

**POETRY IN MOTION**  
**Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Wind, Sand and Stars***  
**A Presentation to the Chicago Literary Club**  
**by**  
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In the Summer of 1967, a friend and I drove cross-country from Kansas to Quebec to visit the Montreal World's Fair. It seemed a whimsical but symbolic thing to do ... to drive from the hard, flat plains of the American Midwest to what we thought of as the most cosmopolitan ... the most European ... the most foreign of North American cities. We were not disappointed, but I must confess that – fifty years later – I remember little about the buildings or the exhibitions of *Expo '67*, as the Montreal World's Fair was called. What I do remember is that the Expo was named after a book.

When we arrived at the fairgrounds, we learned that the theme selected for Expo '67 was *Terre des Hommes* (or in English, "Man and His World"). Only later did we learn that it was named after a book written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry ... and only later still did I realize that it was a book that I had read excerpts of in my high school French class ... a book that I knew as *Wind, Sand and Stars*.

At the entrance to the World's Fair stood a huge billboard emblazoned with these welcoming words of explanation:

In *Terre des Hommes*, his haunting book, so filled with dreams and hopes for the future, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry writes of how deeply moved he was when, flying for the first time by night alone over Argentina, he happened to notice a few flickering lights scattered below him across an almost empty plain. They

"twinkled here and there, alone like stars...." In truth, being made aware of our own solitude can give us insight into the solitude of others. It can even cause us to gravitate towards one another as if to lessen our distress. Without this inevitable solitude, would there be any fusion at all, any tenderness between human beings? ... [This then is] the governing idea of Expo 67, a group of people from all walks of life was invited by the Corporation to reflect upon it and to see how it could be given tangible form.

These words thrilled me. Now, if truth be told, I was far less moved by the prospect of "gravitat[ing] towards one another ... to lessen our distress" than I was delighted by the notion that I had actually read something -- as part of my formal education -- that had some current relevance. There I was ... in what I thought of as a French city ... suddenly thrust back by my memory into a classroom in Kansas City reading ... in French ... of a solitary man in a primitive single-engine plane emerging from a cloud over the Andes Mountains and seeing the lights of civilization in the valley below.

It was July of 1967 ... but at that instant I felt the same feeling I had felt in March 1961 when I read that passage from Saint-Exupery's book. (Keep in mind that in 1961, I have never flown in a plane ... ever.) In reading that passage, I felt -- as that pilot must have felt after flying blind in the clouds -- a bit of acrophobia, a little vertigo, a trifle disoriented, and a lot of relief. In that summer of 1967 at the World's Fair, it was like Proust's dunking a madeleine in his tea in *à la recherche du temps perdu*: the sudden and intense memory from 1961 flooded back ... and -- though I was standing in an ornate fairground in a Montreal park -- I was once again that pilot,

feeling his feelings, shivering that shivering, looking down on some unknown town near the Andes.

And that, my friends, is the incredible power of the written word! A book ... even a part of a book (for I had only struggled through one chapter of *Wind Sand and Stars* in my high school French class) ... can cast such an unforgettable spell that years later a quote from it can unlock that powerful experience once again.

You will forgive me, I hope, for this back-ended and quite personal way of introducing the subject of my discussion: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and his book, *Wind Sand and Stars*. The book is a memoir by Saint-Exupéry – published in 1939 – in which he narrates a series of aviation-related events in his life (and in the lives and deaths of some of his close friends). The events arise from his work for the French air carrier, Aéropostale, in the early days of airmail delivery in African Sahara and the South American Andes. The book includes a healthy and refreshing dose of semi-philosophic musings about the nature of friendship, death, heroism, and comradeship with some broader thoughts on the search for the meaning of life thrown in.

Most of you will have some familiarity with Saint-Exupéry's name and almost surely with his book, *Le Petit Prince* ("The Little Prince"). His charming and magical novella was published in 1943, just months before his death in World War II.

Of course, you remember *The Little Prince*! It has been virtually inescapable anywhere on earth for 70 years! That jewel-like story was voted the best book of the 20th century in France. It has been translated into 300 languages and dialects and continues to sell nearly two million copies a year. To date, over 140 million copies have been sold worldwide.

Richard Burton narrated the story on a Grammy-winning recording in 1954. It was broadcast as a radio play in the United States in 1956, with Raymond Burr as the pilot. Hollywood made a live-action movie of it in 1974 with baritone Richard Kiley singing a profoundly-touching farewell to the little prince. And an animated version was released with Jeff Bridges as the aviator in 2015. Yet, in 1943, the book enjoyed only slight initial success, lasting only two weeks on The New York Times Best Seller list.

But did you know that the earlier memoir by Saint-Exupery -- recounting his real-life crash landing in the Sahara Desert -- is thought to have been the root experience which he used to paint the scene in *The Little Prince*? His 1939 book, *Wind Sand and Stars*, tells spellbinding tale after spellbinding tale of aviation -- each of which can fairly be characterized as examples of the awesome beauty of flight ... of poetry in motion ... but which collectively shrink man into a tiny component of the cosmos. It is mildly ironic that, by contrast to *The Little Prince*, his earlier memoir was a runaway best seller, staying on the New York Times Best Seller list for five months in 1939. Yet now, comparatively few remember *Wind Sand and Stars*. That's a shame. It is worth reading ... and mulling over.

One of the great aviation stories in *Wind Sand and Stars* is Saint-Exupery's night flight carrying the airmail over the Andes ... that's the passage I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation. But another of these spellbinding tales ... perhaps the central one ... is the story of his 1935 crash landing in the Egyptian desert. Trying to break the speed record for a Paris-to-Saigon flight, Saint-Exupery and his co-pilot crashed into the Saharan desert, near the Nile delta. Far from any town or oasis ... lost in the arid, sandy wasteland ... the fliers were almost certain to die of thirst. After two days, the pair were hallucinating when suddenly a real

Bedouin on a real camel discovered and ... to the pilots' undying gratitude ... saved them. Four years later, his near-tragedy became an essential part of Saint-Exupery's extended discourse on Man's place on Earth in *Wind Sand and Stars*. Four years after that, he transmuted that Saharan misadventure into the golden dream we have come to know and love as *The Little Prince*.

In *The Little Prince*, the narrator is a pilot who, one day, crashes his plane in the Sahara, far from civilization. There, the narrator is greeted by a young boy who is introduced as "the little prince." Upon encountering the narrator, the little prince asks him to draw a sheep. ("Dessine-moi un mouton!") The story takes off from there to involve a mysterious rose, a yellow snake, and a fox to name a few of the characters. *Une histoire tres charmante, non?*

Antoine de Saint-Exupery ... *quel homme!* What a man! Perhaps first and foremost, a fearless aviator! No, wait, he would be the first to proclaim that he was anything but "fearless"! Only a fool is without fear in the face of danger, he would say. The brave man ... the man of courage ... subordinates his fear to his sense of responsibility. Duty. That is the great thing for Saint-Exupery:

To be a man is, precisely, to be responsible. It is to know shame at the sight of poverty which is not of our making. It is to be proud of a victory won by our comrades. It is to feel, as we place our stone, that we are contributing to the building of the world.

As a young pilot in the early days of commercial aviation, Saint-Exupery was imbued with a sense of mission ... of purpose ... of responsibility for carrying the mail. In his book, he calls it (in French) *d'avoir l'honneur de piloter la poste* (in English, to have the honor of flying the airmail).

But let us pause the planes of the *aeropostale* service for a moment, and talk about the English language text of *Wind Sand and Stars* which – it turns out -- notably differs from the French language version. I want to tell you a revealing story about the process which illustrates how an author writes ... and sometimes rewrites ... a book and about the alchemy when a work is translated from one language to another. For this story, I will rely upon the words of Saint-Exupéry's translator, M'sieur Lewis Galantiere ... one of the greatest translators from French to English that the literary world has ever seen. In a 1947 reminiscence of Saint-Exupéry published in the Atlantic Monthly, M'sieur Galantiere wrote:

Saint-Exupéry paid his first brief visit to the United States in January or February, 1938. He had arranged to have a plane shipped from France to Montreal, and his purpose was to [make a flight] over all the countries of the Western Hemisphere, from Canada to the tip of Patagonia. "If you will look at an air map," he said when he came to dinner with [friends one night,] "you will see that I can do it by flying practically in a straight line. It's a silly thing to do, perhaps, but I want to do it." Two days later he had taken off, and in another day or two we read that he had crashed [from] an overload of fuel in Guatemala. After some weeks in [a] hospital, first in Guatemala City and then in Mexico, he spent a brief period of convalescence in New York as the guest of Colonel (later Major General) William Donovan, creator and director of the OSS. Here he finished a book upon which he had been at work for a number of years. The manuscript, turned over to me for translation, was entitled *Du vent, du sable, des étoiles*. [This title literally translated into English as "Wind, Sand and Stars."]

[Subsequently, Saint-Exupéry began sending me a flood of letters, describing changes in the text.] In the first place, Saint-Exupéry was purifying his style, ridding it of rhetoric, eliminating the florid [...] and moving towards the severe. He had conceived such a horror of the "literary," the falsely poetic, that he dropped his evocative title and substituted for it *Terre des hommes*, literally "Man's Earth" with the sense of "the planet on which men live." Not only had he rewritten certain chapters in their entirety, substituting meditation for action and description, but he ended by cutting out altogether one third of the text he had left with me. It was clear that he was anxious to give the reader the impression that this was not a book of adventure, and that his aim was a book in which the reader should see unmistakably — as he put it — "how the airplane, that tool of the airlines, brings man face to face with the eternal problems."

[We argued about Saint-Exupéry's edits, and ultimately we agreed to disagree, the end result being a much different book being printed in French than the one printed in English.] Then, when his French text was in proofs, [Saint-Exupéry] turned up suddenly in New York, in February, 1939. He said me that he was sailing back [in] four days in the ship that had brought him, and that he had come only to tell me that he was sorry to have given me so much trouble. I was appropriately touched; but I reminded him that he had promised his American publishers two additional chapters and had not produced them. He made a face, and said he thought he could write one, at any rate, in a couple of days; it had been ripening in him for several years and was ready to drop. And in a room at the Ritz [Hotel], in New York, he wrote what some readers

believe to be the most exciting chapter in *Wind, Sand and Stars*, the chapter called "The Elements." Our moralist was himself so convinced of the excellence of this narrative of fiction that he cabled Paris to ask that *Terre des hommes* be held up for its insertion [...] but it was too late. [The French edition had already been printed.]

Thus, as the narrative of M'sieur Galantiere indicates, for those fortunate enough to have some facility with the French language as well as English, one can choose to read one or the other of two quite different versions of the same book. As a result of the gentle but insistent clash of philosophy and artistic judgment between Saint-Exupery and Galantiere, the French and English editions consciously reflect much more than the usual differences that can result from built-in cultural and perceptual differences of two different languages. While French is generally thought to be more poetic ... more romantic ... more evocative than English, yet to read *Terre des Hommes* "en français" in fact yields a more streamlined stream of meditative consciousness than the muscular lyricism and exhilaration of *Wind Sand and Stars* in English. It is also a fascinating glimpse of the unique personality of Saint-Exupery as a human being that he would tolerate ... indeed embrace ... that very difference in his own creation.

Saint-Exupery was an artist but he was also a man of action ... an airman who sprang to the defense of his country when it went to war with Germany in 1940. When it was so quickly defeated, he moved to the United States and sought to persuade America to go to war against the Nazis. Following Pearl Harbor, when American did go to war, Saint-Exupery went to North Africa with the first invasion force and joined a Free French air force unit, flying reconnaissance missions over enemy territory. In July 1944, as the Allies pressed their invasion of Nazi-held "Fortress Europe," Saint-Exupery was lost at sea flying a solo reconnaissance mission over the



Mediterranean coast of France. His body was never positively recovered and identified, but more than one German fighter pilot claimed to have been the one who shot him down.

In 1998 – 54 years after his disappearance -- Saint-Exupéry's silver ID bracelet was found by a fisherman in the sea off of Marseille. This discovery was an emotional event in France, where Saint-Exupéry had become something of a mythic national hero. Two years later, in the same area, a diver found what he believed to be remnants of the Lockheed P38 Lightning that Saint-Exupéry had been flying. Four years after that, the government of France confirmed that the wreckage was indeed that of the airplane flown by author-aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. A death in aerial combat was a fitting end to a life so well and so thoroughly lived.

As the author himself remarked in *Wind Sand and Stars*, "Behind all seen things lies something vaster; everything is but a path, a portal or a window opening on something other than itself. \* \* \* It is in the compelling zest of high adventure and of victory, and in creative action, that man finds his supreme joys."

Thank you and good night.

W.M.H.