

# Two Psychoanalytical Readings of *The Little Prince*

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A comparison between the psychoanalytical readings by two famous scholars and psychoanalysts, of Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*) should prove extremely interesting, both as an introduction to psychoanalytical reading and as an attempt of conclusion about the pertinence and validity of such an approach, especially for an icon text such as *The Little Prince*, beloved by millions of children and adults around the world.

During the Winter Semester 1959-60, Marie-Louise von Franz, the closest and perhaps most famous disciple of C.G. Jung, gave a series of twelve lectures at the Jung Institute, on the subject of the *Puer Aeternus* or eternal youth human type. These lectures form the content of a book: *The Problem of the PUER AETERNUS* first published in 1970 by Spring Publications. Eight of these twelve lectures constitute a psychoanalytical analysis of *The Little Prince*.

Eugen Drewermann, a German theologian and psychoanalyst, former Catholic priest, published his own analysis of Saint-Exupéry's book: *Das Eigentliche ist unsichtbar: Der Kleine Prinz tiefenpsychologisch gedeutet* in 1984. The English translation: *Discovering the Royal Child Within, a Spiritual Psychology of "The Little Prince"* was published in 1993 by Crossroad Publishing Company, after the French translation published in 1992.

Both Franz and Drewermann also share a great interest in fairy tales and have presented numerous analyses though usually not of the same texts. The fact that here they analyze the same literary text is of great interest. Franz's stand is purely Jungian; whereas, by 'depth psychology', Drewermann means a synthesis of the Freudian and Jungian schools to

which he adds his personal Christian and often non-orthodox Catholic flavor. The two psychoanalysts make a completely different evaluation of Saint-Exupéry's text. Franz seems to have a rather poor opinion of Saint Exupéry that she sees, may be rather rightly, as a minor French writer, whereas Drewermann considers *The Little Prince* as the most representative "fairy tale of transcendent value" of the XXth century, countering Kafka's anti-fairy tale, *The Castle*.

Another matter of interest lies in the fact that Drewermann does not seem to have read Franz's text, published some ten years before his own book, whereas he sometimes mentions Franz in his psychoanalytical readings of some of the Grimms' fairy tales. Thus we have two completely independent psychoanalytical interpretations of the same text.

Another striking difference between the two readings is the audience each psychoanalyst has in mind.

Marie von Franz gave this series of lectures at the Zurich Jung Institute in front of an audience of psychoanalysts and medical doctors to whom she sometimes addresses questions, the answers being incorporated in the text in italics. In other words, her purpose is mainly a didactic one. She wants to inform Jungian psychoanalysts about a human type frequently encountered in their practice: the *Puer Aeternus* or man with a strong mother complex. What she does here is the psychoanalysis of Saint-Exupéry himself, treating the "I" of the narrator as the "I" of the author. She frequently interrupts her analysis to offer examples of cases from her own practice of men with the same problem as Saint-Exupéry. We shall skip these parts and just concern ourselves with the parts directly related to the novel and to this writer.

Drewermann is a prolific writer, very popular in Germany and in France. He is a former Catholic priest who was forbidden to preach or teach because of some of his controversial books. His thinking is always original and provocative, with a genuine interest in interfaith dialogue and ecology. He is mainly concerned with Saint-Exupéry's works and only after a careful analysis of the texts does he refer to his life for confirmation of his findings.

After a presentation of Marie von Franz's analysis and of Eugen Drewermann's analysis, we shall compare the psychoanalytic readings of the same elements of the text, in the hope of reaching a conclusion about the validity of this type of approach.



In her first lecture, Marie von Franz begins by explaining that *puer aeternus* is an appellation given by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* to the child-god Iacchus, later identified with Dionysos and Eros. Then, following Jung himself, she defines this psychological type as a man with an "outstanding mother complex" which, as a consequence, creates one of two typical disturbances: either homosexuality or Don Juanism, to which are added an inferiority complex or a false feeling of superiority. She explains that this leads to a form of neurosis that has been called a 'provisional life': "the strange attitude and feeling that one is *not* yet in real life", in other words, a "constant feeling of dissatisfaction with one's lot in life and difficulty to commit oneself". She adds to this a 'savior complex', which can lead to 'pathological megalomania'. Another characteristic of this type is a "highly symbolic fascination for dangerous sports –particularly flying and mountaineering– so as to get as high as possible, the symbolism being to get away from reality, from the earth, from ordinary life".

Among the positive qualities of the *puer aeternus* type she states "a certain kind of spirituality which comes from a relatively close contact with the unconscious", as well as a great charm.

Franz brushes a rapid biographical sketch of Saint-Exupéry. She stresses his aristocratic origins, his service in the Compagnie Aeropostale and in the army, his unhappy marriage to "a very temperamental and difficult woman" and his own bad moods when he could not fly and his "Nazi psychology". Franz keenly remarks that although so many people make their Bible and worship of *The Little Prince* they also show "a defiant attitude" which has always intrigued her. She attributes it to the sentimentality of the book explaining that sentimentality often covers up

brutality.

In her interpretation of *The Little Prince*, Franz's clear intention is to treat "the shadow problem of the *puer aeternus*". It is therefore not surprising that her analysis of the long quotes from the book as well as the drawings of the author accompanying the text is often quite negative.

Franz begins her interpretation with an analysis of the first pages of the book "told by Saint-Exupéry in the first person, like part of a personal autobiography". As already mentioned, she makes no difference at all between the narrator and the author, although the narrator's name never appears in the story.

According to Franz, the first few pages contain "the whole problem in a nutshell" mainly, the lack of interest of Saint-Exupéry for the world of adults, his nostalgia for the world of the child, and for the artist's life.

Franz explains that Saint-Exupéry grew up in a "very disillusioned and cynical" milieu and that he was right to protest against it and "to cling to his inner artistic and total view of life" remaining "resentful and revolutionary against such adult life". But the problem as she sees it, is that Saint-Exupéry "does not know how to pull out of his childhood world without falling in the disillusionment of what he sees as the only value in life".

In the image of the boa constrictor the psychoanalyst recognizes "an image of the devouring mother and, in deeper sense, of the unconscious, which suffocates life and prevents the human being from developing". Franz describes Saint-Exupéry's mother as "a very powerful personage... a big, stout woman... [with] a tremendous energy" (very much in fact like Franz herself!).

The elephant having been swallowed by a boa is also the image of "a pull toward death" that may account for the melancholy tone of the whole book. Franz explains the symbol of the elephant, archetype of the individuated individual. She interprets the elephant inside the snake, as the image of the hero Saint-Exupéry wanted to become, which is swallowed and unable to come out again.

Next Franz quotes the pages relating to the meeting of the flyer

narrator busy repairing his airplane with the little boy dressed in a Napoleon outfit, which she qualifies of “funny idea and typically French”. She reminds her audience that Saint-Exupéry had crashed into the Sahara with his mechanic and that they had nearly died of thirst in the desert. Franz explains that hallucinations are frequent in such circumstances, just as in fairy tales something numinous appears when one is lost in the woods. At the time of his crash she adds, Saint-Exupéry, in his thirties, was already “in the crisis of his life”, no longer satisfied with his flying but unable to switch to another occupation, a frequent phenomena in pilots’ life. The gesture of impatience against the child requesting the drawing of a sheep is typical, according to Franz, of the *puer aeternus* who gets impatient instead of doing something thoroughly. Saint-Exupéry just draws a box, telling the child the sheep that he wants is inside.

In her second lesson, Franz analyses the motif of the sheep. She explains that Saint-Exupéry never overcame his rage over State or Military administrative obstinacy treating people as sheep. In the problem of the devaluation of the individual she also recognizes the problem of the *puer aeternus* with his difficulties to adapt as a general problem of our time.

The crash in the desert, which gives Saint-Exupéry the opportunity to meet the little prince, illustrates both an incident of Saint Exupéry’s own life and “a symbolic or archetypal situation with which every encounter with the unconscious begins”, that is to say an incident or a crisis which interrupts the flow of life, so characteristic of fairy tales in particular. In such circumstances, according to Franz, it is natural that the symbol of the ‘child-god’ appears. But the child archetype, like most archetypes, presents a double aspect. If on one hand, its appearance announces the possibility of a renewal, on the other hand, in its negative aspect, it can also be an “infantile shadow which must be sacrificed”. Franz explains that in *The little Prince*, and in Saint-Exupéry’s problem, she cannot make up her mind whether “to treat the figure of the little prince as a destructive infantile shadow whose apparition is fatal and announces Saint-Exupéry’s death, or to treat it as a divine spark of his creative genius”.

Marie von Franz interprets this child figure, just as all the material of the book, in a double way. For her, the fact that the star child is the only one who can understand immediately the drawing of the elephant swallowed by a boa, is a proof that the little prince embodies Saint-Exupéry's nostalgia of his childhood, and therefore represents his infantile shadow. Since however both the pilot who crashed in the desert and the star child come from the air and meet on the earth, this symbol also represents a possibility of getting in touch with reality. The child wants a sheep to eat the overprolific trees on his star –another representation of the devouring mother–, and the fact that he wants a crowd-soul such as the sheep in his divine isolation is also interpreted as a positive sign, however, at the end of her analysis of the symbol of the sheep on the individual as well as the collective unconscious levels, Franz concludes that the symbol is negative after all. The child wants to take the sheep up instead of going down to earth and Saint-Exupéry puts the sheep in a box which for Franz means that Saint-Exupéry is simply remaining in his dream world, his "fantasy-theory world", without being able of action, a typical *puer* trait. Franz says that Saint-Exupéry's art is "very neurotic" because he was unable to objectify the *puer*: "he writes out of his neurosis, and it is doubtful that he was a great artist". According to her, a truly great artist is able to "give up his *puer* mentality", as Goethe himself did after writing *The Sorrows of Werther*.

In her third lecture Marie von Franz analyses the symbols of the baobab sprouts and of the many elephants that it would take to get rid of them. The little prince draws a sketch showing four piles of elephants around his planet and Saint-Exupéry draws an elaborate colored drawing of three big trees and a helpless boy, a neighbor of the little prince, who was too lazy to pull up the roots of the baobabs. In the elephants, Franz recognizes the male hero-substance eaten by the snake mother, and in the trees, the death-mother instead of the symbol of inner-growth and individuation that the tree usually represents. Franz's interpretation is that the other little boy represents the shadow of the little prince, and of Saint-Exupéry himself

who does not want to “outgrow the mother problem” which finally destroys him.

On the positive side, Franz sees the little prince as the archetype of the divine child, a symbol of the Self and the source of Saint Exupéry's creativity. However, when she comes to the part of the text where the little prince speaks of his sadness as he contemplated the sunsets –up to forty-four a day– from his planet, Franz interprets this as a symbol of life not flowing, of stagnation. When she analyses the rose, cause of so much anxiety for the little prince, she says that it is very clear that “he alludes here to his experience of woman and of the first anima projection and how difficult it was for him”. She explains that one name of Saint-Exupéry's wife was Rosa and that the difficult relationship of the little prince with his rose is “a perfect description of a lover's relationship where each tortures the other” as well as “a magnificent description of the vanity and moodiness of the typical anima”.

In her fourth lecture, Franz analyses the three volcanoes, reading the two active ones as symbols of emotional eruptions and the extinct one as a loss of emotional reaction or post-psychotic state caused by the death of Saint-Exupéry's beloved little brother.

Franz comes to the part where the little prince leaves his star holding onto a flock of birds and visiting six neighboring asteroids before coming to earth. She interprets the six figures the little prince meets as “shadow figures, or some of his inner possibilities of adaptation to the reality of Saint-Exupéry”. The king figure is Saint-Exupéry's way of “making fun of the power complex and of those false pretensions which are up against reality as it is”. The second figure personifies vanity; the third drinks to drown his sorrows; the fourth is a businessman for whom even the stars represent just money; the fifth is the lamp-lighter in constant activity because of the tiny size of his asteroid; the sixth is the geographer who tells the little prince about the earth. Franz interprets these figures as possibilities of the future grown man gone in the wrong direction. Saint-Exupéry she says could have been the lamp-lighter if he had followed the

family tradition or the geographer in whom she sees a positive figure capable of “finding and mapping the way on earth”.

Franz quotes the pages of the text where the little prince meets the serpent, his first encounter on earth, which she interprets as “the temptation to die”. She explains the dual symbolism of the serpent as “enemy of light and at the same time a savior in animal form”. She shows that the serpent is often combined with the child in mythology, the child god Cupid being the archetype of the poisoner, and she thinks that the serpent is the shadow of the little prince. The serpent offers the child an integration of his shadow in his Self but not in Saint-Exupéry himself. “This means that the whole thing happens in the unconscious and moves the psychological nucleus away from reality again”. Again, Franz relates Saint-Exupéry’s “detached and philosophical attitude toward life” to the death of his little brother. She explains that the *puer aeternus* often acquires prematurely this attitude normal for old people, constantly toying with the idea of death instead of engaging fully into life, “never quite committed to the situation as a whole human being” and therefore remaining for ever split from transformation as a result of his mother complex. She reminds her listeners that: “To Saint-Exupéry, flying, or drugs [taking opium at the instigation of a woman that his mother liked far better than his wife] represented the two possibilities of getting rid of [his] depressive moods, but he never got through the mood” and was thus unable to overcome his suicidal tendency.

Next Franz quotes the passage where the little prince discovers with despair a field of roses like the rose he had thought unique. “To think of oneself in a statistical way is most destructive to the process of individuation, because it makes everything relative”. She sees the battle between “the feeling of uniqueness” and “statistical thinking” as a battle between intellectualism and loyalty towards one’s feeling that needs to be integrated in order to develop fully as a human being.

Then Franz reads the whole text of the encounter between the little prince and the fox. According to her, “the fox teaches the little prince the important value of the here-and-now and, with it, of feeling”. She



analyses the symbolism of the fox around the world explaining that, in Saint-Exupéry's text, the fox is a symbol of faith and foresight, as in Christian allegory, instead of being the usual popular symbol of cunning, cruelty or hysteria. She explains that however, something is lacking in the understanding of the little prince. The fox's teaching should tie him to the earth and to his new friends but it only makes him wanting to go back to his asteroid and to his rose, which shows how strong was the death-pull in Saint-Exupéry.

In the fifth lecture, Marie von Franz mentions the episode of the imaginary well that refreshes the thirsty flyer walking in the desert with the little prince as the most poetic part of the book. She explains that we see clearly here that the little prince, as a symbol of the Self, is also the source of life offering the possibility of renewal. After this "climax of happiness", the end comes quickly, when Saint-Exupéry finds the child making an appointment with the snake. She compares Saint-Exupéry's feeling of helplessness as he is holding the frightened child in his arms, to the feeling he must have felt at the time of the death of his younger brother.

Franz points out the fact that the little prince is "an impure symbol": partly the childish shadow incarnated, and partly the symbol of the Self not incarnated. As a real symbol of the Self within Saint-Exupéry, the little prince would not need to die. The snake kills the shadow to free the symbol of the Self.

According to Franz, this story is "a mixture of right and wrong symbolism". On the positive side, one gets the feeling that, after this meeting with the Self, Saint-Exupéry can return to his own life just as the little prince returns to the Beyond but, on the negative side, one also feels that Saint-Exupéry did not return to the world, but followed the little prince unto death, because he had not accepted to let go of this experience of the Self.

Franz interprets the fact that Saint-Exupéry has forgotten to draw a muzzle for the sheep as a terrible thing since the sheep will eat not only

the baobab shoots but also the rose, a mandala, “nucleus of the process of individuation”, which will be “destroyed on the other side – in the Beyond” whereas, in a “tragic mechanism”, there is an unfortunate extension of the collective with the sheep in the star. Thus the *puer aeternus*, having been collectivized from within, has become the archetype of a man thinking of himself as something special, but without true originality, and longing for death because of his problem with his destructive shadow. The three remaining lectures are cases study illustrating the findings on the *puer aeternus* type made during the reading of *The Little Prince* and they are not relevant here.



Whereas Marie von Franz follows the text analyzed from a purely Jungian point of view, Eugen Drewermann chooses themes that sometimes lead him to similar conclusions and sometimes to very different ones. The book is divided in seven chapters, each developing around a central theme: the royal child; the adults; the desert; love and death; the rose; flying; metaphysics. Drewermann defines his reading, which is far more sophisticated than Franz’s, as a “theological-psychological essay”, written with the central goal of allowing the little prince to remain on our planet, a very different aim indeed than Franz’s purely didactic purpose.

Drewermann is conscious that a psychoanalytical analysis might spoil the pleasure of the reader and disappoint those for whom *The Little Prince* has become “the narrative key to their life” with its reference to “the eternal dream of lost childhood”, “the artful, ironic liberation” it offers from the adults’ world, and its trust in “the unconditional fidelity of love”. Drewermann purpose however is “to apply depth psychology to the clearly autobiographical features of *The Little Prince*”, even at the risk of destroying “the Saint-Exupéry’s myth” because he wants to reach the “psychic and existential truth” contained in the work, instead of satisfying himself with a naïve reading or a scholarly reading.

In the first part of *Discovering the Royal Child Within*, Drewermann analyses the message of the book. He interprets the Little Prince as a quasi-religious figure stressing out the fact that the visit of a royal child coming from elsewhere is an archetypal motif present in many religions. The fact that this child comes from the stars makes him all the more religious, and Drewermann even discovers similarities with the figure of Jesus, and he quotes the New Testament. But he quickly finds the Little Prince wanting, as only “the fleeting shadow of a once powerful religious light”, the fairy tale being deprived of the possibility of coming true. Saint-Exupéry’s book points out the flaws of grown-ups without offering solutions allowing the Little Prince to remain among them. The Little Prince “is merely the counter-cipher to the inhuman world of “grown-ups”. While religion tells of a dream that has become reality, Saint-Exupéry tells of a dream that never was real, and whose realization is nowhere in sight”.

Drewermann interprets the Little Prince in the light of the famous biographical note from *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, where Saint-Exupéry uses the image of “the little princes in the fairy tale” for the first time. Looking at the face of a little boy asleep between his parents, two coarse peasants, in a railway compartment, Saint-Exupéry sees a “murdered Mozart”, a boy who will never get the opportunity to develop his inbred talents. The Little Prince would then be “a psychic image of something in us that was killed before it managed to live”, by the adults, with their “emotional frigidity, cynicism, and hopelessness”.

Following the Little Prince in his planetary voyage, we discover the adult world through his candid eyes. All the adults encountered on the way are incapable of true dialogue and transformation. They live in a state of spiritual isolation in their narcissistic ghetto. The king, the vain man, the tippler, the businessman, the lamplighter and the geographer are all merely fooling themselves by attaching importance to trifles and missing the essential. Drewermann offers directions, not given by Saint-Exupéry himself, which could help these figures to recover their lost humanity. The king should work through his fear of impotence; the vain man should recognize his despair; the tippler should break down the exaggerated

claims he is making on himself; the businessman should see that he is suffering from a chronic fear of the void; the lamplighter should give up his fear of freedom and chaos, and the geographer his fear of reality. "All these martyrs of the ego have to rediscover and radiate within themselves a bit of their lost childhood, of trust in their hidden kingdom, a piece of the Little Prince himself". Drewermann regrets that Saint-Exupéry mainly saw "lost souls" in those figures and "turned his back on them". What is missing in this book according to him is "a feeling of redemption", because *The Little Prince* "only condenses a sort of melancholy reminiscence of something lost all too early on" turning the grown-ups into "stiff and unchangeable" types.

Next Drewermann examines the symbol of the desert in its double meaning for Saint-Exupéry. It is first a "human desert", a state of spiritual vacuity. Drewermann quotes Saint-Exupéry's *Letter to General X* in which Saint-Exupéry expresses his distaste for his epoch and yearns for lost traditions and values, which can only be redeemed in the desert in its second meaning, the desert of North Africa. According to Saint-Exupéry, the desert, just like the monastery, teaches the appreciation of the value of things. People have to "feel the desert in their life", and "the stifling weight of overconsumption", to discover that: "going to the well is more important than drinking", that is to say, finding a meaning to their life and beginning to see with "the eyes of the heart". It is only in the desert, "the place of the prophet and people seeking God", that people can heal, and meet the Little Prince.

Drewermann interprets the encounter of the snake in the desert as the beginning of a transformation, just as in many fairy tales, a descent to the underworld means overcoming the fear of death, and giving life a new meaning. The fox is interpreted as similar to the helpers the hero of fairy tales meets on his search of the ultimate reality, between the Here and Beyond. Drewermann reminds us that the European fox is the descendant of the god Anubis, faithful companion of Isis searching for the remains of her brother and beloved Osiris. "The mystery of Anubis lies in his magical

knowledge of how to bring the dead back to life” and the fox brings back to life the Little Prince plunged into despair by the sight of a field of roses identical to his rose. The fox’s teaching to the little prince is a “magical introduction to the inner world of love”. Drewermann stresses the fact that this teaching is not something new and that the fox, in fact, mainly makes him “aware of the dangers of superficiality”. For Drewermann, the fox is a symbol of the unconscious pleading for “the gift of taming”.

A quote from *Citadel* shows that the idea of love’s ceremonies was important for Saint-Exupéry. The fox helps the Little Prince realize that all the trouble he was taking: cleaning his volcanoes, clearing away the roots of the baobab tree and taking care of his rose, helped preserving life. Drewermann says that this is “a symbolic description of the consistent hygiene of the ego in touch with its own emotions as well as with its own claims on itself”. The lesson from the fox is the same as the lesson from the ruler in *Citadel*. It is the “lesson of the desert: to be able to understand that the preciousness of water comes from the starlit march to the well. It’s not consumption but commitment and effort, sacrifice, and the persistence of the desert itself, as Saint-Exupéry sees it, that make us human”.

Drewermann also reminds us that Saint Exupéry described his own experience of thirst in the desert in *Wind, Sand, and Stars*, where the real issue was not physical survival, but the meaning of life and death, so closely associated for Saint-Exupéry because both require a total engagement. Drewermann reminds us that, in the same way, the search for “the water of life” in religious texts or in fairy tales, is connected to the idea of rebirth and purification, as well as depth and fertility, instead of a superficial attitude toward life. But he adds that the image of the well, in the final analysis, means consenting to death and returning to the stars as the Little Prince knows so well.

Thanks to the fox, the Little Prince realizes his responsibility towards his rose, and also, that the meaning of things is in the interconnection with them, rather than in the things themselves, but this implies that he has to die in order to return to his rose. Drewermann embarks at this

point on a meditation on love and death. He does not follow the Buddha's teaching recommending non-attachment in order to avoid suffering because, according to him, "love provides an answer to death". Meeting the serpent at the appointed place and time, the Little Prince accepts death and transcends it, the serpent being a symbol of death as well as of renewal. Quoting again from the autobiographical *Wind, Sand, and Stars* Drewermann shows that Saint-Exupéry accepted death as part of the natural order of things. For the Little Prince, death is only a return home to his rose. The color of the wheat fields, the taste of water, and the twinkle of stars have changed for ever for the flyer, after his encounter with and parting from the Little Prince, because "death makes it possible to release love, as it were, from the place where it first appeared, and from then on to experience it as a cosmic background in all things". But, being a theologian, Drewermann keenly notices that a true belief in immortality is absent and that: "Saint-Exupéry's starry heavens have only a metaphorical link with the heaven of believers". In other words, Saint-Exupéry, an atheist, merely uses a religious imagery but he doesn't believe in reunion with the beloved in death, as Edgar Allen Poe or Novalis did when they lost the woman they loved, or as religions promise their believers. Drewermann calls the Little Prince "a dream figure and nothing more" because "a person whom we really love doesn't withdraw into death, as Saint-Exupéry describes the Little Prince doing, into an unreal and inaccessible sphere beyond human experience... Instead, the hope and expectation of love remains that after a short period of separation we will find our way back to one another beyond time". Love is stronger than death when the lovers have such faith in the immortality of their love as well as in the immortality of the human being, but Drewermann explains that the death of the Little Prince is closer to a poetic metaphor than to a real religious symbol. His figure is elevated to "a transcendental ideal" and it is "only the dream of a life as it actually should have been lived, but had long ago been prematurely destroyed". Drewermann also stresses the fact that "the religious symbols of immortality and love's eternal life have been transformed into melancholy reminders of one's own lost hope".

He wonders why a fairy tale like *The Little Prince* does not find the satisfying ending so characteristic of the genre, and why “the flyer –the writer’s own ego– never changes his plans and goals after meeting the Little Prince”, simply going back to his own life, sad and nostalgic, but basically unchanged after the child’s death. Interpreting the Little Prince’s departure as “a genuine splitting off, a mixture of libido regression and dissociation of the ego” (note 18 p.144), it is in solving “the mystery of the rose” to which the Little Prince returns, that Drewermann finds the answers to these questions.

The second part of *Discovering the Royal Child Within* examines the life of Saint-Exupéry to find the answers that were not provided by his writings. The themes developed in the first part of the book at philosophical and theological levels are revisited at a deeper psychoanalytical level. Drewermann examines the figure of the Little Prince in the light of Saint-Exupéry’s own experience, on both conscious and unconscious levels. His discovery is that the “single central mystery” of the Little Prince is the image of the rose in which he recognizes “the mystery of the mother” instead of Saint-Exupéry’s wife or lover, as Franz and most critics did before and after him.

Since *The Little Prince* was written at a time when Saint-Exupéry was feeling empty and disappointed, Drewermann reads the story as “an encoded childhood memory, a sort of private dream of regeneration”. It is a sense of crisis and failure that leads to the emergence of the forgotten child in the crashed flyer who now remembers the pictures he used to draw as a child, that no grown-ups could understand, and the fact that he abandoned an artistic career to become a grown-up himself. Saint-Exupéry himself was thus a Leonardo murdered, just like the child he saw in the train was a Mozart murdered, but Drewermann is even more concerned with what the child wanted to draw. Apparently not having read Franz’s analysis, he comes to the same conclusion as her. The drawing of an enormous snake swallowing an elephant alive is a ‘screen memory’ of Saint-Exupéry’s childhood, representing his mother: “this

huge figure of a snake could only be the mother. Then her prey, which she pulls into her jaws, would naturally be her child, the oversized “baby elephant”, which was never allowed to be a child”, because the little boy, explains Drewermann, had to be “big and strong” in order to satisfy “his mother’s hunger for love and life”. According to the psychoanalyst, the lack of understanding from the adults unable to understand the child’s tragedy depicted in his drawings is the root cause, or “the beginning of the double standards and contradictions between an aggressive will to achieve and a strongly repressive longing that run all through Saint-Exupéry’s later work”. The writer himself is not aware of the meaning of his drawings, and not even aware it seems of the problem of his relation with his mother playfully “generalized and abstracted into a question of how *all* children relate to adults”. Avoiding his problem, Saint-Exupéry never came “to face a fight with the “dragon”” – in his case, his mother – as fairy tale heroes often have to and, as a result, the writer never overcame his fear and loneliness and his tendency to despise himself for his weakness: “Self-irony, contempt, and escaping into dreams – all this perpetuates psychic problems instead of solving them” explains Drewermann. The psychoanalyst also stresses the fact that people living under the pressure of such pain, sensibility and fantasy are often the artists, the priests, the dreamers, the poets and the shamans, keeping alive the memory of the Little Prince. In the figure of this child Drewermann sees “the secret source of literary achievement” as well as “the symbol of a highly ambivalent bond with the mother”. According to him, all the Little Prince recollections from his planet: the sunsets, the volcanoes and the rose can be interpreted as “encoded information” about Saint-Exupéry’s relationship with his mother. The “sheep”, “roses”, and “thorns” are not to be interpreted as metaphors of nature and “one more example of the droll fantasy of an innocent child. But in fact it undoubtedly describes the conflict and ambivalence of a central human relationship.” The question so important for the child of knowing why roses have thorns means, in fact, why can his loving mother become so cutting at some other times. The child is unable to understand the contradictory and ambiguous attitude



of his mother who is really a “rose” for him: “the quintessence of beauty, charm and sweetness”. The flyer’s attempt to explain that roses grow their thorns out of spite is indignantly rejected by the child, who would have to defend himself against his “bad” mother if he accepted it. Drewermann interprets the huge blue coat wrapping the Little Prince as a protective image of the mother, counter-image of the giant snake, and he explains that the Little Prince must constantly protect his mother from his own criticisms. By playing the role of protected-protector the child is in effect replacing his father, who died when he was four, to keep his mother’s love. Drewermann notes that the Little Prince’s planet seems to “condense the specific infant fantasies of security and love”, with its female breast shape and the fact that the Little Prince never suffers from hunger or thirst on his planet, just fulfilling the “anal demands for cleanliness and order” by cleaning his volcanoes.

He also remarks that the only real threat menacing the rose is in fact the sheep with which the Little Prince returns to his planet. The sheep is also interpreted in relation to the mother as the “lamb” the Little Prince needs to become in order to live with his mother avoiding all conflict with her. “The sheep absolutely requires a muzzle, lest it eats the rose, the way the giant snake ate the elephant”. In order to prove his “Oedipal reconstruction of the Little Prince’s world”, but even more importantly than this Oedipal theme, Drewermann underlines “the mother’s thoroughly depressive darkening of all vital impulses with the strangest and most incomprehensible expectations. Linked to that, on the Little Prince’s part, is a constant flow of guilt feelings and self-reproach”. Whereas the Little prince has shown only contempt for grown-ups’ vanity and self-importance he refrains himself from criticizing his rose. He is a “sheep” if he contradicts his mother who, under her appearance of a helpless rose, has in fact “not just thorns but real tiger’s claws”. Drewermann further explains that there is nothing more frightening for a child than a mother’s threat to die and this is exactly the kind of blackmailing used by the rose with her “extravagant, totalitarian demand that he loves her boundlessly”. According to him, the Little Prince could have stopped taking the rose so

seriously; alternatively, he could have focused on how adorable she was or taken her accusations and depression as an expression of her love for him but, instead, being a child, the Little Prince is unable to do that and he is overwhelmed with guilt even when he tries to escape from her. His guilt is even increased by the fact that the rose “acts more brave and selfless than ever before” when he decides to leave his planet. The rose almost forces him to go, and he will have to prove himself in order to be worthy of her generosity.

Drewermann interprets *The Little Prince* as “a coded account of not-so-rosy childhood” and a “settling of accounts with the half-conscious or mostly unconscious influences of his loving/distressing mother-rose”. Behind the symbolic figure of the Little Prince, Saint-Exupéry’s most famous book reveals the image of the “wonderful and deeply wounded child – the future immortal and widely loved author”.

In order not to be accused of being merely indulging in “Oedipal fantasies”, Drewermann quotes a few of the letters sent by Saint-Exupéry to his mother from age 21 to age 44, shortly before his disappearance. They really demonstrate that Saint-Exupéry was bound all his life to his mother. It is most certainly the story of their relationship that is expressed in code in *The Little Prince* and one can say that the psychoanalyst has remarkably solved the mystery of the rose.

After having uncovered the same hidden aspect of Saint-Exupéry’s personality as revealed in his letters to his mother, in *The Little Prince*, Drewermann tackles “the universally visible and admired side of the man [in] the role of flyer”. He explains that this public figure, somewhat posing as the superior individual, is redeemed by the fact that the flyer has crashed at the beginning of the book. In the flyer, Drewermann finds the “reverse image of the figure of the Little Prince”, the contrast between the two allowing us to grasp Saint-Exupéry’s “real pattern and truth”. These, according to Drewermann, are best revealed by the contradictions and the distortions present in the writer’s mental field of vision. He finds them in the discrepancy between the message of love and loyalty contained in *The*

*Little Prince*, and the fact that the only warm affection described in the book is in the relationship between the Little Prince and the flyer: "This is an almost "Greek" form of homosexual boy-love, in which the role of the young god Eros, the principle of infinite longing, is incarnated in the Little Prince". Drewermann notes the absence of love for a woman, the feminine being only represented by the rose. He also stresses the contradiction between the facts that the Little Prince loves only his rose while he has entered this world "as a refugee from her demands". The psychoanalyst explains that such contradictions are the keys for the understanding of Saint-Exupéry, a man caught between his devotion to mother and his fear of being devoured by her love, causing his "intellectual restlessness", "his postulate of self-transcendence through heroic effort, devotion and sacrifice", as well as "his longing for death". Drewermann shows that flying was a need for Saint-Exupéry because it meant "the masculine world over against his mother" but, ironically, this flying dream, an archetypal symbol of "a human transformed into a bird to escape certain forms of dependency" ends in failure. "Saint-Exupéry can't escape the maternal "earth serpent" even when he is flying. Drewermann quotes a passage from *Flight to Arras* in which the flyer says that sitting in the cockpit he feels like a little child sitting in his mother's body, and a nursling while suckling oxygen. According to Drewermann, Saint-Exupéry's rage against consumerism may have been prompted by his mama's boy upbringing, his "fear of his own neediness", preventing him from seeing that human love has something to do with "dependence, connectedness, and reciprocal need".

Drewermann demonstrates that the idea that the value of the rose depended on the sum of trouble and sacrifices the Little Prince has taken for it is false since, for love, "no sacrifice and no trouble seems too great". He also adds: "*we* don't have to lend other substance and meaning" to love since the infinite mystery is "the spreading of the soul out into an oceanic feeling of unity in love and eternity", "the opposite of Saint-Exupéry's melancholy utopia". Defining love as labor, and as "rooted in disappointment with human inadequacy", Saint-Exupéry distorted

“the freedom to find meaning in love” into “the compulsion to constitute meaning in action and sacrifice”.

Just as Marie von Franz had done, Eugen Drewermann detects in Saint-Exupéry’s philosophy of voluntarism “a highly disquieting fashion right into the danger of fascist ideology”. When he analyses the meaning of “God” for Saint-Exupéry, he finds him caught between contradictions. On one hand, his “restless transcendence” is “merely a flight from the feeling of his own nothingness” reflecting a “castration complex” and, on the other hand, God for him is “the guarantor of eternity”, “humanity’s hearth and home”. Comparing Saint-Exupéry to Nietzsche, Drewermann writes that their spiritual kinship “derives from the same source, fear of woman” but that, whereas Nietzsche accepted his “homelessness”, Saint-Exupéry “never stopped yearning for what he had lost”, mourning the destruction of the moral values of his childhood and left with “a powerful longing for death” also noted by Marie von Franz. At the end of the book the Little Prince returns to his rose and the flyer takes off again “a finale that finally clarifies nothing”. The chance of fusing “into a living unity”, what Franz would probably call “integration of the shadow in the Self”, is lost forever. Drewermann finds that, “instead, the dynamic of the Oedipus complex, so to speak, [wins] a victory: the return to the world of the mother and, as the inevitable price for that, death”.

In the last chapter of his book, Drewermann revisits the spiritual message of the book, which did not concern Marie von Franz very much. As a theologian, he finds it wanting. *The Little Prince* is not, like the most important fairy tales, “a dream that heals the splits in our consciousness” or “a place where the soul can rediscover itself”, because it “gives us little ground for hope and confidence”. For Drewermann, still a Catholic priest when *Discovering the Royal Child Within* was published in Germany in 1984, two years before *Discovering the God Child Within: a Spiritual Psychology of the Infancy of Jesus*, a belief in “God as the power of love in our hearts”, “God in the eyes of our beloved”, and a belief in eternity, provide the answers that are lacking in Saint-Exupéry’s book. According to Drewermann, Saint-

Exupéry's thinking remains abstract and escaping from reality, as Franz had already noted. This is because Saint-Exupéry was not able to resolve his fear of nothingness, and to reach transcendence, through a deep trust in the justification of his existence. If Saint-Exupéry had really put his trust in God, realizing that "the force that molds our essence is at the same time the one that bears us up", he could have been redeemed from the human desert: "Only the Little Prince could do that, provided he's liberated from Oedipal inclination to incest, from homosexuality, macho delusions, and the castration complex", but we know now that this was not the case.



A close examination of the two readings reveals minor differences in the details of the interpretation by the two psychoanalysts, as well as a major agreement upon the evaluation of the personality of Saint-Exupéry as dominated by his mother complex, which constitutes the deep meaning of *The Little Prince* since it is the book of this author where his problem is most obvious. However, it takes the perspicacity and expertise of the two psychoanalysts to decipher the code of this book, sharing with fairy tales its apparent innocence. Franz's analysis stops at the level of the archetypes and therefore seems a bit naïve, or stretched at some points, especially when she connects the fascination towards death to the death of Saint-Exupéry's younger brother (first located at an early age and then, more rightly, in his adolescent years), instead of connecting it purely to the mother. Drewermann, on the other hand, in a very careful and respectful way, really penetrates the hidden meaning of the book, exposing both its qualities and its limitations. This is probably due to the fact that he does not limit himself to a traditional Jungian analysis, also borrowing Freudian concepts, while pursuing theological and philosophical reflections of great depth on love and human commitment.

Are such psychoanalytical readings justified? Do they form a valid approach to literature? Especially in the case of a book as famous as *The*

*Little Prince*, a modern personal fairy tale whose author is dead, it is most welcome since it offers a refreshing interpretation by two famous psychoanalysts of a text taken for granted, just as valid as their fascinating interpretations of traditional fairy tales. I personally think though, that such an approach might not be suitable for an author still living because psychoanalysts, like doctors, are bound to discretion, but I find both of these books on *The Little Prince* far more interesting than the latest book on Saint Exupéry. Pierre Lassus, a psychologist specialized in mistreated children, published in 2014: *La sagesse du Petit Prince à la recherche de l'enfant perdu avec Saint-Exupéry* (*The wisdom of The Little Prince: looking for the lost child with Saint-Exupéry*), Albin Michel editions. While strongly objecting against psychoanalytical readings, Lassus makes an unconvincing analysis, entirely based on the repressed trauma of the loss of his father by Saint-Exupéry at a young age, as well as on a systematic parallel between *The little Prince* and The Bible, the probably unconscious biblical flavor of this parabola of the wise Holy Child accounting for the success of the book according to him.

An objection to this approach could be the confusion between the man and the work. Proust protested against the intrusion of critics in the privacy of authors and the Nouvelle Critique was adamant to study just the texts. Nothing authorizes us to believe that Saint-Exupéry really drew the picture of a boa constrictor swallowing his prey when he was six, after reading a book called *True Stories from Nature*, and that he gave up an artistic career because no adult could recognize an elephant swallowed by a snake in his first drawing mistaken for the drawing of a hat. This may well be a complete fiction. But both psychoanalysts would probably argue that it is less the autobiographical truthfulness that counts than the psychological one. The mere fact that Saint-Exupéry had the idea of these drawings and of these circumstances is revelatory. Drewermann's demonstration is even more convincing when he finds traces of the talented little boy misunderstood by grown-ups and disgusted with them, in Saint-Exupéry's previous works.

What I personally find most helpful in these two readings is that

they perfectly explain why, even as a child, while liking *The Little Prince*, this book always left me sad and uneasy, with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. I now understand that Saint-Exupéry was not telling an archetypal story of universal value, as true fairy tales do, to which I could relate deeply, although it might have seemed so at first. He was in fact, under the guise of a fairy tale, just telling his own story, guided by the nostalgia of his own childhood, desperately trying to find back the little boy he had been, instead of evolving into a wiser and happier adult. After reading Drewermann, even more than after reading Franz, the reader can only be but convinced that this is the story of the personal drama of the relationship of the writer with his mother and, behind her, with women in general. Both psychoanalysts agree that the boa is an image of the mother, which Franz also recognizes in the baobab and the volcanoes, whereas Drewermann recognizes her, perhaps in a more Freudian way, in the Little Prince's planet itself, as well as in his blue coat – his dagger also been given a Freudian meaning as a symbol of his masculinity –, whereas Franz only finds this costume a “funny and typically French idea”. A Freudian meaning is also given to the daily cleaning of the volcanoes and, above all, Drewermann clearly recognizes the mother in the rose, therefore explaining far better the anguish of the Little Prince about the welfare of his flower. He also provides an interesting interpretation of the sheep and of the muzzle related to the child's fear of hurting his mother. Saint-Exupéry's latent homosexuality, as a consequence of this extreme attachment to his mother, becomes more obvious, and the reader gets an overall view of the implications of his mother complex on his whole work, with its contradictions and strange mixing of authoritarianism and sentimentality, somewhat subdued in *The Little Prince*, but very obvious in Saint-Exupéry's other books.



Do such readings destroy the charm of the book and the writer's myth? Certainly. Just as the psychoanalytical analyses of fairy tales destroy

their glossy Walt Disney's nullity but, thanks to such interpretations, these texts become more human, richer in meaning, both at conscious and unconscious levels, the reader being considerably enlightened by the experience of a re-reading at the light of these psychoanalytical interpretations, instead of being lulled into critical slumber by the Walt Disney's distortions. *The Little Prince*, on the contrary, loses a lot of its credibility, the platitude of the wisdom it professes becoming more apparent and suspect.



**Abstract**

This is the presentation and analysis of two books written by two psychoanalysts about Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*).

Marie-Louise von Franz gave a series of twelve lectures during the winter semester 1959-60 at the Jung Institute in Zurich on the subject of the eternal youth type. The first eight lectures consisted in an analysis of Saint-Exupéry's book, the French pilot and writer being presented as a prototype of *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* published in 1970.

Eugen Drewermann, a German theologian and psychoanalyst, also gave his own interpretation of *The Little Prince* in a book published in 1984 without any reference to Franz. After a detailed presentation of each book, the two psychoanalytical interpretations are compared. A quick overview of *La Sagesse du Petit Prince* (*The Wisdom of the Little Prince*) by the psychologist Pierre Lassus, published in 2014 shows, by contrast, the depth and perspicacity of the two psychoanalytic readings complementing each other and offering a new perspective on Saint-Exupéry himself and his most famous work.

