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Conquering the Arctic and Conquering the Sky: Views on Technical Progress and Superman in Saint-Exupéry's *Night Flight* and P. O. Sundman's *The Flight of the Eagle*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is most known as the author of *The little Prince*. In the 20th century, this book was the absolute bestseller in French literature and the most translated French literary work. But Saint-Exupéry also wrote essays and novels for grown-ups, among which *Night Flight* was very successful when it appeared in 1931¹, and later filmed in Hollywood in 1933². *Night Flight* is a novel about a pilot, Fabien, getting caught in a storm at night while carrying mail from Patagonia to Buenos Aires. Losing his way, it becomes certain that he will perish, as the plane is running out of fuel.

Per Olof Sundman's *The Flight of the Eagle*, which appeared in 1967, is an historical novel about the Swedish engineer Andrée's attempt to reach the North Pole in a balloon in 1897. The balloon trip starts from Danes Island, one of the Spitsbergen³ islands, and flies for about three days, but it has to be given up by

¹ It was published in Norway in 1932 (*Flyvere i natten*, på norsk ved Henrik Groth, Oslo, Steenske forlag, 1932) and in Sweden in 1933 (*Nattflygning*, till svenska av Tania Silfverskiöld-Glachant, Stockholm, Bonnier, 1933).

² The director was Clarence Brown; John Barrymore and Clark Gable were in the cast. Cf. Curtis Cate: *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, his Life and Times*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970. French translation: *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry laboureur du ciel*, Paris, Grasset, 1994, p. 306.

³ The English translation of Sundman's novel uses the word « Spitzbergen », but in this article I use « Spitsbergen », which is more correct – except when quoting the English version of the novel.

the men on the expedition at a point far away from the Pole. They try to make their way on the ice-pack back to Spitsbergen but die at the beginning of the winter. *The Flight of the Eagle* is its author's most famous work and was filmed by Jan Troell in 1982¹.

There are similarities between Saint-Exupéry's and Sundman's novels. Both have a tragic ending. Both are based on facts. There are also obvious differences between the two books. The action takes place around 1930 in the former, at the end of the 19th century in the latter. Saint-Exupéry's narrative is based on the author's direct experiences as a professional pilot, Sundman's on written and photographic documents. They belong to different times: *The Flight of the Eagle* came out thirty-six years after *Night Flight*. Between 1931 and 1967, much happened in the history of the world, questioning values and beliefs that were still broadly accepted in the 1930s.

*Night Flight*² describes the period in history when airplanes began carrying the post. It was a risky business and the death rate among aviators was high. Of course, night flights were even more dangerous than day flights. For someone who wrote about that enterprise at the very moment it was carried out, a neutral attitude was hardly possible. Saint-Exupéry does take side for the night flights, and he does it in a radical way. He does not minimize danger. On the contrary, his narrative focuses on a flight that ends with death. But the head of the air-mail service Rivière's decision not to change anything and to let the next flight start as scheduled is seen as positive and is called a "victory".

As a person in command of others, Rivière is very hard. He does not admit the slightest weakness or failure and punishes delays and technical incidents even when the pilots or the mechanics are not responsible for them. He is not cruel, and he is said to love the men under his orders, but without letting them

¹ With Max von Sydow as Andrée.

² Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *Vol de nuit*, in *Oeuvres complètes I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994. I quote the original French text from that edition, which I refer to as *Vol de nuit*. English translation by Stuart Gilbert: *Night Flight*, New York, Penguin Books, Inc., 1945, p. 50. I quote from that edition, which I refer to as *Night Flight*.

know it. The reason for his being so strict is that he is serving a great cause which is worth every sacrifice in his eyes. By ignoring the pilots' desire for safety, rest and normal unheroic family life, by ignoring their fear, he intends to make them greater, to raise them over their ordinary selves. "For him [Rivière], a man was a mere lump of wax to be kneaded into shape. It was his task to furnish this dead matter with a soul, to inject will-power into it. Not that he wished to make slaves of his men; his aim was to raise them above themselves."¹ That is the reason why all pilots seem to accept his ways. Rivière makes them into supermen – though the word is not used in the text². He saves them from being mere mortal creatures by letting them participate in actions which will tie their existence to a durable achievement. Spiritual immortality means more to them than physical life.

At this point it may be useful to be reminded of the ideological background of the novel. *Night Flight* was written only twelve years after the First World War, at a time when France had been in war, with rather short interruptions, for almost one and a half centuries, and the idea of sacrificing human lives – one's own or others' – for a good, or a sacred purpose was far from being unacceptable. The text is permeated with martial metaphors. The aviators as well as the officers, technicians and engineers "struggle" against wind and darkness, clouds, storms, or against gravity, they fight "battles", they are "defeated" or "victorious", they are referred to as "conquerors". The last sentence of the novel reads: "Rivière the Great Rivière the Conqueror, bearing his heavy load of victory."³

Fighting for something appears to be an anthropological necessity. Saint-Exupéry had been raised in a pious Roman

¹ *Night Flight*, p. 33, *Vol de nuit* p. 123: "L'homme était pour lui [Rivière] une cire vierge qu'il fallait pétrir. Il fallait donner une âme à cette matière, lui créer une volonté. Il ne pensait pas les asservir par cette dureté, mais les lancer hors d'eux-mêmes. »

² A series of letters show that in his youth Saint-Exupéry read Nietzsche enthusiastically.

³ *Night Flight*, p. 172, *Vol de nuit* p. 167 : « Rivière-le-Grand, Rivière-le-Victorieux, qui porte sa lourde victoire. »

Catholic family. As a grown-up, he could no longer believe in the God of his childhood. But he could not bear the idea of human existence and human suffering being meaningless. At the core of his work is the question of the meaning of life. “We do not pray for immortality », thinks Rivière, “but only not to see our acts and all things stripped suddenly of all their meaning; for then it is the utter emptiness of everything reveals itself. »¹ To be genuinely human, a human being has to live for something higher than himself. That is what *Night Flight* clearly wants to tell us.²

In the novel, the heroes and supermen, the best of humankind, are all men and, as it seems, white Europeans – though the story takes place in Argentina. There are some women-characters in *Night Flight*, but all of them are wives, waiting at home and keeping the coffee warm. They all belong to the “other world”, the non-heroic world, the world of everyday life and simple happiness, a world which is not denied worth and is in a way respected as such by Rivière. However, it is the one that has to be sacrificed when ideal is at stake, for “action and individual happiness have no truck with each other; they are eternally at war”³, as Rivière thinks when meeting Fabien’s wife. The non-heroic world represented by women is understood as inferior. There are no women among those who dedicate themselves to the higher part of human life.

Rivière in some inner monologues appears to be aware of possible objections to his attitude, but he acts regardless of any

¹ *Night Flight*, p. 149, *Vol de nuit* p. 160 : « Nous ne demandons pas à être éternels, mais à ne pas voir les actes et les choses tout à coup perdre leur sens. Le vide qui nous entoure se montre alors... »

² Saint-Exupéry’s heroes accept the risk of death, but they do not play with it. What is at stake is the meaning of individual life, not a game with strong sensations. In *Wind, sand and stars*, Saint-Exupéry writes he dislikes toreadors: “Les toréadors ne me plaisent guère. Ce n’est pas le danger que j’aime. Je sais ce que j’aime. C’est la vie.» (*Terre des hommes*, in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *Oeuvres complètes I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 264)

³ *Night Flight*, p. 115, *Vol de nuit* p. 151 : “ni l’action ni le bonheur individuel n’admettent le partage: ils sont en conflit”

other considerations than the necessity of sustaining and developing airlines. In the words he utters and in his behaviour, he reminds us of Ibsen's character Brand¹. But in the depth of his heart, Rivière is not as spontaneously convinced and sure of his own right as Brand. He could rather be described as a pre-Sartrean character who sticks to his choice totally once he has chosen.²

The goal the heroes dedicate themselves to has to be strongly believed in if it is going to give life its meaning and thus be worth every sacrifice. Unfortunately, in the society Saint-Exupéry lived in, no unquestioned faith imposed itself on everybody any longer. Saint-Exupéry believes in the necessity of believing in something, whatever it might be, more than in anything else. But believing that you have to believe comes close to an apory. Saint-Exupéry's heroes escape such an apory by getting involved in action, and the action both expresses and generates their belief. "The goal, perhaps, means nothing, it is the thing done that delivers man from death"³, writes Saint-Exupéry.

In Saint-Exupéry's view, it could seem that the goal one dedicates oneself to is not important as such. Nevertheless, in his books, the ideal is never picked up arbitrarily. When human

¹ Henrik Ibsen was one of the authors Saint-Exupéry admired most, because "he wrote to make people understand what they did not want to understand" and provided the readers "not with a game, but with nourishment" (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *Oeuvres complètes I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 794: "Il a écrit pour faire comprendre aux gens ce qu'ils ne voulaient pas comprendre [...] [II] cherchait à nous fournir non un nouveau jeu de loto mais une nourriture.")

² The existentialistic dimension of Saint-Exupéry's work has been stressed by a series of scholars. Cf. for example Réal Ouellet: *Les relations humaines dans l'oeuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, Paris, Lettres Modernes Minard, 1971, p. 11 and p. 141, and Geneviève Le Hir: *Saint-Exupéry ou la force des images*, Paris, Imago, 2002, p. 115-117. Jean-Paul Sartre appreciated Saint-Exupéry's literary works as good illustrations of the basic existentialistic thesis that a being reveals itself by its acting. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre: *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Paris, Gallimard, 1948, p. 286-287 (quoted by Le Hir, p. 115.)

³ *Night Flight*, p. 150, *Vol de nuit* p. 161: "Le but peut-être ne justifie rien, mais l'action délivre de la mort".

beings live for an ideal and are ready to die for that ideal, it not only raises them above themselves; such a pursuit of the ideal also improves humankind as a whole.

In its early days, aviation was commonly seen as the utmost representation of technical progress; no other achievement could symbolise human mastery over nature as strikingly as aviation. The main characters of *Night Flight* share the author's dedication to aviation, which is regarded as something good and beneficial for humankind. If Rivière, in the secret of his heart, questions his own right to sacrifice others, he never doubts that technical progress is both possible and profitable. He sometimes even regards it as a law of nature, as for instance in the eleventh Chapter: "A living thing forces its way through, makes its own laws to live and nothing can resist it. Rivière had no notion when or how commercial aviation would tackle the problem of night-flying but its inevitable solution must be prepared for."¹

Rivière, the leader is convinced that he is acting properly towards nature and humankind as a whole. His demands would hardly be possible without such a deep conviction to justify them. In one of his many monologues, he muses: "We can command events and they obey us; and thus we are creators. These humble men, too, are things and we create them. Or cast them aside when mischief comes about through them."²

The author shares the main character's belief in technical progress. At the end of the novel, we do not only read about the lost flight from Patagonia, but also about another flight, coming from Asuncion, which lands at Buenos Aires without trouble, and strengthens Rivière's conviction of his being right: "Even at the darkest hour, Rivière had followed, telegram by telegram, its well-

¹ *Night Flight*, p. 91, *Vol de nuit* p. 142 : "Ce qui est vivant bouscule tout pour vivre et crée, pour vivre, ses propres lois. C'est irrésistible." Rivière ne savait pas quand ni comment l'aviation commerciale aborderait les vols de nuit, mais il fallait préparer cette solution inévitable."

² *Night Flight*, p. 72, *Vol de nuit* p. 136 : « Parce que les événements, on les commande, pensait Rivière, et ils obéissent, et on crée. Et les hommes sont de pauvres choses, et on les crée aussi. Ou bien on les écarte lorsque le mal passe par eux. »

ordered progress. In the turmoil of this night he hailed it as the avenger of his faith, an all-conclusive witness. Each message telling of this auspicious flight augured a thousand more such flights to come.”¹

In spite of some failures, Rivière is victorious over night, a symbol of mystery and the unknown. In a letter he wrote to his mother in the days when he was working on the novel, Saint-Exupéry says he is writing “a book about night” and he points out what night meant to him as a child: it was like a huge, unknown and terrifying space that the child had to cross in order to reach the following day. The only thing that could make the crossing safe was the presence of the mother, protecting the child from all presumed and unseen dangers.² Rivière, the hero, is mastering night in reality as the mother did in the child’s fantasies, revealing how close the pursuit of technical mastery on the world is to the child’s and humankind’s eternal fear of the unpredictable.

Saint-Exupéry’s theses in *Night Flight* are far from being unproblematic. Both Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism advocated the submission to a “high” cause and regarded human beings as “a mere lump of wax to be kneaded into shape”, in Saint-Exupéry’s terms. On the other hand, we know that the man who wrote *Night Flight* never showed the slightest sympathy for Stalinism or Nazism, though a series of European writers did in the 1930s. At the beginning of the Second World War, Saint-Exupéry became a member of an air-squadron that volunteered to “fight for Norway”³ and then fought against the German invasion of France. It was on

¹ *Night Flight*, p. 165, *Vol de nuit* p. 165 : “Rivière, même aux pires heures, avait suivi, de télégramme en télégramme, sa marche heureuse. C’était pour lui, au milieu de ce désarroi, la revanche de sa foi, la preuve. Ce vol heureux annonçait, par ses télégrammes, mille autres vols heureux. » (XXII, 181)

² Cf. Geneviève Le Hir : *Saint-Exupéry ou la force des images*, Paris, Imago, 2002, p. 271, where parts of the letter are quoted.

³ Cf. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry : *Pilote de guerre (Flight to Arras)*, in *œuvres complètes II*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 226 : « Je suis du Groupe 2/33 qui souhaitait combattre pour la Norvège. » (« I belong to group 2/3 that wished to fight for Norway. »)

a flight over the south of France on July 31, 1944 that Saint-Exupéry disappeared.

One of the merits of *Night Flight* is that it sheds light on the rather unpleasant fact that almost all technical achievements – not only aviation – that makes our life easier, more comfortable and more interesting today rests on human sacrifices. The novel stresses the ability to dedicate oneself to ideals and values which is the privilege of humankind and produces the greatest things – though we know it also produces the worst atrocities. Saint-Exupéry raises crucial ethical and anthropological questions that cannot be ignored and are still unanswered.

Turning now to another novel, this paper will examine the work of the Swedish writer Per Olof Sundman. We know today that Sundman was a member of a pro-Nazi movement in his early youth – i.e. in the days when Saint-Exupéry was putting his life at stake to fight Nazism. But when he became a writer many years later, his work often emphasized humanistic values. One of Sundman's central themes of his work is the premise that every human being is a mystery and the reasons behind a person's behaviour never can be wholly understood and often remain incomprehensible.¹

*The Flight of the Eagle*² also deals with technical progress and focuses on the leader Andrée who's expedition to conquer the North Pole in 1897 was expected to take him to regions never before reached by any human being. This is an historical novel, as it deals with persons that really existed and events that actually took place and are well known to the Swedish public. Sundman spent several years researching Andrée's expedition. In 1968, at a time when his novel had become very successful, he published

¹ See, for example: Johanna Lundström: *Terrängbeskrivning. P. O. Sundman, moderniteten och medmänniskan*, Ellerströms förlag, 2006.

² Per Olof Sundman: *Ingenjör Andréés luftfärd*, Stockholm, Norstedt, 1967. I quote the original Swedish text from that edition, which I refer to as *Andrée*. English translation by Mary Sandbach: *The Flight of the Eagle*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1970. I quote from that edition, which I refer to as *The Flight of the Eagle*.

parts of the documents he had gathered under the title *Ingen fruktan, intet hopp* (“No fear, no hope”)¹.

Interestingly, as the editor of the documents, Sundman clearly expresses his opinion about Andrée. In Sundman’s eyes, Andrée was a man possessed with ambition, who dared not give up his enterprise after a first unsuccessful attempt in the summer of 1896. Andrée knew his expedition most probably would fail, but he yielded to the nationalistic wish to surpass Norwegian Polar explorers. As a balloon-flyer, Andrée was rather incompetent and mixed up wishful thinking and actual skill. The person described by Sundman in “No fear, no hope” is dramatically different from the idealized heroic figure of Andrée that had dominated in Sweden before Sundman wrote about him.

All those unpleasant traits of Andrée do appear in the novel as well, though not in the same direct way as in “No fear, no hope”. Some critics have meant that Andrée’s psychological portrait in *The Flight of the Eagle* is clearly negative. But in my opinion, the text of the novel does not convey as unambiguous a judgement on Andrée as “No fear, no hope”, for several reasons. In *The Flight of the Eagle*, the story is entirely told by Fränkel, one of the three men on the expedition, who admires Andrée from the beginning and shares his ambitions and his dreams. Furthermore, never to give complete explanations belongs to the nature of a behaviouristic description – such as *The Flight of the Eagle*. Reported facts have to be interpreted and can easily allow various interpretations and various evaluations. For instance, we do know for certain that Andrée is aware of the fact that the balloon will most probably not be able to reach the North Pole, but that he nevertheless does not give up the planned expedition. But what does this tell us about Andrée? That he is childishly stubborn and dare not face disturbing realities? That ambition and hubris and the desire to be better than Fridtjof Nansen are stronger than concern for his own survival? That he is a tragic hero who accepts his fate totally, whatever it might be? That he keeps in mind that

¹ Per Olof Sundman : *Ingen fruktan, intet hopp*, Stockholm, Bonnier, 1968.

many things that were considered impossible were achieved one day? Or that all these factors are influential to some degree? Is Andrée admirable, or ridiculous, or vain?

Andrée shows vanity not only when insisting on flying to the Pole, but also after the landing, when the three men would have better chances to reach land if they went westward, in the direction of Spitsbergen. Instead he chooses to go eastward, towards Franz Josef Land, because there are still unexplored islands to be discovered in that direction. But contrary to most vain people, he shows courage when encountering adversity. He never collapses under the long exhausting journey on the pack-ice and takes his fair share of the hardships, though he is almost twice as old as his companions.

Towards the end of the novel, Fränkel, the narrator, admits to Nils Strindberg, the third member of the expedition, his having read Andrée's diary. In spite of his admiration, Fränkel expresses his indignation and disappointment, because the diary shows that Andrée had not prepared the expedition seriously enough and hardly cared about the fate of his companions. From this moment, Andrée's image changes, suggesting that perhaps a fraud has been unmasked. Nevertheless, Fränkel's relationship to Andrée changes again in the last pages of the novel: after Strindberg's death, followed by Andrée's, Fränkel decides to commit suicide, though he has more than enough food to last through the winter, because his situation "was not a question of food and sustenance, it was a question of loneliness. [...] No, not loneliness. Better: no one with whom to share."¹ Fränkel's sharing Andrée's fate is completed when he takes lethal doses of opium and morphine and lies beside Andrée's dead body, thus repeating the symbolically expressive side by side position they had on the first day they met, eating lunch in a restaurant and sitting "side by side, not opposite each other."² The last sentences of the novel read: "I lay on my

¹ *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 382, *Andrée* p. 344: "var inte en fråga om mat och föda utan en fråga om ensamhet. [...] Inte ensamhet. Bättre: för-lorad gemenskap."

² *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 25, *Andrée* p. 20: "bredvid varandra, inte mitt emot varandra."

side near to Andrée. His beard was grey. He was an old man. I was still young.”¹

To Fränkel, belonging to the group is more important than his own life. This attitude is related to the Sundmanian motive of “solitary people’s dream of sharing”, in the words of Per Rydén.² But it also reminds us that Fränkel is more Andrée’s like than his victim, and that he made his decision freely, knowing the risks of the expedition. He was as ambitious as the man who lead it, thus invalidating the suspicion that Andrée has deceived and manipulated his companions.

Andrée, Strindberg and Fränkel do not only display considerable courage and self-control under very hard circumstances, they are also supermen in Saint-Exupéry’s context because they accepted sacrificing their lives for a higher goal. In their heroic behaviour, they resemble the main characters of *Night Flight*. The difference is that the author of *The Flight of the Eagle* insistently, not just rhetorically, questions the motivations of his heroes. The text does not allow determining whether they are moved by vanity or by nobler feelings. As for their attempt to fly to the North Pole, it may be regarded as vain and useless, or as a contribution to the progress of human knowledge. But if the goal is meaningless, sacrificing one’s own life for it is absurd, and sacrificing others’ is criminal. *The Flight of the Eagle* lacks the strong conviction expressed in *Night Flight* that the aim to be reached is worth every sacrifice.

Andrée and his two companions certainly consider themselves supermen, but the text of the novel is far from describing them as representative of humanity at its best. But they *are* representative of a type of human beings, those who dedicate all their longings and actions to the discovery and conquest of the still undiscovered. They feel they belong to the same kind of men

¹ *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 383, *Andrée* p. 344: “Jag lade mig på sidan nära Andrée. Hans skägg var grått, han var en gammal man. Jag var ännu ung.”

² Per Rydén : *Den svenske Ikaros. Berättelserna om Andrée*, Stockholm, Carlsson, 2003, p. 584: ”Ingenjör Andrées luftfärd ger [...] en skildring av ensamhetens dröm om gemenskap.”

as Columbus or the first balloon flyers. Each of them wants “to be the first one”, Sundman thinks, “to set foot on a place where no other set foot before.”¹ Without that ambition, Andrée’s expedition would never have taken place. Such a desire is responsible for what we commonly call progress, and such a desire distinguishes, in Saint-Exupéry’s view, a human being from an animal.

In “No fear, no hope”, Sundman means that such an ambition “is a typically western assessment of value.”² In *The Flight of the Eagle*, the narrator declares in one of his few brief comments: “There are ways of phrasing a question that are decidedly feminine. *Horror vacui* or, *natura abhorret vacuum*. The horror inspired by a vacuum, the hatred of the unknown, the unexplored, wasn’t that a typically masculine characteristic?”³

Many critics have pointed out that women are to a large extent excluded from the world of Sundman’s narratives. That is the case in *The Flight of the Eagle* also. In the narrator’s eyes, the hatred of the unknown appears to be sexually determined. By choosing such words as “hatred” and “horror”, he voices the opinion that the wish to discover new things is triggered by dubious feelings and thus should not be valued high. This is of course a two-faced assertion. On the one hand, part of the text seems to reduce the quest of progress to neurotic behaviour. On the other hand, the mental attitude that was regarded by Saint-Exupéry, and by many others, as specifically human and the pride of humanity, and which the novel itself dedicates over three hundred and fifty pages to, is said to be unknown to women, or non-western people. The deep ambivalence of *The Flight of the Eagle* lies in the question how to judge and ethically value the

¹ Per Olof Sundman : *Ingen fruktan, intet hopp*, p. 10: ”att vara den förste som sätter sin fot på en punkt där ingen annan tidigare satt sin fot.”

² Per Olof Sundman : *Ingen fruktan, intet hopp*, p. 10: ”Det är en utpräglat västerländsk värdering.”

³ *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 39, *Andrée* p. 33: “Det finns frågeställningar som är utpräglat kvinnliga. *Horror vacui* eller *natura abhorret vacuum*. Avskyn inför tomrummet, hatet mot det okända och utforskade, var det inte något typiskt manligt?”

figure of the superman, whereas the very existence of supermen is practically self-evident.

In Sundman's novel, as in *Night Flight*, progress in knowledge and technique is directly related to human heroism, but at first sight the text adopts a critical attitude towards both superman and progress. If technical progress is the result of mainly childish and neurotic impulses, if it is a sort of game, it can easily look slightly ridiculous in some cases and its benefits can easily be questioned.

When trying to cast some light on how *The Flight of the Eagle* considers technique, the aesthetics of reception such as Umberto Eco's or Wolfgang Iser's may prove helpful. These aesthetics remind us that a narrative exists and lives in the reader's mind only. When reading, we built up representations that integrate the information provided by the text, but also our "implicit encyclopaedia", all the writer knows we know and needs not mention.

Sundman's novel repeatedly stresses that achievements that common sense regards as impossible may be possible. Many people, including scientists and balloon specialists, are convinced that Andrée's expedition cannot but fail. When Andrée declares that the men on that expedition "will be the greatest heroes of our time not only because they will have crossed the North Pole, but because they will have achieved the unachievable"¹, he could sound like a madman, if Fränkel immediately afterwards did not mention Fridtjof Nansen's successful crossing of Greenland: "I read once again Nansen's book about his journey on skis across the inland ice of Greenland, that splendid account of how to achieve the unachievable."² As the reader knows that Nansen existed in reality and that he actually crossed Greenland on skis, he must admit that Andrée's previous words are not mere

¹ *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 36, *Andrée* p. 30: "kommer att bli vår tids största hjältar, inte bara därför att de passerat nordpolen, utan därför att de genomfört det ogenomförbara".

² *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 36, *Andrée* p. 30: "Jag läste ännu en gång Nansens bok om hans skidfärd över den grönländska inlandsisen, denna lysande redogörelse för hur man genomför det ogenomförbara."

nonsense and realize that “the possible” and “the impossible” are rather uncertain notions.

In 1967, Sundman’s novel addressed readers who knew what had happened with the conquest of the sky and of the Poles since the end of the 19th century – and were moreover expecting man’s landing on the moon. Andrée declares in the novel: “First attempts regularly fail. They are regularly followed by a second attempt. That too almost always fails. But after that, with the help of the experiences gained by failure, people are able to find their way to the right methods”¹ Andrée is not just speaking as the character the novelist has made him to, he is also stating real facts.

The Flight of the Eagle provides other examples of enterprises that in the eyes of qualified persons were bound to fail, whereas today’s readers know these enterprises were successful. For instance, in the novel the French engineer Alexis Machuron says about the Eiffel tower in 1897: “A monstrosity that will crash to earth in less than twenty years.”²

A series of scholarly studies has shown that *The Flight of the Eagle*, though called a documentary novel, contains many fictitious elements³. This should not conceal the fact that implicit references to reality are essential to it. If we try to imagine that same text being read in 1897, it would be a different novel, with the ideas of the North Pole remaining inaccessible for ever and the Eiffel tower falling apart at the turn of the century making some sense. The reader of 1967 has no other choice than believing Andrée when he explains: “We’re only pioneers [...] Behind the pioneers wait their successors, the people who’ll complete what

¹ *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 55, *Andrée* p. 47-48: “De första försöken misslyckas regelmässigt. De följs regelmässigt av ett andra försök. Också det misslyckas – nästan regelmässigt. Men därefter och med hjälp av misslyckandets erfarenheter kan man leta sig fram till de rätta vägarna.”

² *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 67, *Andrée* p. 58: “Ett monster som kommer att störta till marken inom mindre än tjugo år.”

³ Cf. for instance: Torbjörn Forslid: “Nordpolens magi och andra icke-dokumentära drag i Per Olof Sundmans Ingenjör Andrées luftfärd”, in *Horisont*, Nr. 1, 1997, Årgång 44, p. 29-37.

they've begun."¹ Andrée accepts the sacrifice of his individual life and his companions' because he regards his enterprise as a link in the conquest of the world, in the same manner as Rivière in *Night Flight*. When predicting that others will succeed where he is going to fail, Andrée is doubtlessly right, in spite of his hubris and his numerous shortcomings, not because the narrative gives him right, but because history has verified his words. By means of its pragmatics, or communicational background, the text itself expresses a belief in continuous, and potentially endless progress of human mastery on the world. There is no ambivalence about that point.

Sundman does not ignore the most serious objections against the ideology represented by Andrée in his novel, and he never directly advocates that ideology. It seems that Sundman the novelist is fascinated by technology, discoveries, daring enterprises, and more eager to show that he is vividly aware of the high price human beings have to pay for progress than heartily concerned about making an end to a progress too costly to be justified. But he *is* aware of what progress costs.

Night Flight begins with hope and faith in progress, then describes Fabien's perilous situation, the growing fear, while making clear that Fabien is going to die, and ends with Rivière confidently hoping that more and more other aviators will perform successful night flights. *The Flight of the Eagle*, though telling a similar story, has a different structure. In the Swedish edition, the first 146 pages, out of a total of 344, depict the preparation of the expedition and culminate with the balloon taking off, on Page 147. The flight itself lasts until Page 186. From the very beginning of these forty pages, the outcome of the voyage becomes very uncertain. The last two parts, 158 pages, nearly half of the novel, are dedicated to the journey on the ice-pack. Sundman gives a long and detailed description of the numerous obstacles the three men meet on their way, of their physical sufferings, and also of the way they adapt themselves to that very unusual environment. It is

¹ *The Flight of the Eagle*, p. 144, *Andrée* p. 127: "Vi är bara pionjärer [...] Bakom pionjärerna väntar efterföljarna, de som skall fullborda det påbörjade."

worth noting that Sundman never had encountered the Arctic ice-pack, and much less travelled on it, when he wrote the novel. Nevertheless, he provides the reader with interesting factual information, and recreates the experience of a journey on the ice-pack; an experience that was alien to most of his readers. This may be called a literary achievement. Certainly, it has to do with Sundman's fascination for the "Far North", which allows him, while sitting on a comfortable chair in a warm house in Stockholm, to create the icy world of the Arctic in order to be able to share it with the reader, a narrative that is based on both well known scientific facts, current representations and inventions on the part of the writer, and which is among the best Sundman ever wrote. The result is that *The Flight of the Eagle* can be said to be to a large extent a novel about the exhausting journey on the ice that ends with nothing else but death.

Thus, it appears that Sundman's text does not condemn what Saint-Exupéry's values. The supposedly neutral behaviouristic presentation does not succeed suppressing feelings that undoubtedly show through the text, admiration for pioneers and conquerors, and fascination for the undiscovered Arctic. But *The Flight of the Eagle* emphasizes incomparably more than *Night Flight* what mastery on the world costs. It shows a strong awareness of the hardships conquest entails, and avoids answering the question if conquest in the end is worth while.