Cultivating Consciousness and Battling Baobabs: Enduring Biophilic Allegory in Saint- Exupéry's *The Little Prince*

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Abstract:

From J.J. Rousseau's eighteenth-century instruction on 'cultivating' the child, to the emergence from the mid-twentieth century of the forest school, there has long existed a strong sense of affiliation between nature and the child. This particular biophilia has gained impetus in recent years with the rise of green youth movements and the figure of the 'eco-child', an ecologically focused reimagining of modernism's potent 'wise child.' Reflecting on his childhood, experiences of adult life, and the complex world around him, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's fervour for allegory manifested itself variously in *The Little Prince* (1943), but perhaps most richly in his engagement with plant life and nature, oftentimes reflecting a desperation to retain the lush pastures of childhood when faced with the arid, thorn-monster-ridden plains of modern adulthood. This paper explores the ways in which Saint-Exupéry uses metaphorical interpretations of plant life and the natural world to present allegorical readings of the wrongs of man and the modern world, and in turn the wisdom and integrity of children. Moreover, the paper acknowledges the pervasive longevity of such notions and issues, addressing their applicability both to Saint- Exupéry's era and to the contemporary world some eighty years later.

Keywords: childhood, biophilia, Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince, eco child, wise child.

Introduction: The 'Wise Child' and the 'Eco Child'

From Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pedagogic directions during the eighteenth century on 'cultivating' the child, to the emerging popularity during the mid-twentieth century of the forest school and resulting nature-based learning, a strong sense of accord between nature and the child appears not only long-established, but it manifests itself diversely. This affinity, a very particular sort of biophilism, has enjoyed further diversification and resurgence in recent years as it has gained global impetus alongside the twenty-first century rise of green youth movements and the emergence of the warrior-like figure of the 'eco-child'. In a growing sea of these environmentally minded young people, it is arguably Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, through her blunt and emotionally charged speechmaking, who has become the world-renowned face of the impassioned eco-youth movement. In amongst her numerous widely reported calls to action, it is

perhaps her fierce address to the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit which captured global attention, when she unreservedly chastised world leaders for what she perceived to be their poorly judged emphasis on greed-driven economic growth instead of impactfully addressing the snowballing climate crisis. The conviction with which Thunberg projected her generation's foresightedness, combined with the largely celebratory response she garnered from those she placed in the crosshairs, elevated her and many of those she represents to the modern embodiment of the 'wise child', representing a contemporary re-emergence scaffolded by powerful biophilic roots of a concept which pervaded intellectual and creative discourse in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

This notion of the biophilic 'wise child' permeated *Le Petit Prince (The Little Prince)* (1943), the best-remembered novella of French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944). Reflecting on his own childhood, experiences of adult life, and the complex world around him, Saint-Exupéry's fervour for allegory manifested itself variously in this heavily symbolic story, but perhaps most richly in his engagement with plant life and nature as a means of reflecting his celebration and critique of children and adults respectively. From his own childhood nostalgia for fairy-tale gardens looking out to the Jura mountains, to his characters' frustrations with the spread of the baobab trees and apparently needy capriciousness of the rose, Saint-Exupéry, his characters, and his story reflect a desperation to retain, protect, and cultivate the lush pastures of childhood when faced with the promise of arid, thorn-monster-ridden plains of modern adulthood. When Thunberg exclaimed of the loss of her childhood, the collapse of ecosystems, and the adult obsession with "fairy tales of eternal economic growth" (Thunberg 2019), it chimed somewhat with both Saint-Exupéry's symbolic representation through hapless kings and the overwhelming baobabs of humanity's selfish greed, and his lamentation at having to grow up at all.

This essay explores the ways in which Saint-Exupéry uses metaphorical interpretations of plant life and the natural world, both negative and favourable, in order to present allegorical readings of the wrongs of man and the modern world, and in turn the wisdom and integrity of children. The weariness felt by the narrator at having to negotiate the inadequacies of adults and educate them is not only mirrored by Thunberg's sentiments and those of her peers, but their striking similarity underlines the pervasive longevity of such notions and issues, cementing the enduring significance of this message and role of the child.

Context: Situating the Child in Nature

The term 'biophilia' (from Greek and Latin roots to mean 'life-fondness'), was formally conceptualised in 1984 by biologist E.O. Wilson as "an innate human desire to affiliate with life and life-like processes" (Rice & Torquati 2013, 79). For many, the manifestation thereof as the "idea of children and nature is an abstraction with little meaning until located in the lives of specific children in specific places at specific times" (Mergen 2003, 643); there is little clear-cut evidence to explain this link that we fairly inexplicably recognise yet often enthusiastically

champion. It is an affiliation that has perhaps become legitimised on a more general scale by virtue of its application in a variety of circumstances and settings. From palaeontologist S.S. Buckman's belief, based on Hyatt's law of acceleration, in the recapitulatory link between children and tree-dwelling apes and contemporary links to the childhood popularity of the jungle-gym (Gould 1977, 137), to "nineteenth-century ideas about childhood as the most 'natural' time in a person's life [during which] children were seen as preserving a pre-industrial heritage in their play in fields and forests" (Mergen, 2003, 646-648), there emerges a widespread belief in what Edith Cobb called "the child's ecological sense of continuity with nature" (Mergen 2003, 655).

This then extends into the arena of lived experience and knowledge-acquisition, where a garden, often the host of a child's initial encounter with the natural world, becomes not only the environment in which children first experience the freedom to wander, explore, and indulge curiosity, but also a space which facilitates "gardening as a valuable means of developing practical life skills and inculcating a sense of civic responsibility, national pride, and moral probity in children" (Crone 2003, 4-6). Early years practitioners such as Dr Deborah Schein (2014) have written on the extensive literature testifying to the significance of a nature-based formal education in producing a more socially and spiritually well-rounded child. Moreover, others have more generally identified that it is only through direct contact with nature's diversity that children are able to develop a meaningful relationship to the Earth, whose constantly changing and challenging environments offer an unparalleled stimulus that garners adaptive and problem-solving responses within the child that (Mergen 2003, 650-651).

In this sense, it follows that nature's capacity to nurture children's emotional and affective development engenders a sense of affinity: "experiences with nature play a critical role in shaping [...] patterns of behaviour toward natural environments [and so] as children learn that they are part of our natural world, they gain respect and appreciation for the environment and other living things" (Woyke 2004, 82-84). This, coupled with the tendency for children to feel happy and freer in the undeveloped landscape of nature, unentangled in the structures of the man-made world whose pervasive expansion persists in the governing of playground behaviours, would suggest that if "the fundamental truth of a child's experience of nature is that it comes with autonomy" (Mergen 2003, 644), then it is unsurprising that it is with an increasing sense of poignancy and drive in the contemporary era that we see so many children, equally impassioned and encumbered, who "grow to become the caretakers of our world" (Humphreys 2000, 20).

In more recent years, by virtue of the highly publicised and outspoken urgency of green youth movements, it seems to be a sense of exasperated responsibility by which the relationship between youth and nature is characterised. Critics have argued that it is the apparent trendy opportunity for "dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent" (O'Brien, Selboe & Hayward 2018) that green youth movements present to angsty teens which is of most appeal, buttressed by further suggestions that indicate that although young people more audibly voice their interest in and concerns about climate change, this is rarely matched with a more sustainable

lifestyle, a positive outlook about the potential for change, or useful prospective remedies (Ojala 2018, 11). However, whilst some evidence suggests the positive correlation between believing in anthropogenic climate change and intent to enact change is offset by the negative correlation between climate change belief and actual behaviour (Armstrong, Krasny & Schuldt 2018, 21), other theories would place greater weight on this particularly modern sort of biophilism having sprouted from young people both responsibly engaging in "an active process of increasingly organising the relationship of the self to the environment" (Kegan 1982,113) and frustratedly reacting to "an age-old political problem where marginalised citizens [...] are materially and existentially threatened by the decisions and actions of other individuals [which] may be perceived as opportunities for action and leadership" (O'Brien, Selboe & Hayward 2018).

Saint-Exupéry, Modernity, and Childhood

Such feelings of frustration and responsibility surrounding the more general and unifying issue of the ills of modernity and the adult human's wilful perpetuation thereof are shared by both Saint-Exupéry and the characters through whom he channels his thoughts. *The Little Prince* is a novella which tells the story of a pilot (the narrator) who has crash-landed in the desert when he is greeted by a mysterious but charming boy: the little prince. Having fallen from the sky, the little prince explains that he is from another planet and proceeds to recount his life story to the pilot over the course of eight days as the latter attempts to repair his aeroplane, telling him of his home asteroid and of all the other planets and their strange inhabitants to which he has paid a visit before arriving on Earth. Although ostensibly aimed at children, *The Little Prince* "is more than a children's story; it is an allegory" (Quinn 1946, 118) which frequently makes philosophical observations and criticisms of human nature, in particular the absurdity of the modern adult world in the eyes of the wise child.

Given that for Saint-Exupéry, "adulthood [...] was an exile" (Schiff 1996, 43), his draw backwards through the medium of literature intuitively written from the child's perspective stemmed from the great joy he associated with his younger years, and as a result of the immense fin-de-siècle-inspired grief he suffered upon the realisation that adulthood had shut him out of the magical garden of childhood games forever. In many ways courtesy of the extensive research afforded to the topic, whilst it is perhaps easy to understand how the repercussions of a childhood of unresolved trauma may make their mark in later years, it is important as well to appreciate that "a happy childhood, too, takes its hostages" (Schiff 1996, 43). Saint-Exupéry's nostalgic anguish for the loss of "the child we once were, but shall never be again" (Higgins 1960, 515) was what drove his own form of literary regression. Biographer Paul Webster discusses at length the ardent attachment Saint-Exupéry felt for his childhood home at Saint Maurice, whose combination of enormous walled gardens, splendid views towards the Bugey and Jura mountains and endless passages to explore and conquer, offered an adult-free playground of childhood dreams (Webster 1994, 15).

On the one hand, *The Little Prince* is a very personal tale for the author, written during a period plagued by deep melancholy and self-deprecation in response to his failing marriage. Moreover, Saint-Exupéry's personal struggles with fears of civil war, pro-Pétainism, and a steadfast German threat is reflected more generally in the novella's allegorical commentary on France's particular political and social precariousness. Whilst Saint-Exupéry's childlike novella could be read as a cowardly, regressive receding away from the harsh reality of the world's responsibilities, its eloquent criticism of modernity is indiscriminate and unrelenting in its challenging of the ills of adulthood as a whole, serving as an exposé of "the fundamental types of modern man in all his stupidity, [offering] so many occasions for an examination of conscience" (Quinn 1946, 118) by which "he proceeds to prove his theory that adults have no monopoly on wisdom" (Higgins 1960, 515).

Saint-Exupéry and Plant Allegory

Whilst Saint-Exupéry chiefly delivers his message through satire, namely that which mocks the misplaced self-aggrandisation of the adult in tandem with the denigration of the child in its perceived stupidity, it also offers a powerful warning through allegory, and especially that of a botanical nature. Saint-Exupéry's engagement with plant-based metaphors is by no means a field untraversed by scholars. Popular consensus has prominently arrived, for example, at the notion of the prince's capricious rose as representative of the author's estranged wife, Consuela, (Webster 1994, 248-251) and interpretation of the notorious baobab tree as a visual metaphor for Nazism running riot across Earth (Reif 1993).

However, considering Saint-Exupéry's consistent and unabashed veneration of the child over the adult throughout the novella, is there not a broader and more pervasive plant allegory in operation? Scholars have traditionally, and understandably, focused on Saint-Exupéry's often comedic depictions of the adults who inhabit the various planets previously visited by the little prince. This includes: the conceited man, who lives only for compliments, regardless of their genuineness; the businessman, who believes he owns the stars because he thought of counting them first; and the king, whose enormous ermine robe almost engulfs his otherwise uninhabited planet, but for whom everyone is a subject, "for kings, the world is extremely simplified: all men are subjects" (Saint-Exupéry 2013). In essence, Saint-Exupéry's collection of adults presents a consolidated criticism of the vital components of adulthood: superiority, ownership and materialism. This is further reflected in Saint-Exupéry's denunciation of reason, and the professing thereof, which he considers integral to the falsehood of adulthood. Notice how "it is the children in *Le Petit Prince* who speak the language of truth, not comprehended by their logical elders [and] it is the language of the prince, that used in expressing the most significant truths, which is 'defective'" by modern standards (Milligan 1955, 249-250). The author exposes the perceived imbecility of adults by both presenting their utterances as nonsensical and their inability to comprehend the unfettered wisdom of the child as evidence of their blind pretension.

In many ways, through his contrasting of the wisdom of children with the ineptitude of adults, his own nostalgic yearning for former years, and the dualistic combination of the insightful prince and the jaded and lost pilot narrator, Saint-Exupéry appeals to his adult audience to re-evaluate their opinions of children, instead inviting them to adopt his attitude to the world. Instead of viewing the maturing process as a positive and necessary pathway to the sense and success of the adult world, the author saw it quite conversely. Whilst lamenting the fact that "the infinite perspectives he had seen as a boy had narrowed" (Webster 1994, 7), he is simultaneously reproaching the adult reader for their hasty dismissal of the truth spoken by the child. And so, it was through this literary exposé of "the false gods of our civilisation" (Triebel 1951, 100) that Saint-Exupéry sought to powerfully describe "a process of dehumanisation of lives and landscapes" (Bunkse 1900, 100). Saint-Exupéry's reconciliation of these issues of reform and responsibility with themes of the natural environment and indeed the prevalence of botanical resonance in his life and in his thinking is clarified by the recurrence of related metaphors not just in *The Little Prince*, but also other works such as 'The Wisdom of the Sands' (1948) in which the author demonstrated "the keenest sense of his responsibility to comrades and fellow-men, a responsibility he expressed indirectly and several times in the lovely image of the gardener" (Triebel 1951, 102).

Botanical analysis of *The Little Prince* is naturally drawn to that of the baobabs. But it is a far more comprehensive exploration of this complex metaphor specifically within the context of juvenile biophilia and commentaries on modernity and the modern man to which this paper is dedicated. Although a genuine tree existing in the real world, and interestingly steeped in the mystery and magic of various folktales local to their African origins (Burton 2013, 452), Saint-Exupéry's baobabs refer to the monstrous and unruly plants native to the little prince's home planet, and to which he must dutifully attend:

> There were terrible seeds on the little prince's planet... baobab seeds. The planet's soil was infested with them. Now if you attend to a baobab too late, you can never get rid of it again. It overgrows the whole planet. Its roots pierce right through. And if the planet is too small, and if there are too many baobabs, they make it burst into pieces (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 14-15).

It is remarked in the novella that "they (adults) consider themselves as important as the baobabs" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 49), offering a humorous though darkly meaningful comparison of adults with baobabs which forebodingly suggests a sort of augury for the future should adults' modernity continue to run unchecked. The unwavering attention and constant tending required by the baobabs is something one might traditionally associate with a needy child, but Saint-Exupéry turns this on its head, instead highlighting not only the adult propensity for self-importance, but also the burden upon children, as the author sees it, to constantly explain the real significances of the world to adults. In much the same way that the little prince explains of man's duty to keep the raging baobabs at bay, Saint-Exupéry, in his

comparison of the monstrous trees to adults, provides a symbolic depiction of the ways in which the world could succumb to the overwhelming greed and self-interest of the modern man, taking over as the world as the baobab's greedy roots engulf the planet, should people not take responsibility in managing a sustainable, supportive and caring outlook on life. As with the novella as a whole, the idea and image of the baobab is far more emblematic than its whimsical appearance may first suggest, instead promoting "a philosophy of giving rather than of getting, of sharing rather than of keeping" (Fay 1947, 95) of which modern man seems blindly or deliberately bereft. The little prince himself consolidates this with both the comment that "people start out on express trains, but they no longer know what they're looking for" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 69), making reference with industrial-themed comparisons of the impatience and blind speed by which the modern man approaches life, and his remarks about the physical coarseness of earth. His complaints about the dryness, sharpness, and hardness of the planet geographically represent the emotional sense of emptiness and hostility with which he associates Earth. Atop a particularly lofty peak, the little prince gazes out across a harsh, jagged landscape bereft of colour and life. The barrenness of his surroundings is reinforced in Saint-Exupéry's accompanying illustration, poignantly fashioned, in contrast to his usual fervour for bright and playful colour, in unsaturated monochrome as if to reflect the empty and shallow mundanity now attached to modern, human life. Through the combination of a planet depicted as both depressingly arid and asphyxiated by wildly greedy plants, Saint-Exupéry impactfully "alludes to the consequences of human control over nature and science" (Munakata 2005, 41) by rendering the human and environmental costs chillingly inextricable.

However, the allegory of the baobab and its botanical nature can be unpacked still further to reveal a complex yet powerful reading. In his discussion of the baobabs, the narrator explains the existence of good plants and bad plants:

> 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 a 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 recognise it (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 14).

This, considered alongside the attestation from the narrator that baobabs resemble rosebushes when young (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 15), gives rise to the notion that there is perhaps a symbolic link between children and such young flowering plants, and adults and the established baobabs. This is further evidenced by the explanation that these unassuming little plants, which "took up no room at all and got in no one's way [and] would appear one morning in the grass, and would fade by nightfall" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 22), seem in their delicacy and youth to require the sort of urgent care and protection required by a child in order for them to grow properly into 'good plants.' Like childhood, "plants are ephemeral" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 46),

whose goodness without cultivation and care will wither. Aspects of humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers' botanical metaphors introduced as a means of explaining his understanding of the counselling process in his 1980 work 'A Way of Being' can be applied to such a reading of Saint-Exupéry's allegory: "a plant has within it the potential for growth, but needs nourishment from the environments for that growth to occur. It needs water, nutrients, and sun. Lacking the sun, it grows into a pale, spindly caricature of its potential" (Cowles 1997, 58). This, alongside the wise words of Saint-Exupéry's fox, who, in explaining that the 'taming' of individuals and the sharing of important rites in life are too often neglected, declares that "it's the time you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 64). Essentially, establishing not only a connection between plants and children, but also between *nature* and *a person's nature*, this allegory articulates that as children, like plants, we appreciate and require careful cultivation, lest *(our) nature* is left to wilt and turn bad, for children and childhood is ephemeral, just like plants and the state of the Earth. Furthermore, in the same way that baobabs start off like rosebushes – good, but with the potential to turn bad – so too do children, for if they appear as rosebushes but are left uncared for and uncultivated, their *nature* decays and they become baobabs, or adults, after which it is too late to save the planet. The tangible darkness of this very real sort of horror by which such a concept is characterised is perhaps influenced or at least reinforced by folkloric tales, recounted by Burton (2013), such as that of the "young man seeking honey [who] once fell into a baobab's hollow centre, never to re-emerge" and the connected belief that "baobabs could walk around at night, that spirits lived in their flowers". There is something to be said in this imagery for a symbolic link to modern man's traits; his greedy determination in seeking out the honey for himself, the ruthless opportunism of his fellow man (baobab) in swallowing him up, the vacuity of humanity and personhood reflected in the hollowness of the tree, and the notion of the spirits of children once here but now gone forever residing in the ephemeral flowers they embodied.

Considering the belief that "childhood is a brief and ephemeral period of human life" (Mergen 2003, 660-661) alongside pervasive and "unresolved anxieties over the future of both children and nature" (Mergen 2003, 645) for both Saint-Exupéry and his contemporaries, it is little wonder that the former felt and sought to share his pressing preoccupation: "when I drew the baobabs, I was inspired by a sense of urgency" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 16). Concerns over the futurity of mankind of course ultimately tumble into the hands and fates of both children and the planet. When Saint-Exupéry's character of the lamplighter poignantly complains "That's just the trouble! Year by year the planet is turning faster and faster, and orders haven't changed" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 42), it resonates not only with the sense of frustrated responsibility to which children feel abandoned by adults, but also the notion that "children have a different sense of time than adults [meaning that] the past, the present, and the future often merge in their lives, creating a sense of timelessness" (Cowles 1997, 59) which both informs and impassions their foresightedness and sense of urgent duty.

Accordingly, whilst Saint-Exupéry "offers no infallible solution to humanity's great problems" (Triebel 1951, 101), in the same way that "younger generations [...] are not a homogenous group" (Ojala 2018, 11) always unanimously in possession of incontrovertible wisdom, it is nevertheless the case that it was with a heart full of genuine anxiety and care that "he so often pleaded, vicariously, for the preservation of man" (Triebel 1951, 103) and by extension his environment. The novella begins with a dedication that features the statement that "all grown-ups were children first (but few of them remember it)" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 'Dedication'), which, supported later by evaluating Earth as "all dry and sharp and hard [where] people [...] have no imagination [and] repeat whatever you say to them" (Saint-Exupéry 2013, 54), suggests that not only does one forever lose the insight and vision possessed and professed as a child once they reach adulthood, but this youthful sagaciousness is so long forgotten that it is mocked and scorned by those who no longer harbour it. It is similar, perhaps, to the ironically immature ridicule endured by prominent members of contemporary green youth movements by certain adults whose power feels threatened by the seemingly illegitimate challenge.

Crucially for Saint-Exupéry, he had not completely forgotten the powers he possessed as a child. After declaring to his mother at the age of thirty that "this world of childhood memories will always seem to me hopelessly more real than the other" (Schiff 1996, 43), he endeavoured to persuade children to cling on tightly and for as long as possible to the lush green pastures of their youthful perspicacity, and to implore adults to help in this practice of preservation, before it is too late and all is lost to arid wasteland. It is in this way that Saint-Exupéry seems to both envisage and promote the child as the gardener of future Earth. For many readers of the novella, child or adult, contemporaneous or recent, it both "best embodies and safeguards the magic [...] felt and believed in as a child" (Strongheart 2001, 498), whilst simultaneously offering a very real and timeless reflection on human loss. This sentimental yet poignant lesson for grown-ups is as much provident and sagacious as it is warm and nostalgic. As Higgins declares, "I cannot help to but write of it in the present tense. Surely, this book lives today; so too does its author" (Higgins 1960, 572), pointing not only to the pervasiveness of issues relating to the care and attention afforded to children and the natural world, but also a sense of hope that even when faced with such desperate aridity, there remains some promise in the form of proverbial green shoots which continue to push through.

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