

THREE DREAMS OF CHILDHOOD

Giraudoux : *Ondine*—Saint-Exupéry : *Le Petit Prince*—
Anouilh : *Antigone*⁽¹⁾

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1939–1945 : at a time of war and disaster, when the writers of France were for the most part divided into two major tendencies, political commitment or existentialism, three masterpieces of totally different thought were written : two plays, *Ondine* by Jean Giraudoux (1939) and *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh (1944), and the other a sort of short philosophical tale for children and grown-ups, *The Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943). The differences between the three are great, and yet in a same movement of thought and sensibility all three works draw their strength and their poetry from a nostalgic evocation of childhood. By comparing and contrasting them, we will try to show what childhood symbolizes for the artist; and more especially, what it symbolized for these three artists and their time, of which each was representative in his own way.

I. The symbolical childhood

The heroes of these three works are children. The petit prince, as everybody knows, is a little, fair-haired boy. At the beginning of

the story, he has already been gone for almost a year from his planet and the beautiful rose, which tormented him so much. Gone to explore the universe, he has arrived on earth after visiting six other planets : the king's one, the concieted man's one, the drinker's one, the businessman's one, the street lamps-lighter's one and the geographer's one. At present, he is in the Sahara desert with an aviator whose plane has crashed and to whom he tells all his adventures.

Ondine, the heroine of the play which bears her name, is an undin. She is fifteen years old. The knight Hans von Wittenstein zu Wittenstein met her when, lost in the forest, during a tempest, he was forced to take refuge with some poor fisher-folk. Ondine is their adopted child. Fascinated by her beauty and her gaiety, Hans quickly forgets Bertha, his betrothed, and marries the young girl instead. But at the king's court, Ondine proves unable to abide by the uses and rules of men. Bertha, on the contrary, is perfect in everything. Hans realizes he has made a mistake and sends Ondine away in order to marry Bertha. The undins sentence Hans to death for unfaithfulness.

Fifteen is also Antigone's age. She is the second daughter of Oedipe, king of Thèbes, and the sister of Ismène, Étéocle and Polynice. After Oedipe left Thèbes, his eldest son Étéocle came to the throne. But his brother Polynice, determined to seize power, laid siege to the town. The two brothers killed each other in battle. Their uncle, Créon, was then proclaimed king and saved Thèbes from anarchy. In order to make an example and to subdue the rebellion once for all, he ordered the last honors be paid to Étéocle, the "good

brother", whilst the body of Polynice, the rebel, be left to rot in the sun, with the death sentence for whoever should try to bury him. Out of love for her brother, Antigone disobeys Créon's orders and thus is sentenced to be buried alive. She hangs herself in her tomb.

One could suppose Ondine and Antigone to be nearer each other because of their age than the petit prince, who is still only a little boy. But this is not so. The childhood in question here is that which is beyond any considerations of physical or psychological development. It is an ideal, not real, state of being—a sort of instinctive and primordial way of existence as opposed to the world of adults and its institutions : "I will never grow old..."(p 100), Ondine says to the Court Chamberlain, and again : "I was born centuries ago. And I will never die" (p 118)

Age, in fact, is of no importance. It is not of the essence of man, but a sort of external attribute, like weight, family and wealth : "Grown-ups like numbers. When you tell them of a new friend, they never ask the essential things (...). They ask : "How old is he ? How many brothers does he have ? How much does he weigh ? How much does his father earn ? Only then do they think they know him"(*The Petit Prince*, p 19).

Just as they do not embody childhood in the biographical sense of the word but that of the eternal Childhood , so the petit prince, Ondine and Antigone also have no real family. They seem, in a certain sense, to have begotten themselves. Ondine is only the adoptive daughter of Auguste and Eugénie and, according to Auguste, was

born of thousands of couples of undins. The old fisherman knows that : "With Ondine, there was never any question of parents. If we hadn't have adopted Ondine, she would have found out how to grow up and live without our help"(p 48). Antigone is an orphan. The nurse quite ludicrously takes the place of her mother and Créon is far from being able to compete with the idealized image she has of her father. As for the petit prince, he never saw any grown-ups until he left his planet. The lack of parents here means a total lack of education, or of any attempt to socialize the child before his coming into society.

II. Childhood and Society

It is a totally pure child who is confronted with the world of adults. This world is first one of uncompromising order and is symbolized by the Court. The first planet which the petit prince discovers is the king's planet. According to this king "all men are his subjects" (p 37) and the whole universe is his kingdom : "As he was not only an absolute monarch, but also a universal monarch" (p 38). Antigone too, is a princess and she lives in the palace, in Créon's court. Ondine leaves Auguste's and Eugénie's simple cottage in order to follow her young husband to the king's court.

The Court in these works is more mythical than real. It refers to the imagery of the fairytales. But traditionally, in the fairytale, it is the Court that is the blissful place of childhood, the place of origin that the young hero, the prince or the princess, has to leave in order to discover the world, usually symbolized by the forest. Here we

have a sort of inversion of the imaginary values given the Court and the world around it. In the fairytale, the hero is completely socialized. He naturally belongs to the Court. That which he has to fight, when he leaves it, is the obscure and monstrous anarchy of the wilderness. When he overcomes this trial, he returns to the Court in order to become both king/queen and father/mother of a large family. The fairy tale has a moral implication. In the end it sides with reason as against imagination and instinct and characterizes a society confident in its values and institutions. The three works under consideration here, however, written when the world was in a state of great crisis, express the degradation of a society—that begun in the 19th century—and a valorization of childhood and its purity.

Confronted with society, the child questions its absurdities and failings with his naive, yet wise comments. In Saint-Exupéry and Giraudoux, this questioning is a mixture of irony, tenderness and tragedy, whereas in Anouilh it is a more violent, excessive and darker expression. But for them all, the child is a ferment of interrogation and contradiction. The petit prince "put a lot of questions" (p 15), according to the narrator in Saint-Exupéry's book, and "[he] never gave up a question once he had hold of it" (p 28 and 56). Antigone, speaking of her father, Oedipe, and of herself, says to Créon: "We are of those who keep on questioning to the bitter end" (p 95)

For the child nothing is taken for granted. Everything is new and stimulates his curiosity. The adults' world, on the contrary, is governed by repetition and habit, immutably regulated by etiquette (the

Court Chamberlain opposed to the poet in *Ondine*), instructions (the guards in *Antigone*, the street lamps-lighter in *The Petit Prince*), or the monotonous and always foreseeable passion mechanism (the drinker, the concieted man, the businessman in *The Petit Prince*).

These two contrary ways of existence are expressed in two contrary conceptions of language. On one hand, we have the child's language, which is interrogative and creative, where neither reality nor meaning are obvious in themselves but instead lead to ever new discovery and wonder, and on the other hand, the adult's language, which petrifies reality in fixed and eternal concepts, that in immobilizing and distorting it, conceal truth instead of revealing it. Giraudoux and Saint-Exupéry were particularly aware of this comment on language arising from their comment on childhood. Giraudoux makes the knight Hans say : "As every wild animal is a symbol for a knight, its roar or its call becomes a symbolical sentence, which inscribes itself in letters of fire in your mind. Animals write rather than speak. But it's not varied. Each species can only say one sentence to you(...) The birds don't answer you. I was very disappointed with the birds. They always recite the same old story to a knight : about the misdeeds of the lie" (p 16–17). The language is repetitive and deceiving, we cannot trust it. Talking about his rose, the petit prince says to the aviator : "I shouldn't have listened to her(...)I should have judged her according to her acts, not her words." (p 33).From the fox, he learned that "language is a source of misunderstanding"(p 69) and that in love and in friendship there are silences more sincere and truer than words. The petit prince also often wonders about the meaning of words. "What does "ephemeral"

mean ? " (p 56), he asks the geographer. And to the fox : "What does "to mate" mean ?" (p 67). This search for the meaning of the words, not immediatly accepting them, leads to richer and more complex definitions, definitions which are finally nearer life and men. Each time the emphasis is on the fact that words are meaningful only in their relation to men, never in an absolute way. Nothing can be eternal, even mountains and seas disappear, but nothing is ephemeral, if it lives, like the rose for the petit prince, in our hearts and through our love. If we have mated it and let it mate us.

In place of the arbitrary order of society, childhood proposes a superior order. In *The Petit Prince*, it is the order of the Cosmos, which governs the stars and the planets. Even if the king is a universal monarch, he must respect the hour of sunset if he wants the sun to obey his order to set. In the play *Ondine*, the king of undins, who embodies the power of nature, is much more powerful than the king in the court. And in *Antigone*, Oedipe's image, with which Antigone identifies and which symbolizes the order of absolute truth, is much stonger than Créon's image and the political order he represents. What makes the play darker and basically more pessimistic than the other two, is that this superior order itself, which triumphs finally in *Ondine* and *The Petit Prince*, collapses lamentably at the end of *Antigone* and is revealed for what it is : mere illusion. Oedipe has nothing left of the hero and Etéocle and Polynce are just two extravagant and violent louts who even dared to hit their father: "Your father was sitting at the table, his head in his hands. His nose was bleeding. He was crying." (p 87). The image, which Oedipe gave of himself, was a mere role dictated by pride. Truth and lie are mixed like the dead bodies of the two brothers, crushed to a pulp :

"I let one of the bodies be taken up for my national funeral, Créon says to Antigone, the less damaged of the two, and I gave the order to let the other rot where it was. Even I don't know which one. And, believed me, it's all the same to me" (p 89). So, Antigone's death loses all meaning and, all certitude gone, she dies fully conscious of the absurdity of her acts : "I don't know why I am dying anymore" (p 115).

III. Childhood and Death

In these three works, death is the only possible outcome of an impossibly locked combat between the child and society. It shows the child's incapability of becoming an adult. In *Antigone*, the tragedy of Hémon, Antigone's betrothed, is parallel to the heroine's. To become an adult means to accept the demythified image of the father : "To become a man is to see one day one's father as he really is " (p 105), Créon says to him. Unable to face the collapse of all he believed in, Hémon, like Antigone, can only flee and die. In the same way Hans and Ondine, caught between society and nature, are sentenced, the one to die, the other to forget—that is to die mentally. As for the petit prince, when his travels around the world are over, he accepts to be bitten by the snake and thus to return to his planet and the rose which waits for him.

A return to the point of departure—a psychological regression—death is perceived less as an annihilation than as a flight and a refuge. The images linked to it, by their protective and maternal values, express the sweetness and the tenderness it has for the child.

In *The Petit Prince*, the desert symbolizes solitude and the destruction of the world of men, but it is also, thanks to a sort of imaginary inversion, a source of life and fecundity. Hidden deep down in the heart of the most complete bareness, there is a well, which we must discover, its waters are not only good for the body but also for the heart : "What makes the desert beautiful, the petit prince says, is that it hides a well somewhere...". In the following lines, the association of images of the desert, the well and the house of childhood is one of the most profound in Saint-Exupéry's imagery. The desert, in its absolute emptiness, has always had for him the secret power of evoking the native house⁽²⁾ and the well, which he is looking for in the sand, the sweetness and the protection of the maternal universe : "One believes that man is free...One doesn't see the rope which ties him to the well, which ties him like an umbilical cord, to the belly of the earth" (*Terre des Hommes*, p 178)

In *Antigone*, Antigone's tomb is the imaginary equivalent of the well in *The Petit Prince*. From the beginning of the play, Antigone is represented as a thin, dark girl, huddled in a corner apart from the others. She is already withdrawn from society. Whenever she does speak, it is to recall her childhood : "When I was young ...". Gradually, as everything collapses around her, the corner or hole becomes a place where she can refuse chaos and protect herself from it. By burying her brother Polynice, she also buries herself. Her preference for darkness and annihilation of self, her taste for a world without color merely further her wish to fade, to sink, so that at the bottom of formlessness, she may find again her latent original strength : "O tomb ! o nuptial bed ! o my underground residence !"

(p 111), she cries aloud before her tomb. Death is the only means for her to keep the purity of her childhood and her love for Hémon intact, to flee the compromises of adulthood and all that must degrade year after year. She builds her house in her tomb far from men and sheltered from the collapsing world.

Likewise, the room which Ondine has installed at the bottom of the lake where she will live after Hans' death, is also the conclusion of this same movement of protection against chaos. It too will engulf her love for Hans and keep it from degradation : "I will have our room at the bottom of the waters (...).So, separated by forgetfulness, by death, by time, by race, we will get on well, we will be faithful to each other." (p 188)

"Separated by race"...Thus, the child, for the artist, belongs to a different race. His innocence, his wonderment, his free way of looking at things, his demand for truth and purity make him the very essence of original man before the fall, of our imagination. It is not by mere chance that these three writers in France turned towards the child during the worst years of defeat between 1939–1945 : for them, the child was a messenger of the profound truth lost in the collapse of a country and of the whole world. The child also embodied at the same time their disillusionment, their confusion and their lassitude towards the mediocrity and the absurdity of the world of men, their withdrawal from society to that far country, more beautiful and more pure, which everyone keeps locked in his heart as the most precious thing he has : childhood.

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Notes :

1. The indications of pages refer to the following french editions: *Ondine*: Le Livre de Poche, *Antigone*, Editions de la Table Ronde, 1946; *Le Petit Prince*, Folio Junior, éditions Gallimard. *Terre des Hommes*, NRF, éditions Gallimard 1939.
2. Lost in the desert, the aviator of *Terre des Hommes* remembers his native house and realizes that his love for the desert is indistinguishable from his love for his childhood (p 75)