

On Jules Roy's *La Vallée Heureuse*, Albert Camus

On Jules Roy's *La Vallée Heureuse*<sup>1</sup>

Today's writers talk about what happens to them. Tolstoi centered *War and Peace* around the retreat from Moscow, which he himself had not experienced. In our own day, he would not receive the approval of his contemporaries unless he replaced the first Napoleon with the third, and cast Prince Andrei in the siege of Sebastopol, where Tolstoi himself fought well (though without having been able to overcome his fear of rats).

There are reasons for this, and they are complex. But, in any case, very few of our writers seem blessed with that innocence which enables them to bring imaginary characters to life, detach themselves from these characters enough to love them truly, and, consequently, make other people love them.

This is, after all, because we lack both time and a future, and because we have to hasten to create in the interval between war and revolution. Hence we do what is quickest, which is to report what we have done and what we have seen.

And it is true that any great work is, in a way, the account of a spiritual adventure. But generally such an account is suggested or transfigured. Today, we go no further than the account, the document, the "slice of life," as the Naturalists ignorantly called it.

A minimum of preparation, a few strips of bacon, two or three flowers of fluted paper, and the meat is served raw. As a result, cooks are becoming scarce; a certain manner is beginning to be lost, or at least forgotten, and finally the best we can do is accept what we are.

But this shouldn't keep us from being clear-sighted and from realizing that this new taste for raw meat leads to the loss of what has long been the strength, sometimes the explosive strength, of our literature—I mean a sense of propriety. (To make myself clear, and by straining words a little, I will say, for example, that there is a sense of propriety in *Sade*.) Candor is becoming obstreperous, and when everyone embraces it, it becomes a new kind of conformism.

The attitude is very understandable, of course. The adventures of past writers almost always had to do with love. Through respect for their partners, and consideration for the world, they transposed. Today, the raw material of experience is provided by men whom no one respects, and their frenzied embraces, called war or revolution. What is the point of restraint? Let the meat bleed, since that is its function.

But this does not alter the fact that art cannot do without restraint, whose very impulses it shares. It does not alter the fact that art lies in the distance that time gives to suffering or to joy. And if our time compels us to turn away from art in order to involve ourselves in new and fresh suffering, it is still true that the best books are and will be those which limit the damage, and which, though rejecting nothing of the cumbersome present, will nevertheless continue to show a certain restraint.

I have not been able to find a better way than this long digression to express why I find *La Vallée Heureuse*, by Jules Roy, a book that meets all the imperatives of the present and yet is exceptional. It manages to maintain a certain delicacy in spite of the killing. At the same time it deals with a personal experience, which the author scarcely disguises. After ten pages, it is obvious that Chevrier is Roy himself. Only the conclusion seems to have been fictionalized. For the rest, it is very clear.

Roy is in command of the crew of a bomber, in the R.A.F., and has to carry out the customary tour of duty of thirty bombing missions over Germany.

Statistically, it is rare for bombers to do more than twenty missions because they are usually shot down before that. This dangerous and monotonous struggle against probability forms the subject matter of the book.

Roy climbs into the his plane, with his crew. He accomplishes his mission. He returns. He waits for the next mission. He climbs back into the "B," his plane, with his crew. He accomplishes his mission. He returns. He waits for the next mission. He climbs back into the "B," and so on and so forth.

All we have is the description of the various circumstances, anti-aircraft barrages, delay in reaching the target when the enemy fighters have already taken off, or collision on landing, when the bomber, in the normal course of events, would have crashed with its load of men and bombs. Finally, we have the death of a friend who has not had the incredible luck of reaching his thirtieth mission.

The book is therefore the story of a run of luck, but one enjoyed with suitable humility. For this is the originality of *La Vallée Heureuse*. It is possible that, like all of us, Roy has lost his innocence. But he does not make a fuss about it, which is another way of approaching innocence. He does not generalize about anything nor does he find a pretext for lamentation or glorification. In *La Vallée Heureuse*, Roy has not set out to write a book of morals or heroism.

It contains no theory of destiny. The author talks about himself and his friends, but does not claim to use his own experience as a basis for judging other men. If such judgment is implied, then that is the reader's business. In other words, Roy has accepted the experience without trying to place himself above it. He is trapped in it, or, rather, other people have trapped him like a rat.

And he has found himself caught, as in those formation flights which he describes so admirably, the airplanes coagulated in the heart of the night, wing to wing, each crew pursuing its task, isolated in the fantastic noise and the shadow of the sky, with no feeling except the terrible perpetual expectation of a possible collision, and the nervous fear that, when they return, all the bombs will not have been dropped, and that the instant of landing will bring new death.

Month after month, shoulder to shoulder, Roy thus pursued his task in the night of a war for which he had no liking. And, rather than draw from it some great view on human destiny, he has limited himself to registering the moments when he was afraid and those when he picked up new courage. This is how he has been able to speak for all of us, while seeking to speak for no one, and this is how for the first time, thanks to him, we can imagine the thoughts of those who, year after year, traveled across the black sky of our imprisoned towns.

*La Vallée Heureuse* does not, therefore, take its place among the great books of humanism that we are used to demanding, but among those works of strength and modesty whose taste we had forgotten. When Chevrier tells us that he is afraid (the terrible *Miserere* that mounts in him at the moment when the bomber takes off on a new mission), it is not so that he can beat his breast. It is normal, in certain circumstances, for a man to be afraid.

And, similarly, when he gives the order to aim for the target under conditions made ten times more dangerous by the fact that the bomber is late, he does not glamorize his action. It is normal, under all circumstances, for a man to do his duty.

On each page of the book, we find the same naïveté (in the sense that Schiller spoke of Greek naïveté). The chapter I like the least, the one where Roy talks about love, reveals indeed that this strange warrior has recognized and accepted his sentimentality for what it was, something defenseless. In other words, he writes naturally about being sentimental, just as he wrote naturally about fear and courage. And that is enough to justify everything.

At this degree of simplicity and honesty, a man should be accepted or rejected as a whole. I would have no difficulty in saying what I feel on this point, as readers will have guessed. But this book is one that makes us think seriously. In other words, it is a book worthy of a man. What other praise can I add?

Let me merely say that after we have followed Chevrier in his long struggle against chance, death, and himself, the fraternal esteem that comes irresistibly to us is, I suppose, the truest homage a writer of good faith can hope for from a reader of good faith. A word finally about the style.

It too is a style of struggle. It does not flow easily; it makes an effort. The sentences are generally long, and rather complex. The image is surrounded, approached, released for a moment, then taken up again in the thickness of the words before being finally delivered in its strength and flesh. Such a great tension is, inevitably, accompanied by a few obscurities and excessive complexities of style. But it is this very effort that explains Roy's greatest success as well as his surprising ability to make us see what he is describing.

For, after this great pitching of words and sentences, grouped into squadrons, assembled like the airplanes setting out on a raid, traveling wing tip to wing tip, slowly through the night, where at the very end of their journey through clouds and shadows they will make the gigantic flames of war burst forth, so the image bursts forth, in the end, so terrible in its loveliness that it shakes us like an explosion or a cataclysm.

This is the passage where the squadron, coming back from a mission, is suddenly surrounded in the darkness by exploding rockets and machine-gunned by enemy fighters, which shoot the heavy bombers down one by one. "New fires were born with the flapping of the heavy gasoline flames as they were flattened by the wind; the bombers rolled over a little, then caught fire from the fuel tanks in the wings, floated on a little longer and exploded like stars."

Published in L'Arche, February 1947

1 Jules Roy was born in Algeria in 1907. From 1927 to 1953 he was an officer in the French air force, and served with the R.A.F. during World War II. In 1960 he dedicated his book *La Guerre d'Algerie* to Camus's memory, but disagreed with his friend's refusal to take sides in the Algerian conflict. —P.T.

The end