³² ***, *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language. Deluxe Encyclopedic Edition*, Lexicon Publications, New York 1991, p. 1002.

³³ Jean Wirth, "Symbol", in ed. Jane Turner, *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 30, Grove, New York 1996, p. 163.

opposed to deciphering of sense. The stars, the desert, the field of wheat: all are empty in themselves. Although various meanings formed culturally are mentioned (the fox mentions a link between wheat and bread and thus both their insignificance for her who does not eat bread) they do not "mean" anything real to characters in the book. Individual experience is what creates real meaning and the meaning may vary from person to person. For the fox, Thursday is a holyday because the hunters go dancing. Moreover, deep and intimate meanings are born only within the relationship between the two characters. Thursday is a holyday in the relationship between the fox and the hunter; a field of wheat is the golden hair of the little prince in the relationship between the fox and prince; the stars are the laughter of a child in the relationship between the narrator and the little prince. It is not in any way insinuated that interpreting the illustrations in *The Little Prince* require a reading of symbols, but a psychological natural interpretation that comes from our human nature itself and not by belonging to a culture.

Thus, returning to the absence or presence of the earth – a base on which the characters are positioned – I do not argue that this element is meant to invoke to a particular significance, but it is intended to create specific human moods and attitudes. Saint-Exupéry wrote *The Little Prince* and illustrated it in an exceptional context in which he was isolated from his native country. Following a life defined by mobility without any constraints due to his job, he ends up being constrained within a country he doesn't particularly like. After a lifetime of movement, one's inability to return to its hometown, may lead to a growth of importance of the physical ground itself; the notion of "home", so abstract and symbolic at first, suddenly materializes in actual physical territory. Saint-Exupéry's anxiety and tension caused by the isolation in America can be read in the illustrations from *The Little Prince*.

Innocent and playful at a first glance, these images have something bizarre and unsettling in them. I attribute this to the way space is depicted in the images. The characters are constrained on their tiny planets, always on the brink of floating away into nothingness and infinity. Claustrophobic and agoraphobic at the same time, they are still remarkable in the sad intimacy they describe. The little prince's planet is small. It can be destroyed by the eruption of a volcano and torn apart by a baobab. When the little prince's rose upsets him, the planet does not offer enough room for refuge and the little prince must leave. However, it is a "home", a foundation of the character. The appearance of the little prince introduces this foundation both in text and illustration.

The unsettling aspect of space is yet another similarity between Surrealism and the illustrations of *The Little Prince*. In paintings such as Dalí's and Yves Tanguy's we often find that the background consists of flat, desolate desert-like landscapes.

The unsettling effect of these backgrounds refers to the obscurity and mystery surrounding the human subconscious. This void space accommodates dreams, memories, frustrations, combined in the most bizarre ways and forms that can occur at any time on the horizon of the mind. Space in *The Little Prince* also has a similar symbolic introspective value. The desert (land introduced to the little prince by snake) is the space in which the “wrecked” narrator faces his dual nature: grown-up and child. In the pictures depicting the little prince’s journey through the desert, the horizon is most often described by two intersecting curves. The visual impact of this line is diminished in certain images either by placing an object on the horizon (as in the picture accompanying the scene where the narrator and the little prince walked to the snake, in which a flower is placed on the horizon) or by compact staining of the sky above with purple (as is seen in the picture where the little prince is talking to the snake), a gesture that shifts the emphasis from linear drawing to the pictorial complementary contrast between the yellow desert and the purple sky.

In other images, the strong line of the horizon is toned down by the rays of sunlight depicted as curved radial lines that make the composition more dynamic (as we can see in the picture with the desert flower). Not incidentally, in the images with the most powerful emotional content - the one where the little prince is crying and the one in which he is dying – the horizon line is clear of any objects, uninterrupted and underlined with a lightly colored strip. In the first one, the little prince is found in the state of supreme solitude after he discovers that his rose is a rose like any other. He is shown lying down below the horizon into a position parallel to it. The text accompanying the second image informs us with particular poetic beauty what happens to the body of the little prince: “He fell as gently as a tree falls”³⁴, but the picture seems to show a character that is dangling above the horizon line. Arched back, the little prince barely touches the horizon with the tips of his feet, his whole body above it. His head is seen from behind, depicted in a similar manner as the star we see in the sky. The axis on which the star and the little prince’s head are placed in and the slightly diagonal horizon form an angle oriented towards the star, closed by the arch of the little prince’s body. The rhythm of the image is from the little prince towards the star. This image could be read as his soul’s ascension to the sky. As I have mentioned, Saint-Exupéry assumes many ideas related to Christianity, but he personalized them. The death of the little prince, although similar to a Christian death is, in the context of the book, the resolution of the narrator's internal conflict. He reached the point where he assumes real maturity (without decaying in the form of the grown-up) and returns home to save his life. He cannot be a naive and irresponsible

³⁴ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, translation by Katherine Woods, Reynal & Hitchcock, New York 1943, p. 90.

child anymore. The death of little prince is an introspective scene and even if we cannot place it in the narrator's subconscious, it is definitely connected to an internal psychological evolution.

The last image in the book shows the same landscape as the one discussed above, missing the little prince and any color. We see a horizon rendered by two curve black lines and a star above them. The theme of this last image is the absence of the little prince. There is a "letter" added next to it. The narrative style used so far is abandoned in favor of an epistolary style. The narrator addresses the reader directly, asking him for help, opening the book towards him. The arrangement of the text on the page is similar to one used in a letter and so this page physically looks like it is independent from the rest of book. The intimate feel of the text written with italic letter is amplified by the illustration next to it as it shows the real trace of Saint-Exupéry hand. The reference to the original image dawn by Saint-Exupéry is even stronger since the image is alone on a full page. These two last pages become an independent object, expressive in itself, that transforms *The Little Prince* in a dramatic story with an unsolved conflict. The narrator cannot accept the death of the little prince. He wants him to return because life without the little prince can be only a sad one. *The Little Prince* is a book of rebellion, stubbornness and loneliness. Saint-Exupéry refused to open up to the country in which he is living in, he refuses to learn its language or accept its specificities. He has extramarital affairs until the end of life, but remains married. He wants to go to war, to fly and be completely free and unbound. He wants to be a child. He cannot do any of these and so he writes in a style that can be considered "for children" but it is more a style hostile to adults that have hindered the author's freedom.

I pondered upon these two pages because the model after which they were created also has a connection with Surrealism. Combining image and text in a composed work of art (and not subjecting one of them to the other); sketching a minimalist image with strong and secure lines; achieving a poetic effect by the absurd joining of a very realistic and natural language, medium of expression or manner addressing one with a fictitious fantasy-message; the slightly subversive and rebellious spirit in a work of art, are some common characteristics of this final part of the book with the Dadaist movement. Although Dada is distinct and separate from Surrealism, it is its unquestionable precursor³⁵. Most founders of the surrealist movement, including André Breton were part of the Dada group. Its dissolution in 1922 (due to disagreements between members)³⁶ led to the empowerment of some members who wanted to

³⁵ Dawn Ades, Matthew Gale, "Dada", in Jane Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 8, Grove, New York 1996, p.433.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 439.

perpetuate similar artistic ideals and ideology and eventually, the foundation of the surrealist movement.

Finally we come to the most important set of pictures in the book: the boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant. *The Little Prince* begins with an account from the narrator's childhood. He tells us how, at age six, he made a drawing of a boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant. The drawing was inspired by a book about virgin forests. His work was misunderstood by the adults who it was shown to. They always confused the snake with a hat. Thus, the child-narrator has made another version of the first drawing meant to enlighten them. He kept that first drawing all his life, but discouraged by said event, he abandoned the practice of painting and drawing.

In this story, we are introduced to first three illustrations of the book. All of them are related to the event. In the first image, the narrator informs us that he tried to reproduce the photo from a book with virgin forests. The purpose of this drawing was to imitate a photo from science book, thus we may say it mimics nature. The second drawing is an invention inspired by this photo. It depicts a boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant. What we see is a brown irregular shape described by a series of reverse curves with a black dot in the corresponding head of the serpent. The image resembles a hat, but it is not a hat. The third image is an intellectual discourse; its purpose is to bring additional enlightening to the original artwork that was not properly understood by the public. In it we see the same shape as the second image but the inside isn't a compact brown, but instead it shows the sketched profile of an elephant.

If we look at the last two drawings as a composite image, we find a structure and a message that are very close to Magritte's *The Treachery of images*. In both we see two recognizable objects: a pipe and a hat. Underneath them, our interpretation of the two objects is deconstructed. Magritte chooses to paint cursive letters that read "This is not a pipe" in French. Saint-Exupéry chooses to use a second image. In Magritte's case, the text added begs the question "If this is not a pipe then what is it?". The elusive nature of this painting makes it a more charming one compared to the explicit works of Magritte, as we saw in the case of the self-portrait in which the question: what can an egg be if it is not an egg, is answered. Although the juxtaposition of the egg and the bird is a pleasant visual play, we are dealing with a rather simplistic painting.

In the case of Saint-Exupéry's serpent, the adding of the second image could bare the same burden of explicitness, but the fantastical nature of the picture, the inability of a snake to swallow an elephant, points us to a different type of interpretation. The opened up snake with the elephant inside is not intended to

obstruct the viewer's subjective, creative interpretation. On the contrary, it indicates that the shape of the hat can be anything, even a boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant. The title of Magritte's painting has a slightly negative connotation - talking about the limits of perception and the unsettling uncertainty that man must face - as interesting as the mystery surrounding it may be. Saint-Exupéry's image does not refer to deception, but to the infinite potential of the imagination (and communication). Both Magritte and Saint-Exupéry take a clear position against the general superficiality of people in their way of looking at life. Also they both discuss the nature of art. The main message seems to be that the real value of any object, gesture, person, etc. hides behind appearances and that the role of art is most certainly not to imitate the appearance of things. As we have seen, the role of art, as perceived in Magritte's art is to reveal "deeper truths" of reality, truths which in some cases are of Christian influence. One possible interpretation of Saint-Exupéry's boa images could lead us in a similar direction. The protagonist is a snake. Although he is a different type of snake than the one that later appears in the book, the venomous one, we have a connection that can be explored. The venomous snake is the one who helps the little prince return home by biting him. In a typical iconography, he is death, absolution, division. The boa is also depicted killing. Saint-Exupéry's illustration could be a reference to the ignorance and disillusionment with which adults choose to look at death. They refuse, or are incapable to recognize the inevitable approach of death, as opposed to the child who still senses its grandiosity and terrifying nature. Adults distract themselves with trivial things: they see only a hat.

Faced with an image, the human psyche can expose its defense mechanisms. When the little prince sees this drawing he recognizes it, he understands its gravity, but he is not frightened. He goes a step further and instead of the boa drawing showing the devastating face of death, he asks for a drawing of a sheep. We mentioned earlier that we can correlate the sheep to the Christian symbol of the lamb. When the narrator tries to meet his requirement, we see the same pattern as in the beginning of the book, but this time the narrator is a grown-up. At first he tries to imitate the aspect of a sheep, but in the end he represents the sheep through the image of a box. The illustration which the little prince will carry with him further on looks like a box, but isn't a box. It is his sheep, his salvation. We can make a symbolic parallelism between this box and the Eucharist. The sequence in which the narrator senses that the little prince will die is followed by this dialogue: "I have your sheep. And I have the sheep's box. And I have the muzzle..." // And he gave me a sad smile. // I waited a long time. I could see that he was reviving little by little. // "Dear little man," I said to him, "you are afraid..." // He was afraid, there was no doubt

about that. But he laughed lightly. // "I shall be much more afraid this evening..."³⁷ Death appears as an inevitably frightening event. The boa cannot be ignored. But a Christian death (if we accept the sheep as a symbol of Christ) has another valence. Through the sheep, the little prince can return home to his flower, but also through the sheep he can lose everything if the flower is eaten.

Whether or not we accept this interpretation, Saint-Exupéry's message remains different from that of Magritte's. The later promises to reveal something which we had not seen before. Meaning is, to some extent "revealed", or rather it relies on an "aha!" moment. The only meaning revealed in Saint-Exupéry's book is "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." The truth revealed is that one cannot stumble upon meaning, but instead one has to create it. Cornfields, the stars, the desert, the fountain, the rose; they all derive their meaning from relationships between characters, as I mentioned earlier in the essay. The boa snake receives its meaning in the relationship between a child and death, while the hat receives its meaning in the relationship between an adult and death.

The image of the boa snake anticipates all the essential points of the book, and along with the image from the end of the book, it sums up Saint-Exupéry's tragedy. As for *The Little Prince*, even a reading that takes no literary and historical context into account will bring pleasure to the reader, and this is undoubtedly on account of the intelligence, talent, eccentricity and courage of its author. But continuing my argument, I finish by mentioning that the wide availability and a "seductive" form are also features of surrealist art.

Saint-Exupéry was not a surrealist writer. He never considered himself one, but when he used crayons and watercolors instead of a pen he became a part of surrealism. His interaction with the members of the group weren't friendly, but the contact with their works surely left on mark on him, a mark that Saint-Exupéry might have not been aware of. Still, we see in the illustrations of *The Little Prince* the spontaneity and that naturalness that surrealism demanded of its artist. We have accounts about the way Saint-Exupéry made his etchings that indicate a similar method to the paranoid critical method used by Dalí or the automatism suggested by Breton, method which resulted not in imitating images but in psychological introspection. The illustration with which he ends his book shows a connection to Dadaism, the precursor of Surrealism. The use of optical illusion and most of all, the play with the duplicity and the frailty of appearances, as done in many surrealist works, is the most important aspect that Saint-Exupéry used in his work. This trait

³⁷ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

is at the core of the book. It is what makes it a symbol of modern culture and made it stand the test of time. Weather in the form of tattoos of the boa constrictor that swallowed an elephant, quotes from the foxes wisdom that continue to pop up here and there, new cinematic of theatrical renditions and especially the continuous popularity of the book, *The Little Prince* perfectly fits our need for “childish” indulgences and it will continue to do so for a society that has suppressed its regression, that does not afford temper tantrums, naiveté, stubbornness, or elective loneliness, but does not afford to explicitly condemn them either. Surrealism tried to offer an art of psychological escape, a venting space for frustrations and dissatisfactions, but how nice it is to be able to have that with a moral, idealistic cushion in the background.