The Enchantment of Belonging

One day, a fox suddenly appeared. The boy asked the fox to play with him, as he was terribly depressed [masentunut].

But the fox said: “I cannot play with you: I am wild [villi]; no one has mastered me [minulla ei ole mestaria / je ne suis pas apprivoisé].”

“What does it mean to master [mestaria / apprivoiser]?” asked the boy.

“It’s something no one thinks about, but it is very important, said the fox. “It means to belong to another [kuulua toiseen].”

“To belong to another?” repeated the boy.

“Yes, said the fox. “So long as you belong to yourself, you’ll be nothing. Just a boy like every other boy. I’ll have no use for you. And, until I belong to you, you’ll have no use for me. I’ll be a fox like every other fox. But if you tame me [hallitset minua] and become my master, we will need each other. To me, you’ll be the most important creature in the whole world, and to you, I’ll be the same.”
The boy was confused. He said: “I had a flower who tamed me. I belonged to it and it was my master.”

“Perhaps,” said the fox. “On Earth one sees all sorts of things.”

“Oh, but it was not on Earth,” said the boy.

This intrigued the fox, who asked: “On another planet?”

“Yes,” said the boy.

“Are there hunters on your planet?” asked the fox.

“No” replied the boy.

“That’s interesting…and chickens?”

“No.”

“Well, nothing’s perfect,” sighed the fox.

The fox then returned to his point: “My life is awfully monotonous. I hunt chickens. Men hunt me. All the chickens are alike and all the men are alike. It’s quite boring, you see? But if you become my master, it will be like the sun has finally smiled on me.1 The sound of your footsteps will be different from all others. Yours alone will enchant me like music, and call me out of my hole.”

The fox continued: “And look! Do you see, just there, the fields of wheat? I don’t eat bread, so, for me, wheat is useless. It means nothing to me. But you have golden hair. So think how marvelous it will be when I belong to you! The golden wheat will remind me of you, and I will love the sound of the wind in the wheat.”

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1 The French is ma vie sera comme ensoleillée.
The fox fell silent and stared at the boy for a long time before demanding, loudly and suddenly: “Please! Tame me!”

“I would like to, replied the boy, but I don’t have much time. I have friends to discover and things to learn.”

The fox replied: “You can only understand the things you’ve tamed. People have no time any more, no time for taming, no time for learning. They buy ready-made things in shops and live all alone. If you really want to learn, if you really want a friend, tame me!”

“How?” asked the boy. “You must be very patient, said the fox. “First, sit far away from me in the field. Rest assured: I’ll keep you in the corner of me eye. It’s very important then that you say nothing at all, since words are the source of all misunderstanding. Instead, every day, just move a bit closer to me.”

The next day, the boy returned to begin to tame the fox, and the fox chastised him: “It’s much better if you arrive at the same time every day. If you arrive, say, at four o’clock in the afternoon, by three o’clock I’ll start getting excited. As the hour advances, I’ll become happier and happier. Right at four o’clock, I’ll be agitated and distressed. Each day, I’ll rediscover every day the price of happiness! But if you come at any time whatsoever, I’ll never know how to prepare my heart….We must keep to our rites.”

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2 In Saint-Exupéry’s text, no tension is remarked between the different roles of master and servant, tamer and tamed. Matinpoika seems to wish to address this matter by adding text that point out the confusion, if not outright tension, between the fox’s claim that taming a thing causes the master to become responsible for the thing tamed, and the boy’s (initial) understanding of this relationship, which is inverse: that his flower tamed him and, therefore, that he belongs to and is responsible for his flower. Ultimately, what Saint-Exupéry, along with many readers and critics, have failed to remark is that mastering or taming is not a mutual or reciprocal process, in which two equal parties belong to each other equally and become ‘friends.’ More analysis of this matter may be found in the Translator’s Preface.
“What’s a rite?” asked the boy.

“It’s something no one thinks about,” said the fox, “but it’s what makes one day different from another, one hour from another. My hunters, for example, have a rite: Every Thursday, they dance with the girls of their village. Thursdays are the most marvelous days! I can run all the way to the vineyard. But if the hunters danced whenever they pleased, my days would all be alike, and I would never get a break.”

So the boy obeyed, doing just as he was told [olla lammas], and tamed the fox.3

When it came time for the boy to leave, the fox said: “Now I will cry!”

“It’s your own fault,” said the boy. “I never wanted to harm you, but you demanded to be tamed.”

“Of course,” said the fox.

“But you are about to cry!” said the boy.

“Of course,” said the fox, again.

“So all this has done you no good!”

But the fox replied: “It has done me good, because of the color of the wheat. Return to the roses. You will see that your flower was, [Here, Matinpoika further sets into relief the confusion and tension noted above by making use of the Finnish idiom, olla lammas [to be a sheep or lamb], meaning, to follow or do what one is told. The thematic perplex is highlighted here, not only because the boy introduces himself to the pilot by demanding a drawing of a sheep — an order that the pilot obeys — but because the boy is being ordered to become a master — an order that the boy (sheepishly) obeys.]

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indeed, unique in all the world. Afterwards, come back and say goodbye, and I will tell you a secret as a parting gift.”

So the boy went to look at the roses again and said to them, crudely [karkeasti]: “You are nothing like my rose. You are nothing at all, for no one belongs to you and you belong to no one. You are as my fox once was: nothing but a fox, identical to one hundred thousand others. But now I am his master and therefore he is unique in the world.”

The roses were deeply hurt [tuskissa].

The boy continued: “You are beautiful but empty. No one could ever die for you. Of course, a stranger might think that my rose was just like you. But my rose is more important [tärkeä] than all of you put together because I watered it. Because I sheltered it with a windscreen. Because I killed caterpillars for it. Because I listened to its complaints, and its vain boasting, and even its silence. Because it is my rose.”

And the boy returned to the fox to say goodbye.

The fox then told the boy his secret: “My secret is very simple: You can only see things with your heart. What’s important [tärkeä] is invisible.”

“What’s important is invisible,” repeated the boy, as if he might forget.

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4 Possibly the best-known and most beloved line from Le petit prince, L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux [what is essential/important is invisible for/to the eyes] is quite awkward and even ugly in French. It is redundant, since invisibility already entails the impossibility of seeing with the eyes. Worse, a more natural and elegant manner of speaking about what is apparent or available “to the eyes” in French is à l’œil [literally, to the eye]. Sadly, Saint-Exupéry’s intentions for this awkward phrase are also, in some sense, ‘invisible.’
“It’s all the time you have wasted on your flower that makes it so important,” said the fox.

“It’s all the time I have wasted…,” repeated the boy, so he would remember.

“People have forgotten this,” said the fox. “But you must never forget it: You belong to what you master.”

“I belong to my rose,” repeated the boy, once again, so he would remember.5

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Later, the boy met a railroad switchman.

He asked what he did and the switchman replied: “I sort travelers, by the thousands. I run the trains that carry them, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right.”

As the switchman was speaking, a train roared by with the sound of thunder.

“They’re in such a rush. What are they looking for?” asked the boy.

“Not even the engineer knows,” replied the switchman.

Another train roared by, this time in the opposite direction.

“Are they coming back so soon?” asked the boy.

5 Again, on the questions of and (Hegelian) complexities regarding who is master and who is servant, and of who belongs to whom, see footnotes 18 and 19 in/and the Translator’s Preface.
“Those are not the same travelers,” said the switchman. “It’s a kind of exchange.”

“Were they not happy where they were?” asked the boy.

“Nobody is happy where he is,” said the switchman.

A third train roared by.

“Are they looking for the first travelers?” asked the boy.

“They aren’t looking for anything at all,” said the switchman. “They’re asleep on the trains, or if not, they’re yawning. Only the children are looking out the windows.”

“Only the children know what they’re looking for,” said the boy. “They waste their time fussing over a doll until it becomes very important to them, and if someone takes it away, they cry.”

“They are fortunate, then,” said the switchman, and the boy agreed.

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The boy then met a merchant who sold pills to quench thirst. One pill every week and you don’t need water.

“Why are you selling these?” asked the boy.

“Because they save a lot of time,” said the merchant. “Studies have found that these pills can save you fifty-three minutes per week.”

“And what do you do with those fifty-three minutes?” asked the boy.

“Anything you want,” replied the merchant.
“If I had an extra fifty-three minutes to do whatever I wanted,” said the boy, “I would walk very slowly toward a fountain.”