

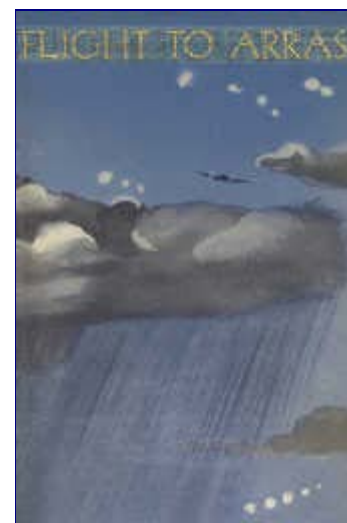
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Flight to Arras
A Novel
by
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

ARJ2 Chapter: A Reading for Enjoyment
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Translated from the French by Lewis Galantière
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2009



Arras is a heavy tapestry, especially one hung as a curtain concealing an alcove. "Quick, behind the arras" is a common command in Shakespearean plays to conceal one or more players. Hamlet stabs someone hidden behind an arras. The town, Arras, over which Saint-Exupéry is destined to fly in this story, is where the heavy curtains were first made, and now it appears it will be curtains for Saint-Exupéry, his navigator and gunner, because hardly any planes returned from missions over Arras.

There is no safe route to Arras. If one flies high, the German Messerschmidts will come down from above and strafe one's plane to destruction. If one flies lower down, the ack-ack of the anti-craft will tear one's plane to shreds. Any minute Saint-Exupéry will get his orders and be off on a mission from which he does not expect to return, heading behind the curtain of death. He thinks of his old schoolroom, a room much like the one he is waiting in, and then his reverie is broken sharply — the door opens.

[page 13, 14] And like a court sentence the words ring out in the quiet schoolroom:

"Captain de Saint-Exupéry and Lieutenant Dutertre report to the major!"

Schooldays are over. Life has begun. . . .

The fact that we had been sent for meant that we were to be ordered out on a sortie. We had reached the last days of May, 1940, a time of full retreat, of full disaster. Crew after crew was being offered up as a sacrifice. It was as if you dashed glassfuls of water into a forest fire in the hope of putting it out.

They got their orders for a "damned awkward sortie" and that was that. "When a sortie was not 'awkward', one plane out of three got back." (Page 22) What can they do?

[page 16] Dutertre and I sat looking out of the window. Here too was a branch swaying in the breeze. I could hear the cackle of the hens. Our Intelligence Room had been set up in a schoolhouse; the major's office was in a farmhouse.

It would be easy to write a couple of fraudulent pages out of the contrast between this shining spring day, the ripening fruit, the chicks filling plumply out in the barnyard, the rising wheat — death at our elbow. I shall not write that couple of pages because I see no reason why the peace of a spring day should constitute a contradiction of the idea of death. Why should the sweetness of life be a matter for irony.

Saint-Exupéry's crew was in the intelligence business, but it was a bloody bad business. Even if they

brought back information about the location of the enemy's troops, they had no way to get it to the Staff. The roads were jammed, the phone lines cut, and the Staff was constantly on the move. "The really important intelligence — the enemy's position — would have been furnished by the enemy himself." (Page 20) Their army was in retreat, facing a disastrous defeat, and Saint-Exupéry says, "The truth is that for a defeated army the problems themselves vanish." There's not much to be done, but still the French army is throwing a plane and its crew into the abyss of war, like a card player flinging a queen of spades on the table hoping against hope to take a trick.

Saint-Exupéry was not going to think about it sitting in his office in daylight. There would be time for thinking at night.

[page 23] Night, the beloved. Night, when words fade and things come alive. When the destructive analysis of day is done, and all that is truly important becomes whole and sound again. When man reassembles his fragmentary self and grows with the calm of a tree. . . I longed for night and the rebirth in me of the being that merits love.

During a night while I was reading the above pages, an estranged friend visited in my home as if nothing had happened. It was for this night I longed and yet it happened only in my dreams. It was a night during which a sword fell to the floor in my library, knocked down by a flying bird, a martin fluttering and trying to land atop a bookcase had knocked it loose. It was night during which a bumblebee buzzed and bumped against the white eggcrate louvers of the kitchen. It was a night during which a long-lost friend visited me in my dreams as if we had never parted.

[page 24] And as I sat there longing for night, I was for the moment like a Christian abandoned by grace. I was about to do my job with Dutertre honorably, that was certain. But to do it as one honors ancient rites when they have no longer any significance. When the god that lived in them has withdrawn from them. I should wait for night, I said to myself; and if I was still alive I would walk alone on the highway that runs through our village. Alone and safely isolated in my beloved solitude. So that I might discover why it is I ought to die.

Saint-Exupéry was awakened out of his reverie by the Major who offered to skip him for his sortie, but he insisted on taking the sortie. He remembered Israel, the pilot who bravely accepted his orders, and never returned from the doomed sortie.

[page 26] Israel, surely, had not allowed a single muscle of this face to quiver on hearing the order. But gently, insidiously, treacherously, his nose had reddened. Israel had been able to control the muscles of his face, but not the color of his nose. And in the silence in which he received the order, his nose had taken advantage of him. Unknown to Israel, it had made clear to the major its emphatic disapproval of the sortie.

They take off and finally leveled out at 33,000 feet, kept alive by their flight suits and oxygen feeds. Saint-Exupéry likens it to sucking on a mechanical teat.

[page 46] I am an organism integrated into the plane. I turn this switch, which gradually heats up my overall and my oxygen, and the plane begins to generate my comfort. The oxygen, incidentally, is too hot. It burns my nose. A complicated mechanism releases it in proportion to the altitude at which I fly, and I am flying high. The plane is my wet-nurse. Before we took off, this thought seemed to me inhuman; but now, suckled by the plane itself, I feel a sort of filial affection for it. The affection of a nursling.

Never have I read a war story written with such feeling and insight as Saint-Exupéry. His is not the just-the-facts of Dragnet's Sargent Friday. No, Saint-Exupéry's facts include his feelings, his reverie, his intimate connection to his airplane, his meeting with death, and the futility of war itself.

He is flying a plane whose rudder worked fine when tested on the ground, but which invariably froze at its designed altitude. As he struggled with his feet pressing down to free the rudder, he was working as hard as if he were a worker lifting a piano, a task which obviously requires more oxygen than sitting quietly, but his oxygen supply only gave him the amount required for sitting quietly, adjusting its supply only for altitude and not for human requirement. A human hitched to a mechanical wet-nurse that can not feel its nursling passing out from lack of oxygen. Saint-Exupéry starts to tell Dutertre what's wrong but gave up.

**[page 63] Words consume oxygen too fast. Already I was out of breath. I was very weak. A convalescent. "You were about to say something, Captain?" "No . . . Nothing."
"Quite sure, Captain? You puzzle me?"
I puzzle him. But I am alive.
"We are alive."
"Well, yes. For the time being."
For the time being. There was still Arras.**

Yes, there was still Arras, hanging out there in front of him like the heavy tapestry it gave its name to, Arras, the curtains behind which his fate hung in the balance. It was curtains behind the curtain — and he knew it. He could only wait until time parted the curtain to reveal his fate. And in the waiting came thoughts of other emergencies.

[page 66] The field of consciousness is tiny. It accepts only one problem at a time. Get into a fist fight, put your mind on the strategy of the fight, and you will not feel the other fellow's punches. Once, when I thought I was about to drown in a seaplane accident, the freezing water seemed to me tepid. Or, more exactly, my consciousness was not concerned with the temperature of the water. It was absorbed in other thoughts. The temperature of the water has left no trace in my memory.

Saint-Exupéry recalled an interview of a man pulled and resuscitated from a cave-in, how he answered the various questions about what happened, how he felt, what he thought. He worried about his pocket watch, whether it was smashed, but he couldn't move his hand to check it. Saint-Exupéry says we remain ourselves even in calamities, or at most we grow a slight bit, as if life at any age is a gradual continuation of the process of birth.

[page 74] No single event can awaken within us a stranger totally unknown to us. To live is to be slowly born. It would be a bit too easy if we could go about borrowing ready-made souls.

Everyone has seen the white streaks or contrails of jets passing overhead, but to Saint-Exupéry it called to mind poetic images. The bride, trailing a veil, hurrying to the altar of death.

[page 79] The German on the ground knows us by the pearly white scarf which every plane flying at high altitudes trails behind like a bridal veil. The disturbance created by our meteoric flight crystallizes the watery vapor in the atmosphere. We unwind behind us a cirrus of icicles. If the atmospheric conditions are favorable to the formation of clouds, our wake will thicken bit by bit and become an evening cloud over the countryside.

Saint-Exupéry loved childhood and wrote about it so memorably in his classic tale of [The Little Prince](#), who like Peter Pan, lived among the stars and would never grow old. Nor would we ever grow old of these two preternatural boys.

[page 105, 106] When I was a small boy . . . I speak of my early childhood, that is to say, of a vast region out of which all men emerge. When come I? I come from my childhood. I come from childhood as from a homeland.

What is civilization? Saint-Exupéry sees it as what opens up our inner distance.

[page 112] When, in the Sahara, the Arabs would surge up in the night round our campfires and warn us of a coming danger, the desert would spring to life for us and take on meaning. Those messengers had lent it distance. Music does something like this. The humble odor of an old cupboard does when it awakens and brings memories to life. Pathos is the sense of distance.

But I know that nothing which truly concerns man is calculable, weighable, measurable. True distance is not the concern of the eye; it is granted only to the spirit. Its value is the value of language, for it is language which binds things together.

And now it seems to me that I begin to see what a civilization is. A civilization is a heritage of beliefs, customs, and knowledge slowly accumulated in the course of centuries, elements difficult at times to justify by logic, but justifying themselves as paths when they lead somewhere, since they open up for man his inner distance.

People in the twenty-first century seem to be always on the move, commuting an hour or more each way to work, rushing off to the best place for lunch, speeding out of town every weekend, flying to exotic locations, as if being still were some kind of disease and staying home was a sign of convalescence. Saint-Exupéry saw that the true worth in us came when we were motionless.

[page 112, 113] There is a cheap literature that speaks to us of the need of escape. It is true that when we travel we are in search of distance. But distance is not to be found. It melts away. And escape has never led anywhere. The moment a man finds that he must play the races, go to the Arctic, or make war in order to feel himself alive, that man has begun to spin the strands that bind him to other men and to the world. But what wretched strands! A civilization that is really strong fills man to the brim, though he never stir. What are we worth when motionless, is the question.

Saint-Exupéry saw deep into what constitutes humanness because he saw with his heart. He saw a density in silence, the silence that comes with being still in prayer, of being transfixed at one's instruments, of being vibrantly alive in moments of stillness and silence.

[page 113] There is a density of being in a Dominican at prayer. He is never so much alive as when prostrate and motionless before his God. In Pasteur, holding his breath over the microscope, there is a density of being. Pasteur is never more alive than in that moment of scrutiny. At that moment he is moving forward. He is hurrying. He is advancing in seven-league boots, exploring distance despite his immobility. Cezanne, mute and motionless before his sketch, is an inestimable presence. He is never more alive than when silent, when feeling and pondering. At that moment his canvas becomes for him something wider than the seas.

The idea that Saint-Exupéry gave [me](#) that there is a density in silence, that there is reverence in stillness, led me to write this poem(1):

A Density in Silence

There is a density in silence . . .

- in the silence of a loving glance**
- in the silence of a prayer**
- in the silence of a caesura**
- in the silence of a long hug.**

**There is a density in the silence of a wake
and a density in the eternal silence of death.**

Saint-Exupéry writes most memorably when he writes of the mundane aspects of life as in this passage about a family home which was to be evacuated and may be never seen again. The house is transformed in his imagination into a ship, a *bark*, carrying the family members through generations of life, a bark of silence, carrying all into the eternal silence of death. Suddenly a loud bark was heard:

[page 118, 119] "Everybody out!"

They had been expecting this. For two weeks they had seen the passage through their village of refugees who no longer believed in the eternity of their homes. Man had been a settler on the planet. He had ceased to be a nomad. He had built himself villages that had lasted through the ages. He had waxed and polished floors and chairs that had gone on serving his great-grandchildren. The family house had received him at his birth, transported him to his death; and then, like a good bark crossing the water from bank to bank, it had carried his sons over the same stream. All that was ended now. The villagers were on the move.

As an airplane pilot flying close to the ground most of the time, Saint-Exupéry had witnessed the moving streams of humanity clogging roads and towns, always on the move, filling every movable container with their earthly goods and bodies, dragging them slowly behind them, slow as molasses.

[page 119] All the stables, all the sheds, all the barns and garages had vomited into the narrow streets a most extraordinary collection of contrivances. There were new motor-cars, and there were ancient farm carts that for half a century had stood untouched under layers of dust. There were hay wains and lorries, carry alls and tumbrils. Had we seen a mail-coach in this maze it would not have astonished us. Every box on wheels had been dug up and was now laden with the treasures of the home.

Saint-Exupéry witnessed and commented upon the paradoxical aspects of this moving sea of humanity.

[page 131] Everywhere in this mob I sense a wearied haste, a haste that has renounced haste. At the rate of two to ten miles a day these people are fleeing before tanks moving at fifty miles a day and aeroplanes flying at four hundred miles an hour. Thus treacle flows when the bottle has been overturned. This man's wife would lie in; but he had all the time in the world before him. It was urgent. Was it really urgent? It was suspended in unstable equilibrium between urgency and eternity.

No one discussed defeat, a defeat staring them in the face, onrushing behind them at breakneck speed, flying over them and strafing them, blowing up occasional cars and carts, annihilating but a few, nipping the flowing mass of humanity in the hock as a sheep herding dog would to keep them ever moving, inexorably on. (Page 127)

[page 132] Not a word about defeat. Naturally. No man feels the need of discussing a thing which constitutes his very substance(2). They *were* the defeat. I had suddenly the vision of a France losing its entrails. Quick! Sew up our France! There is not a moment to lose! France is doomed.

Doomed, not to be judged by defeat, was France — but not in Saint-Exupéry's mind. With his heart he saw into the essence of things, things the history books make no notice of, as it is not visible to the eyes.

[page 147, 148] The injustice of defeat lies in the fact that its most innocent victims are made to look like heartless accomplices. It is impossible to see behind defeat the sacrifices, the austere performance of duty, the self-discipline and the vigilance that are there — those things the god of battle does not take account of. Defeat cannot show love, though love is there. Defeat shows up generals without authority, men without organization, crowds that are passive. Unquestionably, slackers and cowards have their

part in this defeat. But what do they signify? What is really significant is that the rumor of a Russian change of heart or an American intervention was enough to triple the value of those men. Enough to bind them together again in a common hope. Each time that such a rumor blew through France like a sea wind, our men were filled with a fresh exaltation. If France is to be judged, judge her not by the effects of her defeat but by her readiness to sacrifice herself.

What could France do in the face of imminent defeat? What could a Frenchman do? Laugh? Is war funny? What could a farmer do with his haystacks to stop German tanks? This opening passage from Chapter XVI gives us the theme of this book.

[page 151] Which does not prevent this from being a funny war — aside from the spiritual reality that made it necessary. A funny war! I was never ashamed of this label. Hardly had we declared war when, being in no state to take the offensive, we began to look forward to our annihilation. Here it is.

We set up our haycocks against their tanks; and the haycocks turned out useless for defense. This day, as I fly to Arras, the annihilation has been consummated. There is no longer an army, there is no liaison, no materiel, and there are no reserves.

Nevertheless I carry on as solemnly as if this were war. I dive towards the German army at five hundred miles an hour. Why? I know! To frighten the Germans. To make them evacuate France. For since the intelligence I may bring back will be useless, this sortie can have no other purpose.

Soon, too soon, Saint-Exupéry's reverie was interrupted by anti-aircraft fire, but he describes it in prayer-like reverence and beauty. In the two passages below, one can create an mind's eye view of the scene portrayed on the cover (actually, inside cover) art.

[page 172] Each burst of a machine gun or a rapid-fire cannon shot forth hundreds of these phosphorescent bullets that followed one another like the beads of a rosary. A thousand elastic rosaries strung themselves out towards the plane, drew themselves out to the breaking point, and burst at our height. When, missing us, the string went off at a tangent, its speed was dizzying. The bullets were transformed into lightning. And I flew drowned in a crop of trajectories as golden as stalks of wheat. I flew at the center of a thicket of lance strokes. I flew threatened by a vast and dizzying flutter of knitting needles. All the plain was now bound to me, woven and wound round me, a coruscating web of golden wire.

[page 174] I had been looking on at a carnival of light. The ceiling had risen little by little and I had been unaware of an intervening space between the clouds and me. I had been zigzagging along a line of flight dotted by ground batteries. Their tracer bullets had been spraying the air with wheat-colored shafts of light. I had forgotten that at the top of their flight the shells of those batteries must burst. And now, raising my head, I saw around and before me those rivets of smoke and steel driven into the sky in the pattern of towering pyramids.

I was quite aware that those rivets were no sooner driven than all danger went out of them, that each of those puffs possessed the power of life and death only for a fraction of a second.

We hear so much about the "heat of battle", but for Saint-Exupéry, it was much more than that. As one reads the next passage, one thinks that it is seeking those experiences that sends people hurling out of airplanes, jumping off of bridges, surfing 50 foot high waves, skiing down remote mountaintops, climbing Mount Everest, and doing all of the extreme sports that are splashed across media screens today. For Saint-Exupéry, it was a job, it was duty to his country; he loved flying more than being shot at, but surviving being shot at was like being continually being reborn, and that came as a shock to him.

[page 186] Each time, for a fraction of a second, it seemed to me that my plane had been blown to bits; but each time it responded anew to the controls and I nursed it along like a coachman pulling hard on the reins. I began to relax, and a wave of jubilation went through me. There was just time enough for me to feel fear as no more than a physical stiffening induced by a loud crash, when instantly after each buffet a wave of relief went through me. I ought to have felt successively the shock, then the fear, then the relief; but there wasn't time. What I felt was the shock, then instantly the relief. Shock, relief. Fear, the intermediate step, was missing. And during the second that followed the shock I did not live in the expectancy of death in the second to come, but in the conviction of resurrection born of the second just passed. I lived in a sort of slipstream of joy, in the wake of my jubilation. A prodigiously unlooked-for pleasure was flowing through me. It was as if, with each second that passed, life was being granted me anew. As if with each second that passed my life became a thing more vivid to me. I was living. I was alive. I was still alive. I was the source of life itself. I was thrilled through with the intoxication of living. "The heat of battle" is a familiar phrase; the heat of living is a truer one. "I wonder," I said to myself, "if those Germans below who are firing at us know that they are creating life within us?"

As Saint-Exupéry summed up his experience of this one day, it was not as if it were an extreme sport or a day at a carnival full of high-speed rides. — No, he compared it to a long life in a monastery.

[page 208] It was impossible for me not to contrast in my mind the two worlds of plane and earth. I had led Dutertre and my gunner this day beyond the bourne at which reasonable men would stop. We had seen France in flames. We had seen the sun shining on the sea. We had grown old in the upper altitudes. We had bent our glance upon a distant earth as over the cases of a museum. We had sported in the sunlight with the dust of enemy fighter planes. Thereafter we had dropped earthward again and flung ourselves into the holocaust. What we could offer up, we had sacrificed. And in that sacrifice we had learnt even more about ourselves than we should have done after ten years in a monastery. We had come forth again after ten years in a monastery.

Saint-Exupéry is at his best when he is talking about civilization, as you may have noticed. In this next passage he points out that without a farmer, a farm is just a field. I recall Earl Nightingale telling a story about a passerby who stopped his car to admire a farm, and told the farmer, "I guess God has really blessed this farm."

"Yes," the farmer said, "that is right — God has really blessed this farm, but you should have seen what it looked like when He had it all to himself."

[page 242, 243] I may, if I like, speak of a farm by referring to its fields, its streams, its pastures, its cattle. Each of these by itself, and all of them together, contribute to the existence of the farm. Yet in that farm there must be something which escapes material analysis, since there are farmers who are ready to ruin themselves for their farms. And it is that "something else" which is the essence of the farm and enhances the particles of which the farm is composed. The cattle, by that something else, become the cattle of a farm, the meadows the meadows of a farm, the fields the fields of a farm.

Saint-Exupéry says on page 242, "We say nothing essential about the cathedral when we speak of its stones." Once more he reveals to us the Fox's secret that the essence of life is in the meaning of things. It determines what men live for and will die for.

[page 247] Where will I find that rush of love that will compensate my death? Men die for a home, not for walls and tables. Men die for a cathedral, not for stones. Men die for a people, not for a mob. Men die for love of Man provided that Man is the keystone in

the arch of their community. Men die only for that by which they live.

Saint-Exupéry's flight to Arras was supposed to be curtains for him, shredding him to pieces by ack-ack like thousand-foot long wildcats' claws, but miraculously he dodged the claws and arrived home again safely. Safe, but not unchanged. Safe, and stronger because he found himself which had chosen Man as the keystone in its arch." He had done his service to an unseen God, but Arras had opened his eyes. He would fly again, he would write again, he would discover a little boy speaking up to him from the page on which he had just drawn him, he would reveal to many the wisdom of the sands, and forever etch on our memory the Fox's secret, that "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye", and that essential thing is the *meaning* of things.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Rightly understood, there is no "eternal silence of death" as the last line states, but to our currently materialistic or *dense* way of thinking, death silences a human being forever. It is the folly of such a belief that lends this line its density.

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**Footnote 2.** In one of his great insights, Rudolf Steiner expressed a similar idea, "Discussion begins when knowledge ends."

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