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Notions of Self and Nation in French Author-Aviators of World War II: From Myth to Ambivalence

Christopher Kean

University of Connecticut - Storrs, christopher.kean@uconn.edu

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Christopher Steven Kean, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2016

The traditional image of wartime aviators in French culture is an idealized, mythical notion that is inextricably linked with an equally idealized and mythical notion of nationhood. The literary works of three French author-aviators from World War II – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Jules Roy, and Romain Gary – reveal an image of the aviator and the writer that operates in a zone between reality and imagination. The purpose of this study is to delineate the elements that make up what I propose is a more complex and even ambivalent image of both individual and nation. Through these three works – *Pilote de guerre* (*Flight to Arras*), *La Vallée heureuse* (*The Happy Valley*), and *La Promesse de l'aube* (*Promise at Dawn*) – this dissertation proposes to uncover not only the figures of individual narratives, but also the figures of “a certain idea of France” during a critical period of that country’s history. The relation between these two intersecting narratives – the individual’s and the nation’s - is a matter of overlapping images based on a cultural past as they are viewed in the present. These include the notions of masculinity, heroism, and nationhood, each of which is a product of a cultural heritage and an imagined self derived from that heritage.

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Ambivalence

Christopher Steven Kean

B.S., United States Air Force Academy, 1995

M.A., Middlebury College, 1997

M.A., Air University, 2009

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Notions of Self and Nation in French Author-Aviators of World War II: From Myth to
Ambivalence

Presented by

Christopher Steven Kean, B.S., M.A.

Major Advisor _____

Roger Celestin

Associate Advisor _____

Eliane DalMolin

Associate Advisor _____

Carole Edwards

University of Connecticut

2016

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INTRODUCTION

I see many soldiers: would that I saw many warriors! "Uniform" one calls what they wear: would that what it conceals were not uniform! (Nietzsche 47)

The traditional image of wartime aviators in French culture is an idealized, mythical notion that is inextricably linked with an equally idealized and mythical notion of nationhood. The literary works of three French author-aviators from World War II – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Jules Roy, and Romain Gary – reveal an image that operates in a zone between reality and imagination. The purpose of this study is to delineate the elements that make up what I propose is a more complex and even ambivalent image of both individual and nation. Through these three works – *Pilote de guerre (Flight to Arras)*, *La vallée heureuse (The Happy Valley)*, and *La promesse de l'aube (Promise at Dawn)* – this dissertation proposes to uncover not only the figures of individual narratives, but also the figures of “a certain idea of France” during a critical period of that country’s history. The relation between these two intersecting narratives – the individual’s and the nation’s - is a matter of overlapping images based on a cultural past as they are viewed in the present. These include the notions of masculinity, heroism, and nationhood, each of which is a product of a cultural heritage and an imagined self derived from that heritage.

The works to be examined here belong to a critical moment in determining the future of France as a nation. Beginning with the Occupation in June of 1940, an entire nation was torn between two identities. One was the idea of an “eternal France” as it was preached by General Charles de Gaulle, largely built around the narrative of “exceptionalism” and home to the ideals of “liberté, égalité, fraternité,” (liberty, equality, fraternity). The other revolved around the

collaborationist politics of preserving “the fatherland” (rather than the republic) under General Philippe Pétain, based on a more “rooted” model of “travail, famille, patrie” (“work, family, fatherland”). During the war, Saint-Exupéry, Roy, and Gary found themselves at the vanguard of this existential struggle. In their autobiographical novels, each defines an idea of France from his own vantage point and develops a sense of belonging according to his particular memories and personal stories. The resulting mosaic spans the diverse background of France’s modern identity: *Français de souche* (native-born French), *pieds-noirs* (French colonists of Northern Africa), and *Français de papier* (naturalized French citizens).

SCOPE AND METHODS

Historian and sociologist Pierre Birnbaum wrote in *The Idea of France* that “Imagining France – the France of yesterday, today, and tomorrow – therefore requires a special effort to reconstruct the past. It is a living past, one that is constantly revisited and incessantly reinterpreted – a past that remains forever in the present” (xi). In this spirit, this research revisits a crucial and even traumatic crossroads in France’s history. Now seventy years after its close, only a few of the living veterans of World War II remain. What survives might be called “artifacts,” of which the personal accounts of these aviators are representative.

Through the unique lens of their works, this study will reveal a more problematic, less monolithic narrative of France during the time of the war than either the “Gaullist” or “Pétainist” narratives. Furthermore, by focusing on a larger scope of socio-historical progression versus an exclusively literary analysis, the goal is to demonstrate the continued relevance of these authors inside as well as outside of a wartime context. As the world once again sees many of the signs of world war era issues – extreme ideologies, mass migrations of refugees, brutal attacks on

innocent civilians – the negotiation of these authors around their own necessarily multifaceted, sometimes idealized notions of France can be helpful in today's climate.

This dissertation is a literary reading informed by cultural studies. It aims to delineate the element of myth in the three works through five fundamental figures and themes which are co-dependent: *masculinity*, *nationhood* and *heroism* as they are seen through the lens of the *aviator-warrior* and the notion of *French-ness*. The objective is to undo the apparently seamless myths embodied here through a questioning and re-examination of their constitutive elements. The point of this research, however, is not to abandon the myths, as Céline does so well in his *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and as a collaborator.¹

The questioning of certain myths here, rather, recognizes a basic framework that these authors acknowledge in their own culture and upbringing. By unfolding these elements and exploring the authors' conscience through their writing, the goal is to illuminate their intimate negotiation of self and nation. This involves an analysis of the authors' use of myths and their relevance in the particular time and place of the novels. Therefore, ultimately I hope to reveal certain aspects of the individual and national anxieties of the time, and to demonstrate how these authors find their sense of responsibility in them.

MYTHS

There is no single theory or concept of myth. At the very basic level, though, it is derived from the Greek word *mythos*, which means "story." The tradition of story telling is thus an

¹ The following passage is a prime example of how he delimits his departure from the soldier myth:

“- Oh ! Vous êtes donc tout à fait lâche, Ferdinand ! Vous êtes répugnant comme un rat...

- Oui, tout à fait lâche, Lola, je refuse la guerre et tout ce qu'il y a dedans...Je ne la déplore pas moi... Je ne pleurniche pas dessus moi... Je la refuse tout net, avec tous les hommes qu'elle contient, je ne veux rien à faire avec eux, avec elle.” (65)

essential aspect of myth, and the ritual associated with sharing stories often serves a purpose of spreading a particular cultural message or image that becomes a part of a heritage. According to British theorist Lord Raglan, for example, the genesis of myth is “a narrative linked with a rite” through which allegorical tales are transmitted from generation to generation (121).

Myth is often associated with lore or folk tales, which have their origins in the establishing of a noble heritage in a ruling royal family and resulted in the propagation of hero figures. Among scholars of hero myths, some claim that there is a common scenario: anthropologist Edward Tylor, for example, proposes that “the hero is exposed at birth, is saved by other humans or animals, and grows up to become a national hero” (Segal 117). Otto Rank assumes a Freudian connection, created by adults, where “by means of retrograde childhood fantasies, the hero being created [is] credited with the myth maker’s personal infantile history” (123). Whether evolving from family, from the psyche, or from the notion of a world controlled by gods, myths vary.

In Raglan’s traditional view of myths, there is already an ambivalence originating in the recipient’s perspective: “Since, however, the myth-makers omitted to transmit the key, the purpose which they had in mind has been frustrated, and the recipients of these myths invariably misunderstood them, with taking them literally or regarded them as a kind of sacred fairy-tale (121). Even if myths attempt to create idealized, seamless figures that are easily understood, the premise that they are imagined representations opens the door for ambiguity. Furthermore, departing from story-telling rites turns myth into literature, the basis of which is language.

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explains how myth is a second-level, meta-language constructed on a known past, a historical memory. As he writes, “A voluntary acceptance of myth can in fact define the whole of our traditional Literature” (134). Barthes also refers to myth

as a dual system of intellect and imagination, apparently “natural” but in fact constructed. In other words, what becomes more apparent in the examples presented by Barthes is that myths, although seemingly universally understood and seamless in their employment, are in fact constructs, *interpretations*. As they are tied to a past, often a supposedly “immemorial” past, they present themselves as “natural”, but in fact they are in a continual state of renewal, of construction and will break down and reveal their historicity and contingency when systematically scrutinized. For example, and more directly pertinent to the subject of this dissertation, the idealized image we hold of certain historical figures often break down in proximity. By removing some of the distance inherent in historical images, the novels produced by these three aviator-authors transform and even subvert the myths from which they were conceived, namely: masculinity, heroism, and nation.

MASCULINITY

The masculine figure is one of the fundamental threads in the narratives in the works of this study. Although there are many studies that deal with changing ideas about the ideal male body type or exploring male sexuality during the 20th Century, the research here does not address them.² Rather, it examines what is considered to be a masculine notion of sensibility and responsibility. The idea of masculinity here, for that matter, implies an expectation inherent in the educational ideology of France’s Third Republic, rooted in traditional gender roles and a sense of civic duty. The writing of these aviators displays their affiliation with this tradition; their susceptibility to the gravitational and *mythic* pull of this educational and cultural background.

² A good starting point on exploring these aspects of the masculine stereotype is George Mosse’s *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Likewise, Aaron Belkin’s *Bring Me Men* shows contradictions in American military culture through the lens of male sexuality and ambiguous ideals of “manliness.”

Nevertheless, their stories also reveal a more indeterminate notion that Gilbert Sigaux, in his preface to Jules Roy's *La vallée heureuse*, names "la tendresse virile" ("virile tenderness"). The simple fact that these men are writers might be said to clash or at least disrupt both the "male warrior" image and the patriotic, duty-bound citizen image. In addition, the often-lyrical quality of their style further reveals the supposed "feminine" vulnerabilities of men at war as they negotiate their own sense of a "masculine" responsibility in their actions.

Saint-Exupéry, for example, begins *Flight to Arras* with the notion of stepping into manhood, with the entire heritage of a schooling that seems to have formed him exclusively for this purpose. Gary, likewise, spends a great deal of time in *The Promise at Dawn* illustrating the figure of man that his mother had designed him to become. What is clearer, however, in these works is the struggle to accept and respond to the duties that have been bestowed upon them, particularly in the wartime setting. Whereas the traditional masculine hero figure upholds his duty and fearlessly "does his job," these men expose the anti-hero perspective, which Jules Roy exemplifies when he describes the "demons" that occupy the thoughts of the bomber crews as they face the perils of their missions in *The Happy Valley*. Their acceptance of "masculine" responsibility is a negotiation, a process of reflection.

HEROISM

Heroism implies an ostensibly seamless figure, emblemizing unwaveringly faithfulness and devotion to France, and the individual's greater civic responsibility. Like the responsible man and the loyal citizen, the ideal hero is a dutiful, devoted servant. Early images of the aviator, often revolving around pioneering flights and the exploits of the nation, are virtually synonymous with the hero. Physically, the hero is presupposed to be flawless and strong. His resolve is, likewise, seamless. Yet, these authors show the humanity in the hero: he is physically

imperfect, even cumbersome in his machine, and his open and candid self-evaluation through self-reflexive writing demystifies the aviator image. Rather than identifying uniquely with national narrative, through affiliation with a race or a particular, *rooted* heritage, these writers are loyal to a set of ideas, a spirit, and a conscience that invests their personal journey with a more universal (and “universalist”) dimension. As cultural historian Leo Braudy puts it:

In a mythic sense, it is another defeat of Ares by Hephaistos³, the aristocratic warrior tradition by the democracy of earth and labor. Aristocratic bravado, with its sense of class entitlement, is no longer the cynosure of male heroism; instead, the model is the ability to struggle with universal fatalism, to lose but not be beaten. As Hemingway’s idea of the “separate peace” implied, only individual honor was a possibility, whether by fighting with human or archetypal foes. (441)

This type of heroism is increasingly more prevalent, Braudy argues, by the time of World War II. In fact, a study of the works of Saint-Exupéry and others during the interwar period supports the notion of a metamorphosis already taking place in the aviator figure through literature. Joseph McKeon of the University of Louisville traces this progression in “Saint-Exupéry, The Myth of the Pilot” across four of the latter’s monumental works: *Courrier sud* (*Southern Mail*), *Vol de nuit* (*Night Flight*), (*Terre des homes*), (*Wind, Sand and Stars*), and *Pilote de guerre* (*Flight to Arras*). As he illustrates, the image of a knightly figure, “wreathed in an aura of glory,” evolves into even an “image of the peasant” in *Vol de nuit*, for example (1085-1086). Part of this modification betrays the nostalgia of adventure we expect in our pioneering heroes by replacing their role with an image of their thankless task. Moreover, what might have

³ Ares is the Greek god of war, son of Zeus; he is the equivalent of Mars in Roman mythology. “Hephaistos,” or Hephaestus, is the Greek god of fire and metalworking; he is the equivalent of Vulcan for the Romans.

been considered *superhuman* traits required to perform the role of a flyer mutated into work that is comparable to the everyday man, where the universal message becomes “être un homme, c’est précisément être responsable” (1087)⁴.

NATION

The very idea of what comprises a nation has been debated, like myth, since its inception. At the height of defining national identities at the end of the 19th Century, for example, Ernest Renan famously asked “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ?” (What is a nation?). His talk delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris argues that traditional concepts of nation identity are, in fact, flawed because of their lack of consistent truths. A nation concept, he argues, cannot be simply based on geographic boundaries, a bloodline, religion, or even a spoken language. It is more a part of a spirit or a national narrative, to which these writers belong.

The idea of nationhood, then, represents another converging myth for the three authors; each has a particular image of France depending on his own entrance into its nationality. Saint-Exupéry was born in Lyon, a member of long-standing French aristocracy. He was raised in France from a mindset of the “Hexagon” but later expanded his worldview via his travels as an aviator. Roy, however, was born in Rovigo, Algeria, as an illegitimate child and raised mainly in his native land (an outpost of the French colonial empire) before moving to France and serving in the air force. Although he spent most of his adult life in France, Roy strongly identified with his Algerian childhood and, therefore, his idea of being “barbare” (foreign or even “barbarian”). Finally, Romain Gary was raised in the former Russian Empire and parts of Poland (now Lithuania) before moving to France at age thirteen; similar to Roy, he often identified himself as

⁴ “to be a man, in fact, is to be responsible” (Author’s translation)

an “autre” (other) in France, clinging to mixed, nomadic childhood memories. Moreover, he felt a connection to his Jewish roots even though he had become assimilated later into France as a cultural Catholic.

In many ways, the three represent a cosmopolitan spectrum of modern French identity, formed by its past and adapted over time with modern myths of what it means to be French. So, while the sense of kinship and belonging to the nation of France is greatly linked with the stories, symbols and cultural cues of historic France, these men’s private lives remain important influences on their sense of identity. In their literary works, this is often demonstrated in personal memories and reveries of childhood, or in their sensory memory. In this way, the authors’ childhood and the sensory “imprint” of the national landscape are united as one emerging identity.

RECYCLING MYTH

A closer look at these figures thus initiates an unraveling of the myths they embody. The authors, each in his own way, destabilize their relationship with “eternal France” and their role as “heroic flyer” in the war. Despite this, and what is consistent with Barthes’s depiction of myths, they paradoxically strengthen the images in the process of breaking them down. There is a certain iconography in the writers themselves that is intrinsically French. While the analysis of their works reveals the complexity of their own myths, these ideals coalesce into the overall figure of the hero-aviator-author. In fact, their writing itself serves as a vehicle to catalyze the myth of their own creation.

Hungarian-born writer Arthur Koestler had his own way of explaining this while memorializing British Spitfire pilot Richard Hillary in 1943. In his article, “The Birth of a Myth,” he describes his effort to capture the essence of the man as a race against time, where the

“legend-forming mechanism is at work” (227). He uses the analogy of stalactite and crystal formations, where the social medium, like the molecules of the crystal solution, searches a coherent pattern. As he states, “it must have some affinity with that vague, diffuse sentiment, that craving for the right type of hero to turn into a myth; obviously he must express something which is the unconscious of that craving” (227). In this sense, the hero is part of the national narrative that espouses the ideals he embodies. Where the social medium takes on a new perspective, he adds a new branch to the stalactite or a new layer to the crystal that is its imagined identity.

HISTORY

Therefore, as much as Barthes would argue that the historicity evaporates from the myth, the literature of Saint-Exupéry, Roy, and Gary serve as historical accounts of one of the most pivotal periods of history for France in the 20th century. According to the historian Jules Michelet, periods of history are connected moments of death and renewal. Moments of change define the next generation, while they remain part of a larger continuum that is shaped by the past. Yet, as we move further away from common memory of historical moments, their significance often fades, and their interpretation changes as a function of the recorded cultural artifacts and stories. Historians will revisit old documents or data to shed new light on the issues, but the personal testimony of events is most telling of the feeling of the time. Therefore, by viewing history from the actors’ accounts, rather than from distanced historical analysis, this study provides a more intimate picture that is both autobiographical and *auto-fictional*.

In the literary world of this period, voices echoed the myths that helped to glue nations together through the images of war heroes. To put things into perspective, Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* provides a significant contribution to understanding the type of negotiation

that was occurring in the social setting as of 1936; i.e., prior to World War II and from the particular perspective surrounded by Nazism, which he fled in 1933. Mannheim explains the fervor of his time for what we might call a *disambiguation* and the idea of an ensconced national identity; however, his sociology of knowledge explains that this affiliation involves interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, between individualization and collective myths.

Later, in 1942, Ernest Hemingway's *Men at War* presents what he portrays as "a true picture of men at war" through the various accounts of soldiers and generals across time (xxx). The collection of stories, which he organized according to the tenets of war described by Carl von Clausewitz in *On War*, is designed to portray the timeless aspects of war. For example, the section dedicated to Clausewitz's tenet that "war is fought by human beings" includes an excerpt from Richard Hillary's *Falling through Space*. Here, the Royal Air Force pilot describes his own negotiation between myth and reality while flying his Spitfire in World War II. In fact, Koestler describes Hillary's aviator figure as balancing between the zones of *le tragique* and *le trivial* (238). At times to the point of considering suicide because of the pain he feels after being shot down, and burning his face in the process, Hillary covers the gambit of emotions that characterized the flyers in the war: enthusiasm to learn a new trade, pride to be a part of an elite in the image of previously mythified "knights of the air," yet dominated by the absurd predicament of their fighting odds and forced to continue fighting despite having only recently escaped death. After such an incident, Hillary states:

I can't help feeling that a good epitaph for me at that moment would have been
four line of Verlaine:

Quoique sans patrie et sans roi,

Et très brave ne l'étant guère,

J'ai voulu mourir à la guerre.

La mort n'a pas voulu de moi.⁵

A man who has been rejected by death is easily tempted to take up the pen.

(Hillary 9)

Like Hillary implies in quoting Verlaine, he feels alone in the moment of his confrontation with death. He is merely a man, rather than the glorious national hero figure. The convergence of these publications aligns with the spirit of *Flight to Arras* – also published in 1942 – the first of the three works examined here. This is the starting point, then, of the period of study, where the man, the hero, and the nation figures are exposed, as a departure from their myths through autobiographical and auto-fictional writing.

GENRES

The simple fact that the literary works of this study were written by aviators presumes an aura of elitism or loftiness. Indeed, early examples of highly poetic and lyrical writing by aviators presents idealized images of escaping from the “surly bonds of earth” into the clouds. The poem “High Flight” by Canadian Spitfire pilot John Gillespie Magee, Jr., for instance, speaks of the “footless halls of air” where he “danced the skies on laughter silvered-wings” (Ravitch 280). However, the prose of Saint-Exupéry, Roy and Gary occupies the space between an imagined utopia and a very real connection to the earthly things that make them human. They are not overly romantic figures enticed by the peace or pure adventure of flight, nor are they the modern robot pilots that Barthes describes in “L’homme-jet” of his *Mythologies*. Nonetheless, the flying experience, and the experience while abroad in war, is a catalyst to reflective writing

⁵ While without country and without King, and hardly being brave, I wanted to die in war. Death would not have me. (Author’s translation)

on what keeps them connected to home. In a state of exile, they think of their return and what it will represent. They dream, in that context, of what their home will be after their efforts are complete. As individuals, they negotiate the ambiguity of their nation concept through the exercise of writing.

Therefore, the lyricism of these authors pulls away from the lofty poetry of the “sanctity of space” where others describe the realm of the aviator. Instead, they expose sensibilities tied to their own humanity and their need to belong to an identity among men. Likewise, the lyricism exposes their own connection to the myths and ideals that motivate them to act as they do. Their accounts are biographical in the sense that they are tied with real experiences and real events. Yet, their perspective is more shaped by their emotions and their imagined spaces than by the militaristic logging of sorties and battles.

A 1911 study of the evolution of genres through French literature by Swiss professor Ernest Bovet, entitled *Lyrisme, Épopée, Drame*, provides a thematic framework for the works of this study. By characterizing these particular genres, Bovet explains a chronological development in literature and identifies key themes that dominate its phases. I am citing this rather long passage here because it captures the progression we see in *Pilote de guerre*, *La Vallée heureuse*, and *Promesse de l'aube*:

Le lyrisme est avant tout la jeunesse exubérante du sentiment, un débordement de forces sans but précis, un élan de foi ; ses objets principaux : Dieu, l'amour, la nature. L'épopée, c'est la maturité agissante et conquérante, le récit qui est lui-même un acte ; son objet : l'homme ou le groupe d'hommes, s'affirmant dans leur réalité présente et dans leur lutte avec d'autres hommes et d'autres groupes. Le drame, c'est la fin d'une journée, où les ténèbres luttent avec la lumière ; c'est la

route qui bifurque, le conflit des devoirs, de la réalité présente avec l'idéal nouveau, une prise de conscience ; son objet : l'homme en lutte avec lui-même, ou encore, l'être isolé et passager en conflit avec les lois universelles et éternelles. Je résume plus brièvement, en remarquant que les extrêmes se touchent : le lyrisme, c'est la foi et aussi le désespoir ; l'épopée, c'est l'action et aussi la passion, quand elle crée ; le drame, c'est la crise, tendant à la sérénité (Katharsis). (Bovet 13-14)

The development of these three novels parallels the evolution of genre described here: Saint-Exupéry's lyricism represents a youthful purity and faith in France, despite the despair and aimless confusion that come with the German invasion; Roy's epic style accompanies the maturing perspective of his protagonist, Chevrier, as he takes action, in the existential struggle to preserve Man's freedom through the Liberation of France; Gary's dramatic style is precisely emblematic of a changing horizon – a new dawn – that is the culmination of self analysis as he plays his various roles and searches for a universal peace. In summary, France at the onset of its Occupation is caught between lyrical despair and tenacious hope; it is epic action and vigor at the time of its Resistance and Liberation; it is dramatic self-definition and nostalgic "Reconstruction" after the war. There is, of course, as Bovet points out in reference to Victor Hugo, a bit of the whole in each of these "genres," but the tendencies are still consistent with a thematic progression.

UNITY

In light of the mythical themes and figures addressed above, the main section of this dissertation concentrates on the following in the selected works of the authors: a sense of self-definition in life and in dying, a sense of national identity in terms of belonging to a larger whole,

and a sense of personal freedom that lies at the core of each author and his work. Their selected works will be analyzed in chronological order in order to provide a portrait of the war from three vantage points: its onset, its culmination, and its aftermath. The aviator figure as exposed by each author in this chronology, therefore, help trace a larger historical progression in the sociological evolution in France: the figure of Christian devotion and sacrifice in the case of Saint-Exupéry, the more secular servant to the king as a knighted warrior in the case of Jules Roy, and the self-defined citizen of the democratic Republic in the case of Romain Gary. The proposed titles of the three median chapters are, therefore, tied to the models of “the savior, the soldier, and the pseudonym.”

One would presume that the choice of the author-aviators in this study suggests a common narrative of World War II. Yet, breaking from a *uni-form*, presenting a less homogeneous account of that historical moment, becomes a critical part of the progression embodied by these three authors. The authors present a negotiation of the experiences and observations from the perspective of the air and from the ground. Their style alone spans the spectrum of accounts, from the highly reflective writing of Saint-Exupéry to the more picaresque anecdotes of Romain Gary. Finally, therefore, the study aims to illustrate the diversity of perspectives as they are shaped by their personal backgrounds and experiences as much as by their common cultural memory. Because the analysis of each writer shows a break from the “uni-form” myth of the aviator, the personal negotiation in their novels reveals the very ambivalence in the notions of self and nation.

CHAPTER I – THE SAVIOR

MYTH OF THE AVIATOR

GUYNEMER AND THE NEW MOLD

From its pioneering origins, the aviator figure in French culture has bordered on myth and legend. Images of warriors in the sky from the First World War created an ethic of selfless devotion to the nation by a new noble line of soldiers who touted extraordinary physical skills and mystical fates. Perhaps one of the most iconic of these figures is Georges Guynemer. Born on Christmas Eve in 1894, as if sent by God himself for a divine purpose of defending France, he proved himself a valiant “knight of the air” as an ace. In fact, Lieutenant Bennett Molter of the French 102nd escadrille stated in *Knights of the Air* in 1918, “Guynemer was the greatest of all Aces, Allied or enemy. The world has not yet produced his equal and it may be many a day before it does... His name is a household word in France. It is likewise known to almost every red-blooded boy in America who loves chivalrous deeds and high adventure.” (211)⁶

Guynemer was attributed 54 downed planes and 215 combats (Molter 212) until he was shot down on 11 September 1917. The tragic day for the French is remembered as the loss of one of its finest warriors.⁷ The legend of Guynemer follows the tragic model of others who fought courageously. Molter draws back to this lineage: “No man can foresee or forestall all of the

⁶ Among other honors in memorial of Guynemer, today’s 01.002 Fighter Squadron “Storks” (Escadron de Chasse 01.002 “Cigognes”) wears the emblem of his Escadrille 3 from World War I.

⁷ The date has had momentous significance across the centuries for other national struggles. Its current day relevance for the fight against terrorism goes without saying since the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Its importance has also recently been revisited in Barcelona in the efforts for Catalan’s secession from Spain, remembering back to the siege of their city in 1714 by Bourbon armies. Likewise, Chileans will forever remember this date as when Santiago was destroyed by Michimalonco and his warriors in 1541.

exigencies of war when he fares forth to do battle. Achilles had his vulnerable spot; Roland and Oliver were valiant knights, yet each met his fate on the field of honor.” (210) He is placed among the tales of gods and mortals with seamless honor.

Yet, a closer look at the myths around flyers like Georges Guynemer shows the performance of rather ordinary men under incredible conditions.⁸ The public image of certain figures is often an idealized one, and the resulting myths are often capitalized upon for national pride. Additionally, Molter explains how the French affection for Guynemer is more importantly linked with the “modest nature” that was “the spirit and heart” of his heroism (212). Furthermore, much like Jules Roy wrote in *Guynemer: L’ange de la mort*, the passage of time allows for the building of myth, as well as varying interpretation. Looking back seventy years on the death of this figure, Roy introduces this dimension: “Qu’est-ce qu’un héros national mort depuis bientôt soixante-dix ans ? Pour l’ardente admiratrice qui nous guide, il vit toujours, sa gloire resplendit, mais pour d’autres il s’agit d’un mythe.” (20) The myth of the man may be tied to his birthdate, his family’s military heritage, and a name that rings well in the history books. It may also be very well the case that these coincidences are just the stuff that helps satisfy the need of the country to revere a fallen soldier and bolster its own national pride and courage in face of the enemy. The hero becomes a national symbol and icon. Yet, he is still “just a man” who had to react to the world around him and find his place in the events of his time. Roy presents the scenario as such:

De Guynemer il reste des signes. De vie, de mort. On connaît les dossiers et les
monuments, mais les traces qui vont nous rendre l’enfant et l’homme ? Et s’il

⁸ In his case, for example, he became an ace more from self-confidence than physical prowess; he was frail and sickly as a child and originally turned away from military service due to his “faiblesse de constitution” (physical slowness). Without the intervention of his father, a former army officer, he would not have been allowed to enter into service (Sacy 30).

n'avait ni père ni mère, ni sœurs ni rien ? S'il était né de génération spontanée ? Il a un père, une mère, des sœurs, il a eu des ancêtres. Et quel nom ! Venu on ne sait d'où et qui s'en va vers quoi ? Un nom qui court, qui sonne, qui claque, un nom de vague éclatant sur un rocher. Trois syllabes dont une muette, Guynemer, comme Lancelot ou Perceval, ou pourquoi pas ? le roi Arthur. Pour moi, il n'a ni père ni mère ni rien, quoi qu'il fasse, dise ou écrive. Il ne descend que de l'Arioste ou du *Roland furieux*. Il est arrivé au monde plus encore par hasard que chacun de nous ; l'armée et l'aviation ne l'ont eu aussi par hasard, il devra tout à son énergie désespérée, à son œil, à ses réflexes. (17-18)

So it follows that the myth of the aviator is held up to a certain ideal that is presumably obtainable only in stories. As Roy states, it is the “signs” that remain from his legend. This implies a certain iconology, much like the myths described by Barthes. These are tied with static symbols – memorial sites and awarded decorations. Even as Roy tries to define the man, the person, of Guynemer, his exceptional traits once again link him to figures from the past. The sound of his name is noble enough to parallel Lancelot or Perceval; he seems without parents, as if fallen from nowhere to be among us. Nonetheless, his lineage traces as far back as Charlemagne's Roland or Arthur's Lancelot. By design, he is conflated with fictional, idealized images. In actual accounts, he is lauded for his unequivocal, persistent pursuit of the enemy and the unwavering defense of his fatherland. This is the image of the war hero propagated by France.

SAINT-EXUPÉRY, THE “TRAITOR”

No matter how one approaches the premise of myth, however, the struggles of certain men who have passed before, once these struggles are told and shared down the line, leave a mark on others who follow. They serve as lessons and help others negotiate similar struggles in

their own time. For example, in his book *Des hommes*, fellow author-aviator Joseph Kessel pays homage to those men who have made his own life “plus belle” or helped him “vivre mieux” (4). Among his selection are writers, painters, singers, and men of action (including journalists and aviators). His categorization of men is relevant in its own way: Romain Gary made the ranks of writers who influenced him, whereas Saint-Exupéry falls in the aviator list. Among others that comprise the same list, the aviator Jean Mermoz begins Kessel’s tributes, with a section entitled “La légende.” His bravery in the pioneering routes above Patagonia, the Andes, the Sahara, the Atlantic, and other places of the Aéropostale is such that he sets an ideal. He earns his place among universally known saints or bandits, warriors or heads of nations, imposters or heroes.

Kessel observes the lineage of new heroes developing before his own eyes, as he states: “Notre temps commence de construire sa propre légende” (217). Mermoz was unique in that he was one of the pilots pioneering communication routes, mail lines connecting the world at a faster rate than the normal flow of shipped correspondence that preceded the mail pilots of Aéropostale. Their struggle required physical and mental courage, allowing them to face the unknown obstacles in the mountain ranges and storms on the routes. Saint-Exupéry introduces this elite group of men in *Wind, Sand and Stars* in a similar way: “Mermoz is one airline pilot, and Guillaumet another, of whom I shall write briefly in order that you may see clearly what I mean when I say that in the mould of this new profession a new breed of men has been cast.” (Saint-Exupéry, Galantière, and Gilbert 21)⁹ Despite the unique mission set, however, this image

⁹ This statement is not present in the French text, *Terre des hommes*. The chapter entitled “The Men” is in that case falls under “Les Camarades,” thus focusing on a more intimate relationship with the other pilots. In fact, where Galantière’s translation talks about “a handful of pilots” (*Airman’s Odyssey* 21), Saint-Exupéry’s original version of this second chapter begins with “Quelques camarades” (186). For the purpose of easier following of the citations in *Pilote de guerre*, references to the original text will cite Saint-Exupéry’s *Œuvres complètes II*. Translations will be provided in footnotes, taken from *Airman’s Odyssey*.

of the new breed of men is another layer on the war pilots hardened in the First World War. The idea of a “new breed” builds on the existing myth of those men and their stories. Kessel points this out by referring to Mermoz; he is an amalgamation of his own experiences and the models he follows: “il construisait sa légende, tissée d’incroyables vérités... l’accent de ceux qui, pendant la guerre de 1914, avaient eu la chance de connaître Guynemer et le « racontaient ».” (222)

In his preface to *Le dernier verre* by Jean-Marc Melsen, Kessel also provides a good description of the genre of the autobiographical novel that we see with Saint-Exupéry, Roy, and Gary.¹⁰ According to Kessel, Melsen describes his struggle with alcoholism in a style that strikes the balance between sincerity and lucid self-observation, two key elements in telling the internal struggles of one’s own journey. Kessel explains it this way:

Si un homme prend sa vie pour sujet, et qu’il veut en faire un vrai livre, la matière brute, pour riche qu’elle soit, ne suffit point. Ce qui est dit, bien sûr, compte. Mais, davantage, la façon de le dire. Un dédoublement est nécessaire : il faut être à la fois le héros et le témoin de sa propre aventure. (103)

This same description of style is fitting for the works of this study, which involve an often-lyrical self-evaluation, where the author comes across as peering back at oneself at a distance.¹¹ This same style of self-reflexive writing is emblematic of *Pilote de guerre* in which

¹⁰ Melsen was Kessel’s godson, so his intimate understanding of his story is understandable.

¹¹ It is particularly appropriate in the case of Jules Roy, where he uses the fictional character of Chevrier, the protagonist of *La Vallée heureuse*, and writes in the third person. Nonetheless, he is clearly engaged in a narrative of his own experiences, as Roy’s compatriot Albert Camus points out: “After ten page so it is obvious that Chevrier is Roy himself. Only the conclusion seems to have been factionalized. For the rest, it is very clear. Roy is in command of the crew of bombers 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.” (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 244)

Saint-Exupéry recounts the experience of the reconnaissance crews of Group 2-33 during the Battle of France in May 1940. His particular mission is flown toward the town of Arras, the final stand for the French against the Nazi invasion on the eastern front. As François Gerber suggests, “*Pilote de guerre* n’est pas le simple récit d’une mission aérienne pendant la « drôle de guerre » puis la courte période du *Blitzkrieg*... Saint-Exupéry en vient à s’interroger sur la France, ce qu’elle représente pour lui et les valeurs qu’elle porte.” (Lacroix 135) As he suggests, *Pilote de guerre* is more a personal, autobiographical account of the fall of France than a purely historical one that relies on factual reporting.

Olivier Odaert goes further, proposing that *Pilote de guerre* is a commentary on the war novel genre, taking on a whole new image of the aviator figure, less from the mold of Gabriele D’Annunzio or Guynemer or any of the icons of nationalistic heroism (70). Instead, Odaert explains, Saint-Exupéry discounts the traditional representations of the war hero in the interest of providing a truer description of these men and their plight. Despite the tendency to view Saint-Exupéry himself as someone who, like the *Little Prince*, escapes his planet via “une migration d’oiseaux sauvages” (Saint-Exupéry 260), he states in *Pilote de guerre* his intention to deliver a more intimate and attached reflection to his own sense of belonging: “Une mauvaise littérature nous a parlé du besoin d’évasion. Bien sûr, on s’enfuit en voyage à la recherche de l’étendue. Mais l’étendue ne se trouve pas. Elle se fonde. Et l’évasion n’a jamais conduit nulle part.” (160)¹²

Saint-Exupéry’s approach to writing aviation literature was, from the start, a break from the elitism and traditional heroism of the figure. He was critiqued for this style directly, in fact,

¹² “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.” (346)

to the point of being labeled “le traître” by Claude Yelnick reacting to his first publication, *L’Aviateur*.¹³ As Michel Quesnel explains, however, revealing the pilot’s experience to the general public in a language that it can understand is what creates its appeal. Instead we might consider that those who, like Yelnick, would accuse Saint-Exupéry of being two-faced,¹⁴ merely represent a case of refusal of an approach that shows the humanity of heroic figures, thus exposing them to a kind of degradation. In closer contact with the reader and in hopes to convey a more universal message, Saint-Exupéry’s prose is indeed posited on uncommon experiences, but, through a humanizing and lyrical style bridges the gap for those who have not shared them. As Quesnel states: “Impressions ? Rêverie ? La question qui se pose est celle de la valeur objective, extensible au monde des pilotes, de ces confidences.” (Saint-Exupéry 880)

BUILDERS OF BOYS, MAKERS OF MEN

*Arma virumque cano*¹⁵ (Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book I, verse 1)

The masculine image in *Pilote de guerre* continues a legacy of male warrior figures. Saint-Exupéry even acknowledges this explicitly in the novel when he writes, “On enseigne aux hommes, depuis mille années, que la femme et l’enfant doivent être soustraits à la guerre. La guerre concerne les hommes.” (168)¹⁶ However, Saint-Exupéry’s way of conveying his

¹³ “Celui qui se sert de mots de tout le monde pour décrire le métier [...] celui qui invite le profane à visiter le sanctuaire des invités, celui qui fait partager des émotions nobles et rares à un touriste, qui les paie de son argent, celui-là est un espion s’il n’est pas du métier. Et, s’il en est, un traître, absolument.” (876)

¹⁴ Yelnick says he is Janus-faced in this way: “Ce pilote philosophait légèrement [...] ce philosophe pilotait distraitemment” (876)

¹⁵ “I sing of arms and the man.” (Author’s translation)

¹⁶ “For a thousand years man has been taught that women and children are to be shielded from war. War is a matter for men only.” (357) This image is even now on the cusp of changing. The United States military decided only in 2015 to allow women to serve among the ranks of combat career fields. Norway, however, adopted this approach twenty years earlier. This indicates a change from the period of World War II and even recent times. As recently as 2003, cultural historian Leo Braudy wrote, “Throughout history, war has been one of the few social initiations that binds together this otherwise variety of masculine rites and traditions. [...] As initiation separates the boy from infancy and women, it creates the tendency to identify infancy with the world of women.” (21)

experiences, his very style, manages to put that same mold into question. First of all, he maintains the childhood purity of his own life in his writing. In fact, his recollection of childhood myths and cultural models are omnipresent in the novel, and he uses these images as tools of negotiation for his heritage that has entered its own state of ambivalence under the threat of German occupation. The fact that he exposes certain vulnerabilities and sensibilities goes against the male warrior image. Pierre de Boisdeffre labeled him as the “Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the 20th Century” (Tavernier 178), which to many perpetuates the image of a *new man* that is more inclined to tools of “Esprit” and “Intelligence” than violent tools of war. His vision of the responsible man is a derivative of his sense of duty to play his role in the war for France and his sense of personal commitment to create and care for his universal relationships with other men. His manhood is, therefore, inextricably linked to his childhood, as he states: “L’enfance, ce grand territoire d’où chacun est sorti ! D’où suis-je ? Je suis de mon enfance comme d’un pays.” (158)¹⁷

IMAGE OF A CHILD

In 1994, Fifty years after his disappearance, France appropriately released a fifty-franc bill featuring a portrait of Saint-Exupéry that is aligned with the smaller image of the *Little Prince*, both peering into the distance reflectively. His remaining image, as represented in this case, is not the war hero decorated for his courage, but the man who remained a child at heart. When his friends described him, it seemed impossible to separate the child from the man. It is not a Nietzsche superman image or a Roman warrior virility that dominated; he was physically awkward, childlike, “imperfect.” Kessel describes this adolescent presence as follows:

¹⁷ “I speak of my childhood, that is to say, of a vast region out of which all men emerge. Whence come I? I come from my childhood. I come from childhood as from a homeland...” (343)

Le garçon qui se présente à moi était grand, épais ; large. Le nez court et relevé, la figure ronde, les yeux un peu exorbité, naïfs et attentifs lui donnaient l'air d'un collégien poussé trop vite. La maladresse des mouvements, l'hésitation de la voix sourde et heurtée, les membres massifs, une allure nouée, timide, achevaient cette ressemblance. (Kessel 240-241)

Maurice Druon, Kessel's nephew and a member of l'Académie Française like his uncle, shared a similar image of Saint-Exupéry. Having grown up observing him in social settings, he wrote the following description to capture his appearance:

Visage rond, très plein, large front de bonne heure dégarni, nez bref, la paupière supérieure assez lourde sur un regard non pas triste vraiment, mais attentif, méditatif, les jambes longues et les épaules hautes, il donnait une impression, je n'ose dire de lourdeur, de pesanteur plutôt, d'attraction du sol, que démentait sa parole. Un bloc de pensée. (Cadix 7)

This is perhaps the paradox of the physical figure of Saint-Exupéry: while he carried a childlike playfulness in his air, he was nonetheless weighed down, deep in thought, and deliberately grounded. It is also part of the complexity that makes up the myth of Saint-Exupéry himself. Remembering him as a national icon on French currency was rather ironic, in fact. For Druon and others that knew him well, the recognition was somewhat out of place, considering Saint-Exupéry's lack of monetary motivation: "Voir le visage d'un homme qu'on a connu, admiré, regretté, devenir monnaie de papier qui va se froisser au fond des poches, que tout un chacun va poser sur le comptoir d'une boutique ou d'un café, et avec laquelle des enfants qui ressemblent au *Petit Prince*, les étoiles en moins, vont acheter une friandise ou un jouet, procure une impression étrange." (11-12)

TRANSITION TO MANHOOD

The opening paragraph of *Pilote de guerre* captures this essence well, combining Saint-Exupéry's own awareness of the echoes of his childhood in his frame of mind with the acceptance of entering a new realm of responsibility: "Sans doute je rêve. Je suis au collège. J'ai quinze ans. Je résous mon problème de géométrie. Accoudé sur ce bureau noir, je me sers sagement du compas, de la règle, du rapporteur." (113)¹⁸ From the very beginning of the novel, then, we have an adolescent image of the author. This already implies a state of transition and ambivalence. From the masculinity point of view, it is the time when the boy physically changes into a man. Meanwhile, it is also the time of learning the skills that help him take his place in society. As Saint-Exupéry continues, "Je le sais bien : il y a d'abord l'enfance, le collège, les camarades, puis le jour où l'on subit des examens. Où l'on reçoit quelque diplôme. Où l'on franchit, avec un serrement de cœur, un certain porche, au-delà duquel, d'emblée, on est un homme. Alors le pas pèse plus lourd sur la terre." (113)¹⁹

Raised in the mold of the Third Republic, the author is himself a product of a civic sense of duty inculcated by the educational tradition. Moreover, the strong sense of responsibility is directed as gender-specific roles during that time as a continuation of previous wars. The war of 1870 left the French with a strong sense of preparing for revenge against the German invasion of the Alsace-Lorraine as well. François Gerber explains how military exercises and marching were a part of the routine in school and patriotic celebrations were the norm, to the tune of Jules Michelet and Charles Péguy. He writes:

¹⁸ "Surely I must be dreaming. It is as if I were fifteen again. I am back at school. My mind is on my geometry problem. Leaning over the worn black desk, I work dutifully with compass and ruler and protractor." (283)

¹⁹ "What course life takes, we all know. We are children, we are sent to school, we make friends, we go to college – and we are graduated. Some sort of diploma is handed to us, and our hearts pound as we are ushered across a certain threshold, marched through a certain porch, the other side of which we are of a sudden grown men." (ibid)

Le mythe national fonde l'enseignement de l'histoire autour des grands héros républicains et nécessairement guerriers que sont Hoche et Barra, le petit tambour tué par les Vendéens, Bonaparte et les généraux de l'Empire, les cuirassiers de Reichshoffen et les défenseurs de Belfort. (Lacroix 136)

If the schooling of the time is founded on the ideals of the Republic, it is also tied to the idea that men go to war and women stay home. It also follows that the men are the physical protectors of the nation, and the women are its spiritual protectors and guardians of the hearth. Their role was to wait for the soldier's return and pray for their well-being.²⁰ They were charged with the rearing of children at home, especially since many of the fathers had been killed in the Great War. Saint-Exupéry captures this part of his own childhood in a way that illustrates the myth-forming process itself, in the image of Paula, the Tyrolian governess.

PROTECT ME, O PAULA!

Paula is summoned as one of his earliest childhood memories, an embodiment of goodness and security, part of that nurturing phase of his life that, though important, remains a vague recollection. The very distance of the memory empowers the myth-building element, where Paula becomes an idealized version of a perfected being who appears to be flawless and omniscient. All is well when thinking of her. She was like a Santa Claus who was remembered at each New Year, who was well aware of the status of his growth and maturing from the previous year, and who received his letters with much attention. More accurately, he writes, Paula was "le

²⁰ The evolving reality of the war effort, already with World War I, is that women were a critical piece in keeping the country thriving while men were away. Eliane DalMolin explains that "both women and children were officially forced to serve the nation and honor their fighting husbands and fathers by working in the fields, factories, and offices to make up for manpower shortage" (Celestin and DalMolin 164). This type of "forced emancipation," a direct replacement of masculine roles at home, found its place in various parts of French culture in the 1920s as well, including shorter hairstyles and books promoting women's liberation, like Victor Margueritte's *La Garçonne*.

souvenir d'un souvenir," and his letters to her were "un peu comme des prières, puisque je ne la connaissais pas..." (182).²¹ She was the image of his protection that emerged from her Tyrolian home when he needed a sign of hope. This was an imagined home, as Saint-Exupéry describes like a toy:

Elle était retournée à son Tyrol. Donc à sa maison tyrolienne. Une sorte de chalet-baromètre perdu dans la neige. Et Paula se montrait à la porte, les jours de soleil, comme dans tous les chalets-baromètre.

– Paula est jolie ?

– Ravissante.

– Il fait beau au Tyrol ?

– Toujours. (182)²²

The point of Paula in terms of the masculinity myth is that her image is used as a tool of negotiation for Saint-Exupéry. By harvesting this childhood image in the midst of his mission, reverting to the memory in between course corrections called out by the crew, he bridges the gap between his imagination, childhood, and past on the one hand, and his present reality as a man and a pilot on the other. By conjuring up his boyhood and a feminine nurturing phase, Saint-Exupéry brings in ostensibly conflicting elements in his tasks as a male adult. His courage is not fed by stories of glorious soldiers in battle, either in the present or in a glorious faraway past, but by the governess of his own, private childhood. Even as he recounts to her, during his prayer-like conversation, the game of Aklin the Knight that he played as a young boy, the fact that he speaks

²¹ "the memory of a memory"; "a little like my prayers, for I did not know Paula." (375)

²² "She had gone back to her Tyrol. To her Tyrolian house. A house, we imagined, deep in snow and looking like the toy chalet on a Tyrolian barometer. And Paula, on sunny days, would come forth to stand in the doorway of that house like the mechanical doll over the Tyrolian barometer. "Is Paula pretty?" "Beautiful." "Is it sunny in Tyrol?" "Always." (375)

in confidence with her emboldens his own commitment to the mission of his flight to Arras. Therefore, in his male duties, he is only reassured in his boyhood memories, as he explains: “Je cours ainsi vers mon château de feu, dans le bleu du soir comme autrefois...” (185)²³ By remembering the uninhibited play as a child, he transposes himself to that frame of mind. This is how he reconciles a severe sense of vulnerability in the mission. It becomes like a game. He compares his flight to Arras with the ride of the knight toward the enchanted castle, where the dragon and his most difficult tests await him.

This reverie appears in the novel when he needs his strength the most. At this point, he has already questioned his own mortality and recognized the absurdity of the sacrificing of the crews “comme on jetterait des verres d’eau dans un incendie de forêt” (114).²⁴ He has already accepted his heading of 172 degrees toward Arras. He has accepted his probable death. He has accepted his role in the war. In fact, his prayers to Paula come just as he is to face the true trials, like Aklin.

The figure of the aviator as a knight is, therefore, revisited in this childhood memory of Paula. In the same vein, the myth of Guynemer is continued in the recollection of Aklin from his childhood, thereby revealing the innocence of the pilot. Historian François Pernot writes about the lineage of legendary heroes in France: “Comme Roland, comme Jeanne d’Arc, comme Du Guesclin et comme Bayard – le général Anthoine ne parle-t-il pas de Guynemer comme d’un « chevalier de l’Air, sans peur et sans reproche ? »” (Sacy 53) This idea of being without fear and without reproach is a matter of propaganda; it is part of the myth. Yet, it fits the devotion of the man, who was cited for his own motto of courage and dedication: “On n’a rien donné tant

²³ “Like that knight, I ride in the blue of the evening towards my castle of flame. And not for the first time.” (379)

²⁴ “as if you dashed glassfuls of water into a forest fire in the hope of putting it out” (285)

qu'on n'a pas tout donné"²⁵ (Sacy 11) It's the type of quotable courage that aligns with the motto of the French Ecole de l'Air, founded in 1935 in the image of Guynemer himself: "Faire face." If that was all there were to it, the men and women who followed in his likeness would find their tasks a simple pledge to self-sacrifice.

Yet, the absurdity of the Great War and the maturity of aviation bring new shades to the image of the aviator in the Second World War. Furthermore, the ethic of flyers in the mold of Saint-Exupéry continues a more realistic struggle of this line of heroic figures: they battle from within themselves and negotiate their own fears and insecurities. They are not without reproach or fear, but they nonetheless see themselves bound to the duties of the nation. Through their individual struggle, they advance the larger one. Yelnick explains the plight of this new breed of men that Saint-Exupéry introduces: "Une nouvelle chevalerie naissait, qui ne combattait pas d'autres chevaliers armés sous d'autres cocardes, mais un ennemi plus obscur : un dragon déguisé en tempêtes, en givre, en pannes. Ces chevaliers-là portaient en croisade pour l'Homme, contre cet ennemi intime que chaque homme porte en lui" (Yelnick 45).

SHOW ME A HERO

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote in his *Notebooks*, "Show me a hero, and I will write you a tragedy" (51). Indeed, the heroism in *Pilote de guerre* can be classified as tragic. Saint-Exupéry paints a picture of his beloved Group 2-33 as they are up against all odds while facing the more technically advanced and more massive forces of the German Luftwaffe. His form of heroism is not derived from victory, but from facing defeat. His form of heroism, however, is not derived from a stoic mentality, but from a pragmatic outlook for the outcome of the war. Like the other

²⁵ You haven't given anything until you've given everything. (Author's translation)

crewmembers in his flying group, he recognizes the absurdity of the war in which they are engaged, as well as the futility of their mission. Nonetheless, he does his duty to play the role he can. As Saint-Exupéry presents his account of the flight to Arras, what becomes most prevalent is the internal struggle of the flyer with his own identity and his understanding of the role he accepts. His story is not the valiant adventure of Aklin the knight, but more in line with Rousseau's *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. He is more inclined to search a philosophy that ties his own actions to the larger, more common good than to demonstrate his willingness to maintain the glory of his fatherland. In doing so, he assumes a more *humanist* or *universalist* view of his sense of nationhood, as opposed to a "blood and soil" nationalism.

SYSTÈME D

"Nous sommes encore, pour toute la France, cinquante équipages de grande reconnaissance," he writes. (114)²⁶ The crews are well aware that they are outnumbered in the sky by the Luftwaffe, and that each sortie is an effort against all odds. On the outside, the tone among the aviators is a typically French nonchalance, accompanied by a shoulder shrug: "Eh bien, voilà. [...] C'est bien embêtant" (115-116)²⁷. The answer is merely to employ the "système D" – se débrouiller.²⁸ Yet, as much as Saint-Exupéry would let us believe that the men are simply doing their job, their profession as aviators, he depicts a much more conflicted inner struggle throughout the novel.

Certainly, the author explains his struggle against the elements and the routine challenges of piloting a craft at high altitude. The airplane is poorly adapted to the freezing temperatures at

²⁶ "Fifty reconnaissance crews was all we had for the whole French army." (285)

²⁷ Well, [...] It's damned awkward." (286)

²⁸ This is the intrinsically French notion that somehow you can make due or get by despite a knowing lack or resources. To some, it is perfected as an "art" that recognizes the impossibility of some task but denies it with *nonchalance*.

33,000 feet – he complains of his stuck rudder pedal, the builds up pressure in the engine wrapping, the reduced efficiency of the machine gun turret, and the slow response of his controls. He is solely responsible for dealing with these issues, though. He imagines the orders of his Air Staff: “Vous êtes chargé de dégeler les commandes. Vous avez tous les droits. Débrouillez-vous” (151)²⁹. He is well aware, in fact, of the administration’s distance from the fate of the flyers. The intelligence they will receive from photographic reconnaissance is of little value to the war effort, and the air dominance of the Germans implies a low probability of survival from the mission. His fellow members of the Group 2-33 have warned him of the layered altitudes of Luftwaffe fighters en route to Arras. Furthermore, the cloud ceiling and cold temperatures force the pilot to descend, both for thawing the controls and for proper visibility. Unfortunately, this also induces threats from the various caliber guns of anti-aircraft artillery. For these various reasons, the characteristically French “débrouillez-vous” becomes synonymous with orders to conduct an impossible mission.

What begins as expressions of frustration in the novel of Saint-Exupéry’s awareness of his futile mission gradually evolves into an internalized acceptance of his fate, and of his understanding of his role for France. He ends up negotiating death and what it means, not as a simple acceptance or deliberate pursuit of glory in battle, but rather as a symbol of the ephemeral state of France’s vulnerability. Its defeat is unavoidable, but not enduring. Saint-Exupéry portrays his role in its salvation, not as a jingoist but as a Frenchman nonetheless. The fate of France matters deeply to him, but he is still an individual with human, rather than superhuman traits.

²⁹ “You are ordered to see that the controls are thawed out. You have full authority. It’s up to you.” (335)

His routine of suiting up for flight, for example, is described as laborious and long. He chastises the sergeant for not giving him the proper helmet size – one that allows for expansion in the altered pressurization differential at higher altitudes. He cries out for his gloves and his pencil, both of which are cumbersome in the cockpit. These small frustrations are mixed in with the realization that he ultimately is dressing for a funeral of a “dead god”, as if he is to bear witness to the fall of his nation: “Je m’habille pour le service d’un dieu mort” (124)³⁰. In his thoughts, he exposed the reservations he shares with his fellow flyers; up until actual takeoff, he hopes for the malfunction of the intercom system so that their plane is not cleared for the mission. In fact, each of the reflections of the author takes a detour from the actual mission as he tries to rationalize his own actions and sense of purpose. As much as he comes to accept his death, his mind wanders aimlessly at first, in a way that mirrors the general confusion and ambivalence of his country at this moment in time: “Et ce n’est pas que je ne pense sur la guerre, sur la mort, sur le sacrifice, sur la France, tout autre chose, mais je manque de concept directeur, de langage clair. Je pense par contradictions.” (119)³¹

This same sense of confusion is manifested in the portrayal of heroism in the other aviators that Saint-Exupéry presents to the reader. They become like the pawns of the game in which they find themselves. The exposure of the individual stories serves a two-fold purpose in the novel: first, it shows the various shades of aviators that might differ from the traditional figure; next, it deflects attention from the author himself in a potentially self-glorifying tale. It is, therefore, not the point to propagate a heroic image for the national figure, a tendency in the

³⁰ “I am dressing for the service of a dead god.” (300)

³¹ “Not that on the subject of war, of death, of sacrifice, of France, I do not think quite other things than what I now say; but sitting in that office my thoughts were without a compass, my language was a blur. I sat thinking in contradictions.” (292)

stories that emerged from World War I. In this way, the progression toward acceptance of his death is more matter of fact, not a glorious duty. He is simply doing a job, playing a part, to the trivial point of holding a specific heading toward Arras. He goes so far as to claim that the epitaph on his tombstone would tout his summation of purpose as having held the heading of 172 (181). Overall, the pilots find solace in the trivial routines and tasks of the mission as the only understandable elements. Otherwise, like France, they feel lost, as the author points out from the initial mission briefing:

Et ici, dans le bureau du commandant, la mort ne me paraît ni auguste, ni majestueuse, ni héroïque, ni déchirante. Elle n'est qu'un signe de désordre. Un effet du désordre. Le Groupe va nous perdre, comme on perd des bagages dans le tohu-bohu des correspondances de chemin de fer. (19)³²

SPECTRUM OF INTERNALIZATION

The lineage of heroes in the book, in fact, does less to solidify a typically heroic wartime flyer than to illustrate the spectrum of individuals that share a common bond. They do not dismiss their own shortcomings or their own misgivings with the war effort. They are heroic in their own right, but even more vulnerably human. It is also clear that Saint-Exupéry is sensitive to the distinction between the officer class and the enlisted class, as he depicts the variance in their stereotypes as well. Outwardly, on the spectrum of fear to courage, adjutant T, the gunner was all fear; Israel, one of the other pilots, was all courage. As a matter of difference, T. let all

³² "Sitting there in the major's office, death seemed to me neither august, nor majestic, nor heroic, nor poignant. Death seemed to me a mere sign of disorder. A consequence of disorder. The Group was to lose us more or less as baggage becomes lost in the hubbub of changing trains." (292)

emotion shine through in what Saint-Exupéry describes as a sort of fervent reaction, where he hides nothing:

Quand on avait achevé de parler à T., on découvrait que l'on avait simplement en lui allumé l'angoisse. L'angoisse commençait de répandre sur son visage une sorte de clarté égale. T., dès lors, était comme hors d'atteinte. On sentait s'élargir, entre l'univers et lui, un désert d'indifférence. Jamais ailleurs, chez nul au monde, je n'ai connu cette forme d'extase. (121-122)³³

In contrast with T., Israel only shows a piece of his internal anguish. Only his nose reveals his frustration, burning red when he is given absurd odds to fight on the mission. As an officer, he seems to have learned to internalize more emotions, but that doesn't make him any more susceptible to them. His manner of deference may also be rooted in his Jewish roots as a means of self-protection, like a shield from his pure emotion. Yet, the members of the group easily recognize when he is bothered. Nonetheless, the distinction between the officer and enlisted classes is a recurring theme in aviation literature from this period. In *Falling through Space*, Richard Hillary talks about the natural warrior traits of the enlisted men, as if more tied to the land and the toil associated with its cultivation and protection. Jules Roy makes a point to draw a comparison of the two worlds as well in *La vallée heureuse*, where he portrays the officer as one who must enlighten the lower ranks and act as a guiding light. In each case, though, the more taciturn the individual, the closer he corresponds to the ideals of the heroic figure. What we

³³ “When you had finished giving T. an order you discovered that you had lit a flame of anguish in him and that the anguish had begun to spread a sort of even glow through his being. Therefore, nothing at all could reach him. You felt in the man the gradual spread of a desert of indifference that intervened between him and the universe. Never in any other man on earth have I perceived this form of ecstasy.” (295)

find with *Pilote de guerre*, then, is a spectrum of exposing one's fears, anguish, and hesitation. The more fettered this fear is, the more heroic the image portrayed.

As a result, one of the emblematic hero images in Saint-Exupéry's eyes is Hochedé, who bridges the gap between officer and enlisted men. He is one of the few pilots to ascend from the enlisted to the officer class. He both understands and respects the hierarchy of the ranks. However, what makes him a model for the author is his complete acceptance of his role in the mission, and his own mortality. He does not pout, yet does not exalt in his action. He merely carries on in silence:

Qui s'habillerait dans l'exaltation ? Personne. Hochedé lui-même, qui était une sorte de saint, qui a atteint cet état de don permanent qui est sans doute l'achèvement de l'homme, Hochedé, lui-même, se réfugie dans le silence. Les camarades qui s'habillent se taisent, donc, l'air bourru, et ce n'est point par pudeur de héros. Cet air bourru ne masque aucune exaltation. Il dit ce qu'il dit. Et je le reconnais. (134)³⁴

For Saint-Exupéry, Hochedé is the natural embodiment of their struggle to survive. He is part of the war, like a monk engrossed in his own religion. He sees in Hochedé the permanence that he hoped to grasp amidst his own questioning and doubts.

At this point, he connects more with the image of Sagon, who describes his own emotions while jumping from his burning plane. "Si !Si ! J'ai été gêné..." (139)³⁵ he would say

³⁴ "Who can dress with enthusiasm for such a part? Nobody... Even Hochedé who is a sort of saint, a man who has reached that state of permanent grace which surely is the final consummation of man – even Hochedé took refuge in silence. All of us dressed in silence, grumpily – and not because we were heroically modest. That grumpiness concealed no inner exaltation. It told its own story." (312)

³⁵ "Yes! Yes! I was frustrated..." (Author's translation) In Lewis Galantière's edition, this line is omitted, but he replaces the sentiment with this line: "He would insist that he was sorry he had done it." (319) He is referring here to

to avoid any misperception of heroism or modesty. But in the fiery blaze and confusion of the moment, he was overwhelmed by a lassitude, a sort of unexpected leisure in the face of death, waiting in a void of time and place: “Sagon demeurait là, sur son aile, comme rejeté hors du temps !”(140)³⁶ The final image of Sagon’s adventure is like an out-of-body experience: “Et il s’agissait bien de Sagon, et même il s’agissait d’un Sagon rudimentaire, plus ordinaire que coutume, d’un Sagon un peu perplexe et qui, au-dessus d’un abîme, piétinait avec ennui” (140)³⁷.

Like these other men, though, Saint-Exupéry found his own permanence in the tasks of flying the plane. “Je fais mon métier,” he says. “Je n’éprouve rien d’autre que le plaisir physique d’actes nourris de sens qui se suffisent à eux-mêmes. Je n’éprouve ni le sentiment d’un grand danger (j’étais autrement inquiet en m’habillant), ni le sentiment d’un grand devoir. Le combat entre l’Occident et le nazisme devient, cette fois-ci, à l’échelle de mes actes, une action sur des manettes, des leviers et des robinets.” (131)³⁸

“L’AVENTURE DU CORPS”

To say that a soldier questioning his fate, or fearing death before battle, is not heroic is misleading, and not necessarily in line with the warrior heritage. It is, rather, human nature to experience these thoughts and emotions. The ideal, mythic nature of the warrior, however, puts them aside. If the sculpted statues of fallen heroes are the mold to follow, then we neglect the

the fact that he opened the escape hatch, and that the incoming air fueled the flame in the cockpit. The understated tone of the comment, though, gives the reader a feeling of the sort of indifference and defeat in the moment since Sagon was badly burned in his escape from the plane.

³⁶ “Sagon had lain there on his wing, a creature flung out of the dimension of time.” (320)

³⁷ “This was Sagon himself who was doing these things – actually a Sagon more rudimentary, more simple than the Sagon I know: a Sagon a little perplexed, bored and slightly impatient as he felt himself drop into an abyss.” (321)

³⁸ “I was working at my trade. All that I felt was the physical pleasure of going through gestures that meant something and were sufficient unto themselves. I was conscious neither of great danger (it had been different while I was dressing) nor of performing a great duty. At this moment the battle between the Nazi and the Occident was reduced to the scale of my job, of my manipulation of certain switches, levers, taps.” (309)

actual human element in the moment, which is only to be captured by the written thoughts in the annals of literature. Take the model of Achilles, for example, who is more god than man yet, nonetheless, not immortal. In book 18 of Homer's *Iliad* (verses 97-126), he talks of being a "bootless [or profitless] burden upon the earth" as he readies himself to pursue Hector, glory, and perhaps his own mortality. He is seeking his sense of purpose, ready to play his role among the gods. In his action, he neglects his mortality to take on responsibility. Yet, in the *Odyssey*, a more vulnerable and selfish image of the hero is portrayed. During his discussion with Odysseus in the house of Hades in book 11 (verses 486-492), Achilles says he'd rather be a slave on earth than ruler of the dead. This seems like a contradiction of the seamless warrior figure – he values his own life more than glory and bravery; he demonstrates more regret than fulfillment for having pursued his place of honor.

It is more naturally human to protect our weaknesses. The authors in this study each show the ways that their outward appearance often hides the insecurities within. Romain Gary often writes of his "carapace," for example, that shield formed by his identity as a uniformed airman.³⁹ Only when we go beyond this self-preservation do we enter the realm of heroes. Sensibilities are suppressed, and physical pain is endured. It is not self-mutilation – which would be either narcissistic or, even, pathological – but sacrifice for the greater good. In *Pilote de guerre*, Saint-Exupéry talks about "l'aventure du corps" (the adventure of the body) as a three-phased development of growth and belonging: infancy, soldiering, and brotherhood of man. As he builds his identity, the boy is nurtured in his maternal love, accepts his manly responsibilities in arms,

³⁹ One of the surprising adolescent lessons that he learns in *La Promesse de l'aube* is the need to suffer physical pain and discomfort as a means of expressing his love. He is taught this by his mother's need for him to defend his honor as well as by the trials of a young girl during a French language lesson. This episode is spelled out in the chapter on that novel.

and connects with his fellow man through camaraderie. For the author, adventure is a journey of understanding oneself, and as he writes about the simple existence in his room in the village of Orconte, where Group 2-33 stayed in the winter of 1939, he dispels the image of adventure from one of high travels and action in war to the richness of human connections in the group. “Comment aurais-je pressenti l’aventure du corps,” he writes, “qui est d’abord un corps d’enfant au sein maternel et accueilli été protégé, puis un corps de soldat, bâti pour souffrir, puis un corps d’homme enrichi de joie par la civilisation du feu, lequel est le pôle de la tribu” (149)⁴⁰.

In line with this adventure is a process of separation. The process breaks from the *solidarity* with the body, from a sort of *cult of flesh*, to an imminent sense of duty. Just as a parent will save a son from a burning building without concern for personal safety, the hero acts contrary to his own safety and wellbeing. In his own reflection, he comes to understand this same trait in his fellow flyers, and in himself:

Le point de vue que j’adoptais nécessairement était celui de mon corps même. On s’est tant occupé de son corps ! On l’a tellement habillé, lavé, soigné, rasé, abreuvé, nourri. On s’est identifié à cet animal domestique. On l’a conduit chez le tailleur, chez le médecin, chez le chirurgien. On a souffert avec lui. On a crié avec lui. On a même aimé avec lui. On dit de lui : c’est moi. Et voilà tout à coup que cette illusion s’écroule. On se moque bien du corps ! On le relègue au rang de

⁴⁰ “How should I possibly have guessed the adventure of the body – first as infant clinging to the tenderness and the shelter of the maternal breast then as soldier made for suffering and finally as man enriched by the delight of the civilization of fire – fire, the magnetic pole of the tribe.” (331)

valetaille. Que la colère se fasse un peu vive, que l'amour s'exalte, que la haine se noue, alors craque cette fameuse solidarité. (191)⁴¹

Throughout the novel, the connection with mortality drives the author's sense of sacrifice. He explains the need to dissociate himself from what he perceives as his own petulance from preparing to fly the pointless mission. Reference to death, in the various forms of the word, is prominent, especially in the first half of the novel, where the end of multiple chapters highlight the pilot's thoughts on the matter: "je dois mourir" (I must die – chapter I); "un dieu mort" (a dead god – II); "je meurs" (I die – VII); "ceux qui sont morts" (those who died – XIII); une mort de glace et de feu" (a death of fire and ice – XV); "horreur de la mort" (horror of death – XVI). The progression in the novel, like his *aventure du corps*, is a transition from a singular struggle to a larger one. The hero figure of Saint-Exupéry takes the form of a Christ-like savior, as he announces in the middle of the novel that he accepts his death: "j'accepterai" (180). He accepts his heading of 172 toward Arras. He accepts his death. He plays his role.

The contemplation of Saint-Exupéry during his flight to Arras is a convergence of Jesus's praying in Gethsemane and an existential humanism that Jean-Paul Sartre advocates. In what is Jesus's most *human* moment, he asks to be relieved of the burden that awaits him, but he accepts his role nonetheless. It is God's will; this is his ultimate purpose, and it is a necessary act. From Sartre's view, however, there is no religion or moral basis that can uniformly answer choices we make. He states, "si vraiment l'existence précède l'essence, l'homme est responsable de ce qu'il

⁴¹ "It was unavoidable that in thinking of these things I should adopt the point of view of my body. Like all men, I had given it a good deal of time. I had dressed it, bathed it, fed it, quenched its thirst. I had identified myself with this domesticated animal. I had taken it to the tailor, the surgeon, the barber. I had been unhappy with it cried out in pain with it, loved with it. I had said of it, "This is me." And now of a sudden my illusion vanished. What was my body to me? A kind of flunkie in my service. Let but my anger wax hot, my love grow exalted, my hatred collect in me, and that boasted solidarity between me and my body was gone." (387)

est” (Sartre 31). What Sartre argues, though, is that the acceptance of action as a route to escape anxiety is a humanistic source of freedom. A man faced with the choice of staying by his dying mother’s side or heading off to fight in the Resistance, for example, cannot be wrong; these are both valued responses. What Saint-Exupéry concludes from his own reflection is that the larger whole is more important than one’s more immediate concerns. His sense of personal responsibility, which he repeats across his works as “chacun est responsable de tous” (each is responsible for all), can only be understood as belonging to the community of Man.

As a result, he associates his strong sense of belonging with his sense of purpose, and his inner reflection turns from his own frustrations and fears to his sense of sacrifice for the group, for his country, and for the fate of Man in general. His entire experience blooms from this affirmation of belonging, then, as he plays his part and head toward the flames in Arras. He is a witness, he participates in the struggle, and he imagines his return home to Group 2-33. Each time he evades his death, under attack by German fighters, he is in a sense reborn, with renewed sense of purpose. “Durer, faire durer.” (201)⁴² This is, as is the case for his model in Hochedé, a new mantra for his mission that reconciles the debate between living and dying. As he explains, he must be a part of the defeat in order to embolden France. As if experiencing a crucifixion, he must die to show the suffering of France to the world, as a means of calling for help against the oppression of its occupiers. In the end, his inner struggle becomes a part of the larger one that calls on his sense of responsibility despite his own misgivings with the mission: “Je combattrai

⁴² “Stick it out; make others stick it out.” (401) Although the translation here makes sense, the larger implication of the verb “durer” is more than to stick it out in the context of France’s future. With the Occupation, it is more meaningful to be interpreted as “last” or “live on,” as *Le Robert* cites the expression from R. Rolland: “Qui veut durer, doit endurer.”

pour l'homme. Contre ses ennemis. Mais aussi contre moi-même.” (227)⁴³ In this way, he enters the realm of heroism despite his own aversion to claim it. This is a limitation of the autobiographical genre, where the hero figure can only be a shade of the author's depiction of himself and a completely lucid self-perception is a function of the context of the novel.

WHAT IS A NATION?

Une nation est une âme, un principe spirituel. [...] L'une est dans le passé, l'autre dans le présent. L'une est la possession en commun d'un riche legs de souvenirs ; l'autre est le consentement actuel, le désir de vivre ensemble, la volonté de continuer à faire valoir l'héritage qu'on a reçu indivis. (Renan 54)⁴⁴

In 1882, Ernest Renan's delivered a talk at the Sorbonne entitled, “Qu'est-ce qu'une nation ?” The idea of a nation, he explained, is rooted in a shared past, and on common principles that are carried over to a present frame of mind. The talk, taken on its own, was indicative of the frame of mind near the end of the 19th Century – a feeling of intense nationalism was common in Europe. The tension over national boundaries was also at a high point, with the idea of blood and soil closely linked to the idea of *la patrie* (fatherland). As Renan points out in his analysis of the nation, however, more abstract elements make up the notion of the modern democratic mindset.

Much like Renan's personal life, contradictions abound in the discussion of nationhood.⁴⁵

It involves much more abstraction and ambivalence than a concrete sense of race or creed. In fact,

⁴³ “I shall fight for Man. Against Man's enemies – but against myself as well.” (435)

⁴⁴ A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. [...] One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (Bhabha 19)

⁴⁵ Renan was in and out of the seminary before publishing his work on the life of Jesus, *Vie de Jésus*, for example. His own pursuit of truth, through faith and through secular logic, was divisive in the Catholic church in France at the

the conference talk clearly addresses the contemporary debate in his period over “holism” and individualism (9). This is why he sets out to demonstrate that the idea of a nation is only clear in appearance. Race, religion, and common interests mix together inside a geographic boundary that is itself subject to change. Even a common language is not a given; it is more often a choice. Therefore, the individual is a piece of the larger whole that is defined by past experiences of common suffering and long efforts, instilled in their memory but dynamically adapting to the present.

This dynamic element, according to Homi K. Bhabha, is the source of “a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it” (1). Bhabha’s statement, which he builds from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, recognizes a certain temporality in the nation concept where “a nation’s ‘coming into being’ as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social *life* rather than the discipline of social *polity*, emphasizes this instability” (1-2).

Like Renan’s talk or Bhabha recognition of “ambivalence,” *Pilote de guerre* conveys the image of nationhood as an abstract relationship that is in flux. Saint-Exupéry parallels this idea in both the perspective of holism and time: “Nous sommes des morceaux d’une grande construction dont il faut plus de temps, plus de silence et plus de recul pour découvrir l’assemblage.” (123)⁴⁶ A nation is also a living, breathing entity. Because of this, it cannot be grasped without an understanding that the past is only a part of the national identity. This is also a large piece of Saint-Exupéry’s self-evaluation, as he sees himself through the eyes of his own cultural past. At

time. Emile Henriot of l’Académie française argues that he did as much to illuminate the mysteries of the “la mythologie chrétienne” as he did to alienate the church in his writing. (Henriot 233)

⁴⁶ “We were mere details in a vast structure to see the whole of which demanded more time, more silence, more perspective than he could possibly obtain.” (298)

this time in French history, then, his identity is more in flux than he has ever perceived it. With the imminent Occupation, and all he observes with the mass exodus of towns in the path of the German army, he sees his country as upturned. “Vient l’heure, comme maintenant, où je ne comprends plus mon pays,” he states. “Un pays n’est pas la somme de contrées, de coutumes, de matériaux que mon intelligence peut toujours saisir. C’est un Être. Et vient l’heure où je me découvre aveugle aux Êtres.” (123)⁴⁷ Saint-Exupéry’s statement here shows the anxiety that comes from ambiguity in forms. He recognizes the nation concept as a dynamic, living spirit, one which is hard to conceptualize in the “shipwreck” of France at this time.

In his study of national identity in *Pilote de guerre*, François Gerber argues that the author shifts from the ideal images of France to illustrate the dire point it has reached with the invasion by Germany. He shows France like a dismembered body, Gerber says, one that is far from the “madone aux fresques des murs” in the imagery of Charles de Gaulle’s *Mémoires de guerre*, or the ideals of unity in nationalists like Maurice Barrès or Ernest Renan. (Lacroix 137). It is clear that Saint-Exupéry is distraught by his country’s predicament, as he describes the chaos: “J’ai la vision soudaine, aigue, d’une France qui perd ses entrailles. Il faudrait vite recoudre. Il n’est pas une seconde à perdre : ils sont condamnés...” (170)⁴⁸ Of course, the novel takes this predicament only as a starting point. The flight to Arras becomes like his own pilgrimage into his cultural heritage, which is formulated in a past modeled by humanist figures as much as by Christian beliefs. His connection to France is certainly to the abstract ideas of its

⁴⁷ “What we call a nation is certainly not the sum of the regions, customs, cities, farms and the rest that man’s intelligence is able at any moment to add up. It is a Being. But there are moments when I find myself blind to beings – even to the being called France.” (297) Galantière alters the sequence from the previous sentence in his translation, adding it to the Saint-Exupéry’s train of thought. More directly, he stated, rather poignantly, “There are moments, like now, when I no longer understand my country.” (Author’s translation)

⁴⁸ “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.” (359)

spirit, but he does not neglect the sensory memory of his youth. Even his sense of optimism is rooted in the cultural formulas of his nation: “Je songe à une formule vieille comme mon pays : « En France, quand tout semble perdu, un miracle sauve la France. »” (151)⁴⁹

A CULTURAL PAST

In his attempt to reconstruct his national identity, Saint-Exupéry resurrects various cultural icons that are part of the humanist past of France. These figures represent not only the rich artistic, scientific, and philosophical heritage of the nation, but also the general mold to which his heroes adhere. They are figures of astute observation of the nature of things, of deep reflection of their meaning, and, like conscientious tradesmen, of devout commitment to their craft. Part of French identity, for Saint-Exupéry, is the mix of *spirit* and *intellect* that seeks its own creation.

Instead of the warrior image, which is necessarily destructive, Saint-Exupéry focuses on the scientist, the artist, and the thinker: Pasteur, Cézanne (or Renoir), and Pascal. As he becomes imminently present in his craft of flying the plane toward Arras, he sees them as his inspiration. He revels in their ability to be intently focused, “immobile” in their task, as if separated from the outside world. For him, they are figures that help concretize the otherwise abstract idea of the *spirit* of France. He summons their images as if they were phantoms of his cultural past, which is a past based on a creative spirit. He asks himself how he is able to bridge this gap of abstraction in his world of reflection:

D’où vient qu’en d’autres circonstances ce qui m’est maintenant abstrait et
lointain me puisse bouleverser ? [...] D’où vient que, si je suis Pasteur, le jeu des

⁴⁹ “In the spring of 1940, everybody was repeating an ancient French saw: “France is always saved at the eleventh hour by a miracle.” (335)

infusoires eux-mêmes pourra me devenir pathétique au point qu'une lamelle de microscope m'apparaîtra comme un territoire autrement vaste que la forêt vierge, et me permettra de vivre, penché sur elle, la plus haute forme de l'aventure ? (157-158)⁵⁰

It is through this *immobility*, then, that he is able to reflect on his past. By being completely immersed in his task, he is also able to decipher the bigger picture of France, like he describes Cézanne: "Ainsi Cézanne immobile et muet, en face de son ébauche, est d'une présence inestimable. Il n'est jamais plus homme que lorsqu'il se tait, éprouve et juge. Alors sa toile lui devient plus vaste que la mer." (161)⁵¹

This is how Saint-Exupéry brings the particular into the whole. He emulates these men who were masters in their work and created lasting contributions to the idea of France. He sees himself in them by his way of flying his plane and entering into his own reflection. He sees himself in his fellow flyers that share in the same tasks as him. They become, like the figures of his cultural past, the exemplars of the present state of France. Like Sagon, immobile on his wing, he is consumed in his own actions. He feels connected to them like he is connected to France, so much that these figures make a composite list of images of the *spirit* and *intellect* of France. "Je suis de France," he writes. "La France formait des Renoir, des Pascal, des Pasteur, des Guillaumet, des Hochedé." (211)⁵² This is how he reconciles the problem of lacking "clear

⁵⁰ "Whence comes it that in other circumstances I should be overwhelmed by what seems to me now remote and abstract? Whence comes it that if I were Pasteur, the play of true infusoria would seem to me pathetic to the point where a slide under a microscope would represent something infinitely more vast than a virgin forest, and the watching of that slide would seem to me the most thrilling kind of adventure?" (343)

⁵¹ "Cézanne, 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." (347)

⁵² "I am a part of France, and France is a part of me. France brought forth men called Pascal, Renoir, Pasteur, Guillaumet, Hochedé." (414)

language” in the confusion of the war. Through his “immobile” presence, like the men of his cultural heritage he emerges from it with new discovery and resolution. As he writes, “Je trempe dans l’incohérence, et cependant je suis comme vainqueur” (203)⁵³

A SENSORIAL PAST

Saint-Exupéry explained in *Terre des Hommes (Wind, Sand and Stars)*⁵⁴ the feeling of his cockpit like his own scientific laboratory. Looking out onto the landscape below, he notices the traces of human existence: in the roads that move from town to town, in the collections of lights at night that cluster near sources of water and civilization, in the patterns of meandering development that stops at the natural boundaries of dangerous terrain. He, in turn, notices the expanse of earth untouched by man; in its vastness, an infinite discovery lies before him. Therefore, his connection with the immobile study of Pasteur, Cézanne, and Pascal is inherent in his own sensorial awareness of the world around him. Yet, the importance of the senses in Saint-Exupéry’s memory is paramount for a new departure from the present. It involves more than immersing himself into the vastness of his human experience. It is also more than a mere nostalgic catalyst to renew experiences from memory. He relates to his past, as much as to his present, through the intimacy of the sounds and smells of his memories.

Saint-Exupéry continues the discussion from *Terre des hommes* when he recalls his time in the Sahara. Once again in *Pilote de guerre*, he recounts the times when the desert would come alive when the Arabs would bring warning of distant danger (160). The sense of distance is what excites the imagination. It makes the danger more imminent and energizes the myth-forming

⁵³ “I am steeped in chaos, yet I have won a victory.” (403)

⁵⁴ The English translation of the title alone alludes to an opposing perspective of the aviator. Whereas *Terre des Hommes*, literally translated as “land of men,” emphasizes the humanist view and a sense of belonging to an earthly existence, *Wind, Sand, and Stars* alludes to the cosmic elements of flight, as an escape from planetary confines.

mechanism of the past. In a similar way, music can carry us away, and the smell of an old armoire can bring back intense feelings from a previous experience. This is not a matter of escape, however. It is a means of connection. He feels more tied to his sense of belonging from his physical senses, what he would refer to as the *saveur* of his France – the sights, the sounds, the smells, the taste.

Gerber points out how the word “saveur” is often used in conjunction with the places of his childhood as a catalyst to show his sensorial connection to intimate memories that help form his view of France (140). The reference is like Marcel Proust’s *madeleines*, which work like a portal into an entire childhood memory. “Moi, je songe à une gravure qui m’a ébloui, dans l’enfance,” (143)⁵⁵ Saint-Exupéry writes as he talks about his frozen rudder pedal. He connects his present predicament to a memory of this engraving which he describes as an iconographic state of *immobility*: “On y voyait, sur un fond d’auréole boréale, un extraordinaire cimetière de navires perdus, immobilisés dans les mers australes. Ils ouvraient, dans la lumière de cendre d’une sorte de soir éternel, des bras cristallisés.” (143)⁵⁶ All the imagery of the aurora borealis that engulfs the ancient ships evokes for him a sort of cemetery of stillness.

Likewise, the smell of the classroom that doubles as the mission planning area for Group 2-33 incites a the dream-like memories of his childhood at the beginning of the novel: “J’éprouve du plaisir à goûter ce soleil, comme à savourer cette odeur enfantine de pupitre, de craie, de tableau noir. J’enferme avec tant de joie dans cette enfance bien protégée !” (113)⁵⁷ The

⁵⁵ “I was thinking of a picture that used to fascinate me when I was a child.” (324)

⁵⁶ “Against the background of an aurora borealis it showed a graveyard of fantastic ships, motionless in the Antarctic seas. In the ashen glow of an eternal night the ships raised their crystallized arms.” (324)

⁵⁷ “The shining sun fills me with peace. I inhale with delight the childhood odor of the wooden desk, the chalk, the blackboard in this schoolhouse in which we are quartered. I revel in the sense of security born of this daydream of a sheltered childhood.” (288)

same *savoir* of the classroom puts him in an adolescent mind set near the end of the novel, as he return to the Group and is questioned on his observations. In this case, his motionless response is a matter of ill-prepared response to the Major's questions, like a student asked to explain Bernoulli's principle. The answer is more than words can report in a concise reply. The manner of lessons he learned in the flight to Arras is not the same information required from the mission; his reflection has revealed more about the spirit of France than it has about reconnaissance data of any military value.

The strongest of the sensorial experiences for Saint-Exupéry is the sharing of a meal. In his words: "La saveur du pain partagé n'est point d'égalé." (207)⁵⁸ The life cycle of a grain of wheat that makes it to the table, in fact, is a fundamental part of the past and present in his connection to France. He is not inherently connected to the land, like the farmer outside Orconte who shares his harvest in the meal; rather, he is connected to the human spirit that is shared at the table. He revisits the idea of sacrifice in the novel through the imagery of the seed – it must cease being a seed to become the wheat, which in turn must be transformed into bread. In sharing the bread with the farmer and his family, Saint-Exupéry senses the same presence that his cultural heroes illustrated in their silence. He observes things in a very palpable way, but the most intense feelings of connection are often in the absence of sound. Therefore, he finds a peace in the tasting of the meal, and finds his France in the simplicity of the ritual. Unlike the "princesse des contes" or the "madone aux fresques des murs," his face of France is the young farmer's daughter – simple, mysterious, quiet, and imminently present. "Je sens, mystérieusement présente, l'âme particulière qui est d'ici, et non d'ailleurs. Je goûte une paix dont je me dis :

⁵⁸ "There is no savor like that of bread shared between men." (408)

« C'est la paix des règnes silencieux... » » (208)⁵⁹ His connection with the transformation of the seed is not lost in the meal, as he makes a point to the very last line of the novel that France, like the seed, must sacrifice to be renewed. He writes, “Les vaincus doivent se taire. Comme les grains” (228)⁶⁰. So if the seed must die to yield a tree, so too must France fall in order for the Allies to come to its rescue and fight Nazi Germany.

A CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

The sense of communion, portrayed in the breaking of bread, is just one trace of the Christian heritage that is present in Saint-Exupéry's writing. The flight to Arras provides a vehicle for him to reflect, like a pilgrimage. As Joy Robinson describes it, “Saint-Exupéry issues forth from the acceptance of death as from a sacrament, filled with solemn, lasting jubilation. He and his crewmates have matured as though after years of meditation in a monastery. Now they hasten towards the warmth of their comrades' welcome and the communing in the evening bread” (108). In the process of his reflection, he ties his sense of belonging to his heritage – in succession: to Group 2-33, to France, and to his fellow man. “Je suis de Guillaumet, je suis de Gavaille, je suis de Hochedé. Je suis du Groupe 2/33. Je suis de mon pays. Et tous ceux du Groupe sont de ce pays...” (202)⁶¹ This same sense of belonging nurtures the strong sense of responsibility in Saint-Exupéry, which provides purpose to the sacrificial missions by the airmen. Much like the Christ figure, their deaths will help save France, and the fall of France will help save humanity from the threat of Nazism.

⁵⁹ “I felt mysteriously present, a soul that belonged in this pace and other. There was a peace here, sensing which I murmured to myself, ‘The peace of the kingdom is silence.’” (409)

⁶⁰ “The defeated have no right to speak. No more right to speak than the seed.” (437)

⁶¹ “I am part of Guillaumet, of Gavaille, of Hochedé, and they are part of me. I am part of Group 2-33, and it of me. I am part of my country, and it of me. My country and I are one. And all the men of Group 2-33 are one with their country.” (402)

The expansion of community, then, is in line with his Christian heritage, which cannot be neglected in the interpretation of the novel. As the author reveals his own sense of purpose, he unveils a Christian cornerstone in its purest form, devoid of institutional corruption or sectarian disputes. The use of repetition in this section of the book in particular emphasizes the logical progression of interconnectedness he has with the ideals of Christian values:

Ma civilisation, héritière des valeurs chrétiennes. Je réfléchirai sur la construction de la cathédrale, afin de mieux comprendre son architecture.(217)⁶²

Ma civilisation, héritant de Dieu, a fait des hommes égaux en l'homme.(218)⁶³

Ma civilisation, héritant de Dieu, a fondé le respect de l'homme au travers des individus.(218)⁶⁴

Ma civilisation, héritant de Dieu, a fait les hommes frères en l'homme.(218)⁶⁵

Ma civilisation, héritière de Dieu, a fait ainsi, de la charité, don de l'homme au travers de l'individu.(219)⁶⁶

Ma civilisation, héritière de Dieu, a prêché aussi le respect de soi, c'est-à-dire le respect de l'homme à travers soi-même.(219)⁶⁷

Ma civilisation, héritière de Dieu, a fait chacun responsable de tous les hommes, et tous les hommes responsable de chacun.(219)⁶⁸

⁶² "My civilization was the inheritor of Christian values." (423) Galantière omitted the second sentence: "I will reflect on the construction of the cathedral in order to better understand its makeup." (Author's translation)

⁶³ "As the inheritor of God, my civilization made men equal in Man." (424)

⁶⁴ "As the inheritor of God, my civilization founded the respect for Man present in every individual." (424)

⁶⁵ "As the inheritor of God, my civilization made men to be brothers in Man." (424)

⁶⁶ "As the inheritor of God, my civilization made charity to be a gift to Man present in the individual." (425)

⁶⁷ "As the inheritor of God, my civilization preached self-respect, which is to say respect for Man present in oneself." (425)

⁶⁸ "As the inheritor of God, my civilization made each responsible for all, and all responsible fore each." (426)

The logical development of civilization here is above all a search for resolving the same dilemma of holism and individualism that Renan introduces. The architecture of the cathedral, then, is made up of its individual parts, but only in their unity does it hold its structure and acquire meaning. Humanistic values, though important in Saint-Exupéry's heritage, are less important than the sense of belonging that he espouses here, in what he sees as his Christian heritage. *Charity, sacrifice, service*. These are the values that connect his sense of self to his sense of purpose in the impossible mission he is flying. These are also the values that he sees in the role that France plays for other nations that lie in the sights of the Third Reich. Their struggle is an existential one, not only for France, but also for the basic humanity he sees in his own heritage. "L'homme, commune mesure des peuples et des races," he writes (215). Galantière aptly translates this sentence, as "Man, the common denominator of peoples and races" (420). In turn, Saint-Exupéry reconciles what he had introduced as a sense of *exceptionalism*, in a way that France's universal appeal is the saving light for resisting the oppression of Nazism:

Si la France avait eu saveur de France, rayonnement de France, le monde entier
fût fait résistance à travers la France. La France devait de lui servir d'âme, s'il en
manquait. [...] Si nous avions été le Noël du monde, le monde se fût sauvé à
travers nous. (212)⁶⁹

The universalism of the text, therefore, is based on an amalgamation of the cultural heritage that he has been taught and that he has experienced first-hand. His rationalization of his purpose is also based on his spiritual connection to France. He makes no mention of the nationalistic endeavors of a Napoleonic Empire or of Gallic roots. He doesn't cite the

⁶⁹ "Had France possessed the flavor of France, the radiation of France, the whole world would have been magnetized into a resistance of which the spearhead would have been France. [...] Had we of France meant a kind of Christmas to the world, the world would have been saved through our being."

battlegrounds of war to defend the French soil. He appeals to the fundamental roots of the human heart that is based on a civilization of connectedness. This is a different sort of *universalism* than the one that carried over from the Enlightenment period and was a strong part of the French Third Republic. Where de Gaulle would claim *grandeur* of France was based on its indelible past, for Saint-Exupéry it is based on the application of values to a communal presence. Each of these perspectives was at stake in the outcome of the war. Either way, the makeup of the author's national identity is also part of his resolve. From his sense of belonging and his philosophy of "chacun est responsable de tous," he derives his sense of duty and purpose while he acts. This is how his sense of heritage is empowering toward the end of his flight, as much as it is in question in the beginning. In the end, he knows his part and carries on like Hochedé: "J'irai sur Arras à basse altitude. J'ai mille années de civilisation derrière moi pour m'y aider" (161).⁷⁰

LA CHUTE

Historian Philippe Burrin wrote of the summer of 1940 that "Les Français entrent dans l'ère des allégeances divisées" (23). In other words, the fall of France was not simply a defeat of a unified country, but a crumbling of its core, creating a schism into two entirely different paths. Without military strength and proper strategy to stand up the German Occupation, it seemed to only make sense to surrender. Not doing so would only mean more deaths like the massive numbers experienced during the Great War. On this side, the same military leader who had led France to victory during that time – Marshal Philippe Pétain – opted on the side of preservation in this one. Yet, the acceptance of the Vichy government, under the yoke of the Nazi regime, was worse than death for others. For the other side, then, General Charles de Gaulle, only recently

⁷⁰ "I shall drop down upon Arras. I shall carry out the second half of our mission—the low-altitude sortie. Behind me I have a thousand years of civilization to help me." (348)

appointed as the French Minister of Defense, argued that the fight was not yet over. The decision among the people was unclear in the middle of June.⁷¹

Within a day of the surrender, Marshal Pétain and General de Gaulle transmitted two completely opposed messages on the radio waves.⁷² Pétain, who had become French prime minister on 16 June, announced the following day: “It is with a heavy heart that I tell you today we must cease hostilities. The fighting must stop.” (Cobb 24) Much less is said about these words of defeat, however, in comparison to the *Appel (Appeal)* by General de Gaulle to continue the fight. This voice of resistance, broadcasted from London’s BBC studio B2, was an act of defiance for the supposed legitimacy of the new French government that was established on the premise of defeat:

The leaders who, for many years past, have been at the head of the French armed forces, have set up a government.

Alleging the defeat of our armies, this government has entered into negotiations with the enemy with a view to bringing about a cessation of hostilities. [...]

But has the last word been said? Must we abandon all hope? Is our defeat final and irremediable? To those questions I answer – No!

[...]

⁷¹ As Eliane DalMolin points out in *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in Crisis*, the choice of the population for either side, and their level of allegiance to their choice, remains a topic of debate even today. (197) Much of this debate revolves around the myth of *résistencialisme*, a term created in the 1980s to dispel the historical significance of the French Resistance. The notion that the French were more united in resistance, or that the movement itself was paramount in the liberation of France remains to this day highly debated and largely unsubstantiated.

⁷² Jules Dassin captures this well in his film interpretation of Romain Gary’s novel, *Promise at Dawn* (1:21:15 to 1:23:05). As much as the France was shocked and deflated by the announcement by Pétain, it was equally confused and optimistic with de Gaulle’s *Appel (Appeal, or Call for resistance)*.

I, General de Gaulle, now in London, call on all French officers and men who are at present on British soil, or may be in the future, with or without arms; I call on all engineers and skilled workman from the armaments factories who are at present on British soil, or may be in the future, to get in touch with me.

Whatever happens the flame of the resistance must not and shall not die.

(Gaulle 83-84)

Whether heard on this day or in the days following as it was reproduced and retransmitted, whether the true source of resistance or simply the verbal embodiment of what remained of French resilience, his speech is now widely viewed as “one of the most significant acts of modern French history” (Celestin and DalMolin 196). In the moment, however, what permeated France was a sense of shock and confusion, the lack of preparation and the lack of strong leadership.

Sadly, the aging guard of the previous generation’s war had perpetuated overconfidence in the strategic Maginot line and naïve acceptance of pacts of non-aggression with Germany. Up until the *Blitzkrieg* tactics of the German attacks, the war had been like a holiday, a “drôle de guerre” (funny war). De Gaulle accounted in his *Mémoires de guerre* that old age had soured Pétain’s judgment. At 84 years old, he was already recognized by many as semi-senile, and perhaps manipulated because of this. “Age was delivering him over to the manoeuvres of people who were clever at covering themselves with his majestic lassitude,” de Gaulle wrote; “Old age is a shipwreck. That we might be spared nothing, the old age of Marshal Pétain was to identify itself with the shipwreck of France.” (Gaulle 73) Unfortunately, the shipwreck of France was also based on its confidence in the prior reputation of Pétain, something that de Gaulle was lacking when he made his call to resist. He was only recently made a General, and too unknown

to the public for him to expect a national rallying behind his own image. His ideological optimism is what eventually appealed to the French, but at the time, he was alone, as he recalls feeling when he departed for London: “I seemed to myself, alone as I was deprived of everything, like a man on the shore of an ocean, proposing to swim across.” (80)

In part for these reasons, the French were not prepared themselves to choose sides. The Vichy government’s moral order of *travail, famille, patrie* (work, family, fatherland) seemed at first just as poignant to the *blood and soil* loyalties to France as *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, fraternity) of the Third Republic and de Gaulle’s timeless ideals of France. It also took some time for people to recognize the true level of collaboration that the Vichy government was to enforce. In the end, as Eliane DalMolin explains it, “Whatever their allegiance, locked in a strange paradigm of suspicion and secrecy, no one felt free to express their true feelings toward the two radio messages and the different ideas they conveyed.” (197)

In fact, it took several months for many of the French to realize the calamity that had occurred. The results of the Battle of France were met with both apathy and confusion. Saint-Exupéry wrote in his *Écrits de guerre* that initial civilian response was to receive the Germans with no resistance, accompanied by what he called an “ouf épouvantable” (Burrin 24). In his own diary, Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler also chronicled the same unawareness and lassitude that seemed to have trickled down from the very philosophy of the French government. Of his observation of a group of refugees in the Dordogne, he wrote:

All the way saw families camping by the roadside with cars pulled off the road, on the spot where the last drop of petrol gave out. It is a sort of general stay put. All wait for armistice to be signed and ‘everything to become normal again’. They really believe life will be as it was before. Meanwhile, they eat and drink in the

sunny meadows and play *belotte*. The apocalypse as a family picnic. (Cobb 25-26)

NOWHERE TO RUN TO...

With as much confusion and lack of direction that the French experienced upon the armistice, the country had already been in dire straits in terms of its defense. It was equally ill equipped at the civilian level to muster any sense of unified resistance at that point in time. Saint-Exupéry describes the villages and towns aflame as he overflies them in *Pilote de guerre*. His portrait of the exodus from the same places is the epitome of futility. Yet, people generally did not know how to respond to this change in their daily existence. His description of *l'Exode* in chapters XV and XVI is one of the many departures from the timeline of the flight to Arras, like his meal with the farmer and his daughter, where he provides the an intimate and personal view of their situation.

“Il est une contagion démente dans cet exode. Car où vont-ils, ces vagabonds ?” he writes (162-163)⁷³. There truly was nowhere for them to go since the non-occupied part of France did not have the capacity to deal with the numbers of refugees. The roads were blocked with caravans of people already trying to flee the incoming German troops, but the rate of travel was at a snail’s pace – certainly not fast enough to evade the pace of the invaders. The travelers were without sufficient fuel, food, or even water to complete their journey and, worst of all, had no idea where to go. They simply followed orders from the town mayor to leave, for their safety. Their departure was like a knee-jerk reaction to the sight of war, which created confusion for

⁷³ “There is a crazy contagion in this exodus. Where are these vagabonds going?” (349)

them more than any other thing. Yet, their confusion was accompanied by a void of alternative thinking. France had been rendered completely impotent:

Jamais ils ne savaient rien. Personne ne savait rien. Ils évacuaient. Aucun refuge n'était plus disponible. Aucune route n'était plus praticable. Ils évacuaient quand même. On avait donné dans le Nord un grand coup de pied dans la fourmilière, et les fourmis s'en allaient. Laborieusement. Sans panique. Sans désespoir. Comme par devoir. (163)⁷⁴

Rather ironically, and with much compassion for their situation, Saint-Exupéry describes how the townspeople reconsider their departure. The author had suggested their inherent right to stay put, that they in fact had a better chance of survival since food and water were already present. Briefly, he successfully convinces a small group to stay in town, only to discover that the town's baker had already departed. That won't work. Who'll make the bread? They'll have to leave. Life as they knew it was already changing, leaving them in a state of what Saint-Exupéry calls "l'incohérence générale" (175). As he had confessed for himself earlier to no longer understanding his country, to thinking in contradiction, he now witnessed in the townspeople, as he writes, "ils ont perdu toute signification. Leur identité même s'est usée" (170)⁷⁵. In the end, this loss of meaning led to an empty confusion:

⁷⁴ "They never knew [where they were going]. Nobody know anything. They were evacuating. There was no way to house them. Every road was blocked. All still they were evacuating. Somewhere in the north of France a boot had scattered an ant-hill, and the ants were on the march. Laboriously. Without panic. Without hope. Without despair. On the march as if in duty bound." (350)

⁷⁵ "they had lost their significance. Their very identity seemed to have been rubbed off." (359)

Tout ça sur le même plan. D'emblée. Dix millions d'hommes. La voiture.
 L'armée de l'Est. La civilisation occidentale. On a retrouvé le chauffeur.
 L'Angleterre. Le pain. Quelle heure est-il ? (172)⁷⁶

BARTHES, “HISTOIRE” ET “NATURE”

[...] it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. (Barthes 110)

Roland Barthes's interpretation of myth recognized the layers in language and meaning as expressed in a “type of speech”. The duality of his mythology is that a certain historicity is inevitably present in the message of this speech, while it can be seemingly arbitrarily interpreted in its present context. This is part of the elegance in recognizing that myths are living entities, much like Saint-Exupéry's image of a nation. In this sense as well, they are as much determined by the stories from their past as they are by the conversations of the present. It is likewise in this fashion that myth can be removed from *ambiguity* with a certain *intention*. Yet, this intention is in itself subject to partiality. It depends on the perspective of the particular mythologist or myth consumer who takes on the roles of providing the inevitable meaning to the myth. “The meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning,” writes Barthes as he introduces this analogy:

In the same way, if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I
 can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp

⁷⁶ “All this on the same level of importance. Just like that. Ten million men. The motorcar. The Army of the East. Western civilization. The chauffeur has been found. England. Bread. What time is it?” (361)

the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparence of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full. The same thing occurs in the mythical signifier: its form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full. (123-124)

The other level of language, one that Barthes does not refer to in this analogy, is the reflection back at oneself – where the window is acting like a mirror. Saint-Exupéry was very aware of his role in the process of interpreting France in *Pilote de guerre*. He was also keenly aware of the way in which future analysis would attempt to portray the war in ways that may not be true to the moment. The role of his novel, then, is paramount in capturing the essence of the spirit in France before it fell, and during its final hours of capitulation. It is a matter of distance, through time and space, which changes one's perspective and blurs the sentiment of the moment.

If we recall Ernest Hemingway's *Men at War* from the introduction, we are reminded of the "true picture" that these particular soldiers provide. They have the view of the battlefield: from its fields, from its seas, and from its skies. Very rarely can the headquarters provide the same image of war, even with today's technology and incessant flow of "intelligence." The face of the struggle is different when it is close at hand. There is distance between the general staff and the actual fighting that clouds its perception. The ability of soldier-writers or author-aviators to capture the essence of their struggle, then, is a unique skill that is crafted by their sensory perception and their creative imagination, as Hemingway describes: "Learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after is the greatest gift a soldier can acquire. It naturally, is the opposite of all those gifts a writer should have. That is why what makes good writing by good soldiers such a rare thing" (xxvii).

Similarly, the distance of time is a key element in the myth formation mechanism as we have seen in Koestler's crystal formations (the case of Richard Hillary's tribute), in Saint-Exupéry's Paula, and in Barthes's general view of history. In *Pilote de guerre*, we find this same realization that history is interpreted from a distance:

Ah ! le schéma que bâtiront plus tard les historiens ! Les axes qu'ils inventeront pour donner une signification à cette bouillie ! Ils prendront le mot d'un ministre, la décision d'un général, la discussion d'une commission, et ils feront, de cette parade de fantômes, des conversations historiques avec responsabilités et vues lointaines. Ils inventeront des acceptations, des résistances, des plaidoyers cornéliens, des lâchetés. (170-171)⁷⁷

The reflection that takes place in his novel, however, is a better gauge of the real story. Saint-Exupéry's reflection on his own image of nation, and the meaning of the heritage from which it has grown, merge with his sense of personal responsibility.

L'HOMME-JET

The lyrical style of *Pilote de guerre* is indicative of the type of reflection that Saint-Exupéry pursues during his flight. Moments of introspection become a larger-scale contemplation of the war and of the future of France. As with Barthes's car window, he sees the world from different perspectives. "Ce que je rapporte de ma mission ne peut s'inscrire sur un compte rendu," he writes (197)⁷⁸. In his eyes, it is Dutertre's role to capture the intelligence of the mission – trucks, trains, tanks, soldiers, canons, horses, etc. His is a more general perspective

⁷⁷ "Ah, the blueprint that historians will draft of all this! The angles they will plot to lend shape to this mess! They will take the word of a cabinet minister, the decision of a general, the discussion of a committee, and out of that parade of ghosts they will build historic conversations in which they will discern farsighted views and weighty responsibilities. They will invent agreements, resistances, altitudinous pleas, cowardices." (360)

⁷⁸ "What I bring back from this sortie is not a matter for a report." (395)

– clouds, sea, rivers, mountains, the sun. “Il observe à la verticale, Dutertre. [...] Moi, j’observe trop en oblique. [...] Je me fais une idée d’ensemble.” (196)⁷⁹ Even in the heat of battle, in the moments where tracers are shooting past his plane, Saint-Exupéry paints himself a broader picture, captured in that moment that becomes like a spectacle of lights:

Penché vers la terre je n’avais pas remarqué que l’espace vide qui peu à peu s’est élargi entre les nuages et moi. Les traçantes versaient une lumière de blé : comment aurais-je su qu’au sommet de leur ascension elles distribuaient un à un, comme on plante des clous, ces matériaux sombres ? Je les découvre accumulés déjà en pyramides vertigineuses qui dérivent vers l’arrière avec des lenteurs de banquises. A l’échelle de telles perspectives, j’ai la sensation d’être immobile. (189)⁸⁰

Here again we encounter the sense *immobility* that enables his reflection, like the genius of Pasteur, Pascal, or Renoir. This same sensation of being frozen in time is ironically discussed in “L’homme-jet” (“The Jet-man”) of Barthes’s *Mythologies*. What he attempts to illustrate in the short article is essentially two-fold: that the *jet-man*, despite traveling at nearly twice the speed of sound perceives no sense of physical speed; and that due to his routine and his equipment, the *jet-man* is more like a robot than a living, free-thinking human being. Instead, he enters a realm that becomes like “a kind of anthropological compromise between humans and Martians” (73). Barthes argues that the humanity of the “traditional hero” (in this category he

⁷⁹ “Intelligence is Dutertre’s business, not mine. [...] I see roughly, and get only a general impression.” (394)

⁸⁰ I had been looking on at the 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. (384)

specifically places Charles Lindbergh and Saint-Exupéry) is lost in the evasion from time and space. His separation in the air creates an imagery of celestial existence that no longer relates to his own world.

Yet, this particular separation is the antithesis of the image of the aviator in *Pilote de guerre*. As we have seen in Joseph McKeon's "The Myth of the Pilot," Saint-Exupéry himself had already gone through a personal evolution from the idea of the aviator that Barthes describes as "classical" – dominated by daring courage, and intoxicating adventure of an unprofessional nature – to one that is not unlike the *jet-man*. Although he is traveling at only a quarter of his speed, he is caught in the same sense of *immobility*. Furthermore, even in the presence of his crew, he pursues his thoughts in the self-imposed isolation of reflection. The same sense of motionlessness overtakes him; still, with all his flying gear – helmet, gloves, oxygen, communication system – he remains deeply connected with his humanity and his belonging to a historical heritage. In this way, Barthes's own *jet-man* myth demonstrates the historical recycling of traditional images as they are interpreted by their contemporary view.

So the aviator becomes like a space traveler, where time is displaced differently. For Saint-Exupéry, the temporal perspective is also skewed. Each contingent moment that sends him into reveries or reflections is mere seconds for the pages of his novel. In fact, his entire flight only lasts one hour and twenty minutes (Pradel and Vanrell 175); nonetheless, his reflection during that time brings out all the wisdom from his heritage, giving him hope. "Nous vieillissons," he writes. "Une heure vécue à dix mille mètres équivaut-elle à une semaine, trois semaines, un

mois de vie organique [...] je baigne dans la sérénité des vieillards.” (Saint-Exupéry 142)⁸¹ More directly, he writes of his speed: “Nous naviguons, je le sais bien, à cinq cent trente kilomètres-heure... Cependant tout s’est fait immobile. La vitesse se montre sur un champ de courses. Mais ici tout trempe dans l’espace.” (145)⁸²

LE FIL DU TEMPS

The concept of time, then, is a critical link in Saint-Exupéry’s portrayal of France itself. Much like the different reports of the mission from his navigator, Dutertre, and him, his perspective of time looks differently at history. Rather than a continuum of uniformity, he sees verticality in this moment of history for France. Like the Revolution for Jules Michelet or Victor Hugo, the Fall of France in World War II becomes like a moment frozen in time, encapsulating an entire history. This is how Barthes describes the verticality in a moment in history like a myth. In his text, *Michelet, l’Histoire et la Mort* (*Michelet, History and Death*), explains how historians like Michelet will often stream together the past and the present to make sense of those moments that are like a shift in the timeline. He proposes that history becomes like a dream because it tries to reconcile life and death, creating a myth to explain the moment with “la cohérence d’un destin” (a coherent destiny) (Barthes 101). So *History*, or the historian will build its own myth based on the past that it wants to emphasize, as he writes: “En prêtant aux morts passés le regard du

⁸¹ “We were aging. [...] An hour of life spent at thirty-three thousand feet is equivalent to what? To a week? three weeks? a month of organic life [...] I float in the serenity of old age.” (323)

⁸² “We are now flying at three-hundred and twenty-five miles an hour, you on the ground would say. But that is a race-course point of view. Here time is not, but only space.” (327)

présent, en joignant au souvenir des morts de sens de leur vie, en redonnant aux morts une mémoire universelle, à l'échelle de l'Histoire" (100).⁸³

The myth-forming mechanism employed by historians, then, emerges from an effort that is like a eulogy. How do we remember someone? We make sense of them in the larger picture, in an idealized image of them. We can recall Koestler's stalactites in order to remember the myth-forming mechanism. He recognized the same process in place, which is why he explains that time is fleeting if he is to capture the true Richard Hillary in his commemorative article, "The Birth of a Myth." Like this effort to capture the essence of the man, Saint-Exupéry tries to capture the essence of France in *Pilote de guerre*. He witnesses to a dying France, in flames beneath him, evacuating its towns around him, void of meaning within him. His reflection during the flight to Arras is in part to give himself meaning and to gain the courage he needs to complete his mission, as he sees it to "jouer le rôle" (play the part) (156). It is also to give meaning to his France that is dying. As Joy Robinson explains, "Saint-Exupéry seeks the images to describe the otherwise inexpressible chaos of that time, and he sees it symbolized in the clocks that have all stopped and the water running to waste from the village fountains" (104). Time has become irrelevant in this moment of France's history, while it once again seeks its own sense of meaning.

It is for this reason that Saint-Exupéry dreams of his childhood, examines his heritage, and forges his own image of heroism. Even that is left to question, as he poses quite openly in the book: "Pourquoi ne décore-t-on pas les traîtres ?" (172)⁸⁴ In this case, it took the lapse of

⁸³ By giving form to the dead of the past with the face of present times, by joining meaning to their lives in remembering their deaths, by giving once again to the dead a universal meaning in the ladder of History. (Author's translation)

⁸⁴ "Why, I want to know, are not the traitors decorated?" (362)

history to see more clearly who was on the side of saving France. De Gaulle was sentenced to death and labeled as a traitor by the Vichy government when he headed to London for his famous *Appel*; ironically, he labeled Saint-Exupéry as a traitor for some time and blocked publication of *Pilote de guerre* in Free France when it was initially released in New York in 1942. On some terms, Saint-Exupéry recognized the risk in writing poignant words that showed a weaker France, or for that matter, a more human image of the aviator. He was very self-aware of his identity as a writer, and this wore on his conscience mainly for his understanding among his fellow flyers. As for de Gaulle, the irony is that each critiqued French aviation for not having evolved like the Germans, and for being completely unprepared for the war. As for his comrades, he knew that he had earned his place among them because of his own sacrifice. He was not an outsider, not a mere witness reporter. He was part of the effort and part of the group. As he writes:

Et maintenant que je reviens d'Arras je suis de mon Groupe plus que jamais. J'ai acquis un lien de plus. J'ai renforcé en moi ce sentiment de communauté qui est à savourer dans le silence. Israël et Gavaille ont subi des risques plus durs, peut-être, que les miens. Israël a disparu. Mais, de cette promenade d'aujourd'hui, je ne devais pas revenir non plus. Elle me donne un peu plus le droit de m'asseoir à leur table, et de me taire avec eux. Ce droit-là s'achète très cher. Mais il vaut très cher : c'est le droit d'« être ». C'est pourquoi, ce bouquin, je l'ai signé sans gêne... il ne gâchait rien. (200)⁸⁵

⁸⁵ “And now, flying home from Arras, I am more than ever interwoven with Group 2-33. I have formed still another tie with it. I have intensified in me that feeling of communion with it that is to be relished and left unspoken. Each of us had risked his life in more or less the same fashion. Israel had disappeared. It seemed pretty certain that in the course of today's outing I too should disappear. What have I earned by this swing round the sky except a slightly

The sacrifice that Saint-Exupéry engages during his flight is also the theme he preaches for France. Following his Christian heritage, he sees that France will be saved through its own death. With all the similar images he shares in the death of Christ – reflection in the desert, feelings of being forsaken, acceptance of death, community through breaking bread, sacrifice – it is easy to make a parallel of the man with the Christ-like savior figure. As a writer, his imagery also stays in line with the historian's view of death and renewal. A historical moment creates a fissure with the past, collecting all of its meaning only to redefine itself in the present. His part in the war was certainly not without importance, but his witness account of the feeling of France rises above the military decorations he later received. As a result of his mission to Arras, he was awarded the Croix de guerre, but the citation can only pale in comparison to the rich language in which he described his own sense of sacrifice and his own idea of France: "Officer uniting the finest intellectual and moral qualities, constantly offering himself for the most dangerous missions. Brilliantly succeeded in two photographic reconnaissance missions. Is a model of duty and the spirit of sacrifice for the personnel of the unit" (Robinson 98).

LA MORT DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

The disappearance of Saint-Exupéry in 1944 remained a mystery for more than a half century. It was not until 1998 that a fisherman found his bracelet in his net off the coast of Marseille. Subsequent recovery of his P-38 (found in 2000 and removed from the sea in 2003) confirmed that he did not disappear into the desert, like many felt would have well coincided with the story of the *Le petit prince* (*The Little Prince*). Furthermore, claims by German war pilots that he had been shot down became widely accepted; yet, there is still some speculation

better right to sit down at their table and be silent with them? The right is dearly bought; but it is a dear right. It is the right to be, and thus to escape non-being." (399)

today as to the actual pilot who did it. These findings also put off any possible thoughts of an intentional suicide mission or simple mechanical failure. No matter the speculation, Saint-Exupéry was last seen 31 July 1944, nearly two months after the D-Day Invasion and nearly one month prior to the Liberation of Paris. He departed from Bastia-Borgo Aerodrome for a photographic reconnaissance mission over the area of Grenoble and Annecy.

It had also been slightly more than a year after his return to the war following his exile in New York, from 1941-1943. It was there that he finished writing and published *Pilote de guerre* and *Flight to Arras* in 1942. He was committed to writing the book as an effort to help convince the United States to enter the war, that in reading about the sacrifices of France and its aviation, that Americans would see the need for aiding the Allied effort. Its reception was not without mention; upon its release *Time* named it as “The most important book yet written about this war” (Robinson 111). Clearly, though, the attack on Pearl Harbor was much more a motivator than the book for Americans to enter the war. Other voices were equally instrumental in preparing the spirit of Allied commitment to the war: Churchill’s speeches were resonating in London; and Richard Hillary’s *Falling through Space*, also published in 1942, told the story of the Battle of Britain.

It was *Le petit prince*, published in 1943, which left its indelible mark on France, and the world. Translated into over 250 languages, and the third highest selling book in the world, the clarity of its message is well received. This was Saint-Exupéry’s last book published since *Citadelle* remained a work in progress upon his death. Meanwhile, he had fervently published his “Message to Young Americans,” giving them the mental capacity to enter the war, his “Lettre aux Français” (“Call to Frenchmen”), which ignited the French spirit to regain France, and

“Lettre à un otage” (“Letter to a Hostage”) which explained his desire to rejoin his Group 2/33 in the war effort.

Of all the themes and legacies in his literature, though, the spirit of *Pilote de guerre* is one of self-sacrifice. It does not imply a useless sacrifice but, rather, a commitment to be part of the whole. The savior figure in the novel is found in Saint-Exupéry’s commitment and humility in his role. He stands as an example of what the individual must do: “Chacun est responsable de tous” (Each is responsible for all). His figure is built on relationships that alone can give meaning to the absurdity of war. He builds on his image of a responsible man, one that envisions heroism through the silent competence of his models. His idea of France is built from a spirit of community that he carries from its past, but he engages soulfully in the present. In its eleventh hour, if a miracle were to save France, it would be through the same savior figure that Saint-Exupéry exemplifies in his text.

CHAPTER II – THE SOLDIER

FORGING A MYTH

The expression of professional bravery and the spirit of adventure in Saint-Exupéry's early novels are part of his legacy that, still today, many French aviators will admit have influenced them. The figure of the aviator evolved over the interwar period, though, in large part due to Saint-Exupéry's own maturing perspective from the air. As an older flyer, he was much more inclined to write about the spirit of France or the responsibility of mankind together, rather than the pioneering spirit of aviation alone. The internal struggle of the war pilot during World War II, as exemplified in *Pilote de guerre*, is further tied to this more reflective side of the pilot on a personal journey.

This journey continues in Jules Roy's *La Vallée heureuse*; "Jules Roy, en admirateur de ce pionnier, a poursuivi la réflexion sur la guerre, là où Saint-Exupéry l'avait interrompue," as Jeannine Lepesant-Hayat states in "Quand Jules Roy raconte ses guerres" (110). Rather than flying the reconnaissance missions and witnessing the invasion of France, however, Roy takes part in the nighttime bombing flights of the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) over Germany and parts of France. He is among the small number of Frenchmen who came to England as part of the Free French Forces to answer de Gaulle's call. Roy's commitment to the war is more than response to the fervor of the moment, however, since he is a career soldier, and was molded for duty that way from an early age. He grew up with his own models of bravery in pursuit of certain ideals and, in terms of the aviator image and authorship, it is without question that Saint-Exupéry was among the central figures that bolstered this image.

ALGERIA

To say that Saint-Exupéry affected Jules Roy is to recognize not just the content, but also the style of his writing. Furthermore, though the two rarely encountered each other personally, their mutual esteem is well documented.⁸⁶ This is not to say, however, that the two were mere reflections of each other; on a whole, Roy's writing reveals much less optimism than the hero in *Pilote de guerre*. Where Saint-Exupéry's novel about the Battle of France speaks of a country on the brink of war, shocked and confused with its vulnerability before the enemy, Roy's *La Vallée heureuse* is a tale of fatigue, tension, and disenchantment toward the end of conflict.

In 1943, just after Allied victory in Tunis, Roy meets Saint-Exupéry in Laghouat, Algeria, where his squadron was awaiting repairs to the planes. Despite the recent Allied success, the general feeling at the base was frustration. For some time, the attitude was that France had fallen silent, and Roy was personally anxious to get back to fighting. For his part, Saint-Exupéry had just been authorized to return to the war, rejoining his Group 2/33 there. In this one encounter we can see the embodiment of the mythical presence he embodied, and Roy's reverence and curiosity for what he represents:

J'occupais alors, à l'*Hôtel Transatlantique* de Laghouat, un petit appartement de deux pièces. La première chambre, comme pour en sortir, était

⁸⁶ In an unsent letter to Jules Roy, however, Saint-Exupéry expresses his concern of a certain disillusionment he fears that Roy held for him during his exile in New York. He had heard that Roy had categorized him as a "salaud" for not rallying behind de Gaulle. Although this accusation may have never taken place, it is true that despite its fairly clear message, some misinterpreted *Pilote de guerre* as an attack on France and loss in faith with the French spirit. His intention was, in fact, the opposite, as he explains in his *Lettre au général Z* (*Œuvres complètes I* 354-355). Saint-Exupéry's general stance on the matter is that of reconciliation, as he takes one of his common themes in the letter to Roy: "Mon ami est souvent celui qui pense contre moi car il m'augmente" or "Peut m'importe, bien au contraire, que vous exploriez un autre chemin. Ça double les chances de trouver" (336). In fact, he also says in the letter how he does not judge Roy for his royalist views under Pétain, or for his newfound allegiance to Gaullism and the efforts of the Free French Forces.

vide. Un soir, je venais à peine de m'endormir (la lumière électrique fournie par la génératrice de l'oasis était coupée à onze heures), qu'un bruit de pas et de voix m'éveilla. Je compris qu'on installait un camarade près de moi. Je reconnus l'une des voix, mais l'autre, sourde et brève, me fit tressaillir. Je l'avais entendue deux ans plus tôt. Je la retrouvai subitement dans ma mémoire : ce ne pouvait être que celle de Saint-Exupéry. Mon voisin demeura seul, ouvrit des valises, fit couler l'eau dans le lavabo, puis le lit geignit longuement sous son poids. De l'autre côté de la cloison, celui en qui j'avais deviné Saint-Exupéry souffla et gémit un peu. Il craqua une allumette et l'odeur douceâtre du tabac américain m'arriva. (51-52)

The return of Saint-Exupéry to the fighting was an illogical choice. It was not the preference of his comrades in French aviation, like Gavoille who now commanded the *escadrille* (detachment) of P-38 Lightning aircraft from Group 2/33, nor was it the favor of the general literary community that saw his fighting as a risk of losing the prized thoughts of the author. Nonetheless, he was fulfilling a commitment to *participer* (take part), since he was only at ease while witnessing the struggle from within. He was now 43 years old and rather ill at ease in the cockpit with some of the newer equipment. Furthermore, although his heart may have been with his group, his mind was often on his writing.⁸⁷ He was already working fervently to put his thoughts in writing when he arrived in Laghouat. From the passage below, we can tell that he had been up late writing when Roy meets with him in the morning. Despite all this, or because of it, his presence was a jolt to the Roy's outlook; his model was being true to his word and following through on the message of *Pilote de guerre*. Saint-Exupéry carried with him the spirit

⁸⁷ He was known to circle for extra passes in the landing area in order to complete sentences of his book – at this time, he was working on *Citadelle*, which was incomplete when he disappeared in 1944.

of his words in the flesh. For the aspiring writer, he was the embodiment of his own thoughts as they were now together in the same struggle in the air.

Le lendemain matin, je frappai à la porte de communication et j'entrai prudemment en m'excusant. C'était bien Saint-Exupéry, déjà éveillé, à demi assis dans son lit, la cigarette aux lèvres, ses yeux d'oiseau de nuit tout écarquillés de pensée. Il était un peu interloqué de mon intrusion qu'il expliquait mal, et moi-même je n'osais lui parler. Sa chambre étroite était encombrée de belles valises béantes, de linge fin, et, sur la cheminée, il avait déposé un petit réchaud à alcool solidifié sur lequel il avait fait du thé. Je bredouillai, fis quelques gestes et m'éclipsai, le laissant abasourdi. Saint-Exupéry était revenu parmi nous. (52-53)

JULIUS, THE SOLDIER

Jean Louis Roy, Jules Roy's son, wrote the following of his father: "L'image que Jules Roy a laissée de lui est très réussie: volonté, audace, puissance, noblesse, rigueur, fidélité, morale. Un pur, un preux, un chevalier" (55). It's an image that would give him great pride. Much of his life was dedicated to vocational fields that provided the rigor and morals he hoped to espouse. He was said to have had a "cœur romain" (Roman heart), from which he derived much of his sense of virility(103). At the same time, he was often described as "déchiré" (troubled), and his restlessness and constant pursuit of action earned him the knick name "l'intranquille." He was a seminarian, but found himself at odds with the restrictive lifestyle and at times blind faith of his superiors. He entered the army, drawn by its coded ideals and the imagery of his brother's uniform; here, he flourished, but found himself caught in resource-deprived service that did little fighting. Eventually, in 1937, he entered the air force, only to become a part of the defunct military serving under the Vichy regime. Aviation itself was the image of chivalry for him, as he

dreamed of following in the ranks of flyers from World War I like Guynemer and experiencing the adventure that Saint-Exupéry had written about in his earlier novels, or being a part of the *esprit de corps* that Joseph Kessel described in *L'Équipage* during the inter-war years. In the spirit of these men, Roy found his expression through aviation as it liberated him from the confines of the rigor he nonetheless appreciated in the military society. In *Mémoires barbares*, he wrote: “Ma vraie et unique passion, c’était l’avion, tragique et funeste besoin de quitter le sol et de s’aventurer ailleurs. Nos courses à travers le fantastique faisaient, de nous des hommes d’une autre espèce” (Roy, Jean Louis 65)

This ideal, though, is not what he experiences in the “Happy Valley,” which is the ironic nickname created by the crews for the industrial zone of the Ruhr Valley where they flew the majority of their missions. First of all, the type of flying with the bomber crews differs greatly from the chivalrous image of a solitary pilot in a fighter plane; he is not the lone knight on his horse meeting face-to-face with his opponent. On the contrary, he flew with five other members of the crew: a pilot, a navigator, a radio operator, and two gunners (one in the nose and the other in the tail). In fact, although Roy was a trained pilot, his role in the Halifax aircraft was as a bombardier, like a second navigator; he was actually the captain of his aircraft and primarily responsible for the timely release of bombs on targets. Part of the personal anxiety is tied to understanding that some of the bombs he was responsible to drop fell on civilians and, even worse, on some of his fellow citizens in French cities and towns. Almost all the bombing raids by the R.A.F. were conducted at night, whereas American crews flew daylight “precision” bombing. Since the R.A.F. bombs were released into the darkness of the sky, often in the obscurity of broken cloud formations, Roy saw only the lights of Allied ground forces illuminating the target, or the bursts and tracers of German artillery and intercepting fighters.

Furthermore, the tightness of the formation flying was an inherent risk of its own. It was a tactical necessity to improve the statistically challenging scenario of penetrating German airspace with the massive numbers of aircraft required to improve bombing effectiveness. Additionally, the regulations mandated that navigation lights be turned off once leaving the British coast to enhance the element of surprise. The nature of these risks to the crew is a central theme in *La Vallée heureuse*. In fact, the first episode is built around a mid-air collision of two of the bombers where part of one crew is lost and the other scrambles to decide whether or not to bail out. This decision alone becomes an illustration of the swiftness of actual events that test the individual perceptions of obedience to training and regulations versus sticking with a craft and its pilot that manages to pull through. The very tone of this ambiguity is part of what Clausewitz calls the *fog of war*; in Roy's description, though, it becomes part of the constant anxiety that afflicts the crew. He makes sense of it all through his perseverance and ideals of chivalrous soldiering, but with this comes a growing contempt for the hierarchy of the bomber command and the absurdity of the situations he faces.

INTO THE FIRE

In *Pilote de guerre*, Saint-Exupéry describes his flight toward the fire in Arras. Likewise, he describes the heroism of a father who goes into a burning building to rescue his son; he uses fire to symbolize the destructive force in his country. In the case of Jules Roy, at least initially, fire is a creative force. For him, it is the heat that forms the character of the soldier, like a blacksmith forges his sword. This is part of the soldier image that we see deployed in *La Vallée heureuse* as it unfolds: the desire to fight, the tests of endurance, the obedience to the rules, the stretching of wits, and the ultimate hope for rest. For Chevrier, Roy's protagonist, the "Happy Valley" is the place where he will be *forged* into a warrior, proving to himself each time that he

will make it through despite the odds: “Il allait s’y plonger l’âme et le corps, comme un fer qui doit devenir une épée, un étrave de navire ou un soc. Il lui semblait que le fer sous le feu dût changer de nature jusqu’à devenir lui-même du feu. Pour que le marteau pût l’écraser et lui donner forme d’arme ou d’outil, le fer devait posséder encore sa nature de fer, mais aussi la vertu du feu.” (Roy 63)⁸⁸

Although Chevrier saw the “Happy Valley” as a terrifying place, it was the testing grounds for his physical and emotional wits. On one side, he saw the toils of the sorties like a ritual; the crews referred to the flights over the valley as going “au charbon” (138)⁸⁹, and they worked like miners or factory laborers performing mundane tasks, with no intrinsic glory. On the other side, surviving the missions was more than a run up against the odds; they were part of the process that made the crews into hardened soldiers. All the negotiation with their fears and anxieties was part of the process of making them numb to the fact that they were facing dangers each time.

Loin de fuir l’épreuve, Chevrier l’appelait comme le malade que seule une opération peut sauver. « Que j’en meure ou que j’en vive, mais que ce calice s’éloigne de moi... » C’était l’essentiel de la réponse attendue. Le feu le réduirait en cendre ou le durcirait ; il sortirait de là poussière ou épée. Là, les armes seuls

⁸⁸ “He was going to throw himself into it body and soul, as whole-hearted as a piece of iron that is to be forged into a sword, the stem of a ship or a plough-share. It seemed to him that in the fire the iron must change its nature and turn into fire itself. For the hammer to be able to flatten it and shape it into a weapon or tool, iron had still to possess its iron nature but it needed the quality of fire as well.” (38)

⁸⁹ “Down the pit!” (98)

gardaient une valeur. Il allait être placé sur l'enclume et frappé, et il ignorait le son qu'il allait rendre. (76)⁹⁰

The role of myth in *La Vallée heureuse*, then, stems from this soldier image. He embarks on his journey as a man who will be tested and built into the ideal veteran of these experiences: one who resists the temptations to avoid risk and who is constructed from the same codes that put him in harm's way. His ideals of the aviation world are an extension of his adherence to the rigor that hardens him as a man, making him worthy of the stature he aims to match. It is an escape from mediocrity and a response to his sense of self-definition.

From this perspective, the "Happy Valley" can also be seen as a metaphor that symbolizes an ideal struggle for Roy's image of the masculine hero figure: it resides in the *action* of the moment, void of the *anxieties* of troubles to come because of the requirement to be imminently present. He need not worry about the nobility of his action during the mission since it is dominated by the act of survival in the myriad threats in the air. The periods of inaction that precede the flights, however, create the pensive anxiousness that revolves around the upcoming challenges. Furthermore, the reconsideration of particular decisions that are made in the time-compressed milestones of the mission, once on the ground in post-flight, cause anguish related to the responsibility of command. In Roy's writing, we get a more intimate picture of what this struggle means for the aviator negotiating his thoughts. Chevrier reveals his doubts, his

⁹⁰ "Far from shunning the test, Chevrier clamored for it, like a sick man for the operation that alone can save him. "Let me live or let me die, I don't care which, so long as this cup of bitterness is taken from my lips..." That was the essential part of the answer he wanted. The fire would either reduce him to ashes or harden him, turn him into cinders or into tempered steel. There the only values to write were the values of the weapons of war. He would be placed on the anvil and struck with the hammer – and he did not know what sounds he would make beneath its blows." (48-49)

insecurities, and his hopes. He also uncovers the disillusionment of a man who has held himself to a set of ideals that seem to be fading in the world of the mechanized military.⁹¹

THE BOOK OF A MAN

Jules Roy's compatriot, Albert Camus – fellow *pied noir* from Algeria and Nobel laureate for literature in 1957 – said of *La Vallée heureuse* that Roy wrote “naturally” about his own sensibilities, his fears, and his sense of courage. “At this degree of simplicity and honesty, a man should be accepted or rejected as a whole. [...] In other words, it is the book of a man. What other praise can I add?” (Camus 246) This is not to say that the book is written from the perspective of a masculine figure to establish his authority on the subject of the war or to glorify his image; rather, the book is written in a way that reveals the inner vulnerabilities of that figure. In many ways, the main character, Chevrier, is testing his own limits of male responsibilities that require action in war, but he expresses his sensibilities along the way. His reluctance, at times, to embrace his role shows that he is aware of his own insecurities and fears. It is through literature that Roy *expresses* and *exposes* the unspoken fears of the man who progresses through the “forge” of the bombing missions and all the struggles they bring. This is why Gilbert Sigaux, in his preface to the book, explains that Jules Roy expresses “une certaine idée de l’homme” (a certain idea of man) in his writing, and that *La Vallée heureuse* reveals “une tendresse virile” (a virile tenderness) (12, 17). In this sense, the battle is a mere pretext for the man’s struggle; the presence of danger is what catalyzes the need to define his own set of values. In his lucid accounts, we get a picture of the war and all its horrors, but we also get the story of a man trying to be true to himself.

⁹¹ Leo Braudy explains how this is a trend of the World War II period, in fact. The loss of personalized warfare changes the perceptions of valor.

Part of the ambivalence in the character of Chevrier, however, comes from recognizing the changing wartime context of his narration. Already with trench warfare in World War I, the type of tactics challenged the sense of honor and nobility, where victory could only be gained by phenomenal attrition rates. Increasingly, as warfare became more mechanized in World War II, the face of battle became more distant, more de-humanized, and more “absurd.” Cultural historian Leo Braudy suggests that French popular culture of the period mirrors the idea of “doomed heroes” that represent “an individual struggling against an indifferent world” (441). In French films, for example, Jean Gabin played a variety of roles portraying an antihero image. Notably, in Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion*, Gabin interpreted the role of Maréchal, an airman of modest background imprisoned in a castle in World War I. He eventually escapes with the help of Boeldieu, an officer of aristocratic descent. More important than breaking social norms of class affiliation or the overall antiwar message in the film⁹², Braudy suggests, is the representation of changing male images of this time period, which he says “received a philosophic foundation during World War II in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism and Albert Camus’s idea of the absurd, both of which emphasize action over any idealized or essentialized definition of personal nature” (441).

The masculinity figure’s association with *action* is not entirely new; however, with the theme of the *absurd* nature of warfare it becomes a more entrenched part of the male’s virtuous answer to his condition. Furthermore, it is coupled with a more “mysterious melancholy-enveloped hero” image that represents a reflective man who is troubled by indifference in his plight (442). This seemingly contradictory coupling characterizes Chevrier’s conflict with his

⁹² Despite the antiwar message of this film, and Gabin’s departure to Hollywood in 1940, he eventually participated as part of the Free French Forces and the Liberation of France in World War II. He was decorated with the Médaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre.

own “virility.” So being “true to himself” can only come from revealing a “tenderness,” which is traditionally considered a more feminine trait. Furthermore, the reflection expressed in writing is construed as more passive and, therefore, less virile pursuit. This fits the perception of men and women during the first half of the Twentieth Century as a whole, particularly over the course of World War I, as George Mosse points out in the imagery of the time: “The men at the front saw women largely in a passive role as nurses or prostitutes. Marianne, for example, as she appeared during the war, did not march or fight among the *poilu* but floated above them, exhorting them to do battle” (107-108). The point here, of course, is not to disregard the various contributions of women on the home front, or in the war effort overall during this time, but merely to acknowledge the perception of the period regarding masculinity. It implies that more actively engaged men fit the mold of vigor and virility, whereas those not involved in fighting or engaged in more passive pursuits, like contemplation and writing, were placed in a more feminine camp⁹³.

To add to this association of masculine *action* in conjunction with the hero figure, a look at correspondence from the iconic Guynemer with his parents reveals a terse style dedicated to descriptions of his glorious pursuits. Henry Bordeaux’s 1918 biography of the flyer, *La Vie héroïque de Guynemer : le chevalier de l’air* (*Georges Guynemer: Knight of the Air*) describes his letters as void of personal reflection that would fit the “tenderness” side of a writer. Bordeaux describes it this way:

His correspondence with [his parents] is full of airplanes, his flights, and then his enemy-chasing. His letters have no beginning and no ending, but plunge at once

⁹³ A simultaneous development during, and particularly after the war, is what has been called “littérature engagée.” Camus was editor-in-chief for *Combat* from 1943 to 1947, for example, which was a newspaper of the Resistance with contributions from writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux. Overall, the period after the Liberation of France was characterized by an abundance of publications that engaged in the socio-political climate in a way that replaced violent action.

into action. He himself was nothing but action. Only that? the reader will ask.

Action was his reason for existing, his heart, his soul – action in which his whole being fastened on his prey. (67)

In the more than one hundred fifty letters addressed to his family, Bordeaux points out, only one landscape appears in a blunt description of a landscape, summarized in broken verse: “Uninterrupted descent, volplanning for 800 meters. Superb view (sunset)...” (66)

Jules Roy, in contrast, includes colorful description in his writing and mixes action with reflection and sensibility. Like Guynemer’s correspondence, *La Vallée heureuse* enters immediately into the action of a mission; yet, his book is more immersed in his setting and the feelings of the crew. Though troubled by his own thoughts during times of inaction, he includes them with his descriptions of action, as part of the fluidity of his text, as we see already in the opening paragraph:

A la côte anglaise que les nuages recouvraient de leur édredon, les feux de position furent allumés et la route grouilla soudain d’étoiles rouges et vertes. Elles étaient bonnes à voir. Les équipages les reprenaient où ils les avaient laissés à leur passage, comme une lampe posée près d’une clé en quittant la maison. Ils rentraient. Ils étaient chez eux. Ils piquèrent doucement vers la couche de duvet qu’il fallait percer pour atteindre la base, puis la terre apparut avec les rosaces des aérodromes et les phares de rappel assemblés en faisceaux, trois par trois, comme des épées plantés dans le ciel. (23)⁹⁴

⁹⁴ “As they came to the English coast, which lay beneath a blanket of clouds, the bombers switched on their navigation lights and the sky suddenly came alive with red and green stars. It warmed the crews’ hearts to see them. It was as if they were picking them up from where they had left them on the outward journey, as you might leave a lump outside a house close to the doorkey for your return. They were on the way home... They were home. They

“THERE I WAS...”

The responsibility of the writer who acts as a witness to history is a balance between exercising the freedom to say what he wants, and fulfilling the duty to say what he must. It's a matter of gathering into words the emotions and physical sensations that are particular to one's point of view, while recognizing the conscience from which he draws this perspective. What makes its universal appeal, then, is not the simple act of capturing the actions and events, but a manner of writing openly, without constraints.

This was not as evidently done in the period of France's Occupation. A spirit of accommodation was rampant in France, and many had to make choices to remain silent, disguise the voice of their message, or write from a position of physical or emotional exile. Already occupied France had entered into an environment of collaboration, which Philippe Burin characterized in four key elements: the feeling of constraint, material interest, personal complacency, and ideological connivance (Burin 183). This was a matter of survival; some had the courage to write despite the consequences, but the Occupation created an atmosphere of limited expression that tainted the accuracy of the moment.

In fact, Gisèle Sapiro presents the full range of challenges and choices of writers during that time in *La guerre des écrivains (French Writer's War)*. As she points out, many fell victim to writing under the auspices of *art for art's sake*, or simply as a matter of *distinction*. At the same time, she explains how others blamed the “mauvais maîtres” (bad masters) who had facilitated the French defeat, or the intellectual egotism that had thrown to the wayside the values

began gliding down gently towards the layer of fleecy clouds which hid them from their base. Suddenly the ground appeared, with aerodromes spread out like a garland of winking rosettes, and the clear flarepath lights, set in threes, like swords planted in the sky.” (9)

of “l’honnête homme” (honest man) (110). It is, therefore, in the wake of this period that *La Vallée heureuse* was published in 1946. Roy nonetheless initially suffered consequences for his openness – he was incarcerated by his Etat-major for two weeks when the novel was released. He left his incarceration period with accolades, however, receiving the Renaudot Prize.⁹⁵

Albert Camus says it best: *La Vallée heureuse* “deals with a personal experience, which the author scarcely disguises. After ten pages, it is obvious that Chevrier is Roy himself.” (244) His book is not entirely autobiographical since certain elements are fictionalized, mostly to illustrate the thoughts of the characters and the connection with an idea of France during the end of the war – an idea that will be explored later in this chapter. Still, the nature of the flights and the details of how they were conducted are not fictional; he represents them as he lived them. According to Flight Lieutenant Denis Hornsey, who earned the Distinguished Flying Cross during the war: “No book I have yet read portrays so exactly, graphically and movingly what went on in the minds of the airmen sent on these terrible and hazardous bombing missions.”

Therefore, Roy remains loyal to his personal commitment to writing what he feels is his “true picture” of the war. He holds nothing back while sharing an emotional journey, albeit through the eyes of Chevrier, nor does he exercise restraint while assessing the varying levels of respect he holds for the commanders in the R.A.F. The men are exposed in their nakedness, and the flying environment is often revealed in its absurdity. The bombing missions were not something the men discussed on the ground, but in the case of the book, they are captured in high fidelity. This is also what Camus alludes to when he says that Roy writes naturally about his

⁹⁵ The Théophraste-Renaudot Prize, founded in 1926, is second to the Goncourt Prize. Some of its prior winners included Louis-Ferdinand Céline for *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and Louis Aragon for *Les Beaux quartiers* (1936). Subsequent to Roy, its winners included such works as *La Modification* (1957) by Michel Butor and *Les Choses* (1965) by Georges Perec.

experiences. “Today, the raw material of experience is provided by men whom no one respects, and their frenzied embraces, called war and revolution,” Camus adds. “What is the point of restraint? Let the meat bleed, since that is its function.” (243)⁹⁶ It is the function of his writing, then, to bridge the gap of muted men like Chevrier who would often return from their missions and enter the solitude of their own thoughts. It is not a manner of beating his chest and touting the success of destroying the German industrial machine; instead, it is a manner of exposing the humanity of it all while maintaining the different shades of men who had to accept that responsibility. This is how he, as Camus suggests, “manages to maintain a certain delicacy in spite of the killing” (243).

CHARACTER FLAWS

The rawness of Chevrier’s testimony, and the “virile tenderness” he evokes in his writing is part of the nature of flying with his crew. When they take off for each mission, as he describes, “l’équipage est pur” (112). They empty their pockets of all personal effects and photos; the *sanitization* process is out of operational necessity, in part to prevent the enemy from obtaining something to taunt them with during interrogation if they had to parachute into hostile territory. Psychologically, though, it has the effect of centering the crew on their singular job in the plane and reducing them to the simplicity of their physical self, confronting the tasks and trials of that job. In the air, this is a test of wits and skills for the men; as a result, their personal flaws are

⁹⁶ Camus also was part of the principal contributors to *La Table Ronde*, which helped publish many of the unheard words after the Liberation of France. In its debut January 1948 edition, Jules Roy’s article, “Amour des armes,” appeared in company with some of the same names that praised his work in *La Vallée heureuse*; it was an assembly of present and future Nobel laureates, Académie Française members, literary critics, professors, and screen writers – Albert, Camus, Francois Mauriac, Gilbert Sigaux, Jacques Tournier, Thierry Maulnier, Roger Caillois, and others. The intention of the monthly publication and its diverse grouping of writers was stated as such: “dire librement ce qu’ils estiment être la vérité, en tout ce qui touche le destin des hommes de défendre les valeurs, de qui l’existence reçoit un sens ; non pas dans l’absolu, mais dans les circonstances réelles où ces valeurs se trouvent tous les jours impliqués, souvent menacés.” (3)

easily exposed. On the ground, inside the enclosed society of the airbase, the men are equally naked for the scrutiny of the others; commanders are quickly respected or despised according to their merit, and the *noncombatant* officers are disdained for their lack of combat exposure. The measure of the men, then, is gauged as a factor of overcoming fears and accepting responsibility. In *La Vallée heureuse*, we see many variations of this qualification.

In the first narrated mission over the “Happy Valley,” Chevrier states that he “connaissait les qualités et les défauts de chacun [de son équipage] depuis un an que l’exil les avait rassemblés et qu’il peinaient ensemble”(55)⁹⁷. With each one, Roy describes unique sets of circumstances that push their capacities and challenge their training. All of this is presented from the perspective of Chevrier as he directs the crew and shares in their confusion during the flights. We learn very little about the thoughts of the other crewmembers, who are only judged on their performance.⁹⁸ The predominant tone in his interaction with the crew, though, is that of commiseration and compassion. He is connected to them in their flight activities, to the point of saying that he feels a sense of “amour” (love). Roy easily dismisses some of the errors in his own crew since he sees them in the thick of their work. For the other crews, the support officers, or the commanding officers, however, his scrutiny is sharp.

⁹⁷ “He had known the defects and qualities of each man among them for a year now, since exile had brought them together and they worked side by side.” (32)

⁹⁸ Jules Roy’s *Le navigateur* acts like a supplement to this novel in that it provides the perspective of other flyers in his crew and in the bombing group. The navigator – the same one who bails out in the first episode of *La Vallée heureuse* – suffers from the personal dilemma of leaving the plane when it is in fact safe to land. The radio operator, too, fails to extract the antenna as part of standard procedure in the bailout and is scolded for his lack of discipline. The central plot, though, revolves around the fact that the navigator is so shaken up by the near death experience that he refuses to fly, especially with other pilots that are known to be dangerous. He takes it upon himself, though, to fly with one pilot whose vision is impaired with each night mission, unable to see the navigation lights on other bombers or the landing lights on the runway. The navigator’s empathy for the pilot’s challenges draw him in, as he literally helps him see the light during a break-through flight.

Chevrier blames the headquarters for setting up the seemingly impossible situations of the bombing raids, or the “fools” of the meteorological service for miscalculating the cloud conditions. For example, the combined effects would send them to conduct a raid in the clear visibility of moonlight over the target, which resulted in good bombing effects but poor survivability for the bombers. Chevrier’s account makes it clear that the intelligence officers were generally seen as out of harm’s way and, therefore, on a lower rung of masculine respect by the crews. The British bomber command often receives his harshest critique, especially “le colonel” who is dismissed as a “con” (idiot):

Personne n’aimait le colonel à cause de sa figure jaune et inquiète. On le subissait, en vertu de la discipline, mais on ne l’aimait pas. Il le savait et cela ajoutait à sa maladresse quand il avait à prendre la parole. Il avait peur des équipages et il voulait se montrer dur et soupçonneux pour inspirer le respect. Les gens haussaient les épaules. Chaque soir, ils se préparaient à affronter les canons, et les canons leur faisaient peur, mais pas le colonel. Ce n’était pas toujours les chefs d’équipage en titre qui commandaient à bord, mais celui dans l’équipage qui était reconnu par les autres. Les indécis et les farceurs étaient vite jugés. (38-39)⁹⁹

⁹⁹ “No one liked the colonel because of his yellow and worried face. They submitted to him, purely out of discipline, but they didn’t like him. He knew this, which added to his awkwardness when he had to speak. He feared the crews and wanted to present a harsh and suspicious image in order to draw some respect. The men shrugged their shoulders. Every night, they prepared to confront the canons, and the canons gave them fear, but not the colonel. It was not all the time that the crew commander in title actually commanded the crew, but the one amongst the crew that was recognized by the others. The indecisive ones and the fakes were quickly judged.” (Author’s translation) This section is notably absent in the translation by Edward Marsh. This could be related to the endorsement by the R.A.F., whose Air Marshall Sir Robert Saunby praises the “grim courage and endurance” of the crews (7). “Their way was the way of loneliness and bitterness, even heartbreak; redeemed only by a purpose which glowed the more brightly against this somber background,” he writes (8). Surprisingly, he also asserts further on the same page that, “at no time did we ever need to worry about the morale of our aircrews” (8). The passage cited here is the beginning of a harshly critical section on the C.O. (commanding officer) that would have followed the following sentence if included: “The noise faltered for a moment as the C.O. walked in, then continued as before.” (22) Instead, over three

Roy's action-oriented masculine image implies that officers who were not in the thick of the struggle were less a part of the men. Nothing speaks more loudly in the company of men than action, especially when considering the taciturn nature of most soldiers. As we see in *La Vallée heureuse*, Chevrier scrutinizes the men at a distance, and dislikes lulls in activity. For example, he critiques the R.A.F.'s inefficiencies that often left the men "dans les huttes où ils se levaient tard et jouaient aux fléchettes ou au billard à trous" (58)¹⁰⁰. For Chevrier, the down time was left to reflection, which most inevitably left to anxiety about the next mission or the war in general; these fears had the undesirable effect of breaking down his idealized soldier image. Furthermore, Roy's writing in the third person allows some deflection of a less "virile" image during the periods of anguish from the author himself, who is more at ease with embracing his thoughts.

DEMONS

During the cycle of one sortie, each man confronts his own set of "demons." Part of this is tied to the fears they had to overcome on the long flights to the target. Much of it, as well, is the fact that the male aviator image drives them to a solitary struggle that is less spoken about than experienced outright. Chevrier's narration is the only communication that expresses these thoughts; he keeps them to himself, and he is well aware of that existence: "Ils se comprendraient jamais très bien les uns les autres, ils n'éprouvaient jamais en temps ordinaire le désir de manger les uns à côté des autres ni d'échanger des confidences. Chevrier entendait ne

pages are left translated, including comments like, "ils le méprisaient de donner en exil une aussi pauvre image des chefs de leur pays" (40-41) (they despised him for providing, in their exile, such a poor example of leadership of their country. – Author's translation)

¹⁰⁰ "in lonely hutments where they got up late as they liked and played darts and billiards all day long." (34)

forcer personne dans le champ clos de sa vie intime.” (177)¹⁰¹ This aligns with what Braudy calls the “solitude of the wandering knight”:

Although the life of a knight and man-at-arms was typically in a group, as either a retainer amid a crowded household or a fighter struggling for life and victory on a crushingly crowded battlefield, he nonetheless became the legendary embodiment of male individualism and warrior prowess. The literary and artistic myth of his autonomy, the solitary knight on a quest to do what he believes is right, owes its genesis to effort of Christianity and chivalry to reshape the warrior heritage into a new system of values.(91)

All the mental isolation and lack of talking of the aviator’s fears, however, does not mean they are nonexistent. On the contrary, in *La Vallée heureuse* Roy writes about the ever-present feelings of anxiety about the mission. For Chevrier, the time prior to takeoff is the worst since anticipation fuels his imagination. Before each departure, he says he is “ainsi, un peu attendri et sauvage. Il pouvait demeurer assis à côté de ses gens à les écouter d’une oreille, en suivant le fil capricieux des images et des pensées”(239).¹⁰²

During the flight, the worries are channeled into the task at hand. The navigator, for example, while he sees nothing of the outside world behind the curtain of his station, works diligently in the dim light with his chart, compass, pencil, and eraser; keeping the bomber on track and on time is paramount. The gunners watch frantically for fighters as they approach the target, and have to quickly discern whether the fast-moving planes may have friendly markings

¹⁰¹ “They would never understand one another well, they never felt they wanted to eat together off duty or exchange confidences. Chevrier himself had not the smallest desire to draw anyone else over into the closed field of his private thoughts.” (128)

¹⁰² “sentimental and timid like this. He could sit up by his men and listen to their talk with only half an ear, while in his head he followed the capricious leaps and flashing pictures of his own imagination.” (178)

on the tail. The pilot is mainly concerned with running out of gas and not colliding with the closely packed members of the formation. As for Chevrier, the guardian over the entire crew as its captain, he is the one to make the ultimate decisions for hitting the target on time, stretching the limits of British flying regulations for mere survival, and enforcing the roles of each of the members of the crew. From his position, the crew cannot see his face, nor can he see theirs, but he knows the internal tension of each is only a reflection of his own: “Derrière lui aussi, il y avait tout l’équipage avec sa foule de démons domestiques en liberté sous les lampes voilés” (73)¹⁰³ On and off, though, wrapped up in the tasks at their individual stations, the fears disappear. When Chevrier leans over the bombing sight above the target, the activity of the moment suppresses his fears; it is not until he has returned that he would start the process again, and they would begin to mount (249).

So when Chevrier talk about “l’étrange sérénité du retour” (215), it is with the sinking knowledge that they have survived only temporarily, and they will soon face the same demons again, if only over a slightly different target. Their return is a custom of touching the ground, kissing it as if they are home from a long, arduous trip, and taking stock of their lives before entering back into the routine of the base:

Au retour; ce n’était pas la victoire qu’ils éprouvaient dans le secret de leur âme,
mais le soulagement de leurs nerfs, la légèreté de la bête ailée échappée au dragon,
le repos fragile de l’homme écarté d’un danger, mais promis à d’autres dangers du
même ordre régis par l’obscur et stupide loi de proportions. (129-130)¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ “The whole crew was in fact behind him, with the pressing crowd of their own private demons set free under the screened lamps.” (46)

¹⁰⁴ “When they touched down back home at the base it was not victory they savoured deep down in their hearts but relief, the lightness of the winged creature who had flown through the dragon’s claws, fragile comfort of the man

Here, Roy touches on the existential elements of the absurdity of war. In Sisyphean fashion, each time the crews return to base, their thoughts recycle the fears and anxieties of the burden that will lie ahead of them on the next sortie, as if they are walking down the hill contemplating the next effort they will have to put forth to push their rock up the to its peak. Each milestone is a faint success since they are aware of the increasingly poor odds of survival with each coming mission. Yet, the end of the war is not clear, so they are condemned to this toil without a sense of when it will be finished.

Despite this, as a response to the seemingly futile effort in which he is engaged, Chevrier remains committed to the idea of “une conquête de la liberté par les hommes” (262)¹⁰⁵. He and his crew become like emblems of Man; they choose to continue in the context of this absurdity because of the hope that they represent. In this way, Roy’s narration on the war goes beyond the recognition of the indifference in the world and the low probability of survival in their missions. He underlines the importance of existence through an optimism of acting nonetheless. Therefore, they carry on:

Tant pis si [la conquête de la liberté] finissait par rejoindre le vaste espace obscur des illusions et si l’humanité n’en était pas soulagée. Il y avait toujours des traîtres et des voleurs, et Chevrier s’était rangé une fois pour toutes du côté opposé, avec une bande de copains naïfs que se cassaient la gueule les uns après les autres ou qui attendaient de se la casser, comme Morin. (262-263)¹⁰⁶

who had escaped danger but who is promised other dangers of the same order all controlled by the same dark and stupid law of averages.” (92)

¹⁰⁵ “the conquest of freedom for mankind” (197)

¹⁰⁶ “So much worse if it only joined the vast store of other lost human illusions and humanity never drew any comfort from it. The world would always have some traitors and thieves... But Chevrier had once and for all taken

VIGNY'S HEROES

Alfred de Vigny, a 19th century Romantic poet, was a member of a noble family with a strong military heritage; he followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather in the army before he grew tired of it and ultimately pursued his literary career in his “ivory tower.” Initially, his writing is filled with reverence for military culture; yet, much of his later work shows a critical eye for the faults of its social hierarchy. His writing maintains a certain aloofness that shows his disillusionment with the military system. Jules Roy makes only one reference to Vigny in *La Vallée heureuse*, but his general influence in the novel is omnipresent.

In many ways, Roy's writing revisits the same process that we see with Vigny: idealization and great expectations followed by humanization and troubled loyalties. In fact, like Vigny's self-reflexive writing, Roy's process of expressing his conflict of allegiance to the army and to Marshall Pétain provides a basis for understanding the same type of ambivalence in *La Vallée heureuse*, in terms of the soldier who becomes a writer. The image of the writer who explores his own understanding of the absurdity of the war comprises his more ambivalent or “tender” side, whereas the image of the soldier presumes his more “virile” side that is prone to action. The distance he takes from this action allows him to access the anxieties involved in the struggle of the crews.

In his own *Amour des armes*, Roy describes his restlessness growing up, and his strong desire to a part of the adventure the military seemed to offer. As he explains, a boy who reveres

his stand in the opposite camp, along with a band of naïve and simple men who were breaking their necks on after the other, or, like Morin, firmly waiting for them to be broken.” (197)

his father will aim to mirror his accomplishments.¹⁰⁷ This sentiment is clear in the following passage from *Servitude et Grandeur Militaires*, quoted by Roy as he opens his reflection:

J'aimai toujours à écouter et, quand j'étais tout enfant, je pris de bonne heure ce goût sur les genoux blessés de mon vieux père. Il me nourrit d'abord de l'histoire de ses campagnes et, sur ses genoux, je trouvai la guerre assise à côté de moi ; il me montra la guerre dans ses blessures, la guerre dans les parchemins et le blason de ses pères, la guerre dans leurs grands portraits cuirassés, suspendus en Beauce, dans un vieux château. Je vis dans la noblesse une grande famille de soldats héréditaires, et je ne pensai plus qu'à m'élever à la taille d'un soldat. (87)

As Roy expands the legacy of an idealized soldier in the piece, though, and in his continuing series entitled *Le Métier des armes*, he notes the bitterness and disillusionment that often accompanies a maturing process in the profession, as was the case for Vigny, and for him. Yet, as Roy notes in the article, these types of illusions are needed for the next generation of heroes to take up the task of soldering: “Il est bon que nos amertumes ne dépassent pas notre bouche et que nos fils soient tentés d'accomplir notre œuvre avec l'arme qui tombe de nos mains lasses” (87). In fact, part of his motivation to transfer from the army into the air force in 1938 stemmed from the lack of action he was seeing. He relished in the rigor of the army, which he equated with the “saveur” of his existence, and he experienced what he calls the “joies viriles” and “ivresse intellectuelle” in commanding the training of young recruits (89). However, the

¹⁰⁷ In Roy's case, his half-brother's participation in the army was more an influence than his father. Jules Roy was born to Mathilde Roy and Henri Dematons, who was a schoolmaster in Rovigo, Algeria, where the boy grew up. At the time Mathilde was married to Louis-Alfred Roy, a former gendarme, but he disowned Jules and his mother during his baptism, in a drunken rage. It was not until later in life that Jules learned that he was born as a result of an extra-marital love affair. Catharine Brosman notes that the implications of his illegitimacy did not appear in his printed works until after 1960 (5).

thirst for danger and a “sentiment royal” called him to enter the air force, largely in revolt against the lack of combat with the army (94). In part, the mere fact that each takeoff presumes a certain amount of danger and risk, even without combat, the profession of aviation appealed to the restless nature in Roy. As he announces in *Le Métier des armes*, he needed the adventure: “Tant que je vivais, je ne pouvais pas être jardinier” (980)¹⁰⁸.

So while Chevrier describes the profession of aviation, he also balances between the moments of reverence for the rigor and routine and the underlying banality of these same aspects. The regulations highly emphasized with the bomber crews in the R.A.F. help to minimize the same dangers that attracted some of its flyers in the first place; even those are questioned constantly by Chevrier out of pure self-preservation. The general rule to turn off the navigation lights, for example, once heading over the English Channel toward the targets, is often ignored in order to prevent mid-air collisions within the formation. The discussion with the crew pertaining to when it was okay to leave them on is a recurring event; in fact, it is their decision to not follow the rules that saves them from crashing into other bombers – their first and most imminent threat during the flights.

At times, Roy describes the crews as wholly committed to carrying out the mission. Even when their timing is late and they would be expected to return for reducing losses, Chevrier compensates and attacks the target anyway, fully aware that the crew would be deflated with a failed attempt. At these times, he sings praises of the men as valiant, unwavering examples of heroism, like the ideals cherished in Vigny’s writing. Chevrier reflects on them here with his subtle reference to the author:

¹⁰⁸ “As long as I lived, I couldn’t be a gardener.” (Author’s translation) This statement is in direct contrast with the statement by Saint-Exupéry in a letter to Pierre Dalloz dated 30 July, 1944, the day before his disappearance: “Moi j’étais fait pour être jardinier.” (*Œuvres complètes II* 1050) (“I was meant to be a gardener.” – Author’s translation)

En entendant rire l'équipage, il refoula son émotion. « Braves types, braves types », songea-t-il. « Ce sont les mêmes, sans les machines, se dit-il qu'a dépeints Vigny. Ils ne se plaignaient pas. Ils allaient partout où il leur était ordonné d'aller, simplement parce que cela entraînait dans le plan général d'emploi de l'armée et qu'ils appartenaient par vocation à cette armée. (236)¹⁰⁹

At other times, the general feeling of the crews is uselessness, a void of meaning or of a definitive end in sight. He contrasts the seamless image of obedience and professionalism, then, with a feeling of futility that overwhelmed the men who were entered the war as a last resort and felt lost in the pursuit of an abstract idea of freedom:

L'armée, déjà, en avait beaucoup usé parmi eux. L'exil les avait fatigués. Quelquefois ils flottaient comme des navires désemparés dans la tempête de la guerre et dans chacun de leurs actes presque inutiles en apparence. Avec un sombre désintéressement, ils portaient déverser leurs cinq tonnes de tolite qui ne craquerait que sous le poids d'un certain nombre de milliers de tonnes. (237)¹¹⁰

This feeling dominates the missions of the seasoned crews, causing them to focus on the particular parts of the routine rather than the general crusade for freedom or chivalric obedience of orders they may have once perceived. By nature of the mission, of course, this sort of *compartmentalization* is necessary for aviators to carry out the physical and mental tasks in flight,

¹⁰⁹ "When he heard the crew laughing he buried his feelings again. "Fine chaps, fine chaps," he thought to himself. "Except for the aircraft," he thought, "they are just like the men Vigny described. They never complained. They always went wherever they were told to go – because they knew it was part of the plan for the entire army and they belonged to that army by profession." (175-176)

¹¹⁰ "Military service had worn a lot the them out, used them right up, already. Exile had made them weary and strained. Sometimes they drifted like disabled ships in the tempest of war, most of the things they were asked to do seemed to be so futile. With a grim feeling of disinterest they went off to unload their five tons of explosives and incendiaries into the hell of some town they were attacking, knowing that it would only really crack under the weight of several thousands of tons." (176)

but the sense of tedium that accompanies the missions over the Happy Valley is also paired with the increasingly unlucky run against the *law of averages*. Eventually, their “number was to come up,” so focusing on the passing of milestones is more of a coping technique than a celebration: passing the thirteen mission means having the nose of the fuselage decorated with both the thirteenth and fourteenth markers at once to avoid the superstitious number; passing the twentieth mission means breaking the barrier of the average life of the crews; and passing the thirtieth mission – a number scarcely attained – generally means a prolonged leave of absence from the war, granted by the R.A.F. to prevent over-straining the crews.

UNE CERTAINE IDÉE DE LA GLOIRE

All the restlessness and anxious enthusiasm that Roy expresses in *Le Métier des armes* are also evident in *La Vallée heureuse*. He had gone through a kind of personal metamorphosis, however, through this self-reflection on loyalty, to the army and to Pétain. His decision to desert to England, a move he makes after the Allied invasion in North Africa in 1942, is not a simple one. He had sworn his loyalties to serve under that leadership and to follow orders. Furthermore, his faith in the Allies is not without falter; he even goes so far as to name them “conquérants” (conquerors) that could just as easily take over the extension of the French Empire in Africa as it could work toward the liberation of France from there. It is during this time that he decides to join the Free French Forces. This is just prior to his meeting with Saint-Exupéry in Laghouat. It is in part because of his distaste with the inaction of the Vichy government and the French army to engage its occupiers; it is also because of the exhausted possibilities of making a difference in his current status with the air force. He joined the R.A.F. just as much to join the action out of his uneasiness for stalemate as to take part in the liberation of France.

Still, the difficulty of this choice is deeply rooted in Roy's sense of chivalry in a soldier who unfailingly serves the leader of the country. Furthermore, this sense of loyalty may be developed from an early age as a simple case of following the model of one's ancestors. This also comes with great expectations of achieving some idealized level of achievement, a pursuit of glory. It was more common in the time of Vigny for men to achieve status through military progression than it is in our time, and Roy was greatly influenced by the romanticized images in Vigny's writing.

The sheer experience of having to analyze his loyalties to his army and his country, therefore, was contrary to many of these same ideals. As Roy writes in *Le Métier des armes*, he is torn by his thoughts of being disloyal to his comrades and to himself. In all the confusion and ambiguity, he seeks an underlying truth. "Je devinais que ma vérité m'échapperait toujours. C'était cela qui m'angoissait le plus," he writes (975). In the end, the decision to obey or disobey is interconnected to his perception of an honorable and glorious outcome. His ambivalence, therefore, results from the very human predicament that there is no ultimate and seamless truth. Being "true to himself," for that matter is a negotiation of the various allegiances he perceives as a soldier and as a freethinking man.

The complexity of his situation is indicative of the ambiguity of trust under the Vichy government. In Roy's case the truth was something more than blind obedience, which begins to explain the seemingly apathetic adherence to a strict idea of glory by the aircrew. Their chivalrous ideals were tied to something more than "patrie" alone, since the environment of the Occupation clouded that very idea. In Jean-Claude Brisville's introduction to Jules Roy's *Passion et mort de Saint-Exupéry*, he attempts to explain this same opaque allegiance, "une

certaine idée de la gloire”(11). The action they take is a result of this vague reflection that searches for the central validity to their efforts, as he explains:

Accordant leur courage à leur intelligence, trouvant leur liberté dans l’accomplissement de leur vocation, ils ne se battent pas par plaisir ou dans la haine, ni même pour sauver un bien précis, mais peut-être une certaine lumière, « certain arrangement des choses » – en somme, des nuances. Mourir pour des nuances, il faut être en effet un chevalier pour y songer sans rire. (15-16)

Likewise, in *Des écrivains et des hommes (Writers and Men)*, literary critic Robert Kanters points out this fundamental aspect of Roy’s literature as he underlines the plight of the professional war-time aviator: “L’aviateur qui va au combat, parce qu’il risque sa vie et parce qu’il porte la mort, ne peut se contenter d’une justification de sa routine du même ordre que celle d’un ouvrier quelconque. [...] Le clé de l’édifice, c’est la mystique, et c’est sur l’idée de patrie qu’il convient donc de s’interroger.” (212) When faced with that reality, Roy’s disenchantment with his profession of arms begins to take form. Rather than a logical extension of the government that oversees his country, the military becomes like a gang of men without scruples. The soldier takes more a form of the “forban” (pirate).

Chevrier expresses his same conflicted ideals of the soldier figure. He is like a man born too late for his sense of nobility; now he was part of what he describes as an era where adventures were nonexistent and men had become like slaves (Roy 188). Outside of the military, the world made no sense to him; it was his basis of stability, now in question as well. Part of this is due to the fact that he is older than his crew and most of the men in his unit. From experience he sees the trend of a different breed of men coming into the system:

Tous les vingt ans, il fallait recommencer au nom des mêmes principes, et c'était toujours la même bande de braves types qui se faisait descendre. Pour Chevrier, c'était différent. Il était soldat de métier, aviateur de métier. Cela voulait dire que son métier était la guerre et n'avait pas de raison d'être sans la guerre. (47)¹¹¹

Of course, the norm of French society in the first half of the Twentieth Century was for men to take part in their national service, which varied in term from 18 months to three years during that time.¹¹² This was already a change from the Napoleonic years where conscription was even more deeply engrained in the educational backbone of the country. But during the time of the Occupation, with a government that had already proven defunct in terms of national defense, the idea of serving in the army for the prospect of glory was lost. Instead, the men in the French component of the R.A.F. were fighting for what Chevrier calls “une certaine idée de l’humanité” (101). This had to be the case; how else could they justify the bombing of their own homeland in planes that were built and maintained in a foreign country? Chevrier’s changing allegiances had to become centered on this somewhat ambiguously universal idea of humanity. He describes the bombing raid of “la régulatrice” (the junction), which was a militarily important part of the railroad used by the Germans in the north of France, as evoking these particularly emotions. This was especially the case here, given the idea that he could be sent on a mission to bomb his hometown, where his mother was living. The borders of his country, in cases like these,

¹¹¹ “Every twenty years men had to start all over again, every time for the sake of just the same principles, and it was always the same gang of decent fellows who got themselves killed in the process. It was different for Chevrier. He was a regular, an airman by profession. That meant that his profession was war, in fact without war he had not *raison d’être*.” (25)

¹¹² In 1996, the French military became “professionalized,” which means it was comprised of a purely volunteer force. Instead of national conscription, each young person is now required to attend a Defense and Citizenship Day to introduce the youth to the military culture. Both young men and women are now required to register for potential service if required, however.

became untraceable. He decided his true “patrie” was the Milky Way, not a part of the land. He concludes, “Pour le moment, il savait qu’elle se bornait aux pays où la liberté respirait encore” (102).¹¹³

For these reasons, Chevrier and his French squadron mates take on a distanced view of the missions they flew. More than the shrugging of shoulders and comments like “C’est bien embêtant” that we found in *Pilote de guerre*, the bomber crews carried themselves with a sort of aloofness that dismissed the idea of dying for *king and country*. “Tu parles [...] Pour la gloire, ça nous connaît,” Morin responds to Chevrier’s notions of becoming a glorious hero (91).¹¹⁴ Instead, their type of fighting had lost all its sense of chivalry; they never saw the face of the enemy from 21,000 feet (or 6,000 in the raid on Goch) in the dark of night, and each sortie became like an absurd gamble against fate. Rather than obedience built on loyalty or allegiance to the nation, the crews were reduced to obeying the harsh law of averages. “La seule noblesse de leur condition,” Roy writes, “résidait dans le consentement. Ils savaient que cette fatale loi des moyennes qui les abattait était stupide, et ils s’y soumettaient.” (212)¹¹⁵

DES ARMES AMÈRES

Roy’s constant questioning of his fidelity and the notion of nobility left him troubled throughout the war. From the beginning, his devotion to the head of state in the established image of honor in Pétain appeared unwavering. The widespread propaganda of the Vichy government that promoted allegiance to the Marshall only fueled that emotion: “Cette émotion extraordinaire, chaque fois à voir le Maréchal à l’écran. Il me semble soudain être face à face

¹¹³ “For the moment all he knew was that it was limited to those countries where freedom still had room to breathe.” (69)

¹¹⁴ “What do you think of that? [...] We know too much about heroes, thank you!” (61)

¹¹⁵ “The only nobility in their position lay in consent. They knew that this relentless law of averages that struck each man down in turn was completely absurd, yet they submitted to it.” (156)

avec le visage de la patrie” (Cantier 60). Over the course of 1942, however, with the arrival in Northern Africa of Allied troops commanded by General Eisenhower, and through his own reflective writing, his allegiance goes through a change that enables him to break from romantic ideals of chivalric obedience to rebel against the deception and inaction he was observing. Of this transformation, he later wrote in *Métier des armes*: “Je relisais Vigny. Je tirais de sa grandiose mélancolie une consolation, mais aussi un trouble de plus en plus profond. [...] Quand je compris enfin que Vigny ne pouvait plus rien pour moi, je jetai son livre avec colère.” (968) His break from allegiance to Pétain is more than a decision to join the Resistance to liberate France; it is an upheaval of his notion of his profession and its own sense of honor, always in light of pursuing the truth in his situation. Kaners describes the struggle that emerges from Roy’s reflections:

Il s’interroge avec une conscience douloureuse ; il nous fait part de ses angoisses sur un ton qui ne manque jamais de noblesse, et l’on a plaisir à aimer ce guerrier déchiré, lucide, plus proche de nous que Vigny de *Servitude*. C’est l’épreuve du cloître sans clôture pensée par un homme qui eut, très jeune, la vocation des armes et qui sait s’interroger sur les principes de sa fidélité. (211)

As Kaners suggests here, the hero image that Roy shapes in his writing is tied to a more complete image of a man that allows for some ambivalence in his thought as expressed through reflective writing. The qualification of allegiances must be based on principles, rather than simple matter of subservience to a structure of deference and rank. The nobility in his writing, then, comes with accepting a gentler side of passion in the hero who is more concerned with doing the right thing than simply acting according to set codes. His awareness of his own role in the outcome of events is a critical part of an engaged hero.

More than a discussion of loyalties to the head of state, though, Roy is concerned about the changing military. In *La Vallée heureuse*, Chevrier laments over the changing context of war. The mechanization of the military adds to the decay of chivalrous ideals he holds as the foundation of his profession. This changing context for the aviator meant a different face of the enemy, often reducing the engagement to a very distanced one where the men were simply part of a large war machine. This clearly leaves a mark on Roy in the novel, most notably in the chapter entitled, “Douze cents bombardier sur Bochum” (“Twelve Hundred Bombers over Bochum”). In it he repetitively describes the synchronized motion of the bomber formation, joining from multiple bases across England, as they move toward the city of Bochum. As much as he attempts to illustrate the personal “demons” that show the individuality of war, he emphasizes the massive whole of the bomber command over Germany. Chevrier comments on the peace after leaving the flaming destruction of a target after a raid that is only a momentary lapse from the swelling worry of murdering people he will never see.

Furthermore, all of this is done from a position of exile, where he is not protecting his own land. Chevrier explains how he feels his hope disappear, not knowing if the destruction will reap any reward: “L’amour ? Il n’y avait pas d’amour en exil. L’espoir de revoir la France ? La France aussi était dans le cirage. Tout était dans le cirage : la France, la terre, les avions, et il fallait se casser la gueule entre copains, comme si les canons et les collines ne suffisaient pas” (82).¹¹⁶ Roy uses the same imagery in the chapter entitled, “*Toutes les coupes du roi Salomon étaient d’or pur*” (“All King Solomon’s Drinking Vessels were Made of Gold”). In the same tone that Roy ends the first chapter of *La Vallée heureuse*, he ends this one too: “L’aviation détruisait

¹¹⁶ “Love? There was no love in exile. The hope of seeing France again? France, too, was in the mess and muck around him. Everything was in the same mess: France, the whole earth, the aircraft, everything... and they themselves had to break one another’s necks, as if guns and hills were not enough.” (53)

l'humanité pour lutter contre la barbarie. Mais cette barbarie abattue, d'autres se lèveraient à leur tour contre le travail et la paix des hommes" (255-256)¹¹⁷. This is part of the undesirable effects of the type of war in which these men were engaged, and the ambiguity that lingered for its resolution in the end.

It is not until the end of the book that Chevrier begins full accounting of the lost crews of his group. None has more significance, though, than the one he claims to remember most due to its recent occurrence: the loss of the pilot named "Chevalier" symbolizes Roy's personal disenchantment with his own profession of a soldier in the modern era of warfare. The death of Chevalier carries none of the savior figure symbolism that Saint-Exupéry uses in *Pilote de guerre*. Instead, the symbolism maintains the sort of opaque morality that he associates with the war – like the perpetual state of cloudiness he experienced over England:

Chevalier venait de se tuer avec son équipage au retour d'un raid. Ce soir-là, la base avait été recouverte par les nuages. L'avion s'était écrasé dans la percée sur les âpres collines neigeuses qui bordaient l'aérodrome, et il avait rebondi de crête en crête en semant sa route de corps disloqués et de ferraille jusqu'au fond de la vallée. (261)¹¹⁸

For Roy, not only did the war bring destruction to his own country, but it also changed the face of chivalry in his profession since he saw no clear glory in the outcome. His loyalties to the images of honor he once held in Pétain had finally been crushed, and from this his personal understanding of his own profession was changing from a knight to simple factory worker as part

¹¹⁷ "Aviation was destroying humanity in order to fight barbarity. But once this particular one was crushed other forms of barbarity would rise to interfere with the work and peace of mankind." (191)

¹¹⁸ "Chevalier was killed with all his crew on returning from a raid one night when the base was buried in a cloud. Like so many others his aircraft had crashed on the rough snow-topped hills that surrounded the aerodrome, and it bounced from hilltop to hilltop, sowing the twisted bodies and pieces of metal all over the valley." (196)

of a modern machine: “Chevrier sentait que sa propre position s’effondrait et que les temps étaient révolus où un soldat pouvait obéir à ses chefs sans se poser de questions, et c’était là qu’il hésitait encore comme par un dernier scrupule. Il n’y avait plus de soldats. Il avait été peut-être le dernier ; et déjà il avait dépassé en lui le soldat”(188-189).¹¹⁹

THE PATRIOT, DESPITE HIMSELF

Anybody can fall into heroism by mistake, like falling into an open sewer in the sidewalk. – Chevrier quoting William Faulkner in *The Happy Valley* (199)

When Paul Ricœur discusses the concept of memory, it is with an “object-oriented” and Husserlian approach: “all consciousness in consciousness of some thing” (3). As he sees it, our individual conscience is made up of partial memories of life experiences. Likewise, the idea that something can remain a part of our memory often comes from what Bergson would label a *memory-habit*, especially when we learn it by heart, through repetition (31). Finally, Michel de Certeau writes about signs and symbols in the social realm as if they are historical archives, often at odds with the immediacy of learned, material memories (127). So how do we tie memory and history into a coherent view of our present position? In the case of Chevrier, it is precisely by means of negotiating the historical signs and traces of his personal and socially collective memory. Through the references to national songs and symbols in the book, Roy establishes a link between memory and history. Whether his writing represents an intentional effort to bring out the importance of these references or the references themselves are the products of his own particular subconscious is irrelevant. Either way, he pulls them into the novel as subtle, yet

¹¹⁹ “Chevrier felt that his own position was crumbling and that times had changed since the days when a soldier could obey his officer without question...it was here that his hesitations still came in, as if his scruples were making a last stand. There were no soldiers any more. Indeed he may have been the last himself, and already he had left the soldier in him far behind.” (137-138)

powerful, elements at an important historical moment. Chevrier is fighting for the liberation of his country, and the sights and sounds of national flavor remind him of the heritage to which he belongs. They become like the iconic images that contain a myth within them, like Barthes's explanation of the young African soldier on the cover of *Paris Match* that encapsulates the propaganda and oppression of French colonialism at once. Chevrier is a "soldat de métier" (career soldier); his heritage as a professional airman is strongly rooted in military traditions and ideals of patriotism, which he accepts. Yet he often does so reluctantly as he sees his own struggles as more imminently troubling than those of the country.

SONGS

The first historical link of the novel is song, particularly military songs. They are part of the individual memory of the soldier since they are essential to his training. Because military tradition stems from historical memory – past battles and words of national fervor – it installs an environment where the liaison between tradition and memory is apparently natural. So, as Ricœur or Bergson would propose, singing the military history of France is engrained like an automatic function, after the ad nauseam singing of certain *chants*. They become second nature, like the takeoffs and landings the pilots practice. When Chevrier hears the [Chant du Départ](#) on the radio, transmitted by the BBC, the refrain sounds very familiar: "Pour Elle un Français doit mourir" (91). As Morin sings along, Roy gives us the impression that the song is as natural as whistling while they work.

In fact, the song goes as far back as the French Revolution, and was written around the same time as [La Marseillaise](#), the official French national hymn. Under Napoleon it actually took its place as the new hymn since he preferred it to *La Marseillaise*. Its lyrics are as much a part of the collective memory as they are a part of the individual one because of the story it propagates

over time with each new line of recruits. Here we see the first verse and chorus, which illustrate the call for the people to stand up against oppression:

Un député du Peuple	A deputy of the People
La victoire en chantant	Victory singing
Nous ouvre la barrière.	Opens for us the gates
La Liberté guide nos pas.	Liberty guides our steps
Et du Nord au Midi	And from North to South
La trompette guerrière	The war trumpet
A sonné l'heure des combats.	Has signaled the hour of combat
Tremblez ennemis de la France	Tremble, enemies of France
Rois ivres de sang et d'orgueil.	Kings drunk on blood and pride
Le Peuple souverain s'avance,	The sovereign People comes forth
Tyrans descendez au cercueil.	Tyrants go down to your graves
<i>Refrain</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
La République nous appelle	The Republic is calling us
Sachons vaincre ou sachons périr	Know how to vanquish or how to perish
Un Français doit vivre pour elle	A Frenchman must live for her
Pour elle un Français doit mourir.	For her a Frenchman must die. ¹²⁰

The *Chant du Départ* is part of an arsenal of fighting songs that were heard on the radio waves during the war, transmitted from the BBC's French language broadcast, Radio London. Each has its own historical resonance, but maintains the universal call to arms against an invader.

¹²⁰ Author's translation

Some songs emphasizing the survival of French blood, like [*La Strasbourgeoise*](#), whose final words sung by the girl from Strasbourg affirm “Mon p’tit cœur il restera français” (My little heart will always be French). It is fiercely anti-German, and harkens to the war of 1870, when the French lost the Alsace-Lorraine region to Germany. It is also representative of deeply engrained feelings from times of war; the young girl witnesses her father go off to fight and never return, and her mother is killed by the canons as they strike the church where she mourns his death.

These themes are as universal as they are historically important to the French narrative. A similar song that was popular with the Resistance was the *Chant des Partisans*, which was actually translated in 1943 from a Russian song by Anna Marly (née Betoulinski), who had fled the Bolshevik revolution in Russia when she came to France. Joseph Kessel and Maurice Druon converted the song from her interpretation, and it quickly became the anthem of the Free French Forces during the World War II. Their words were clearly a call to arms against oppressors, which sounds through as a universal theme in these hymns. Of course, it was Anna Marly’s voice that initially performed the song for BBC broadcasts, and she was known as the “troubadour de la résistance.” Along with her voice, the radio waves of the BBC were used for songs from artists like Edith Piaf and poetry that often had hidden messages for the Resistance.

In any case of “airs patriotiques” that Roy pulls into the novel frames the expectations of the flyers. The republican patriot defends the land but also the ideals of liberty. These songs continue to be part of a national iconography today that is espoused by military as well as civilian culture. *Le Chant des partisans*, for example, has a standing place in the repertoire of songs brought to the fore on Bastille Day, the 14th of July, while a military formation assembles in Paris. In addition, it has been performed by the Army’s choral group as homage to victims of

terrorism. *La Marseillaise*, which often appears as cliché, has been sung with much more reverence and emotion since the 13th of November terrorist attacks on Paris. In fact, French President François Hollande declared 2016 the year of *La Marseillaise* “afin de célébrer ce chant qui nous rassemble nous tous,” and to help draw the link between the song and the history of the nation.¹²¹

The universal message in the songs of unity against attack is one that carries across different historical contexts. Yet, because of the cultural preservation of the memory in these songs, they function as well to recall the previous successes in rallying to the cause of national preservation. This is how these songs are renewed in the present as a spirit of unity. Like Barthes suggests, “the history which drains out of the form will be wholly absorbed by the concept” (118). “Unlike the form,” he adds, “the concept is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth.” (119) In this case, the myth of national unity is one that is signified as a recurring theme in times of crisis or attack.

SYMBOLS

Before the unlucky thirteenth flight, Roy subtly introduces another symbol of the Resistance that simultaneously harks back to the previous German conflicts: the Croix de Lorraine (Lorraine Cross). All the French soldiers knew that it was a direct reference to the earlier period when Germany occupied the region, which had only ended with the 1918 armistice of World War I. It had become the symbol of the Freed French forces for the current fight against the same occupiers. Remembering through symbols like these is also why Roy has one of

¹²¹ <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/memoire/rubrique-actualite/2016-annee-de-la-marseillaise>

the British enlisted airmen comment to Chevrier: “vous êtes tous volontaires [...] Et puis, vous êtes Français. Vous avez quelque chose à défendre. Vous, au moins, vous savez probablement pourquoi vous vous battez” (113).¹²² Certainly, the symbol helps Chevrier make the link of history and collective memory in order to make of it a personal memory as well. The symbol in its entirety recalls the Christian heritage in France, and with its coinciding warrior message, it is just enough to encourage him to face the dangers of the thirteenth mission with slightly more confidence.

Overall, the history-memory links that Roy inserts in the novel are largely military. For example, he compares the view of one of the targets – a canal and its surrounding woods – to a fortress designed by Vauban, the Marshall of France and architect for Louis XIV. Even the cultural reference to Vigny is marked by its warrior heritage; when Chevrier talks about the “braves types” that the poet described, it is ultimately with the same *clin d’œil* (literary wink) that he uses for the other patriotic signs. In this way, he alludes to an eternal image of France. All the symbols give the impression of encouraging the aviator, reinforcing their conviction of knowing why they are fighting. At the same time, the images of these historical archives are suppressed by the urgency of their present predicaments:

Ils accomplissaient leur tâche sans élan, presque sans foi, parce que la tâche elle-même avait tué tout élan et toute foi à les plier sous des mesures, des frayeurs et des moyennes, mais elle n’avait pas réussi à limiter leur imagination et cette folle

¹²² “They tell me you’re all volunteers? [...] Besides, you’re all French. You’ve got something to defend. You do at least know what you’re fighting for.” (78-79) This passage is like an echo of what we see in Saint-Exupéry’s *Lettre à un Américain*; a twenty year old American pilot expressed his deep concerns for the motivation in fighting the war: “Vous, vous savez pourquoi vous faites la guerre : il vous faut sauver votre pays.” (*Œuvres complètes II* 360) (You, you know why you are fighting the war: you need to save your country. – Author’s translation)

s'obstinait à moudre en chacun d'eux son grain dru de vent faux, de routes en dérives, de coup de canon et chasseurs. (237)¹²³

After all, our “hero” creates the linkage for the reader with a warrior past of France, much like Ricœur or Certeau do for the historian. In other words, the signs that are objects of a cultural history connect collective memory and individual memory. The military songs and symbols act as a backdrop to give the lines of text a coherent narrative. The result is that Chevrier and his comrades are united in their war effort, but they are not without their own personal motivations to continue fighting. The signs helps them maintain a certain amount of *esprit de corps*, but Roy reminds us that there are limits. Across the novel the reader has a sense of hearing things from an insider perspective, as if to dispel the public image of the aviator. In fact, the references to collective memory are things that the civilian reader would know well too, but he paints an image of a mystified public, naively thinking that in the world of the flyers, “ils grimpaient dans leurs avions en sifflant des airs patriotiques” (135)¹²⁴. That may happen at times, but when a young girl suggests one day to Chevrier “Quelle joie vous devez avoir à bombardier Berlin...” (135)¹²⁵, he simply doesn’t respond. Rather, in his own mind, he mulls over the range of feelings he has about his commitment to the raids; the girl, who represents the public view of the aviator, has no awareness of these thoughts.

First of all, Roy had never been on a mission over Berlin, nor did he truly desire it. It was undoubtedly even more heavily defended than the Ruhr Valley and would mean increased

¹²³ “They performed their task without enthusiasm, almost without faith – for that task itself, though it had killed their enthusiasm and faith by burdening them with figures, and fears, and averages, and endless calculations, had not succeeded in stifling their imagination. In each one of them it went on nourishing a frantic seed of changing winds, drifting planes, cannon-bursts and enemy fighters.” (176)

¹²⁴ “Civilians imagined them consumed with a vast flame of patriotism, climbing into their aircraft gaily whistling the national anthem.” (96)

¹²⁵ “What a wonderful feeling it must be, bombing Berlin...” (96)

probability of becoming another lost crew. Like Saint-Exupéry, who quietly hopes that a broken communication system will cancel his flight, Chevrier describes how any flyer would secretly hope to catch typhoid fever compared to flying into Berlin airspace. Furthermore, he saw any impulse to take the mission joyfully would be out of foolish vanity for bragging rights. Despite this, however, he saw himself caught up in a larger crusade for freedom, not just for France, but for all those threatened to have it taken away. With that in mind, he would accept his missions regardless of their destination, even though he would quietly anguish over the predicament. “Son angoisse était une angoisse de métier, l’angoisse de métier le plus dur du monde après celui d’otage,” Roy writes (137)¹²⁶.

The fact of the matter is that the wartime aviator presents a particular image to the public. This explains part of the ambivalence of Jules Roy as we see in *Le Métier des armes* since the Vichy government routinely summoned the imagery of Captain Guynemer as a model for loyalty and self-sacrifice. As early as 1940, the Vichy press resurrected his name as a means to encourage subservience to the nation. Twenty-three years after his death, on the 11th of September, Guynemer was remembered for his courage and, more importantly, his abnegation. In each of the subsequent years, Vichy expanded his image and distorted it to imply a seamless devotion to the France that Marshall Pétain was trying to maintain, in order to “inviter les Français à se réformer, à retrouver leurs forces intérieures, à se régénérer, sans remettre en cause pourtant l’occupation allemande, mais en obéissant toujours au Maréchal” (Sacy 59). The fact that French military aviation had already adopted Guynemer as its archetypal hero¹²⁷ only adds

¹²⁶ “His worries were those of a craftsman belonging to the cruelest profession in the world, making a crueler sacrifice than any other... except that of being a hostage.” (98)

¹²⁷ The 11th of September has been recognized as the French Air Force Day since 1918. Still to this day a military ceremony is held on French Air Force bases, where they will read simultaneously read the same words in his

to the complexity of the type of subservient image Pétain was advocating under the Vichy regime. Guynemer was a defender against German invaders in his time; now citizens of France were being asked to be loyal to collaboration. This use of propaganda by the Vichy regime distorts the mythical image of Guynemer. In fact, those who knew him well noted his maverick qualities and insouciance, which contributed to his success as an ace.

In contrast to Vichy propaganda, rather than simple acceptance of subservience, the character of Chevrier in Roy's novel follows a line of examples from his generation showing a search for meaning in the ambiguity of their condition. Of Saint-Exupéry, George Pélissier wrote, "Il me disait: je sais bien *contre* quoi je me bats dans cette guerre. Mais j'aimerais savoir *pour* quoi. Il serait regrettable que ce fût pour sauver les héros de M. Courteline" (Kanters 205). Jules Roy's tone, of course, is far from the ridiculous and trivial *théâtre de boulevard* of Georges Courteline. When dealing with absurdity of military routine, he does not write in the same satirical manner as Courteline's *Les Gaietés de l'escadron* (*Fun in the Barracks*), for example.¹²⁸ He is a pensive soldier that is aware of the ambivalence of his role in the larger scheme of the war. Arthur Koestler, writing on Richard Hillary's *Falling through Space* in 1943, explained it this way:

"[...] for we all more or less feel that we fight this war rather *in spite of* than *because of* something. The big words and slogans rather embarrass us, we don't like to be taken for quite as naïve as that. This tongue-in-cheek patriotism, the

memory: "Mort au champ d'honneur le 11 septembre 1917. Héros légendaire, tombé en plein ciel de gloire après trois ans de lutte ardente. Restera le plus pur symbole des qualités de la race : ténacité indomptable, énergie farouche, courage sublime. Animé de la Foi la plus inébranlable dans la victoire, il lègue au soldat français un souvenir impérissable qui exaltera l'esprit de sacrifice et provoquera les plus nobles émulations" (Sacy 70-71).

¹²⁸ Courteline's work was originally a novel in 1886, then remade into a play in 1895. It was depicted in Maurice Tourneur's 1932 film, which included Jean Gabin in its cast.

attitude of the sceptic knight, the heretic crusader, is as typical for the mental climate of this war as the stoning of dachshunds for the last; and we get a hint of the quality of the forces which select this specific type of hero for their purpose.”

(230-231)

LIBERATION

The liberation of France, though filled with exuberance and relief from the end of an oppressive Occupation, was nonetheless characterized by a painful healing process that involved summary executions, the shearing of women guilty of “horizontal collaboration”, sentences of national degradation, rampant accusations, recriminations, and continued distrust. France had been shaken to its core, and returning to pre-war conditions was not a matter of simply ending the Occupation. In fact, much of the distrust that people felt after the armistice in 1940 only grew during the four years that followed. Now, with victory over the occupiers, healing among the occupied needed to begin. First and foremost, this meant dealing with the *collaborateurs* from within.

A highly visible way that the French accomplished this was through what became known as les “tontes” (shearings). Women who were labeled as collaborators, or were sympathetic with the occupiers, were treated in a way that deprived them of their very image of femininity.¹²⁹ As Fabrice Virgili points out in *La France “virile,”* twenty thousand women had their heads shaved and were paraded through the streets to shame them for their “collaboration sexuelle” with German soldiers. Even prior to the liberation, some of this revenge and recrimination was underway as acts of resistance, but nearly 70% of the total number of occurrences were during

¹²⁹ Some cases also involved men, but they were rare in comparison.

the days immediately following, in August of 1944 (Virgili 91). It was done in private and in public, in nearly all regions of France. Arguably, though, the Pétain and the Vichy government sanctioned the “crimes.” The loyalist perspective left much of the behavior under the Occupation up to individual interpretation, especially with Pétain’s edict of “collaboration” which stated that “Cette collaboration la France est prête à la rechercher dans tous les domaines, avec tous ses voisins. [...] Le choix appartient d’abord au vainqueur ; il dépend aussi du vaincu...”(20).

The significance of the “tontes,” though, lies more than in the intensity and routine with which they were carried out immediately following the Liberation. They were representative of the explosion of feelings that were finally able to revolt against the submission of the Vichy regime and the Occupation in general. Furthermore, it was one of the symbolic ways in which France was making a clear break from this shameful period and the events that lead to it. The masculine image in France had not lived up to its responsibility to defend her¹³⁰, and the “collaboration horizontale” of French women was the extreme manifestation of losing a national identity. Meanwhile, the efforts of France to rebuild its own image of virility was a step to break from the fascist tendencies of the German occupation, marked by omnipresent misogyny and general dominance of the male figure, and the similarly single-sighted view of the Vichy regime. Significantly, the replacement of female busts of Marianne with those of Pétain under the collaboration, for example, needed to be reversed to show the fidelity of the female figure to the Republic. Additionally, it was ironically the start of increased rights of women in French society, with the right to vote in October 1944, for example.

¹³⁰ Virgili comments here that, “Bien avant la défaite, le mythe du guerrier ne fonctionne plus ; pour la période de la « drôle de guerre », les exemples sont nombreux d’une représentation du soldat éloignée de celle du guerrier.” (306)

For the men, this also meant the reconstruction of an image of virility in the form of action. Some 10,000 collaborators were executed in the purge after the liberation before trials began (Celestin and DalMolin 210). De Gaulle incorporated the members of the Free French of the Interior (nearly 15,000 men) into the regular army and began to stabilize the political transition. As Roger Celestin indicates, the idea of *responsibility* came even more to the forefront of discussion, in politics as well as in literature (213). The application of this was clear in the executions and trials since the French were seeking retribution and justice for the experience of the Occupation.

Some of this healing process was not as simple, however. The execution of war criminals, those who blatantly helped the Germans in the killing and deportation of French citizens, for example, was not always easy to legitimize. In some cases, the question of collaboration determined through the rhetoric of the written word. Robert Brasillach was one of the men who was tried and executed for sharing “intelligence with the enemy,” his advocacy of fascism, and the anti-Semitic stance of his writing in *Je suis partout*, of which he was editor in chief from 1941 through August 1943 (Celestin and DalMolin 214-215).

Most importantly, the trial of Marshall Pétain exemplifies the level of confusion that complicated the transition of France from its damaged national image. Even despite its years of deception, as it had come to understand near the end of the war, there was a certain feeling of guilt that need to be repressed, and hatred for the acts of Pétain were understated by some because of their own long constructed loyalty to his person. Jules Roy, for example, comments on the surprising lack of personal notes in his journal during the days of the trial, which he recaptured twenty years later in *Le grand naufrage (The Trial of Marshal Pétain)*. “There are wounds a man is not proud of, wounds, that scar the soul more than the body,” he writes

retrospectively (3). As the French title implies, Roy continues the metaphor of a “shipwreck” of France during the occupation that Saint-Exupéry used when he described the passengers of a “navire” (ship) that become lost during the Battle of France. Even during the trial, though, the Marshall’s insistence that he was forced into a position of *patriotic collaboration* blurred the rhetoric of what national allegiance entails. He was eventually sentenced to death, then to life in prison, where he died at the age of 95 in 1951, but the royal airs of his statements left journalists stunned, most notably parts of his opening remarks on the first day of the trial, July 23, 1945:

I was asked for nothing and wanted nothing. I was begged to come; I came. I thus became heir to a catastrophe for which I was not responsible, while those who were really responsible sheltered behind me to escape the wrath of the people...Yes, the Armistice saved France and contributed to the Allied victory by ensuring that the Mediterranean remained free and the Empire intact. Power was entrusted to me lawfully and recognized by every country in the world from the Holy See to the U.S.S.R. I used that power as a shield to protect the French people, for whose sake I went so far as to sacrifice my personal prestige. I remained at the head of an occupied country...While General de Gaulle, outside our frontiers, carried on the struggle, I prepared the way for the liberation, by preserving an unhappy but living France...(18)

Already with *La Vallée heureuse*, we see distance develop from the war experiences of Jules Roy. Although he writes in the third person, the book is more accurately categorized as a memoir or *récit*. He talks about his own sense of disillusionment with the past as he looks forward to the ambiguous form of what France will be in the years to come. Certainly, he recognizes the close of the war being at hand, but the crushing of ideals shades his return to

France. Victory is, therefore, bitter sweet. His Chevrier describes the feeling like a man “qui recevrait l’amour et la puissance, un poignard planté dans le cœur”(258)¹³¹. Even many years later, as Roy wrote about Pétain’s trial, he remembered this sunken feeling of a liberated France: “The future cast a gloom over us,” he recalls in the time of the trial (2). It was the unknown that lingered from the same ambivalence of loyalties through the Occupation, and it was the fear that France’s identity would never again be the same. Roy briefly summed up his years in exile and his efforts with the R.A.F. that had allowed for this place in French history:

I was thirty-eight and I had come back from the war with my hair sprinkled with salt as if I had been through sea spray in a storm, my face furrowed with wrinkles, my belly hollow, my pockets empty and my eyes uneasy. A few months earlier, clouds had still been shaking the tin can from which we unloaded bombs on Germany, but sometimes on France as well; the joys of victory had not lasted, and they bore little resemblance to what we had imagined. (1)

THE FACE OF FRANCE

As we have already in the introduction with de Gaulle’s “certaine idée de la France” (certain idea of France), for which he uses the metaphor of “the princess in the fairy stories or the Madonna in the frescoes” (3), the republican image of France is prominently feminine. Despite all the discussion of *patrie* (fatherland) and the dominance of a largely patriarchal society, when artists show the face of France it is the face of a woman. Since she emerged from the Revolution, the allegorical Marianne has simultaneously symbolized liberty and the French Republic; she has

¹³¹ “who won both love and power, but with a dagger plunged into his heart.” (194)

been depicted in paintings, statues, busts, currency and national logos.¹³² Where we saw the innocence of a young farmer's daughter in *Pilote de guerre*, the female figure in Jules Roy's récit is a mature woman. She is less mystifying than Saint-Exupéry's girl, but equally obscure when he describes her. Undeniably, though, she remains an allegory for the form of Roy's idealized France.

When asked about a new government setting up in liberated France, for example, Chevrier simply responds to the British intelligence officer: "vous voyez mal mon pays" (217)¹³³. It is not a simply matter of changing institutional forms of the country for him.¹³⁴ Like the case of most of his French comrades, he relates to something much more intimate and indescribable that only the woman figure can represent: "Ils s'en foutaient comme de la robe de la femme que l'on va étreindre après cinq ans de séparation. Ce n'était pas à la robe qu'ils pensaient mais au visage, à la courbe de l'épaule, à la tiédeur de la hanche, et à cause de ces images leur ventre devenait lourd." (218)¹³⁵

Part of the ambiguity of this female image of France coincides with Morin's drawings. He creates an entire mural of figures in the sleeping quarters, in fact, that represent the aging process, shown as a series of nudes (Martha, Paula, Simone, and Marie) that are older, uglier, and less joyous as he progresses. They are watched by an old man with a scythe, a personification of death (named "Alcide" by Chevrier), and interact with a young, handsome

¹³² Eugène Delacroix's 1830 depiction of her is perhaps one of the most reproduced, showing her leading the way to liberty while carrying the tricolor flag.

¹³³ "you have a very confused idea of what my country is like." (160)

¹³⁴ Specifically, he is referring to the removal of Pétain from leadership and the end of the Vichy government, which had dissolved the Third Republic under the Occupation.

¹³⁵ They did not care a tinker's cuss... any more than you care what dress a woman you love is wearing when you fling your arms round her and kiss her after five years' separation. They were not thinking about her dress, but about her face, her shoulders, the warmth of her thighs... and because of those very images they had a sinking feeling in their stomachs. (161)

man (Alcindor). Morin's murals become a pastime while he is not flying, and they are a place for him to express his thoughts. As he approaches his later missions, he is clearly thinking more of his return to France, and he begins his masterpiece, on the wall behind the bar in the mess, that will represent his archetypal woman. Chevrier describes the state of the work, as it remained after Morin's death: "Morin avait dessiné au fusain un chêne, une énorme roue d'avion sur une piste de décollage et une femme nue couchée sous le chêne, un bras sous sa tête qui n'avait pas encore de visage. Il n'y avait pas de vers écrits sous le panneau mais une longue case vide, et des portées à peine marquées." (291-292)¹³⁶

The fact that his woman has only the form of her body completed before Morin dies in the end of the book is quite symbolic. It leaves the ideal image left to interpretation, and perhaps to never be completely finished. It is part of the chasing of mythical forms that is portrayed as a never-ending pursuit. If she is a figure of France, it remains undecided whether or not she will show a face that resembles Marianne, the France they once knew.

Critics of the book often brush aside the short romantic interlude near the end of the book, where Chevrier meets a local British girl at the Red Lion pub.¹³⁷ They rush to note the awkwardness of this particular chapter in the overall drama of his journey. Yet, its role is integral in Roy's depiction of the sentiment of the French, particularly of the men who served in exile and returned with certain expectations of their country. Her role is not so much to be seen as a diversion or distraction to a warrior on some grand quest, nor does the episode simply add to the levels of complexity in the sensibilities of the hero. Instead, the imagery of *strangeness* of the

¹³⁶ "Morin had done charcoal sketches of an oak-tree, an enormous aeroplane wheel on a runway and a nude woman lying beneath the tree, one hand behind her head. The face was not yet drawn in. There were no lines written up beneath the panel, but waiting for them was a long empty space in very faint outline." (220)

¹³⁷ Camus, for example, says this is the chapter he likes the least (246). In Catherine Brosman's study on Jules Roy, she says the episode is "a minor element" that is "less stirring" than the rest of the book (16).

girl represent what France is not for Roy. She is real. She is present. Despite her understanding and patient nature, though, she does not fulfill his idealized image of a woman. Chevrier finds himself focusing on trivialities – her fingers are too chubby or the freckles on her neck seem out of place. He finds himself wanting to be with her, despite the language barrier that he never intends to fix; however, she falls short of his great expectations and represents the “carnal temptations” in London. For Chevrier, the ideal woman takes the form of a fictional, or mythical, person named “Infanta,”¹³⁸ who is necessarily French:

Depuis des années, il appelait celle qu’il nommait son infante et il ne l’avait pas rencontrée. Mais il était sûr qu’elle viendrait aussi de son côté, peut-être sans le savoir, et qu’il saurait lui donner tout ce qu’il gardait pour elle, à moins que...

L’éternelle pensée l’assaillait. Et si l’infante ne venait pas ? (274)¹³⁹

All of the ambivalence that Chevrier exhibits with the young British woman is tied to his anticipation of an ideal that he feels may never come. In addition, the misty weather in England and the constant darkness that accompanies his missions pair with his psychological murkiness, adding to his anxiety. The imagery in Roy’s writing capitalizes on the natural setting to emphasize this uneasiness and general sense of lonely aimlessness. While he exposes Chevrier’s inner thoughts and fears, he ties them as much with his romantic emotions as with his sense of belonging to the certain image he has of France:

Chevrier retira doucement sa main et se leva. Est-ce que cette femme comprenait ? Elle devait deviner certaines choses, mais sûrement pas l’essentiel.

¹³⁸ Historically, in Spanish, “Infanta” refers to a child, particularly of royal blood, a princess.

¹³⁹ “For years he had been waiting, yearning for the one he called in his imagination his “Infanta”, but he had not found her. Yet he was certain she would find her way to him – though perhaps with realizing – and when she did he would give her everything he had kept of her... unless...The eternal question was there to torture him. What if Infanta never came?” (206-207)

Non. Il savait bien qu'il mentait pour masquer sa défaite. Ni apparence ni essentiel. Il n'avait abordé à rien. Il errait devant la sombre rive de la mort, comme un navire qui n'accoste pas, dans la crainte des écueils. Les images de la liberté et de l'infante demeuraient dans le cirage gluant des nuits ? S'il survivait, il ne reconnaîtrait pas sa patrie. S'il rencontrait un jour l'infante, elle serait mariée [...] (282-283)¹⁴⁰

The point of the British woman and Morin's nude drawings in the chapter entitled "The Red Lion," then, is less to display his sentimentality than it is to represent the ambiguity in the face of France after its defeat. It illustrates his idealization of France, which is obscured in the war-torn state of his country. It is a continuation of the allegorical identity of France as a woman. Furthermore, the compromise he feels he is making stems from the realization that his country will no longer be great as he imagines it. His mythical France becomes unattainable.

RETURN TO MEDIOCRITY

The idealism in Chevrier's Infanta, coupled with all the uncertainty of Morin's faceless drawing, helps to explain both the anxiety and the disillusionment of Roy's France. Chevrier describes his fears of returning to normal life, void of glory and ideals. For that alone, he does not share the enthusiasm for the end of the fighting that some of his fellow flyers express. Furthermore, he recognizes that the France he will find upon his return is not the same as the one before the war. He had witnessed first-hand the destruction of some of its towns, in certain cases

¹⁴⁰ "Chevrier gently took his hand away and stood up. Did this woman understand? She must have guessed something but surely not the essential thing. No. He knew he was lying, to cover his defeat. There was no question either of appearances or essentials. He had attempted nothing at all. He was wandering along the dark coasts of the sea of death, like a ship that never puts in to shore for fear of reefs. His visions of freedom and the Infanta were buried deep in the clinging, impenetrable blackness of the night. If he survived he would not recognize his country. If one day he did meet the Infant he would find her married already" [...] (213)

at his own hand. He knew of the divided loyalties and mistrust in the people, something he had also experienced first-hand with the deceitful character of Pétain. Even worse, he feared the *martyr* image of France, one that had been built up in *Pilote de guerre* and the whole spirit of Saint-Exupéry, would become farcical for him as well. Would he encounter a self-serving nation that was living in the relative lassitude of Vichy France? As Chevrier states, he is preoccupied with the loss of nobility in his plight for the liberation of the France he once knew: “il se disait que plus tard, revenu à la médiocrité de la vie, il regretterait peut-être la vallée heureuse”(215).¹⁴¹ While forming his expectations for France upon his return, Roy’s own ideals of nobility, tradition and pride are conflated with his sense of masculine virility. It is based in action; a passive, apathetic France would mean a loss of its *grandeur* over the course of reconstruction.

BARTHES AND LE TOUR DE FRANCE

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes writes: “Je crois que le Tour est le meilleur exemple que nous ayons jamais rencontré d’un mythe total, donc ambiguë ; le Tour est à la fois un mythe d’expression et un mythe de projection, réaliste et utopique tout en même temps” (133). The Tour de France, he explains, captures all the elements of an epic myth: from its Homeric circumnavigation of the ends of the Hexagon to its division into stages of personified feats; from the aura of the riders to the ethically ambivalent nature of the tactics used to win; from the natural, immersive fluidity of the race to the risks against chance and fate. It retains its own lexicon that alludes to a mythical past, and it takes on national interest as its followers witness the personal struggles of individual men on their journey to the resting grounds after a seemingly impossible task. All of these elements are contained in Roy’s narrative in *La Vallée heureuse*.

¹⁴¹ “he kept reminding himself that one day when he returned to the mediocrity of ordinary life, he might come to look back with regret on the nights he had spent over the Happy Valley.” (159)

However, Roy breaks down the glorious image of the mythical epic to portray the humanity of the journey. Where the Tour elevates the status of its participant into the realm of the gods, the images of the aviators in the novel are placed among mere mortals.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

*Il y a une onomastique du Tour de France qui nous dit à elle seule que le Tour est une grande épopée.*¹⁴² (Barthes 125)

We have already seen the significance of the author's name to classic references: by his friends, "Julius" was said to have a Roman spirit, and the fact that he kept Roy as his family name, even after his biological father's public ostracizing of his mother, left him with a royal self-image growing up. However, where the press mythicizes names during the Tour¹⁴³, Roy takes some care to give the flyers of his book a certain amount of honorable modesty. He names the protagonist Chevrier, which in French is a goat herder. The implication is clearly that he is herding the crew as their leader, but he is teased for the bucolic reference, all of which gives more a feeling of closeness to the reader than awe for a god-like hero image. For that matter, Castor (The Beaver) is the pilot of the other crew, which alludes to the busy work in which the flyers are caught up to just keep things going like factory workers.¹⁴⁴ As we recall, the "Happy Valley" is in itself a nickname that understates the nature of their bombing runs over the Ruhr Valley. Despite the horrors that it inevitably evokes to the crews that know it intimately, the

¹⁴² There is a whole study of names in the Tour de France that alone tells us that the Tour is a great epic. (Author's translation)

¹⁴³ Barthes names a few from his era: Brankart le Franc, Bobet le Francien, Robic le Celte, Ruiz l'Ibere, Darrigade le Gascon. Others simply retain their given names that seem to have the myth breed directly into them by their heritage: Geminiani, Lauredi, Antonin Rolland (125). In our generation, Lance Armstrong seemed to equally hold to the image of his name, notwithstanding all the fallout from his doping cover-up scandal.

¹⁴⁴ Added to this naming choice is the back-story of Castor, whose ideal existence after the war is to be a lock keeper on a canal in a certain part of France.

name gives it some level of approachability. It is more manageable, likewise, to gear up for going “down the pit” than to remember all the obstacles that it poses during the course of the mission.

The most noticeably symbolic name near the end of the novel is Chevalier, who is one of the pilots who dies. As previously discussed in the section entitled “Des armes amères,” the pilot’s name stands out more than as the most recent death recalled by Chevrier, but as a symbol of the overall loss of knightly nobility he idealizes in warfare. Roy makes less effort to eulogize the crews that are frequently lost during the war than some of his predecessors who wrote about the war experience, but he does focus on both the proximity and probability of death.¹⁴⁵ He is shocked, for example, to learn that the members of the crew lost in the beginning belonged to Geoffrey, a fellow Frenchman. Since the relative numbers of the French forces in the overall Allied bombing effort were small, this news only exacerbates the feelings of inevitability in death and absurdity in their struggle. Furthermore, in the same way that writers like Richard Hillary and Romain Gary did in particular, the listing of names of fellow countrymen lost in battle has the effect of memorializing them in the text. In Roy’s case, the metaphorical knightly figure itself is put to rest with this war.

EPIC FEATS

Despite the imminence of threats on the missions, though, the aviators know the nature of the routine in *La Vallée heureuse*. It’s part of the battle rhythm. In fact, the cycle of flight itself is well established in literature as well. With Saint-Exupéry’s *L’Aviateur*, one of his earliest pieces,

¹⁴⁵ Saint-Exupéry clearly highlights the high loss rate in *Pilote de guerre*. Moreover, Richard Hillary writes of the loss of his comrades in refrain-like fashion: “From this flight...did not return.” Roy mimics this announcement only in the very end of his book: “Ce soir, il ne rentrerait pas.” (296); “That night, Morin would not return.” (224)

we have seen the integral series of events as they are condensed into the short tale of the death of an instructor pilot named Bernis.¹⁴⁶ Michel Quesnel wraps it up nicely for us: takeoff, flight, aerial observation of the ground, return among men – each of these, he says, is charged with sensations and meaning as they are captured in the tale (Saint-Exupéry 878). What it exposes are more than mere “impressions” of the flight experience, however, since the inner workings of the profession are opened for discussion. Its fundamental risks are accepted, and the myth of its adventure is exposed for what it truly is: the constant reminder of its perilous nature and the possibility of death underscore all the elation of flight.

This same iteration of events is repeated in Roy’s novel. As opposed to the completeness of one sortie cycle that we see in *Pilote de guerre*, we see a succession of flights that are each a part of the larger psychological journey. Whereas Saint-Exupéry describes his flight like the passion of Christ, accepting his role for France, Roy’s narrative is more an acknowledgment of the whimsical side of death. As we saw in the passage about “l’étrange sérénité du retour,” death is personified like a dragon that is escaped with each sortie; the “strangeness” of this return is in knowing that the peace of returning to base is only a temporary reprieve. Once on the ground, the cycle of anxiety and acceptance repeats. Each time, he is up against the same risks, but the stakes increase incrementally as he progresses.

Like the Tour de France, which has multiple stages of varying perils and challenges, Roy describes each take off as the predetermined acceptance of the nature of the beast. He picks up where Saint-Exupéry left off, writing about both the experience of flight and of the war. Yet, instead of alluding to the finality of death as a risk – like we see in the long contemplation during

¹⁴⁶ The original title was *L’Evasion de Jacques Bernis*, who later is the protagonist in Saint-Exupéry’s *Courrier Sud* (*Southern Mail*).

the flight toward Arras – Roy’s novel shows what happens next. It has its own circle of completeness with its dealing in death, though: it begins with a collision that causes the death of Geoffrey and part of his crew, and ends with a crash that kills Morin’s entire crew.¹⁴⁷ His plot is not in saving France by dying, but in repeatedly facing the anxieties of the mission. In a sense, he explains the toil of repetition in the passion that Saint-Exupéry experiences; it leaves the men numb to their task.

When Camus describes Roy’s literary style, he makes it analogous to the formations of the raids themselves: “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...” (247). The overall construction of the narrative, then, is like the self-contained, sequenced episodes of a mythical epic, each with its own milestone in the journey and its own specific moral message. The first of these bears the same title as the book itself, highlighting the nature of their struggle over the Happy Valley: the very real risk of mid-air collisions, living in exile, working in voluntary captivity for the liberation of an idea of France. “La régulatrice” (“The Junction”) explores the inner workings of the French crews, their image among the British, and the overall superstitious approach to the thirteenth mission that doubles their emotional attachment to the earth. “Douze cents bombardiers sur Bochum” (“Twelve Hundred Bombers over Bochum”) shows the passing of the twentieth mission, and the intricately coordinated mass of the aircraft that perform the bombings over Germany, each with its own internal workings of the crews consumed with personal fears and anxieties. “Le message” (“The Message”) brings the small bit of hope that copes with approaching the thirtieth mission, and the thoughts of

¹⁴⁷ This collision is tied to an actual event that Roy experienced, as he reports in his personal journal, published as *Retour de l'enfer* (*Return from Hell*). He nearly lost his life in a collision on July 13, 1944 (Lepesant,-Hayat 112).

reintegration into the world outside the base; a short leave only leaves Chevrier more confused about his purpose after the war. “Toutes les coupes du roi Salomon étaient d’or pur” (“All King Solomon’s Drinking Vessels were of Gold” presents a moral discussion on the noble status of the aviator and his role in the war as a destructive force on humanity. Finally, “Le Lion Rouge” (“The Red Lion”) is the ultimate return to peace for the warrior, which remains just as tainted as the bitter imagination he entertains for the future of France. Overall, the moral is not clear, however, as Barthes would argue in the case of the Tour: “Le Tour possède une morale ambiguë” (130). The choices in war are not always made with omniscience. What Roy shows, moreover, is the internal struggle of the soldier that portrays an immense sincerity; in this nakedness, he exposes the difficulty of the hero, against the odds and against the various obstacles of the missions, like the heroes that face impossible stages in the Tour: “c’est un héroïsme pur, destiné à afficher un caractère bien plus qu’à assurer un résultat” (130).

So as the journey flows, from each takeoff and landing, the cycle of each mission repeats the same toil that awaits the crew. They become immersed in their tasks, as their aircraft are part of the general fluidity of the moment. For Barthes the riders are consumed in the ebb and flow of the race like a natural part of the environment:

Le coureur cherche obscurément à se définir comme un homme total aux prises avec une Nature-substance, et non plus seulement avec une Nature-objet. Ce sont les mouvements d’approche de la substance qui importent : le coureur est toujours représenté en état d’immersion et non pas en état de course : il plonge ; il traverse ; il vole ; il adhère ; c’est son lien au sol qui le définit, souvent sans l’angoisse et dans l’apocalypse (*l’effrayante plongée sur Monte-Carlo, le feu de l’Esterel*). (127)

Roy creates an equally fluid imagery in the natural setting, like flying fish in the ocean of the sky. They trod along like a school in this viscous air, always in movement, and fully aware of the threats that can upset their steady parade:

Comme un banc de poissons volants, les avions glissaient, aile contre aile, dans le lit du fleuve, et les pilotes s'évitaient d'une légère pression des paumes. Les feux de position grouillaient vert à gauche, rouge à droite et, devant le B, les feux blancs d'étambot, comme des planètes, mais encore attachés à une masse dont la nuit n'avait pas absorbé la forme. Quelques pilotes craintifs avaient aussi allumé les feux de nez et la lumière jaune du ventre, et leurs avions ressemblaient à des yachts de plaisance. Les mitrailleurs jetaient sèchement leurs avertissements.

– Allo, pilote. Avions à dix heures... (70-71)¹⁴⁸

This metaphor of flying fish functions in exact opposition to the imagery of stationary ships that Saint-Exupéry remembers from engravings in his childhood as he struggles with frozen rudder pedals. The immobility of reflection in the previous case is replaced here with ever-present movement. These “fish” or “ships” are part of an overall ocean-like liquidity that perpetuates the epic style writing as if to continue an odyssey. Furthermore, the combination of multiple bombers in a massive wave, other than this flowing imagery, projects the symbolism of the individual plight of these flyers as part of the larger progress of Man.

¹⁴⁸ “Like a shoal of flying fish the bombers were moving in formation, wing to wing, and the pilots were keeping away from each other with the gentlest pressure on the controls. Navigation lights swarmed around them, green on the left, red on the right. In front of them sailed the white stern-lights, like so many stars, but each attached to a huge mass not yet wholly absorbed into the blackness of the night. Some of the more timorous pilots had also switched on the nose-lights and the yellow downward identification lights, and their aircraft look like cruising yachts. The gunners curtly gave their warnings: ‘Hello, pilot. Aircraft at 10.00 o’clock...’ and so on.” (44)

What is not clearly present in *La Vallée heureuse*, as compared with the typical mythical epic, is a strong sense of nationalistic fatalism. Roy recognizes his own desire to be a part of the historical moment and pursue his own limits in the process. In his case, however, the end result is not the building of an empire, but the prevention of an oppressive one. His ambivalence comes with his own disenchanted image of what he is protecting in the process. He retains the hope of what his nation will retain after the war, in the image of classic ideals. Nonetheless, he remains unclear as to the fate of what awaits him upon his return. Compare this with the ever-present sense of purpose in the epic presented by Virgil, as Leo Braudy points out:

The great military epic of Rome, Virgil's *Aeneid*, also features an ambivalent hero, who has sacrificed his personal desires and destiny to the historical fate of being a founder of Rome. In an image of this submission, Aeneas flees burning Troy carrying his father on his back and holding his son by the hand – inexorably bound to both past and future. Such, implies Virgil, are the limits of male valor in combat with the gods and time, especially when the issue is less personal fame than building the foundations of empire.(47)

LES CHAMPS ELYSÉES

Lucis habitamus opacis,

Riparumque toros et prata recentia rivis

*Incolimus.*¹⁴⁹ (Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, verses 673-675)

¹⁴⁹ We live in the shady wood; we sleep on the couches of the riverbanks, and dwell in the fresh prairies fed by the streams. (Author's translation). Bougainville references this line in Virgil to set up his description of Tahiti in *Voyage autour du monde* (Trip around the World) (247), which gives the impression of the utopian society. In the *Aeneid*, Sybil and Musaeus are addressing a crowd as Aeneas enters the fields of Elysium, known as a resting grounds for heroes after their wounds in war, and as a reward to faithful poets.

The Champs Elysees, the French expression for the field of Elysium, is also the famous boulevard in Paris that runs from the Place de la Concorde and Place de Charles de Gaulle, where the Arc of Triumph stands. Other than its important business function, especially for tourists, and the locale of the palace of the President of the Republic, it is also the final stretch of the Tour de France. Each summer, the riders make several loops around the boulevard before the end of the race. Incidentally, besides a showdown for sprinters, it is generally more of a victory ride for the leader of the Tour, and he is rarely challenged on this last day of celebration and rest.

For Chevrier, the rest he is allowed is persistently overshadowed by the dread of an unfinished reconciliation of losing his country's identity. The imagery of a peaceful glade, in the company of a young woman, is part of the allegorical female representation of France and his return. "Ils prirent un sentier à travers une lande de fougères mortes et rousses, et s'engagèrent dans un bois humide et dépouillé qui escaladait la plus proche colline," he writes (279).¹⁵⁰ Of course, here the imagery is changed: the meadow is not fresh, but dead despite its humidity. Furthermore, all the while the young woman begins to arouse his desires, he cannot help himself from being caught in between the thought of the crews taking off in the distance and his underlying fears of what may be lost in France. His basis is the myth of what he knows in its purest form: a man acting for a noble cause, Vigny's soldier, the France of Marianne. His reality has become the bitter existence of a mechanized, massive military machine and the face of Pétain on the busts of the French squares.

As Braudy describes his solitary, wandering knight, Chevrier is inextricably bounded in his pursuit of truth by the confusion that has been created in his idealized image of the soldier

¹⁵⁰ "They followed a pathway running across the heath, through dead, russet-coloured bracken, and then entered a damp, leafless wood that scaled the nearest hill." (211)

and of France: “In great part, then, the future warrior virtue advances by means of a myth of the past: the individual man of principle who triumphs over the entrenched forces of false honor to be recognized for who he really is.” (102) For Roy, this man of principle is one who negotiates his allegiances based on the course of freedom and hope in Man’s future. As a virile man, he takes action to secure these concepts; as a reflective “tender” man, he examines his conscience and the basis of the concepts themselves to ensure his direction is correct. His ambivalence is part of this process; as Chevrier’s navigator suggests with a broken clock at the Five Arrows hotel, he has “le droit de se détraquer, [...] mais pas celui d’indiquer l’heure fausse” (204)¹⁵¹.

¹⁵¹ “every right to be out of order, [...but...] no right to tell the wrong time.” (149)

CHAPTER III – THE PSEUDONYM

GLOIRE À NOS ILLUSTRÉS PIONNIERS

In 1962, Romain Gary published a collection of short stories, each tied to a general philosophical or biological human phenomenon. In characteristically Garyan style, he surprises the reader with the ironic and often parodic interpretation on a range of presumably humanistic and naturalistic topics: “Un humaniste” (A Humanist), “Les joies de la nature” (Joys of Nature), “Les habitants de la Terre” (Earthlings), “La plus vieille histoire du monde” (Oldest Story Ever Told). In an anecdote that bears the title of the collection, *Gloire à nos illustres pionniers* (Glory to Our Illustrious Pioneers), for example, Gary depicts the visit of a U.S. president to the airport in East Hampton, Connecticut. He is one of the few originals that resemble man as we know him: two arms, two legs, breathing lungs, and a face full of flesh. In fact, he was likely elected because of a sense of *nostalgic* patriotism. Meanwhile, a large number of people have surpassed the biological “stagnation” of his form. They have *evolved* into creatures with more aquatic qualities, which helps explain the numerous pools in the East Hampton area – a quick immersion in the water alleviates their anxieties in the earthly environment. Overall, the story exemplifies the paradoxical outlook that Gary spreads across his work: he searches a human universalism that remains elusive; he mutates to new identities while keeping historical traces in his peripheral view. Gary’s own citation of Sacha Tsipotchkin’s *Promenades sentimentales au clair de la lune* captures this dichotomy:

L’homme – mais bien sûr, mais comment donc, nous sommes parfaitement d’accord : un jour il se fera ! Un peu de patience, un peu de persévérance : on n’en est plus à dix mille ans près. Il faut savoir voir grand, apprendre à compter en âges géologiques, avoir de l’imagination : alors là, l’homme ça devient tout à fait

possible, probable même : il suffira d'être encore là quand il se présentera. Pour l'instant, il n'y a que des traces, des rêves, des pressentiments... Pour l'instant, l'homme n'est qu'un pionnier de lui-même. Gloire à nos illustres pionniers ! (7)

In a similar way, Gary pioneers his own self-image. He engages in his own style of myth formation that revolves around recognizable images and characters. What we find in analyzing these same apparently seamless representations, though, is a process of constant recreation of meaning. The name for which he is most recognized, Romain Gary, is in fact a pseudonym; his birth name was Roman Kacew. Gary created multiple pseudonyms for himself over his literary career, and his life was a process of continual recreation of his identity in pursuit of new roles. This personal quest is what he describes in *La Promesse de l'aube* (*Promise at Dawn*), a form of *auto-fiction* that allows him to recount his life up to that particular moment, in 1960. Other than the circular framing of the storyline as a retrospective reflection, however, the part of his biography that he tells builds to a crescendo that ends in with the Liberation of France in World War II. Fifteen years later, he still yearns to find some of the myths and ideals that helped him survive the war; however, unlike Saint- Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre* or Jules Roy's *La Vallée heureuse*, Gary's narration is scarcely focused on the actual flying during the war. Nearly two-thirds of *La Promesse de l'aube* is constructed as a *memoir* is devoted to the time he spent in parts of the Russian empire, Poland, and southern France as he and his mother fled unfortunate circumstances in search of the land of promise.¹⁵² Omnipresent in his development are the images of an idealized France that are propagated through literature and his mother's stories. His

¹⁵² Russia was experiencing the uprising of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and Poland pushed many of its Jewish population outside its borders during this time due increased anti-Semitism. Although Gary makes often an understatement of his Jewish background – he remarks in *Promise at Dawn* that he was “more or less Jewish” (175) – it is nonetheless an important part of his nomadic upbringing and his constant sense of *othering*.

image of the aviator is like a convenient intersection of multiple idealizations she held for his future: the uniform of the nation she so unwaveringly mythified, the descendent of heroic figures, and the toughness of a masculine figure that would protect her.

Unlike Jules Roy, Gary did not have a personal relationship with Saint-Exupéry, and unlike Roy he made no studies dedicated to his life and death, nor to that of Guynemer, for that matter. In *Promise at Dawn*, for example, he makes a reference to Saint-Exupéry only to remark on the physical similarities he sees in the owner of an Ayot-372 plane at the aerodrome in Merignac: “[...] the same roundness of face and features, the same massive, broad-shouldered body – but there the resemblance stopped.” (251).

This is not to imply that he was not impressed by these pioneering aviator figures, since their iconography are the basis of the image he tries to mirror. It takes him only seven paragraphs to call out Guynemer as the hero his mother hopes he will emulate, without further explanation of the traits that he evokes; he later lists Saint-Exupéry as one of the authors he *devoured* as a young man in France. Furthermore, in his short story “Je parle de l’héroïsme” (I speak of heroism) – part of the same collection discussed above – he explains, when speaking at a conference in Haiti, that he uses his name in order to illustrate the essence of heroism. He includes references to Saint-Exupéry along with Richard Hillary and André Malraux in his talk, and acknowledges afterward in a conversation with a certain Docteur Bonbon that he is personally acquainted with Jules Roy, because they have the same editor. (*Gloire à nos illustres pionniers* 190) He leaves it at that. One could argue that these are mere instances of his tendency to utilize “l’art de la litote,” one of the rhetorical styles that Jorn Boisen highlights in Gary’s work (8-9). It is the art of saying less where much more is implied in the chosen language; this approach aligns with the premise of myth making, which reduces a sign to a simpler form. Like

Barthes states in his *Mythologies*, “myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is allowed later to see through the myth” (130). The signs are considered to be, at least at first, seamless and natural. Yet, as much as he suggests that there is an immediate meaning in a cultural reference that requires no explanation, he also states that “language offers to myth an open-work meaning” (132). Myth, like language is interpreted depending on the context. Gary often enters the myth-making process to revive cultural cues that are easily recognizable and adds the intended interpretation between the lines.

Yet, Gary’s literary style is far from obscuring cultural iconography by way of avoiding a topic. He pursues these cues to their fullest in his characters, most notably himself in *Promise at Dawn*. He is just as likely to takeoff on what he would call one of his “high lyrical flights” (251) as he is to address the reader directly as a reminder that he is simply telling his own story. So if his muted self-exalting comes across as pure matter-of-factness, this is largely due to the role of *picaro* he likes to play. He is like Voltaire’s *Candide*, who responds to the events around him with a sort of innocence that comes with interpreting the world from the teachings of his master, Pangloss.¹⁵³ From his early encounters with his “budding masculinity” to his various acts of courage to become someone of importance, he does his best in the moment to fulfill what his mother would expect of him. As opposed to the reflective Saint-Exupéry, who tries to redefine the French spirit in the course of a one hour twenty-minute flight, or Roy’s solitary knight who

¹⁵³ Like *Candide*, Gary’s narrative is less moralistic than Saint-Exupéry or Roy. His description of his first encounter with sexual intercourse, observed from a distance, is reminiscent of the scene in *Candide* where he tries to understand the relations that Pangloss has with the housemaid. Like a matter of scientific study of *cause and effect*, the event is documented in his mind as a curiosity to be understood by laws of nature. Furthermore, the insertion of historical events in the tale, like the occurrence of a large-scale earthquake in Lisbon, is for a semblance of truth in accounting; otherwise, the story is highly fictionalized. Similarly, Gary makes little fuss about the historical matters in his book, despite the significant impact of the Russian revolution, of anti-Semitism in reestablished Poland independence, and of the Second World War on his nomadic existence.

battles his fears and anxieties before a series of epic-style bombing sorties, Gary depicts a more dramatic character who often exaggerates the details for the sake of a good story; he is the teller of tall tales. This often results in a humorous blend of the young boy or man trying to react to often embarrassing situations imposed by his mother's training: for her, he says he was "prepared to play the clown or the hero" (134).

Gary's own identity is built more around the success of his literary works than on a career in aviation. Over the scope of his works, aviation takes a secondary focus compared to other topics. Even in *Promise at Dawn*, where he cites the "hundred victories in the sky" (1)¹⁵⁴ that his mother says he will earn and describes his ultimate goal of walking arm in arm with her through the Marché Buffa in Nice while wearing his air force officer uniform, he is more motivated to announce his growing success as a writer. The publication of *Education européenne* in 1945, which earned him remarkable success and launched his literary career, was one of the defining moments that fulfilled his mother's aspirations for him. According to Joseph Kessel, the book shows how Gary is able to write in a way that puts the "souffle de la vie" (breath of life) into his characters (43). "Tout [...] existe [...] avec une simplicité de moyens extrême. Les paysages sont à peine indiqués, les sentiments, les pensées ne sont jamais analysées. Ce monde vit, sans l'auteur, de son propre mouvement" (43-44). Barthes would add to this discussion that the myths that abound in Gary's writing are part of the vehicle for this natural expression. He explains the transference of history into nature this way:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away

¹⁵⁴ In *La Promesse de l'aube*, he simply says that she wishes him "adieu à la mobilisation" (14).

with all dialectics, with any going beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world which is wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (*Mythologies* 143)

We see this same sort of naturalness in the narration of *La Promesse de l'aube*. But in spite of its apparent simplicity, Gary deliberately draws from myths in his work while he creates new modes of interpreting them, which Barthes also explains: “myth is speech *stolen and restored*” (125). Through his own retrospective look on his development, Gary tells how he succumbs to as many ideals as he is able to consume from an early age. In his effort to emulate them in all his innocence, however, he reveals the ambivalence in their forms.

MANGEUR D'ÉTOILES¹⁵⁵

Mais je suis un vieux mangeur d'étoiles et c'est à la nuit que je me confie le plus aisément. (*La Promesse de l'aube* 345)¹⁵⁶

Statements like these are prominent in Gary's narration. He claims to be an “apprenti idéaliste” (314)¹⁵⁷ in search of order built around “un être aimé selon quelque règle d'or” (314)¹⁵⁸ His story of becoming a man is built from his mother's high expectations of him to

¹⁵⁵ The title of this section is not derived from Gary's book, *Les Mangeurs d'étoiles*, but the reference is nonetheless intriguing and relevant to this study. The original version of that text was in English, under the title *Talent Scout* and with the translator's name listed as John Markham Beach. When the book was published in 1961, Beach was unknown; in the same year he produced a translation of Gary's *La Promesse de l'aube* as *Promise at Dawn*. However, the translator was in fact one of Gary's pseudonyms; the author and translator are the same person. The French version of *Les Mangeurs d'étoiles* was not published until 1966. For the purpose of consistency in this study as well in the interest of addressing the French text more directly, citations of *La Promesse de l'aube* from this point forward will appear in the main body discussion; the author's “translation” will appear in the footnotes. In some cases, like those already pointed out, the texts vary, but the question of the author's *intention* is less open to interpretation.

¹⁵⁶ “But I am an old star eater and it is to the night that I most readily entrust myself.” (295)

¹⁵⁷ “apprentice of a lofty idealism” (268)

¹⁵⁸ “some golden rule of beauty and happiness” (269)

breathe life into the mythical tales she shares. In this way, Gary's concept of masculinity and heroism are combined into an idealistic view of France, as an offshoot of the protagonists in its cultural canon. He would become a second *Gwynemer* in her eyes. He would be like Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, a French Gabriele d'Annunzio... Nothing short of national heroism or literary celebrity would be accepted in her vicarious aspirations for her son. Moreover, the intimacy at an early age of his idea of France is inextricably linked with his mother's romanticized view:

Ma mère me parlait de la France comme d'autres mères parlent de Blanche-Neige et du Chat Botté et, malgré tous mes efforts, je n'ai jamais pu me débarrasser entièrement de cette image féerique d'une France de héros et de vertus exemplaires. Je suis probablement un des rares hommes au monde restés fidèles à un conte de nourrice. (51)¹⁵⁹

Another importance influence on Gary's idealism during World War II is the rhetoric of General Charles de Gaulle and his recipe for the psyche of a Resistance fighter. First of all, he writes that he is predisposed to its cause by his reflective nature as he states, "J'ai une nature méditative, un peu triste" (220)¹⁶⁰. Furthermore, the combination of his romantic sense of adventure and his general concept of honor make him a perfect fit for de Gaulle's own description of these men:

These were, in fact, of that strong type to which the fighting men of the French resistance, wherever they might be, were bound to belong. A taste for risk and adventure pushed to the pitch of art for art's sake, a contempt for the cowardly

¹⁵⁹ "She spoke to me of France as other mothers speak to their children of Snow White and Puss in Boots. Try as I may, I have never entirely succeeded in ridding myself of that image of France seen as a never-never land of shining heroes and exemplary virtues. I am probably one of the few men alive who have remained completely loyal to a nursery tale." (38)

¹⁶⁰ "I am, by nature, prone to meditation and sadness" (187)

and the indifferent, a tendency to melancholy and so to quarreling during the periods without danger, [...] such were the psychological characteristics of this elite, [...] (*The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle* 94)

More important still is the fact that de Gaulle's inspirational speaking style, which Gary later describes in his collection of texts about him, including his *Ode à l'homme qui fut la France* (*Ode to the Man who was France*). Like his mother's stories, de Gaulle is part of Gary's development of a romanticized, idealized France. Only in de Gaulle did he see France from the same fairy-tale, mythical imagery he gained from her. De Gaulle's own self-created figure served as a model for *enacting* myth. In the following passage he captures the mythical creation of de Gaulle's speeches from his perspective; they are built around an eternal image of France that has a long past and projects his optimistic vision for its future.

Je ne sais si, lorsqu'il s'était mis à écouter Charles de Gaulle, ce vieux pays avait retrouvé un instant son âme d'enfant, mais je sais qu'être un homme c'est une poursuite inlassable d'un imaginaire fait de dignité et de lumière, que le plus grand service qu'un tel rêveur peut nous rendre, c'est de nous faire partager un instant son inspiration – et aussi, que le général de Gaulle est un rêveur hautement contagieux... (Gary 79)

Finally, Gary's thirst for literature, at the same time inspired by his mother's encouragement to write at an early age and his inclination toward a self-reflective existence (often in seclusion in his room or withdrawn from his peers). He writes that, in addition the reading from his mother, he "devoured" all the stories he could manage from the local bookseller. They did not all come from his imagined French canon – his list of authors includes Walter Scott,

Karl May, Mayne Reid, Arsène Lupin, and Robert Stevenson – but they remained consistent within the noble ideals of the protagonists. Even with the writing of *La Promesse de l'aube* he claims to retain some of his childhood purity in reading some of the tales. For example, regarding Walter Scott, Gary writes, “[il] me plaisait beaucoup et il m’arrive encore de m’étendre sur mon lit et de m’élancer à la poursuite de quelque noble idéal, de protéger les veuves et de sauver les orphelins” (113)¹⁶¹. Gary’s earliest notions of the hero figure is derived from the combined effect of the stories of his mother’s reading or his own, leaving him with the burning desire to follow in their likeness.

PROTEUS AND PROMETHEUS

Jorn Boisen writes that Romain Gary lived with a constant “tentation protéenne” (13), searching for repeated renewal and recreation of himself. Gary made this very clear in his own suicide note, which caused a scandal by revealing one of his most successful and complex pseudonyms.¹⁶² He wrote, as it was later published in his “Vie et mort d’Emile Ajar” (Life and Death of Emile Ajar): “Recommencer, revivre, être un autre fut la grande tentation de mon existence.” (*Œuvres complètes d’Emile Ajar* VIII) This evolutionary concept is central in *La Promesse de l'aube* as well, where we see seeing recurring personification of two essential elements taking mythical forms: water, represented by Proteus; and fire, represented by Prometheus.

¹⁶¹ “[he] gave me great pleasure and I still occasionally fling myself on my bed and set off in imaginary pursuit of some noble ideal, defending poor widows and saving little orphans.” (96)

¹⁶² Although Gary committed suicide on December 2, 1980, his other identity as Emile Ajar did not emerge until July 3, 1981 when his cousin’s son, Paul Pavlowitch, broke his promise and revealed that he had doubled as Ajar only to cover up Gary’s elaborate plot. Gary had in fact been both authors and was the only person in the history of the Goncourt Prize to win twice: first in 1956 for *Racines du ciel* (*The Roots of Heaven*) as Romain Gary; second in 1975 for *La Vie devant soi* (*The Life before Us*).

Proteus, the *old man of the sea*, symbolizes change and adaptability. Gary clearly embraces the idea that mankind has aquatic origins on evolutionary terms as well; he makes several allusions to this in *Les Racines du ciel*, for example.¹⁶³ In the overall framework of *La Promesse de l'aube*, Gary stages his contact with the sea to foretell the changes in his life. Not only does he begin and end on the coast of Big Sur, but he also places his reflections on a connection with the sea at major turning points in his life: arriving in France via Nice, leaving France across the Mediterranean, and crossing the English Channel to join de Gaulle's Free French Forces. These could be considered simple geographic circumstances if Gary didn't go out of his way to highlight his deep connection with "frère l'Océan" to the point of addressing it directly as an apostrophe to his normal narration:

Chère Méditerranée ! Que ta sagesse latine, si douce à la vie, me fut donc
clémentine et amicale, et avec indulgence ton vieux regard amusé s'est posé sur
mon front d'adolescent ! Je reviens toujours à ton bord, avec les barques qui
ramènent le couchant dans leurs filets. J'ai été heureux sur ces galets. (167)¹⁶⁴

He follows with the opening of chapter XXI by saying "Notre vie prenait tournure" (168).¹⁶⁵ The address appears at the very midpoint of *La Promesse de l'aube*, in fact, where he begins to insert more and more narration on his pursuit of writing through various pseudonyms.

Prometheus, on the other hand, symbolizes Gary's burning desire to create something and to become "someone." Prometheus is, of course, the god who stole fire from Mount Olympus

¹⁶³ He also makes reference to this in *Adieu Gary Cooper*: "Il paraît qu'on est tous sortis de l'Océan, il y a des billions d'années." (45)

¹⁶⁴ "Dear Mediterranean! How tolerant and gentle is your Latin wisdom, how sweet and helpful is your knowledge of man, and how indulgent your look of age-old amusement rested on my tormented brow! I come back always to your beaches when the fishing boats return with the setting sun caught in their nets. I have been happy on those pebbles." (143)

¹⁶⁵ "Our life was entering a new phase." (144)

and the creator of humanity. Where fire for Saint-Exupéry is the symbol of looming sacrifice and for Roy is part of the forge for the soldier, it is a yearning for love and creation for Gary. He writes of his “chronic longing for warmth” (*Promise at Dawn* 63) and a “spark of confidence” that “keeps glowing” in him (212). More importantly, he shares that his first published literary piece is a short essay entitled *La vérité sur l’affaire Prométhée* (*The Truth about the Prometheus Affair*).

Car il est hors de doute qu’on nous a trompés sur la véritable aventure de Prométhée. Ou plus exactement, on nous a caché la fin d’histoire. Il est parfaitement vrai que, pour avoir dérobé le feu aux dieux, Prométhée avait été enchaîné à un rocher et qu’un vautour se mit à lui dévorer le foie. Mais quelques temps après, lorsque les dieux jetèrent un coup d’œil sur la terre pour voir ce qui se passait, ils virent que non seulement Prométhée s’était débarrassé de ses chaînes, mais qu’il s’était emparé du vautour, et qu’il lui dévorait le foie, pour reprendre des forces et remonter au ciel. (176)¹⁶⁶

To end of this explanation in the English edition, Gary adds in summary: “He was an artist” (151). He further adds, to show his own experience as artist at this point in his life (he inserts his retrospection as the author here): “je suis à mon dix millièmè vautour. Et mon estomac n’est plus ce qu’il était autrefois” (176).¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ “For, no doubt about it, we have been cheated. The real adventure of Prometheus, or rather, the end of it, has been kept from us. It is perfectly true that, because he stole fire from the gods, Prometheus was chained to a rock and that a vulture began to devour his liver. But what we were never told is that when the gods, some time later, took a look at the earth to see what was going on there, they saw, not only that Prometheus had freed himself from his chains, but that he had seized the vulture and was devouring its liver so as to recover his strength and try to grab the sacred fire again.” (151)

¹⁶⁷ “I am at my ten thousandth vulture and my digestion is not what it used to be.” (151)

These motifs of change, yearning, and creation recur in many forms throughout *La Promesse de l'aube*. The overall message that he expresses is that he goes through a metamorphosis in multiple stages in order to become who he is at the time of writing the book. Yet, the underlying tendency is for him to desire some sort of constancy in all the change. Furthermore, despite all his personal interaction with the present and active participation in events as he undergoes his apprenticeship, Gary would have us believe that he is held to a fateful *happy ending* that is directed by his mother's power of suggestion. He repeats in the book, like she did for him during his childhood, the many mythical figures that serve as models for his development. As much as he recognized the aviator figure, though, his identity as a writer overtakes the biographical elements of *La Promesse de l'aube*; his connection to various pseudonyms becomes more real to him than a warrior identity on his path to manhood and nationhood.

IN A HURRY TO BECOME A MAN

... "mon fils a l'intention de s'établir, étudier, devenir un homme" (146)¹⁶⁸

Romain Gary's description of his early childhood in *La Promesse de l'aube* shows the ambivalence and mutation personified in the mythical figures of Proteus and Prometheus. His mother's influence is part of the "feminine" eternal image that is his basis for stability, but she is also the catalyst of his transformation, as a source of heroic inspiration and the idealization of France. More importantly, his Promethean self-creation through his writing is a direct response

¹⁶⁸ ... "it is my son's intention to settle, to study, and to grow into a man" (125) His mother's words, as captured on the application for residence in France, are testimony themselves as to the relationship he has with his own manhood. It is first and foremost an effort guided by his mother since she speaks on his behalf. It is also an ongoing learning process accomplished by study and the notion of eventually attaining a certain status.

to her expectation of him to become “someone” as a writer. This intrinsically implies “someone” other than himself and the necessity of a pseudonym – one that is also intrinsically “French.”

He portrays his life as a young man as if it were a run against the clock, trying to achieve the successes his mother envisioned for him prior to her death. Unlike the *immobility* in Saint-Exupéry’s *Pilote de guerre*, Gary’s perception of time is always one of fleeting opportunities. Even when compared with the fluidity of the missions in Jules Roy’s *La Vallée heureuse*, where any inaction leaves Chevrier anxious of what is to come, Gary is much more a part of an ongoing fate-filled journey. Saint-Exupéry reflects on his country’s past to better understand it in the present, and Roy looks forward with much concern for what it will become, and with no clear sense of when the war will be over; both use the imagery of the broken clock to represent their feeling of being *lost in time*.

For Gary, though, everything he writes is clearly retrospective while as he leads the reader toward a known destination. He is nonetheless in a hurry to get there; he even begins his story with the words “C’est fini” (It is over), which seems rather premature considering he was only forty-four years old when he wrote the book. As a young boy, he recalls feeling pressed by his mother to become a man, which he can only presume was filling a void in her own life. He writes that “she had encouraged me to wear long trousers, to kiss the hands of ladies, and had watched approvingly when I tried to shave my nonexistent beard: she was in a hurry” (10)¹⁶⁹ A large part of his growth was in the mold of traditional masculinity, like this excerpt implies. As a young boy, however, he was still growing physically as well, and he indicates that he did his best

¹⁶⁹ This excerpt and the one that follows do not appear in the French edition, where, as opposed to noting milestones in his own progress, Gary focuses more on the perspective of his mother: “ Elle essayait de me traiter en homme. Peut-être était-elle pressée. Elle avait déjà cinquante et un ans. Un âge difficile, lorsqu’on n’a qu’un enfant pour tout soutien dans la vie.” (22)

to catch up with his mother's impatience by pushing that aspect of his development: "Every few day I checked my height with a tape measure; I used also to devour raw carrots by the pound, having heard they helped one to grow faster" (10).

Gary's feeling of obligation to his mother comes from many aspects of their intimate relationship as he was growing up. First of all, she was twice divorced and never remarried while he was a boy. Additionally, Gary never really knew his father, so she was his only parental influence. In fact, Gary often felt the need to encourage his mother to take on a new husband, but she had clearly severed that part of her life and was solely dedicated to his upbringing. Secondly, the fact that Gary and his mother moved multiple times in his early childhood meant that they could really only rely on each other for the familiar comfort of a home unity, their closest sense of community. With the recurring financial struggles he describes in *La Promesse de l'aube*, he often witnessed his mother's sacrifices, which only deepened his commitment to her. Finally, the fact that his mother became increasingly ill from diabetes meant that he had a short window for reaching all the goals she had for him. Getting his second lieutenant rank, for example, was an endeavor with a time constraint. All of this lead to his mindset: "Nous étions pressés" (237)¹⁷⁰.

A MOTHER'S LOVE

Gary discredits the notion that his devotion to his mother can be explained by Freudian analysis. According to him, the Oedipus complex did not factor into his affection for her. Rather simply, he writes, "je n'ai jamais eu, pour ma mère, de penchant incestueux" (78)¹⁷¹. On the contrary, as he concludes in a long explanation in the first part of *La Promesse de l'aube*, he judged his life to be much more about "une volonté farouche d'éclairer triomphalement la

¹⁷⁰ "Time was running short." (203)

¹⁷¹ "I have never had incestuous leanings toward my mother." (64)

destinée de l'homme, que du destin d'un seul être aimé" (82)¹⁷². By no means, however, does this discount the influence of his mother on his notion of manhood and a general sense of chivalry. In fact, he recognizes openly that he is being raised to fill a void of the image of someone she had once loved. Furthermore, her vicarious aspirations for him constantly drive him to redefine himself in an effort to achieve a certain sense of honor in her eyes.

So despite Gary's dismissal of a Freudian analysis of himself, in a general sense his personal drive, as a form of *libido*, follows some of Freud's logic, which states, for example, that "Il faut un obstacle pour pousser le libido vers le haut" (Freud 138). The obstacles that Gary faces with his mother are numerous: anti-Semitism in Poland, financial troubles while establishing themselves in France, the missing father-husband figure for them both. Gary is also in constant search of filling certain voids on behalf of his mother, in order to become the image of a man she has envisioned for him. So he pulls from the bank of characters she nourished him with during his youth: "ma mère n'ayant jamais cessé de me voir autrement que comme un mélange de Lord Byron, Garibaldi, d'Annunzio, d'Artagnan, Robin Hood et Richard Cœur de Lion" (60).¹⁷³

This idealism flows into his romantic life as well, since he feels his mother's love sets such a high standard that all others pale in comparison. There is, therefore, a hierarchy that Gary points out in the French saying, "ce que la femme veut, Dieu le veut" (38)¹⁷⁴ His logical explanation of his mother's love reveals a sort of alibi for the future failures in his personal love life. The first imprint of love is the most lasting, but it sets us up for disappointment later in life,

¹⁷² "a fierce determination to cast a light of dignity and justice over the hidden face of the universe, to tear down its mask of absurdity and chaos, than by the mere wish to see a smile of happiness on my mother's face." (68)

¹⁷³ "my mother always saw me as a combination of Lord Byron, Garibaldi, d'Annunzio, Robin Hood and Richard the Lion-hearted." (45-46)

¹⁷⁴ "a women's will is God's will" (25)

as he writes: “Avec l’amour maternel, la vie vous fait à l’aube une promesse qu’elle ne tient jamais” (39)¹⁷⁵. Therefore, he concludes, his mother’s love created an ideal notion of singular commitment that cannot be copied, and he feels some resentment toward her, as he explains metaphorically: “Si ma mère avait eu un amant, je n’aurais pas passé ma vie à mourir de soif auprès de chaque fontaine” (39)¹⁷⁶.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Gary’s sense of masculinity, then, is based on a certain idea of honor that is based on a steadfast notion of justice, like the heroes in the stories. It is also derived from recognizing women as a “fairer sex” that needs and merits protection. It is the male role to absorb the pains for his female counterpart in order to shield them off from her. In large part, his basis for this is the cast of characters from the stories his mother read to him, or that he read himself. Moreover, he learns from his personal experiences that teach him a certain idea of masculinity, which he shares as anecdotes in *La Promesse de l’aube*.

He makes sense of his masculinity with Hegelian dialectic logic; that is, by defining it in terms of what it is not. Surprisingly, he learns in two anecdotes from his childhood his relationship with women that love is not entirely a tender emotion. In the abstract idea of love, he is devoted to his mother, and he finds that he is easily attached to his romantic love interests. In order to make his love more concrete, however, he takes on the responsibility of physical suffering on their behalf. For his mother, who raises him always with confidence of his future status and showers him with premature accolades, he learns the extent of her expectations of him

¹⁷⁵ The English edition is a bit more explicit on the negative side of this initial imprint: “At the dawn of life, you thus acquire a bad habit, the worst habit there is: the habit of being loved.” (25)

¹⁷⁶ “If my mother had had a husband or a lover I would not have spent my days dying of thirst beside so many fountains.” (26)

to defend her honor. For one of his earliest loves, he discovers the tests he must endure to demonstrate his capacity for pain.

At nine years old, Gary explains, he had become enamored of a girl named Valentine. He is overtaken by the romantic feelings he has for her: “tout ce que je sais c’est que mes jambes devinrent molles et que mon cœur se mit à sauter avec une telle violence que me vue se troubla” (83)¹⁷⁷. He seems to know instinctively that he should try to impress her with his ability to withstand pain, first by staring directly into the sun. Yet, she is not impressed and escalates his test to compete with her other admirer: “Janek a mangé pour moi toute sa collection de timbres-poste,” she says (84)¹⁷⁸. From this point, Gary goes on to describe an exaggerated list of items he was forced to consume to prove his love: earthworms, butterflies, leaves, cotton thread, a book, goldfish, even a Japanese fan and some rubber galoshes.¹⁷⁹ Gary’s recounting of this prodigious consumption serves to demonstrate the heights of apparently ludicrous pains he is willing to absorb for the admiration of his love interests. It is his earliest notion of chivalry and honor, which he later takes to the point of duels in hotel rooms in order to not dishonor the French code of gallantry. With this early indoctrination from Valentine, though, he defines for himself the image of a young Casanova that he plans to maintain as a man:

Dieu sait ce que les femmes m’ont fait avaler dans ma vie, mais je n’ai jamais connu une nature aussi insatiable. C’était une Messaline doublée d’une Théodora de Byzance. Après cette expérience, on peut dire que je connaissais tout de

¹⁷⁷ “all I know is that my knees began to shake, blood rushed to my head, my sight became blurred, and I raised, rather obviously, my hand to my heart, in my mother’s best romantic manner.” (69)

¹⁷⁸ “Janek ate his whole stamp collection for me.” (70)

¹⁷⁹ In Jules Dassin’s film interpretation of the novel, *Promise at Dawn*, he shows the young Gary eating a houseplant and used cigarette butts to impress his young lady.

l'amour. Mon éducation était faite. Je n'ai fait, depuis, que continuer ma lancée.

(85)¹⁸⁰

During his time in Poland, which he and his mother always see as a temporary existence on their way to France, he receives another important lesson in his masculine role, as taught by his mother. The other schoolboys – as he calls them “banderilleros” – tease him for his Francophile attitude. On one occasion, he explains how they suggest they hadn't made it to France yet because of his mother's reputation as an “ancienne cocotte” since she was a former actress.¹⁸¹ His reaction, however, falls short of his chivalric duties: “ma surprise fut si complète qu'elle prit l'apparence de la lâcheté. Mon cœur disparut soudain dans un trou, mes yeux s'emplirent de larmes et je tournai pour la première et dernière fois de ma vie le dos à mes ennemis” (143)¹⁸².

When he tells his mother of the incident, however, her reaction is not what he expects. “Brusquement toute trace de tendresse, d'amour quitta son visage,” he writes. (144)¹⁸³ He soon understands the punishment he is receiving, though, and begins to feel self-pity: “Une immense pitié pour moi-même me saisit. Je me sentais outré, trahi, abandonné.” (144)¹⁸⁴ When she slaps him, he fully grasps the importance of what had transpired, and he fully internalizes the male responsibility he had missed with respect to his mother's honor. With her words, she makes it very clear to what extent, she expects him to defend her honor: “Rappelle-toi ce que je te dis. A

¹⁸⁰ “God knows what women have made me swallow in the course of my life, but I have never known anybody so insatiable. After my experiences with her, there was nothing left for me to learn about love. I knew.” (70)

¹⁸¹ The implication here, of course, is more suggestive, that his mother was more of a *femme facile*, of questionable moral fiber.

¹⁸² “so great was my surprise on this occasion that it took the appearance of cowardice. My heart suddenly sank into a hole, my eyes filled with tears and, for the first and last time in my life, I turned my back on my enemies.” (123)

¹⁸³ “All of a sudden, every vestige of love and tenderness left her face.” (123)

¹⁸⁴ “[I] was filled with a great surge of self-pity. I felt indignant, betrayed, abandoned.” (123)

partir de maintenant, tu vas me défendre. Ça m'est égal ce qu'ils te feront avec leurs poings. C'est avec le reste que ça fait mal. Tu vas te faire tuer, au besoin.” (145-146)¹⁸⁵ It is also with this incident that his mother decides definitively to move to France and complete Gary's transition to manhood.

THE NEED TO ARRIVE, TO BE “SOMEONE”

Although Gary denies a Freudian approach to his own psyche, there is at least one point where he would agree with the psychoanalyst. Regarding fiction, Freud suggests the following: “Dans le domaine de la fiction, nous trouvons cette pluralité de vies dont nous avons besoin. Nous mourons en identification avec tel héros, mais pourtant nous lui survivons et sommes prêts à mourir une seconde fois, toujours sans dommage, avec un autre héros.” (147) In an effort to meet his mother's expectations of greatness, he endeavors to conquer a variety of talents – violin, dance, tennis, painting, ping pong, etc. – each with its own archetype in whose footsteps he was to follow. As he writes, “j'allais être un grand violoniste, un grand acteur, un grand poète ; le Gabriele d'Annunzio français, Nijinsky ; Emile Zola” (44). Already in Gary's childhood we see the conflation of cultural icons in these figures, which only contributes to the ambivalence in his national affiliation later in life. As much as his mother emphasized the lives of *illustrious Frenchmen*, his gallery of heroes is more *disparate* than “hexagonal” or “purely French.” As we notice in the needed qualifier “français “ to “d'Annunzio.” Greatness is what matters most; otherwise, it was simply a matter of transforming these “cosmopolitan” figures, like Nijinsky, into a more acceptable French iconography.

¹⁸⁵ “Remember what I've said to you. From now on, you have to defend me. I don't care what they do to you with their fists, that's not what hurts most. If necessary, you'll let yourself be killed.” (125)

In fact, the way he describes his pursuit of identity in *La Promesse de l'aube* would make the reader believe it was a last refuge he stumbles upon as a matter of coincidence with the tests his mother put him through. But as he tells the story of his own progression, he undoubtedly creates his persona only in the appearance of innocence. In fact, he pursues a self-reflection that is very well established, as Mokhtar Atallah explains in *Le Culte du Moi dans la littérature française* (*The Cult of the Self in French Literature*). He follows a lineage of writers who pursue what Atallah calls “un singulier destin de l'écriture” where the author and narrator become fused into one entity in order to project an autobiographical context (26). His underlying question hits on the type of self-analysis that Gary demonstrates in his *auto-fiction*, which pulls *La Promesse de l'aube* into the models of this lineage:

Aujourd'hui l'écrivain est un être excentrique qui prétend refuser l'appel des mots ! Cet anti-conformisme qui lui offre la libre expression, n'a-t-il pas ses racines dans l'épanouissement des *Lettres* aux siècles précédents ? L'écriture, peut-elle venir *ex nihilo* ? Par sa remise en cause perpétuelle, l'écrivain moderne ne vit-il pas là une épopée nostalgique ?(25)

Tracing the development of auto-portraits from Montaigne's *Essais* to Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Atallah points out the importance of psychological analysis in traditional literature in three phases: *egotism* (where introspection refines one's personal sensibilities to the surrounding world); *egoism* (where only the “self” exists, as an escape from the surrounding world); and *egocentrism* (where the “self” is projected into the center of the surrounding world). In this literary heritage, which is presented in largely chronological fashion, Atallah place Rousseau in the category of *egotism* as the exemplary “homme nouveau” (new

man)¹⁸⁶, for example; he puts Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* figure, the dandy, in the *egoism* grouping, along with Maurice Barrès's *Le Culte du Moi*; finally, for *egocentrism*, he references the psychological drama in Proust, which leads to a development of the notion of "self" where there is an "intérêt progressif pour la restauration délectable du passé dans la construction du présent et du futur, en impliquant même davantage le devenir de la notion d'écrivain" (46).

In this lineage, then, I would place Saint-Exupéry in the realm of *egotism*, Jules Roy into *egoism*, and Romain Gary into *egocentrism*. These categories have less to do with the common sense of these terms regarding a sort of narcissism, but rather explain the ways in which they relate to the world through their auto-portrait style of literature. Paradoxically, Gary actually acknowledges his own "egocentricity" in his empathy toward suffering around him. "Mon égocentrisme est en effet tel que je me reconnais instantanément dans tous ceux qui souffrent et j'ai mal dans toutes leurs plaies," he writes. "Cela ne s'arrête pas aux hommes, mais s'étend aux bêtes, et même les plantes" (232).

To take this further, then, I would propose that Gary pushes into the area of *nouveau roman*, which, according to Atallah, refuses the psychological analysis of traditional literature, in a way that allows the writer to escape certain contradictions in his language. (53) While Gary presents literature itself as a sort of escape or refuge, he argues he projects himself with humor precisely to avoid the *zeitgeist* of what he sees as excessive psychoanalysis. He presents his argument here in *La Promesse de l'aube*:

¹⁸⁶ The idea of the "new man" is that he embraces his sensibilities in conjunction with his manhood, despite any contradiction that may imply. Because of his tendency toward reflection, however, he is prone to see an absurdity in a purely warrior ethic of traditional masculinity. In this sense, the "new man" created in Rousseau's likeness is different from the "new man" of the fascist order in Europe which recognized the fusion of all capacities into a *total man* concept: "a man who was at the same time warrior, athlete, artist, and thinker" (Carroll 140).

La réalité est que « je » n'existe pas, que le « moi » n'est jamais visé, mais seulement franchi, lorsque je tourne contre lui mon arme préférée ; c'est la situation humaine que je m'en prends, à travers toutes ses incarnations éphémères, c'est une condition qui nous fut imposée de l'extérieur, à une loi qui nous fut dictée par des forces obscures comme une quelconque loi de Nuremberg. (161)¹⁸⁷

In addition to Gary's "arme préférée," his use of humor, he inserts the allegories, metaphors, and symbols that Atallah says, through their familiarity to the reader, serve a dual purpose: they allow for the pleasure of the text as well as the accessibility of the *psyche* of the author (27). His reference to Prometheus, for example helps them reader envision the toils associated with his creation. Furthermore, the repetition of historic, literary, and mythic figures serve to reinforce the emblematic images of heroism and justice that he embraces from his childhood.

So even if Gary avoids the suggestion of an Oedipal relationship with his mother, he uses her as the *porte-parole* of many of these same symbols. In this way, he transfers his psychoanalysis, where the "self" is in the center, to a transmission of ideals through the *metalanguage* that Roland Barthes proposes. In fact, Barthes's semiology makes no reference to a cult of "self" development in his system of *language-object*. On the contrary, Barthes writes, "voluntary acceptance of myth can in fact define the whole of our traditional Literature" (134). As Barthes suggests with his *Mythologies*, Gary uses images that are packed with cultural

¹⁸⁷ "The truth of the matter is that "I" does not exist, and if "me" seems the target, it is against the human situation as a whole, underlying all its ephemeral incarnations of "I" or "me," that I thrust that favorite weapon of mine; it is with our fraternal predicament that my laughter and derision try to come to grips, probing for something mych deeper and more significant than myself; it is against the biological, moral, spiritual and metaphysical servitude that has been imposed on us from outside, dictated to us like some ugly Nuremberg law, and not against my own shortcomings that I raise my mocking voice." (137)

familiarity that help him define his character. The meaning of the figures he uses is “*already* complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions” (117).

Therefore, the number of permutations that Gary undergoes as a young man, in search of greatness in his mother’s eyes and of his own identity, aligns with his protean existence as a writer. This, too, is reinforced by his mother’s power of her suggestion: “Tu sera d’Annunzio ! Tu sera Victor Hugo, Prix Nobel !” (23) “Ma mère n’avait jamais cessé de me parler des victoires et des lauriers qui allaient être les miens,” he writes (319). Gary’s repetitive style draws attention to the images she created for him. Likewise, his description of his quest for a pseudonym is a repetitive, omnipresent process in *La Promesse de l’aube*, which acknowledges his self-perception as an *alter ego* through his writing. He escapes his pre-conditioned self with one created through multiple identities. Hubert de la Vallée, Romain de Roncevaux, Roland de Chantecler, Romain de Mysore , Roland Campeador, Alain Brisar, Hubert de Longpré, Romain Cortès, François Mermonts, Lucien Brulard, André Corthis – these are just some of the names he cites in his search for the right pen name. The perfect one, of course, would be a mixture of his past and his projected present, but it would need to be undeniably French. In fact, he writes that he envies Charles de Gaulle, since his name contained both a royal heritage and a connection with the ancient bloodline of Gauls. “Romain,” then, ties his given name Roman to an imaginary heritage of Gauls, whereas “Gary” is phonetically derived from the Russian word for “burn,” indicating both a break from his Russian origins and a persistence in the Promethean reference to fire and creation, symbols of his literary identity. In fact, we can see this same theme in one of his earliest pseudonyms, Lucien Brûlard – a combination of Stendhal’s Lucien Leuwen and

Henri Brulard – and in his infamous Emile Ajar, where “ajar” is a phonetic representation of the Russian word for “embers” (Van Renterghem para 14).

The influence of Gary’s mother on his self-creation, then, is derived from the ideals she placed in him at an early age. From her, he learned an unyielding sense of honor that he carries with him through the war. His concept of masculinity required that he protect her, and her strict love left an indelible mark on his conscience, to the point of staying at his side like a ghost even when she was gone. In fact, throughout the “Troisième Partie” of *La Promesse de l’aube* – the part that revolves predominantly around his action in the war – he refers to his mother as if she were physically present, when in fact only a figment of her is with him, as a moral judgment to each choice he encounters. He establishes this early on as one of the consequences of the responsibility of protecting her honor:

Je croyais à une logique secrète et souriante, dissimulée aux recoins les plus ténébreux de la vie. Je croyais à l’honorabilité du monde. Je ne pouvais voir le visage désemparé de ma mère sans sentir grandir dans ma poitrine une extraordinaire confiance dans mon destin. Aux heures les plus dures de la guerre, j’ai toujours fait face au danger avec un sentiment d’invincibilité. Rien ne pouvait m’arriver puisque j’étais son *happy end*. Dans ce système de poids et mesures que l’homme cherche désespérément à imposer à l’univers, je me suis toujours vu comme *sa victoire*” (48)¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸⁸ “I believed that in life’s darkest crannies there lay concealed a secret, smiling, and compassionate logic; that justice always triumphed in the end; I believed in all those clichés that had for centuries assured man’s survival on this earth; I could not see a look of total helplessness on my mother’s face without feeling surging within me an extraordinary confidence in my destiny. At the darkest moments of the war, in the thick of battle, I always face peril with a feeling of invincibility. Nothing could happen to me because I was her happy ending. In that system of

This sense of destiny is also in the speeches of de Gaulle during this time. Gary's sense of honor and nobility aligned with de Gaulle's mantra of "liberty, dignity, and security" that he maintained would "assure France in the world through the crushing of the enemy" (Gaulle 275). "While the French people is uniting for victory, it is assembling for a revolution," he published in a manifesto on June 23, 1942 (275). When he made his famous Appeal of 18 June in 1940, however, Romain Gary claims that he had already answered the call of his mother two days earlier, on 16 June, as he imagined her rallying a crowd in the market of la Buffa in Nice. In fact, Gary's departure for England predated the appeal of de Gaulle by a couple days.

"JE PARLE DE L'HÉROÏSME"

[...] le héros moderne, confronté avec un péril mortel, redécouvre à cette heure suprême toutes les valeurs permanentes oubliées, [...] une telle expérience peut féconder une œuvre et une vie. (Gary, Gloire à nos illustres pionniers 190)

As mentioned earlier, Romain Gary tells a story about when he was invited by l'Institut français to speak at a conference in Haiti. He explains how Docteur Bonbon invites him to go for a shark hunt, which ends up with the speaker diving Cousteau-style into what he presumes to be shark-infested waters. He reluctantly goes along with Bonbon's plan as it unfolds, only for the sake of upholding his reputation to the words of heroism that he spoke. He soon realizes that he had been played, however. His harpoon was lodged into the bottom of the boat when he thought it had pierced a large shark, and he was, in fact, in an area protected by a reef where sharks never visit. Despite all of this or because of it, in his next speech he finds himself repeating the same

weights and measures which men try so desperately to impose upon the universe, I always saw myself as *her* victory." (35)

rhetoric regarding the *modern hero* for which he was being tested, much to the admiration of his prankster who returns, expecting to hear a change in his message.

In this anecdote, Gary highlights a basic truth of the nature of heroism: it loses its essence when we talk about it. It is observed rather than explained first-hand. Certainly if someone claims for himself to exemplify it, its luster vanishes. Yet, stories of heroism become the very foundation of myth; it matters how they are told. Gary explains, for example, that he had chosen the conference topic because he quite familiar with it from reading about it in the library, not from his personal experience. This is a perfect example of “l’art de la litote” simply because he leaves out talk of his own confrontation with death or any mention of his military decorations. It is similar to the way in which Saint-Exupéry deflects his personal sacrifice as a gesture of playing his role in the larger context of the martyrdom of France. It is also linked to the choice by Jules Roy to write in the third person to explain more openly the struggles he experienced over the Happy Valley.

Gary’s figure of the *modern hero*, then, is one that simply responds to the situation that confronts him. He becomes a victor as a matter of circumstance, and it is because of this innocence that the tale is worth sharing. This is why Jean-Marie Catonné describes *La Promesse de l’aube* as a “récit picaresque” where the hero is an antihero; it is an undertaking of “démythification au réalisme prosaïque” (Roumette 86-87). Gary’s predominantly burlesque style is a departure from the lyrical warrior as he is more concerned with addressing his day-to-day concerns. His ambulatory existence during the war is particularly prone to ambivalent situations that he portrays as constant threats to the honor he maintains for the sake of not disappointing his mother. As Catonné puts it:

Dans ce pseudo-roman héroïque, le picaro se raconte lui-même, prenant le lecteur à témoin, ironisant sur la leçon des ses malheurs comme dans les romans d'apprentissage. La narration prétendue autobiographique de *La promesse* commente ainsi la guerre qu'il a ratée avec un humour qui désamorce le réel, pour en tirer une leçon de relativité sur les vicissitudes de l'existence. (Roumette 86-87).

Gary intentionally presents the image of the antihero in this way, by telling of the war that he feels he has missed. As much as he works to fulfill his mother's dreams of reaching the status of a glorious war hero, he only finds himself as a circumstantial extra in the war around him. He makes it a point to state this to the reader in order to perpetuate this particular self-view as the failed hero: "Je tiens donc à le dire clairement : je n'ai rien fait. Rien, surtout lorsqu'on pense à l'espoir et à la confiance de la vieille femme qui m'attendait. Je me suis débattu. Je ne me suis pas vraiment battu." (357)¹⁸⁹

More than making self-assessing statements like this, however, he uses several anecdotes that illustrate his point throughout the book. For example, he explains how, while flying with the famous 342 "Lorraine" squadron out of Hartford Bridge, he missed a submarine that had surfaced when it should have been an easy kill. He goes on to explain his deep conflict of interest that revolves around his desire to have made a mark on his battle experience while he remains committed to the nobler notion of Man that doesn't kill. His anxiety at night is not based on the horrors of having unleashed bombs over target and caused death and destruction, but rather on the fact that he hasn't killed. Ironically, he is tormented by missed opportunities to kill the enemy.

¹⁸⁹ "I wish, here and now, to make one thing perfectly clear: I did nothing, nothing at all. When one bears in mind the hope and trust in me, not only of my mother, but of practically the whole Buffa Market, I have no excuse." (305)

More than anything, he fears that his mother would not be validated if he were not to come home as the decorated war hero she had envisioned him to be. If he was to be compared with Guynemer, for example, he would fall short in many aspects: he was not a fighter pilot, or a pilot at all for that matter, he could not accrue enemy kills to reach the status of “ace,” and the confrontation with the enemy was almost always at a distance. His job in bombers, as a second navigator like Jules Roy, was less glorious than she supposed in the many letters of *encouragement* that she had sent to him throughout the war¹⁹⁰, as he describes:

Ce n'était pourtant pas ma faute si ma guerre n'était pas brillante. Je faisais de mon mieux. Tous les jours, j'étais au rendez-vous dans le ciel et mon avion revenait souvent criblé d'éclats. Je n'étais pas dans la chasse, mais dans le bombardement et notre métier n'était pas très spectaculaire. On jetait ses bombes sur un objectif et on revenait, ou on ne revenait pas. J'allai jusqu'à me demander si ma mère n'avait pas appris l'histoire du sous-marin raté au large de la Palestine et si elle ne m'en voulait pas encore un peu. (375)¹⁹¹

Furthermore, he often talks about the daily activities of the squadron as efforts to fill the boredom of the war and explains certain situations that would not make his mother proud. This was especially the case while assigned to French Equatorial Africa, where he describes careless acts of the crews as an attempt to break from the tedium of flights: dive-bombing the Governor's Residence, flying too low near a herd of elephants and crashing on one occasion because of a

¹⁹⁰ In total, Gary says she had prewritten 250 letters that she had sent to him via a friend in Switzerland. They continued to arrive well after she passed, about three years before the end of the war.

¹⁹¹ “Yet I was not to blame if my war had been lacking in brilliance. I was doing my best. Every day I was punctual at my rendezvous with the enemy in the sky and my plane often crawled back riddled with shells. I was not a fighter pilot, only a bomber, and our job was not very spectacular. We dropped our bombs on target and then went home, or not, as chance dictated. I even caught myself wondering whether my mother had heard about the submarine I had missed off the coast of Palestine and was perhaps furious with me.” (322)

collision, seeking solace in the company of young Hungarian dancers who were “interned” there by the British. The level of this interaction in the last case is only assumed by allusion; through Gary’s style of not saying all the details, the implication remains unmistakably understood:

Loin de hisser au niveau de tous ce qu’elle attendait de moi, j’en étais réduit à la compagnie de pauvres filles dont les jolis visages s’amincissaient à vue d’œil sous la morsure impitoyable du soleil soudanais au moi de mai. J’éprouvais continuellement une effroyable sensation d’impuissance et je faisais de mon mieux pour me donner le change et pour me prouver que je n’étais pas complètement dévirilisé. (358)¹⁹²

ACHILLES’S SHIELD

Thetis, the mother of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, has a special shield crafted for him prior to his battle against Hector. Its ornate imagery has been interpreted in various ways in an effort to make sense of the contrasting scenes of a utopian society and violent struggle. Most notably, Virgil incorporates a lengthy description of the shield of Aeneas in Book XVIII of the *Aeneid* and W.H. Auden provides an austere representation in his 1952 poem, *The Shield of Achilles*. Regardless of the interpretation, however, the premise is the same: at a mother’s request this shield was made to protect Achilles from the perils he will face. In a very similar way, Gary’s association with the aviator image is like a “carapace” that he uses to cover his sensibilities. The aviator’s uniform, particularly the leather flying jacket, is like a symbol for him, through his mother’s eyes, of protection against any notion of mediocrity.

¹⁹² “Far from attaining the level of her expectations, I was reduced to seeking solace in the company of a lot of poor girls whose pretty faces grew thinner and thinner, almost while one watched, under the pitiless bite of the Sudanese sun in the month of May. We were obsessed by the feeling of manhood draining away, of stagnation and impotence while violent fighting was going on in Libya, and we did what we could do to reassure ourselves and to assert our virility.” (306)

Gary's description of his personal attachment to the jacket in *La Promesse de l'aube* exposes his fragility as a man. The aviator image on the whole transposes his mother's expectations of the hero image for him while covering the inner boy she loves, like Achilles's shield, given to him by Thetis, that covers his vulnerable heel from different angles. On the outside, Gary appears tough, seamlessly courageous, and noble; on the inside, he is hopelessly attached to promises made to his mother, caught up in the moments he encounters, and simply trying to achieve a certain amount of status as a Frenchman. He shows here how this "carapace" presents an image of toughness: "Je restai là, le cigare idiot aux lèvres, avec ma veste en cuir, ma casquette sur l'œil, mon air dur, mes mains dans les poches" (261-262)¹⁹³. Yet, he immediately puts this in perspective as he explains his true feelings in that moment, upon hearing the news of his mother's illness worsening: "cependant que la terre entière devenait soudain un lieu inhabité. C'est de cela que je me souviens surtout aujourd'hui : une sensation d'étrangeté, comme si les lieux les plus familiers, le sol, les maisons, et toutes les certitudes fussent devenus autour de moi un planète inconnue où je n'avais jamais mis les pieds auparavant." (262)¹⁹⁴ Therefore, he shows a more vulnerable side of his own character, not of the solitary wandering knight, but of a lost son who struggles to find his place in the world. Gary's burning desire to find new identities is tied to his constant self-perception as "un autre" (an *other*).

The leather flying jacket, which Gary points out did as much for the recruiting of the air force as it did for any practical purpose in flight, allows him to access another identity. By

¹⁹³ "I stood there in my leather flying jacket, with that ridiculous cigar in my mouth, my cap pulled down jauntily over one eye, my hands in my pockets, and the familiar tough look on my face" (224)

¹⁹⁴ "while the whole world around me became a strange, foreign place empty of all life. That is what I chiefly remember of that moment today: a feeling of utter strangeness, as though the most familiar things, the houses, the trees, the birds, and the very ground under my feet, all that I had come to regard as certainties, had suddenly become part of an unknown planet which I had never visited before." (224)

donning the “carapace” he is able to become the man his mother wanted him to be; he is able to hide any insecurities and attach himself to a known, emblematic hero image. It is also an example of his ability to change into new characters in his literary inventions. He employs what Ralph Schoolcraft describes as one of his “strategies of mobile identity,” which vary from the highly visible to the incognito hero:

These strategies of clandestine resistance can thus aim for high visibility or complete anonymity, but in both cases the foundations are the same. It is a concept that allows Gary to bring under the same umbrella the opposing faces of his own existence, the Resistance hero and the bastard child, the two archetypal figures that lie behind all of his different incarnations. (87)

Schoolcraft adds that Gary’s characters on the whole “invent all aspects of their life stories, changing their names and nationalities and tossing off wild improvisations whose contradictions leave the reader never knowing a character’s true identity” (87). In this way, as Gary inserts the image of the aviator throughout *La Promesse de l’aube* he not only shows how he is fulfilling his mother’s expectations, but also shows how the traditional image he employs is largely only on the surface. What it represents is not entirely consistent with his true feelings or his personal motivations. At times, he would prefer to slip by unnoticed, hiding behind the image. At others, he asserts the image with confidence to attain a desirable outcome to a situation. What he finds, though, is that he is lost without the identity he creates in the aviator, symbolized by the leather flying jacket, since it was the one that seemed most readily apparent and *unambiguous*: “Elle était une enveloppe familière et protectrice, une carapace qui me donnait un sentiment de sécurité et de dureté et, en m’aidant à camper une silhouette légèrement menaçante, résolue, un

peu dangereuse même pour tous ceux qui oserait s’y frotter, elle me permettait, en somme, de passer inaperçu” (318)¹⁹⁵.

The notion of the carapace is one of the repeated images in Gary’s work. In *La Promesse de l’aube*, it also takes multiple forms. He had already introduced it when he described the woodshed in Wilno (Vilnius) where he would hide to escape the taunting insults directed at “the Jew” from the neighbors. He also explained its function as he was outfitting himself with aviator wings and cap as he prepared for the graduation parade in Avord after completing flight training, on very similar terms to the leather flying jacket:

La visière longue me donnait un air plus vache, ce qui était très recherché, mais la visière courte m’allait mieux. Je finis cependant par opter pour l’air vache. Je me fabriquai également, après mille essais infructueux, une petite moustache, très à la mode alors parmi les aviateurs, et, avec des ailes dorées sur la poitrine – enfin, on pouvait trouver mieux sur le marché, je ne dis pas, mais je n’étais pas du tout mécontent, loin de là. (242)¹⁹⁶

More important than the façade of toughness, though, as Gary points out in the English edition, this outer shell provided another layer to his inner self, where “thus hidden, the little boy could hope to pass unnoticed” (207). This sort of image of the aviator that he presents in his self-reflexive writing shatters the notion of a seamless warrior. When we consider the development of Gary’s *ego* through his writing, it is clear that the myth associated with this sort of iconography

¹⁹⁵ “It was a familiar and protective carapace, which gave me a feeling of security and toughness. It helped me to hide under an aspect slightly menacing, resolute and not a little dangerous to those who might try to come too close to peek at me too attentively; in short, the little boy lost could feel secure and pass unnoticed.” (271-272)

¹⁹⁶ “The long visor gave me a more rakish look, which was much to be desired, but the short one suited me better. I managed, after a thousand fruitless attempts, to produce a small mustache of the kind then considered very smart by fliers. With a pair of gold wings on my chest, I won’t go so far as to say that I cut a stunning figure; still I looked pretty tough” (207)

is more complex. Though quickly recognizable on the exterior, all of his “egocentricity” reveals a much more self-aware and sensibly vulnerable soul than a warrior in the action of fighting. Nonetheless, it becomes difficult to separate the mythification of the aviator figure from his own identity as a writer. On the surface is exemplified the characters of the heroic tales that he read, and that he mirrors in his own writing.

The very toughness of this “carapace” of the aviator image, therefore, becomes like a refuge for his ideal hero identity. Without it, he cannot slip by without exposing his individuality or his mediocrity. The leather flying jacket is a symbol of a certain level of achievement that follows the path of *grandeur* expected by his mother, for de Gaulle, for France, and his own *devenir* hero; all the myth of the aviator figure is produced in it. On its most basic terms, as described by Barthes, “Myth is a pure ideographic system, where the forms are still motivated by the concept which they represent while, not yet, by a long way, conveying the sum of its possibilities for representation” (127). So where Barthes implies that “the whole of Molière is seen in a doctor’s ruff” (127), in the case of Gary’s carapace, the whole of the hero figure is seen in the leather flying jacket. If we can infer from Barthes, for example, that in *Le Médecin malgré lui* (*The Doctor in Spite of Himself*) Sganarelle is thrown into a role that he eventually embraces despite his true qualifications, it still becomes a part of his identity. Rather than the farcical connotation of Molière’s play, however, Gary’s role as an aviator is one for which he has trained, both in the air force and by his mother’s idealism. At this point in his life, the role is a culmination of efforts and a realization of dreams. This is why when he loses his jacket when

leaving North Africa, at one of his most vulnerable moments after the fall of France¹⁹⁷, he claims that “on m’avait vraiment tout pris” (318)¹⁹⁸.

THE NOBLE PICARO

If Gary represents his own image of a *modern hero* in *La Promesse de l’aube*, it is in part because of his hero figure’s sense of nobility, which is both *romanesque* and romantic. It is not based on the status of birth but rather on a sense of honor that is derived from holding fast to a set of values. He does not have a privileged status that he is protecting out of duty to a position in society, like some royal obligation. Instead, his sense of honor is based on his notion of responsibility as a man, as a son, as an aspiring citizen of France. Gary’s way of telling this story is to present the situations he faces as they arise, making decisions as they come and moving forward with the outcome of those choices. As he lay in a hospital bed during one of his illnesses, for example, he remembers, “J’avais un sens aigu de mes responsabilités” (119)¹⁹⁹. He was thinking of his mother, feeling that he was not able to help her while he was sick and that he was falling short of her expectations. At times like these, he writes that he summons the characters from across literature as a guide: he calls on d’Artagnan and Arsène Lupin; he spouts off the fables of La Fontaine. His moral guide lies in the nobility and fables of literature.

One could best categorize type of auto-fiction in *La Promesse de l’aube* as a series of anecdotes, each with its own personal connection to his life that tests his moral code and results in some realization of how it helps him prevail in the various experiences in which he participates. His references to actual dates or historical events are not as causal as the immediacy

¹⁹⁷ He had been in hiding in a *maison close* in Meknès in order to mask his intention of deserting to England as part of the Resistance. He had also just come from receiving word that his mother’s illness was worsening.

¹⁹⁸ “I really had lost everything.” (272)

¹⁹⁹ “I had an acute sense of my responsibilities.” (101)

of the situations he confronts. Nevertheless, in the overall historical context of his book, his participation implies a heroic involvement in the events he describes. According to Jean-Marie Catonné, “Il faut lire *La promesse* comme le premier de ses récits picaresques dont il fera théorie dans *Pour Sganarelle*. Cela ne remet pas en cause son courage mais témoigne de sa volonté de raconter autrement, d’en faire un conte plus qu’un témoignage” (Roumette 86). The idea of converting his life into a series of tales, versus a simple accounting of life events, has the dual effect of creating a thematic unity while giving the illusion of naturally flowing circumstances. In other words, he portrays things as happening without an apparent plan, according to reactions, whereas each anecdote has a coherent message that is predetermined.

Gary rarely provides a tale that acts like a preplanned occurrence, which would make it seem too contrived. A possible exception to this is in his description of the time he nearly kills Hitler, as part of an elaborate, well-scripted plot that he designs to take the train to Berlin, fully equipped and personally settled with all the risks and consequences of the assassination. He would be a national hero for this, of course. Gary’s humorous depiction of the setback in his plan, however, give the reader a clear notion that he is merely making an exaggerated point of how far he would go to attain a level of heroism in his mother’s eyes. In the end, it is her that prevents him from going, as close as he was to executing the plan.

More indicative of Gary’s anecdotes, though, is his when he describes his wanderings on the airbase in Bordeaux, in search of an airplane to accommodate his desertion to London. His survey of characters he observes is like a pastiche of the random states of the air force during the final days of the German invasion into France: old and new hobbled together with the mix of civilians fleeing the influx of troops as part of *l’exode*. During his interaction with the crews, he

makes his varying connections of patriotism in an attempt to demonstrate his own commitment to defend France or understand the residual enthusiasm among them.

In particular, his observation of a two-star general in his cockpit intrigues his romantic sense of honor. The general, he posits, is busily writing letters to loved ones as he prepares to execute a dramatic answer to the looming surrender to the enemy: he plans to commit suicide with his own revolver, which lies waiting on his lap while he finishes his final adieux. With several passes, Gary returns to verify whether or not the general made his fatal statement. When he reveals, however, that the general was apparently just completing routine correspondence and using his weapon as a paperweight, his sense of heroism is deflated. “J’avais besoin de faire confiance à quelqu’un,” he remembers, “et ce général, avec son visage jeune et noble, m’inspirait confiance : j’attendais donc patiemment près de l’avion qu’il me remontât le moral.” (286)²⁰⁰ In this case, Gary concludes that he does not share the same view of the world around him as this man, and probably many others, since he is so idealistic and prone to seek meaning in it through the lens of the stories he’s read, and according to the moral compass of his mother. These guide him through his nomadic existence during the war, and the overwhelming conscience is something that he cannot avoid: “Mais si tous mes livres sont pleins d’appels à la dignité, à la justice, si l’on y parle tellement et si haut de l’honneur d’être un homme, c’est peut-être parce que j’ai vécu, jusqu’à l’âge de vingt-deux ans, du travail d’une vieille femme malade et surmenée. Je lui en veux beaucoup.” (204)²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ “I desperately needed somebody whom I could trust and this general, with his young and noble face, inspired me with just the right confidence, and so I waited patiently for him to give a boost to my morale.” (244)

²⁰¹ “But if my books are filled with so many invocations to dignity and justice, if I make such a to-do about the honor of being a man, that, perhaps, is because I lived until the age of twenty-two on the sweat and toil of a sick and exhausted old woman and I still feel mad at her sometimes.” (172)

MORE FRENCH THAN THE FRENCH THEMSELVES

Un passé historique, des grands hommes, de la gloire [...] voilà le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée nationale. – Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation ?*²⁰²

If we recall the discussion from Chapter I on Renan's concept of the nation, we will remember that it is full of contradictions. Renan reasons that the abstract elements of nationhood cause it to change dynamically, which Homi Bhabha attributes to its "ambivalence." If we read further into Renan's talk, though, we see the seeds of a certain idea of a nation that is based on the actions of its heroic figures. He characterizes this idea as rooted in a moral conscience. "Comme l'individu," he writes, the nation is "l'aboutissement d'un long passé d'efforts, de sacrifices et de dévouements" (Renan 56)²⁰³. There is a sort of cult of ancestry that comes from Renan's perspective. Nonetheless, it acknowledges more of a process of belonging through efforts and merit than blood or soil. In other words, this abstraction can truly only be concretized by an affiliation with the *grandeur* of the country, based on a rich history of shared struggles. Furthermore, it is a conscious choice of committing to the that affiliation, what Renan famously called a "plebiscite of every day."

In *La Promesse de l'aube*, Romain Gary builds his own affiliation with France, then, through these two qualities: conscious choice and commitment. Unlike the cult of ancestry that Renan easily accesses, however, Gary's French ancestry is imagined. Unlike Maurice Barrès's *The Cult of Self*, for that matter, Gary's psychological analysis does not lead him to a preexisting

²⁰² "A heroic past, great men, glory [...] this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea." (Bhabha 19)

²⁰³ "The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion." (19)

identity that is passed on by “native sons” (Carroll 21)²⁰⁴. Gary *becomes* French, despite his foreign roots, particularly his Jewish descent, which for Barrès was the epitome of the negative aspect of “deracinated” people. In fact, if we were to use the narrative-based elements of Barrès’s or Renan’s idea of France – where national narratives are passed from parents to their descendants – Gary would actually meet the requirements of belonging to the cultural “fatherland.” He commits whole-heartedly to the greatness of French historical figures and myths. He and his mother choose to move to France for all the ideals that it represents; he is naturalized as citizen in 1935, and he masters the language as if it were his native tongue. Furthermore, he served in the air force from 1938 through the Liberation of France, and was decorated with the Cross of the Liberation, the Croix de Guerre, and the Legion of Honor. He also served as a French diplomat from 1946 to 1960. Regardless, Gary remains an amalgamation of his actual foreign origins and his created French identity. Even with the Frenchness he creates for himself, though, for Barrès, Gary could never be *truly* French since he is still a foreigner, a “déraciné” like Dreyfus.

Gary’s ultra-Frenchness, albeit constructed, is nonetheless what he highlights in *La Promesse de l’aube*. Paul Audi notes that, as if to overcompensate for his “late start,” Gary strives to become “*plus français que les Français. Français, si l’on peut dire, par excès – lui qui l’était déjà par défaut...*”(33). It is actually his foreignness that drives him embrace the idealized image of France even more than the French born citizen. From the tutelage of his mother, his choice of becoming French was made for him, as he puts it: “J’ai toujours été moi-même un

²⁰⁴ As David Carroll explains, Barrès’s idea of France is based on a “myth of an original, authentic national culture, which is presented as the alternative to social and political disharmony and the ‘decadence’ of the nation in modernity.” (21).

grand francophile. Mais je n’y suis pour rien : j’ai été élevé ainsi” (101-102)²⁰⁵. The simple fact that he was not *naturally* French, coupled with his mother’s fascination with the culture made it that the young Gary was exposed to the clichés of French heritage like a religion to believe without question. His assigned readings covered the periods of iconographic figures, including survey of “greats” in *Vies de Français illustres (Lives of Illustrious Frenchmen)*, a list including Pasteur, Joan of Arc, Roland de Roncevaux, etc. Her instruction was a mix of visualizations that delivered a healthy dose of the variety of icons:

ouvrez de grands yeux devant chaque bergère et entendez des voix ; annoncez à vos soldats de plomb que du haut de ces pyramides quarante siècles les contemplent ; coiffez-vous d’un bicorné en papier et prenez la Bastille, donnez la liberté au monde en abattant avec votre sabre de bois les chardons et les orties ; apprenez à lire dans les fables de La Fontaine – et essayez ensuite, à l’âge d’homme de vous débarrasser. Même un séjour prolongé en France ne vous y aidera pas. (102)²⁰⁶

ETERNAL FRANCE

The repeated images of mythical France in *La Promesse de l’aube* show the persistence in Gary’s growing affection and commitment. Because of his unyielding confidence in his mother’s depiction of these images, or because of her outward display of enthusiasm, he often

²⁰⁵ “I have always been a Francophile. But it was not my fault: I was brought up in such a way that I had no choice.” (84)

²⁰⁶ “listen to Jeanne d’Arc, and then open your eyes in wonder and hear the voices every time you meet a shepherdess; gather your army of lead soldiers on the nursery floor and tell them that “from the top of these pyramids forty centuries are watching you”; take the Bastille at the head of your troops, and give the world liberty by attacking the nettles and the thistles of La Fontaine, and come to feel that French is your mother tongue – and then try to forget, try to see with your own eyes, try to get rid of the fairy tale. Even a prolonged residence in France won’t help you to achieve this.” (85)

finds himself in embarrassing moments where this idealism exposes itself. He recalls, for example, that when he was inducted into the air force at Salon-de-Provence in 1938 that she was the only relative to accompany her son waving a tricolor flag and shouting “*Vive la France!*” To the others, this overzealous display only drew attention to her non-native perspective: “ça se voit qu’elle n’est pas française, celle-là” (240)²⁰⁷ What Gary implies with this observation is a certain amount of distance for *truly* French people regarding the patriotic symbols, as if some affiliations are predetermined and understood without the need to express them. Nonetheless, what Gary does in his writing, like with the rhetoric of de Gaulle or his mother, is to insert the known symbols and figures of French heritage where they remind the true Frenchmen of their subconscious culture.

Gary blends his “cosmopolitan” childhood background with his imagined French mentality as he creates his own legacy of Frenchness. This is most evident in the third section of *La Promesse de l’aube* as he prepares himself for the war. He writes that his mother had created in him such an invincible idea of France that he had a *Maginot Line* of patriotic feelings. She hid from him the stories of defeat in 1870, and he held on to the idea of “la Patrie immortelle”; “la France, la France, toujours recommencée” (296)²⁰⁸. Moreover, Gary’s use of the first person plural when speaking of France asserts his direct affiliation with his nation, even when he includes the traces of his earlier bloodlines:

Les succès foudroyants de l’offensive allemande ne me firent guère d’effet. Nous
avons déjà vu cela en 14-18. Nous autres, Français, nous nous ressaisissons
toujours au dernier moment, c’était connu [...] Je crois que mon sang lui-même

²⁰⁷ “You can see that she’s not French!” (206)

²⁰⁸ “our immortal country”; “this France of ours which is eternally reborn” (253)

charriait une confiance invincible dans les destinées de la patrie, qui devait me venir de mes ancêtres tartares et juifs. (271-272)²⁰⁹

PRESERVING AN IMAGE

The culminating point of Gary's growing French identity is captured as he wanders through the air base at Bordeaux-Mérignac in search of a plane to fly to England. He had just come from the sergeant's mess, where he writes that he enjoyed a meal of "une vraie cuisine française, digne de nos meilleures traditions"²¹⁰ as he happens across a crew of a Potez-63 aircraft and is offered some red wine under the shade of its wing. His personal pride of affiliation as a Frenchman emerges here. He is already quick to claim complete authority over what is a *truly* French meal, and he includes himself in the possessive "nos" (our) traditions. Next, in a moment of inspiration and outward display of camaraderie with these men, he summons all the indoctrination of his mother:

[...] j'évoquai Guynemer, Jeanne d'Arc et Bayard, je gesticulai, je mis une main sur le cœur, je brandis le poing, je pris un air inspiré. Je crois vraiment que c'était la voix de ma mère qui s'était emparé de la mienne, parce que, au fur et à mesure que je parlais, je fus moi-même éberlué par le nombre étonnant de clichés qui sortaient de moi et des choses que je pouvais dire sans me sentir le moins du monde gêné, et j'avais beau m'indigner devant une telle impudeur de ma part, par

²⁰⁹ "The lightning success of the German offensive failed to impress me. We had seen the same sort of thing in the '14-'18 war. We French had a knack for restoring the situation at the very last moment: everyone knew that. [...] An invincible belief in the destiny of my fatherland ran in my blood, no doubt bequeathed to me by my Jewish and Tartar ancestors." (231) Saint- Exupéry cites this same French mentality of coming through in the eleventh hour in *Pilote de guerre*, as we saw in Chapter I of this study: "En France, quand tout semble perdu, un miracle sauve la France."

²¹⁰ "French cooking at its best, worthy of our greatest traditions" (252)

un phénomène étrange [...] je crois même que ma voix changea et qu'un fort accent russe se fit clairement entendre (296)²¹¹

The whole ensemble of Gary's sense of nationhood is captured in this passage: the glory of a historic and mythical past, childhood memories, mixed languages, a voluntary effort that is necessarily sustained by his subconscious. It is hard for him to tell whether the display of national fervor is simply a result of his state of fatigue or the influence of the wine he was sharing with the crew – such was the involuntary performance that it felt *natural*. The experience actually seems to him like it happens despite his awareness of a contrived effort. Yet, even in this moment of glory, there is obscurity in his true identity, perhaps in part due to his understanding that the airs he puts on are second hand, like he is being controlled.

The feminine image of France, like Marianne or de Gaulle's "princess," is consistent in Gary's depiction of his mother's influence on his French upbringing. If we try to put a face on the image of France in this study, we see a gradual aging of the allegorical feminine symbol : the mystical purity of the young farmer's daughter that Saint-Exupéry aims to save in *Pilote de guerre*; the ideal woman in some unknown village as Jules Roy imagines his return to France after the war from his missions over *La Vallée heureuse*; and Gary's mother, shown from the onset of *La Promesse de l'aube* as an aged woman of many trials, incessantly smoking her *Gauloises* cigarettes and eventually supporting herself with a cane that doubles as a weapon to accentuate her passionate expression. So if Barrès defines the "native sons" of France as those

²¹¹ "I invoked the memories of Guynemer, Joan of Arc and Bayard; I gesticulated; I laid one hand upon my heart; I brandished a clenched fist; I gave myself noble and heroic airs. I truly believe that it was my mother's voice which was talking through me, because the longer I went on the more staggered was I by the astonishing number of clichés which flowed from my lips without my feeling the least embarrassed. It was useless to feel outraged by the shamelessness of my performance [...] I even believe that a change came over my voice and a strong Russian accent was clearly audible" (253)

who received the cultural narration from their parents, she fills that role completely. Furthermore, since Gary describes the long struggles she endured to secure their place in France, one could deduce that she fits Renan's description of sacrifices and devotions.

Gary's fairytale idea of France evolves slightly over the course of his narration in *La Promesse de l'aube*. He exposes the disillusionment he comes to share with his fellow countrymen, a more critical eye than he was trained to have by his mother. When he tries to understand her idea of eternal France, he places her "around about 1900" when he writes that bourgeois values and opinions saw France was "ce qu'on faisait de mieux" (232)²¹², which included a spirit of universalism with a heavy dose of French exceptionalism. Gary learns for himself, though, the many contradictions of the French identity.

Despite his citizenship, for example, he writes that he was denied his commission at the French Air Force Academy after completing all the required training since it was deemed that three years was not long enough to be considered truly French. He was the only one of his class of 300 to not receive the rank of second lieutenant. He also insinuates that his Jewish background was part of the discrimination he encountered on commissioning day. In an explanation Gary only includes in *Promise at Dawn*, he spells out the implication of discretion in the "general aptitude mark" in training, or as it was called, "good-looks" mark. As he states, "In the hands of reactionary and politically minded officers, it served to eliminate Jews, left-wingers and various other *métèques* – the closet translation would be "naturalized trash". It was an un failing weapon, later brought to perfection by the Vichy régime" (210). From Gary's perspective, the experience of the Dreyfus Affair was alive and well in the French military.

²¹² "generally regarded as the pinnacle of creation" (198)

Experiences like these are part of Gary's realization that his idealized France is more mythical than he presumes. Instead of seamless figure of honor and resilience, France, too, is capable of contradictions. "Je compris enfin que la France était faite de mille visages," he writes, "qu'il y en avait des beaux et des laids, de nobles et de hideux, et que je devais choisir celui qui me paraissait le plus ressemblant" (248)²¹³. The difference between Gary's idealized France and the one he lives leaves him nonetheless in a state of ambivalence. Yet, he remains committed to the myths that his mother nurtured in him at an early age. As much as he looks into the past for images of glory and greatness, he is optimistic for the future, for the capacity of France to fulfill his mother's dream:

Jusqu'à ce jour, il m'arrive d'*attendre* la France, ce pays intéressant, dont j'ai tellement entendu parler, que je n'ai pas connu et que je ne connaîtrai jamais – car la France que ma mère évoquait dans ses descriptions lyriques et inspirées depuis ma plus tendre enfance avait fini par devenir pour moi un mythe fabuleux, entièrement à l'abri de la réalité, une sorte de chef-d'œuvre poétique, qu'aucune expérience humaine ne pouvait atteindre ni révéler. (44)²¹⁴

RECONSTRUCTION

The period after the liberation of France, generally coined the "reconstruction" of France, can be understood just as much by its moving forward as by its renewal of its past. As such, the *myth* of France that we see in *La Promesse de l'aube* is tied to Gary's humanistic and democratic

²¹³ "It dawned on me, at last, that the French were not a race apart, that they were not superior beings, that they too could be stupid, ridiculous, and as unjust as anyone else – in short, that we were all brothers." (213)

²¹⁴ "To this day there are moments when I find myself *waiting* for France, for that never-never land of which I learned so much, which I have never known and never shall know; for the land of France, which, from my earliest childhood, my mother conjured up for me in her lyrical and inspired descriptions, has become for me a fairy tale, a mythical place, a poetical masterpiece that no fact of life, no contact with reality could ever encompass or reveal." (30-31)

ideals while it remains connected to the what he terms as “the subliminal memory of the French collective psyche.” This is how he frames his historical notion of myth embodied in Charles de Gaulle, as he writes in “Ode to the man who was France” (42C)²¹⁵. In this “ode” he describes even more explicitly than he does in his own biographical story, the contagious influence of what the Resistance mindset was for de Gaulle’s image of the Free French Forces. Moreover, he describes the genius in de Gaulle’s ability to be a “realistic dreamer,” which gave hope to the French at a time when they needed it most. As Gary explains, de Gaulle balanced the “collective psyche” of the French – which Paul Audi translates as in the French edition as “inconscient” – with the “deliberate and calculated purpose” of inciting action that would assist its liberation from the enemy – which Audi then terms “conscient” (13).

Therefore, when Gary refers to himself as an “unconditional Gaullist,” he attaches himself not to the political aspects of what has been referred to as *Gaullism* but to the man himself, which Gary sees as his *magnum opus*. That is, as an “enactor” of history, the general made his mark by using *points of reference*, known concepts, in order to create the *myth* of de Gaulle – “the ‘I, De Gaulle’ that struck in even the most skeptical Frenchman an irresistible and responsive nostalgic chord” (42C).

Although Roland Barthes had no essay built around the myth of de Gaulle, Gary’s depiction of his genius – one that utilized a similar notion of myth – explains the *natural* appeal of the figure he created in himself:

He was a fantastically clever and gifted impersonator of 10 centuries of French history. With the historical – and histrionic – material known by heart by every

²¹⁵ The article was first printed in English in 1970 following de Gaulle’s death; Paul Audi translated it in 1997 as part of the collection of Gary’s works on him.

Frenchmen since school, with debris of the past, with fragments of all the Louis, with the light still feebly reaching us from all the dead stars of past glory, with chips of stone from all our cathedrals and statuary, out of museums and out of legends, with genius, skill, fabulous workmanship, technique and shrewdness, he built a mythological being known as De Gaulle, to whom he quite rightly referred in the third person [...] (42C)

Despite the intricacies of true impact of the Resistance on the liberation of France, of what has been discussed as the *resistential myth*²¹⁶, De Gaulle's remarkable timing and sense of showmanship allowed him to emerge as a hero, seemingly out of nowhere in 1940, and again out of seclusion at the height of the Algerian crisis in 1958. From the point of view of post-war France, his symbolism represented what Gary calls "a strength of spirit, a faith in man's ultimate triumph, a light" (42D)

LOOKING BACK

It is not surprising, then, that Romain Gary's *La Promesse de l'aube* was written and published at a time when de Gaulle's popularity was again on the rise. Much like the enthusiasm for gritty heroism of Resistance fighters in the popular readership of his *Education Européenne* in 1945, the story of his personal life that culminates with his taking part in de Gaulle's Free French Forces also satisfied the French need for nostalgia. The added fame that came with Gary's 1956 Goncourt Prize, four years earlier, made a perfect union of exposing the inner thoughts of a literary celebrity and acting diplomat with the nostalgic flavor of a war hero. As

²¹⁶ Predominantly during the 1980s, much of the historical debate around the strength and unity of the Resistance exposes the reality that it was neither to the extent that de Gaulle would have us believe in his rhetoric.

Ralph Schoolcraft suggests, Gary's fiction also has relevance in the cultural climate of his period because of the creation of his own socially recognized persona:

“From the end of the war until de Gaulle's return to power, Gary's public persona fulfilled a social function, providing a positive image of the French war effort and of France's status as a haven for European political, economic, and ethnic exiles. With *Promise at Dawn*, other easily identifiable character types were worked into his portrait: the young immigrant driven to achieve in order to redeem his abandoned mother, the cosmopolitan diplomat, the lone wolf, the movie star's husband, and so forth. These were Gary's responses to the necessity of continually adding new episodes to the legend, but the predominant feature remained those reflecting a heroic French Resistance.” (155)

In light of this savvy understanding of his audience, when Gary writes about the mythical past of France passed on through his mother, or the ideals of honor that she imprinted on him, he does so not only to show the maternal nurturing that groomed him as a young man, but also to subvert the projection of his own myth in the book. Writing about his mother's high image of him exposes a humorous humility while at the same time building on public affection for his contribution in the war, as if to write, “L'aviation française, c'était moi” (The French Air Force was me). In fact, in this style, he does precisely this when depicting his mother's reaction to a BBC announcement of his bombing activities over Germany. He writes, “il n'y avait jamais le moindre doute sur ce que « l'aviation française partant de ses bases britanniques » voulait dire. C'était moi” (329)²¹⁷.

²¹⁷ “the French Air Force operating from its British bases' could mean only one thing: *me*.” (281)

Of course, he does much more justice to his fellow airman than his mother would care to allow. French contributions to Allied aviation were much larger than what he calls out as “un camarade nommé Morel et moi-même” (329)²¹⁸. Part of the universal appeal to French readership in his accounts lies in the diversity of characters that he says are answering the call of resistance. In the very moment of his attempt to desert to England, in fact, in the “shipwrecked” state of the air base in Bordeaux, he describes the crew he was to join in his escape.²¹⁹ It consisted of Jean-Pierre, who was a married father of three, Belle-Gueule, who ran a female escort service in his civilian life, and de Gaches, a bourgeois French Catholic:

De Gaches devait piloter l’avion. Il avait trois cents heures de vol : une fortune. Avec sa petite moustache, son uniforme de chez Lavin, son air racé, il était le garçon de bonne famille par excellence, et il donnait, en quelque sorte, à notre décision de désertir pour continuer la lutte ; la consécration de la bonne bourgeoisie catholique française.

Comme on voit, en dehors de notre volonté de ne pas nous reconnaître vaincus, il n’y avait, entre nous, rien de commun. Mais nous puissions dans tout ce qui nous séparait une sorte d’exaltation et une confiance plus grande encore dans le seul lien qui nous unissait. Y eût-il un assassin parmi nous que nous y eussions vu la preuve du caractère sacré, exemplaire, au-dessus de toute autre

²¹⁸ “a friend of mine called Morel and myself.” (281)

²¹⁹ He recounts, however, that the plane crashed on the runway as he took a phone call from his mother, as if protected by her fortuitous timing.

considération, de notre mission, la preuve même de notre essentielle fraternité.

(278-279)²²⁰

Gary goes on to explain the void he feels with following the war due to the loss of the numerous aviators he knew before they were killed in some sort of crash; only five remain in 1960, according to him. He also does not spare details on the various ways in which they were lost, often going into elaborate accounting of the events. Where writers like Hillary or Roy were more inclined to keep a certain distance in simply reporting that “From this flight ... did not return,” Gary recalls, for example, “Roque tombé en Egypte, La Maissonneuve disparu en mer, Castelain tué en Russie, Crouzet tué dans le Gabon, Goumenc en Crète, Canappa tombé en Algérie, Maltcharski tué en Libye, Delarouche tombé à El Facher avec Flury-Hérard et Coguen [...]” (344)²²¹. His personal retrospection is a key element in *La Promesse de l’aube*, but he at moments like these he demonstrates the fact that his story is not entirely a singular one. The spectrum of backgrounds that these names imply, along with the geographic spread of their fatalities, the complicated and pervasive makeup of the French aviators who contributed to the war effort. If these names are fabricated by Gary as part of the fictional development in the book, the specificity in call them out gives at least the impression of factual accounts; the overall impact on the reader remains the same.

²²⁰ “De Gaches was to pilot the plane. He had three hundred hours of flying time behind him: a fortune. With his little mustache, his uniform made him by Lavin and his general air of breeding, he was the very type of the young man of good family, and his presence helped us a great deal, for it seemed to give our decision to desert to England the blessing of the fine, sound French Catholic bourgeoisie.

Apart from our determination to refuse defeat, the three of us had very little in common. But we derived from everything that separated us a feeling of exaltation and an increased confidence in the single bond which united us. Had there been a murderer among us, we would have seen in his presence a further proof of the sacred, exemplary character of our mission, which made everything else futile and irrelevant, so that our differences only underlined our fundamental fraternity.” (237-238)

²²¹ “Maissonneuve shot down with Roque of the coast of Egypt, Catelain killed in Russia, Crouzet in Gabon and Goumenc in Crete, Canappa downed in Algeria, Maltcharski in Libya, Delarouche crashed at El Fasher with Flury-Herard and Coguen [...]” (294)

At times, Gary's retrospection is presented as an outside look at his younger self, as if to study someone foreign to him. He does this in order to accentuate the idealism that was part of the fervor of their struggle and helped him carry on, with what he calls in *Promise at Dawn* "sacred naïveté" (294). "Vingt ans sont passés," he writes, "et l'homme que je suis depuis longtemps abandonné de sa jeunesse, se souvient avec beaucoup moins de gravité et un peu plus d'ironie de celui que je fus alors avec tant de sérieux, tant de conviction" (314)²²². A large part of what Gary explores in his auto-fiction, here and in other works, is this sense of *nostalgia* that helped define him in the way that de Gaulle's idea of France and his mother's stories did. At the time of its publication, Gary was well aware that, despite his claims to maintain the "lofty idealism" of his younger self, he was living in a world where absolutes were not as clear as he would portray his decision to join the Resistance in 1940.²²³

STABLE GROUND

The mind's deepest desire, even in the most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. [...] That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of human drama. – Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

Camus's idea of the absurd, which he embraces in his interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, is at the heart of Gary's struggle. The basic notion that man is condemned to choices is

²²² "Twenty years have gone by and the man who has left his youth behind him can remember, with a great deal less solemnity and a little more irony, the youth he was then, with such seriousness and such fierce pride." (268)

²²³ The theme of nostalgia is also at the center of his novel *Adieu Gary Cooper*, where he shows the rise of complexity in American culture, in particular the male hero figure: "C'est fini, Gary Cooper. Fini pour toujours. Fini, l'Américain tranquille, sûr de lui et de son droit, qui est contre les méchants, toujours pour la bonne cause, et qui fait triompher la justice et gagne toujours à la fin. Adieu l'Amérique des certitudes." (25)

part of existential thought that is also part of the *zeitgeist* of the 1940s and 1950s. The anxiety that accompanies this condition explains Gary's tendency to become easily attached to the *materiality* of existence: the French landscape, the sea, the love of a woman. As he writes in *Promise at Dawn*,

All of us can win many battles in our lives but it takes a lot of courage to get used to the idea that we may be constantly winning battles without ever winning the war. The war goes on and on and we die without hands full of victories. But I believe, and shall always believe, that one day mankind will win the great war it has been waging since the beginning of time, and that one day human hands will succeed where I have failed and tear down the mask of darkness and chaos and absurdity, and look at the face of truth radiant with meaning, justice and love.

(102-103)²²⁴

Gary's optimism for a universal peace, therefore, aligns with his philosophy that man is continually making progress toward a stable culminating point; nonetheless, his story reveals that the eternal images he cherishes are ephemeral in the end. His connection with the sea, which bookends *La Promesse de l'aube*, for example, is at the same time a yearning for constancy and a symbol of change; this perpetuates the protean nature of his self-definition. In his first contact with the sea, he recalls the feeling of complete comfort, "une paix illimitée" (a peace without limits) (122). For Gary, the sea relieves him of his responsibilities with a logic that is difficult for him to express except in paradoxical metaphors. In its presence, he writes, he becomes like a

²²⁴ This excerpt does not appear in the French edition to the same extent of his overall absurd, yet optimistic, outlook. He writes more plainly, "J'ai gagné beaucoup de batailles dans la vie, mais j'ai mis beaucoup de temps à me faire à l'idée qu'on ne peut pas gagner la guerre. Pour que l'homme puisse y parvenir un jour, il nous faudrait une aide extérieure et celle-ci n'est pas encore à l'horizon" (121).

“noyé heureux” (122), implying the overwhelming calm that it brings him – to the point of being like a happy drowning victim.²²⁵ The sea, for Gary, is one of the most nostalgic metaphors of human existence. He recognizes it as the source from which we emerged and began our mutation to our current form.

Looking back at the war experience, as Gary makes sense of it all, he clings to the myths that formulated his sense of purpose during that time. His thirst for nostalgia and unity determine his view even more writing fifteen years later than he may have realized. Historian Henri Michel, Secretary General of the Committee on the History of the Second World War, recognized this as a fundamental function of the memory of spirit of the Resistance that was created in de Gaulle. In his essay entitled “L’État d’esprit en France à l’égard des événements de l’époque hitlérienne,” he wrote in 1957: “La nation française retrouvait dans la résistance une unanimité dont son histoire lui offrait peu d’exemples et dont elle avait toujours eu la nostalgie. Une aube se levait, de jours nouveaux, de matinées qui chantent” (Machover 42).

Like Gary’s connection to the sea, the ambiguous flow from what is established in the past to what is derived in the present is at the core of understanding how myth works in *La Promesse de l’aube*. As the title implies, Gary is bound to his responsibilities, but he keeps his gaze on the horizon; his optimism is just as much tied to recovering the idealism in nostalgic images as to discovering some underlying truths in future ones. As much as he sees his “promise at dawn” as the contract he will keep fulfilling his mother’s hopes for him, he believes in the “promise” of the “dawn” to come as well. The prevailing “light” he sees in de Gaulle’s myth,

²²⁵ Here, too, we find one of the few examples where his English edition gives a more direct interpretation, in lines that remain absent in the French: “Its salt is like a taste of eternity to my lips, I love it deeply and completely, and it is the only love which gives me peace. Perhaps it reminds me of my mother, and if all the Freudian theories about the return to the womb are even vaguely correct, the seashore is certainly as close as I can get to her now.” (104)

furthermore, is derived from the pre-packaged, recognizable *points of reference* that mobilized the nostalgia of liberty during the Occupation.

In fact, Gary utilizes the same rhetorical tools of myth in his own literary practice. Like de Gaulle, Gary projects himself as a hero figure by using images that are drawn from the French cultural canon. Regarding his model, Ralph Schooolcraft suggests: “The fact that the traits composing de Gaulle’s portrait preexisted him actually served de Gaulle’s purposes, because he was seeking a simple, recognizable image to be legitimized by its rootedness in France’s past. His goal, after all was to unite the people of France.” (155) The following passage from de Gaulle’s *War Memoirs* exemplifies the way in which he inserted this sense of revolutionary culture in his presence and in his speech, as he describes the celebration surrounding the second anniversary of his appeal of 18 June:

The four tiers of the Albert Hall were as packed as the safety regulations allowed.

A great Tricolour screen with the Cross of Lorraine superimposed was stretched behind the rostrum and drew the gaze of all. The “Marseillaise” and the “Marche Lorraine” rang out; all hearts echoed them. As I took my place, surrounded by the members of the National Committee and the volunteers most recently arrived from France, I heard every mouth in that enthusiastic crowd crying out faith to me. But on that day, besides hope, I could feel the soaring of joy. I spoke. It was necessary. Action employs men’s fervor. But words arouse it.

Quoting Chamfort’s saying, “Men of reason have endured. Men of passion have lived,” I recalled the two years which Free France had just gone through.

“We lived much, for we are men of passion. But we have also endured. Ah! what men of reason we are! ... (300-301)²²⁶

Symbols from the French Revolution and from fighting against German occupiers are clearly evident here, and the insertion of Nicolas Chamfort’s aphorism invokes the memory of a Jacobin spirit of dying for the cause of liberty.

In contrast with the renewal of myth that we see from de Gaulle, however, Romain Gary is at constant odds with a fragmented identity that he does not see as his own. Regarding this process of self-identification, Paul Audi suggests that, through his literary works and his personal life, Gary uses strategies of imaginary genealogies to “se créer une légende” (create his own legend) (82). Gary’s opening line in *Pseudo*, which he wrote under the pseudonym Emile Ajar, is particularly telling in this endeavor since it implies that this creation is in essence from nowhere yet attaches itself to known entities: “Il n’a pas de commencement. J’ai été engendré, chacun son tour, et depuis, c’est l’appartenance” (*Les Œuvres complètes d’Emile Ajar* 497). This development for Gary, then, is a means of defining himself in something that preexists his own creation. According to Audi, its two sides include: first, “Il appartient à l’individu – c’est sa prérogative *en tant que « créature »*”; second, “Il revient à un *récit fondateur*, à un « mythe des origines »” (85).

So if we consider, as does Audi, that *La Promesse de l’aube* is one of Gary’s first autobiographical works, we can understand the effort to define his own myth for the reader²²⁷.

²²⁶ For better appreciation of the original French in these expressions, de Gaulle’s *Mémoires* is cited here: “Citant le mot de Chamfort : « Les raisonnables ont duré. Les passionnés ont vécu », j’évoque le deux années que la France Libre vient de parcourir. « Nous avons beaucoup vécu, car nous sommes des passionnés. Mais aussi, nous avons duré. Ah ! que nous sommes raisonnables !... »” (261)

The socio-political climate following 1958 supported the appeal of his patriotic references to de Gaulle, and his devotion to his mother becomes like a metaphor for him defending the feminine image of France, albeit this time as an older woman, with her *Gauloises* cigarette in her mouth and supported by her cane. More importantly, his now well-known mutation to Emile Ajar can be understood as a response to the changing climate after May 1968, which coincides with a loss of confidence in Gaullist policies. Schoolcraft sees Ajar as “antidote” for popular anti-establishment appeal since his persona was built around a Bohemian misfit identity and non-conformism in general. He points out that Gary himself acknowledges his adoption of certain character types based on the cultural conditions and myths that coalesce with them:

“Gary’s point that the image *preceded* him is significant. Gary can be said to have orchestrated his images, to have manipulated them, even embellished them creatively, but he did not really *invent* them. The character types were waiting for him; he merely identified and enacted them, as much in the instance of “Gary” as with “Bogat,” “Ajar,” or “Pavlowitch.” Such myths do not create social beliefs; they actualize existing ones.” (156)

BARTHES’S “GREAT FAMILY OF MAN”

Le monde historique est comme un océan où affluent toutes les histoires partielles.

(Halbwachs 136)

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes writes about an American photography exhibit in Paris that sets up its visitors to celebrate a certain universal image of man, from his origins,

²²⁷ Paul Audi clarifies that by acknowledging the *autobiographical* elements of *La Promesse de l’aube* he does not dismiss the fact that it not absolutely historical or biographical. He points out simply that Gary is representing his life in a story as a function of “*son propre devenir*” (his *becoming* someone). (109)

through his toils, and to his own mortality. Already with the title, *La Grande Famille des Hommes* (*The Family of Man*), both the French and English versions, Barthes argues, provide the illusion of either the biological or psychological unity of our species. He suggests that the basic premise of the exhibit asserts a human essence, with all the “Adamism” associated with it, as it is presented clearly in the literature accompanying the photos. The leaflet states: “*this look over the human condition must somewhat resemble the benevolent gaze of God on our absurd and sublime ant-hill*” (100). Furthermore, seemingly timeless proverbs are dispersed near the photos to suggest the particular timeless truths that they represent; i.e., “The Earth is a Mother who never dies, Eat bread and salt and speak the truth, etc.” (101).

What Barthes clearly disagrees with in the asserted themes of this exhibition is that certain facts of life (like birth and death) and general truisms (such as “work yields profit”) do little to clarify the specifically *historical* condition of man. In reality, improper focus on these will distort the image of man’s existence by implying that all his *essence* and his gestures are *natural*. Herein lies one of Gary’s most fundamental dilemmas, one that helps to understand his singular struggle while simultaneously highlighting his quest for the universal. He is caught between them. He remains a boy in a man’s body, a hero who romanticizes his interaction with his world, and a hopeless Francophile who remains foreign wherever he goes. Gary yearns for the eternal comfort of the sea while he relishes in the change its liquidity delivers. With each recreation of himself, he wishes for the notion of an absolute. This sort of “mythoclastic” enterprise is how Julia Kristeva describes Barthes’s approach to language; she points out his characterization of the notion of meaning, where there is “neither form nor contents, only the process that goes back and forth between them” (Kritzman 409). Furthermore, she adds for her

part that “The writer does not invent but combines: thus variation and arrangement are the two basic operations that define literary activity” (409).

This basic description of literature aligns with Barthes’s concept of mythology, which he describes as a sort of “language-robbery” that recycles “poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fats, and ready for signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc.” (127). Certainly, Romain Gary uses pre-packaged cultural images of France that help us conceptualize his idea of national identity. He arranges them in subtle ways as well as poignantly blatant ones, and uses repetition to emphasize their omnipresence in his vision of France. Additionally, his use of humor allows the reader to associate with certain aspects of *Frenchness* without the need to be afraid of hyper-nationalism. We see this, for example, when he claims that his mother created a “Maginot Line of unshakable certainties and patriotic pictures” around him that go along with her unwavering patriotism that is based on her “simple-minded idea of France” (*Promise at Dawn* 197, 242). The mere reference to the Maginot Line is iconic enough to understand his mother’s way of whole-hearted committing herself to her endeavors, almost to a fault of disregarding any risks because of her blinded optimism.

TIME CONTINUUM

One of the elements of Gary’s literary practice that illustrates the back-and-forth of form and content in *La Promesse de l’aube* is his reference to time. On the one hand, he sees the progression of time as a promising advance toward a more enlightened self, or a more coherent sense of mankind in general. On the other hand, he acknowledges his own overconfidence in this notion, which reveals his own weakness for mythical premises. He writes: “je vois la vie comme une grande course de relais où chacun de nous, avant de tomber, doit porter plus loin le défi d’être un homme ; je ne reconnais aucun caractère final à nos limitations biologiques,

intellectuelles, physiques ; mon espoir est à peu près illimité” (246)²²⁸. The image of the relay race assumes a certain continuum of time and the idea that “chacun de nous” (each one of us) is part of that same race presupposes that his existence is linked coherently with the rest of humanity. This is part of the desire to find *unity* in his struggle among other men, the same desire that seeks *nostalgia* in myth in an attempt to simplify and reduce the chaotic departures of the multiple possibilities of representation. Because of this, Dominique Rosse explains Gary’s style of novel as a historic ideology of convergence, as she writes:

Le roman garyen relève bien dès lors d’une idéologique historique ; d’une part, il y a toujours, implicitement, une fin heureuse de l’histoire (toujours dans les deux sens du terme), et d’autre part, il fonctionne comme un procès de sens débouchant inéluctablement sur une vérité finale (l’Histoire y occupe d’ailleurs fréquemment la place de grand Référent). (Rosse 181)

However, even if Gary admits to wishing for this sort of order, as he does at the very beginning of *La Promesse de l’aube*: “A quarante-quatre ans, j’en suis encore à rêver de quelque tendresse essentielle” (13)²²⁹, he recognizes his idealism for what it is: something unattainable. Gary does not conclude that in his life he was able to find the constancy he seeks. He describes his love life as a series of short-lived passions, often leaving him rejected in the end. His friendships in the war are left behind, mostly because of tragic deaths of his comrades – a realism that leaves him unable to make intimate connections later in life. Unlike Richard Hillary, who ends *Falling through Space* by justifying his book as a sort of “fellowship with my dead” and as

²²⁸ “I see History as a relay race in which each one of us, dropping in his tracks, must carry one stage further the challenge of being a man; I refuse to find anything final in our biological, intellectual or physical limitations; my hope knows no frontiers” (211)

²²⁹ “At the age of forty-four, I still catch myself dreaming of some universal and total tenderness.” (1)

a tribute to fallen comrades that left their mark on “the future of civilization” (269), Romain Gary chooses to communicate with the seals on the coast of Big Sur and simply asserts to himself, “J’ai vécu” (I have lived!). Furthermore, whereas Saint-Exupéry ends *Pilote de guerre* by looking forward to “demain” (tomorrow) and Jules Roy at the end of *La Vallée heureuse* equally gazes into the future sense of “l’aube” as he writes, “Comme si le jour avait besoin de cette flamme pour allumer l’espoir des hommes,” (296)²³⁰ Gary’s *La Promesse de l’aube*, despite its suggestive title, is purely retrospective.

In terms of the “variation and arrangement” in his literary operation, we see him jump from 1960 in California to the 1920s in Poland to 1940 in France, all within the course of a few pages of text. While the general flow of his anecdotes is chronologically based, he enters the mind of his boyhood self or his days as a sergeant as if he were writing in that moment. Meanwhile, he interjects the perspective of his forty-four year-old “self” as if to remind the reader that this is, of course, all recollection. The fact that Gary writes with a time lapse of twenty to thirty or so years, though, reveals that his perspective is seasoned by a certain amount of distance and reflection. His *nostalgia* is more accurately an application of the literary myths that meet his need to bring *unity* to his overall story. He begins near the sea with all the implications of aquatic origins and mutation, embryonic connection with his mother and fluctuations of the tide; he also ends near the sea, which he characterizes as an eternal symbol, one that “ne meurt pas vite” (391)²³¹. He arranges the timeline with a unity of its own, where he starts with the end – “C’est fini” – and ends where he began. His variations of the myths he

²³⁰ “It was as if the coming day needed that conflagration to illuminate the hopes of mankind.” (Roy, *The Happy Valley* 224)

²³¹ “does not die quickly” (335)

repeats in the book show not only how they are deeply engrained in his cultural view, but also how is able to process them in his own sense of chivalry and Frenchness.

OLD AGE

The singular unity in *La Promesse de l'aube*, then, suggests a break from Gary's idealized universalism. To come back to Barthes's "Great Family of Man," this would give some credence to the notion that the myth of a human *essence* breaks down upon close examination. However, Gary's particularities as a Jew, an immigrant, a flyer, a writer, etc., add to the universal appeal of his writing. Precisely because of his declaration, "J'ai vécu," he implies that the numerous, diverse experiences of his life have given him something to share. "Je suis, aujourd'hui, un homme expérimenté," he writes, "Je n'ai pas besoin d'en dire plus, on a compris" (262)²³². The very idea that his existence is defined by a series of *experimentations* suggests that he is defined by his choices and actions rather than a birthright. Furthermore, the tone of completion in *La Promesse de l'aube* projects an image of arriving at a final point in his life, a certain *veni, vidi, vici* of his struggles against all sorts of enemies. Yet, Gary's book is not a tale of victory over these universal struggles.

On the contrary, Gary recounts the enemies of his childhood who remain with him later in life. They are symbolized by "gods" created for him by his mother: Totoche, the god of Stupidity; Mersavka, the god of Absolute Truth and Total Righteousness; Fioche, the god of Mediocrity; and Trembloche, the god of Acceptance and Servility. Each represents a temptation to men, essentially as pitfalls to following a path of balanced virtue. But even in his more mature age, Gary is still in his process of negotiating his own sense of masculinity, heroism and

²³² "Today I am a mature man of much experience. I have lived. I need not say more." (225)

Frenchness as a “realistic dreamer.” He understands the skepticism that comes with being truly French, for example, but he remains a boy at heart, as he writes, “J’ai les cheveux grisonnants, à présent, mais ils me cachent mal, et je n’ai pas vraiment vieilli, bien que je doive approcher maintenant de mes huit ans” (387)²³³. In fact, Audi suggests that Romain Gary is a “fils de son temps” (son of his time period), which is dominated by relativity and the lack of absolutes. (86)

If we consider the image of the “absurd and sublime anthill” from the Family of Man exhibition, Camus’s question of whether to live comes to mind. As he describes, there is a leap that acknowledges the absurdity in man’s existence yet continues on in spite of it. As Camus argues at the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “the point is to live.” Gary is confident that he chooses that path as well at the end of *La Promesse de l’aube* when he declares, “J’ai vécu.” Unfortunately, his real life and his fictional one collide in the end. With his story, Romain Gary draws from myth, but he also creates his own identity. His literature is a Promethean struggle; yet, there are only so many times one can reverse a condemnation and devour the liver of a vulture – Gary himself claims to be at his ten thousandth one.

The culmination of the affair of Emile Ajar was for Gary the final existential quandary. Either he had truly met all his goals as a writer by this point or he found no way out of the identity crisis he had so meticulously created during the 1970s under the pseudonym of Ajar. The final truth he found, in any case, is something that had so fervently fueled his writing in *La Promesse de l’aube* and other works; it ended with catastrophic results with his suicide in 1980. According to his final words in *Vie et mort d’Emile Ajar*: “De ce que la littérature se crut et se voulut être

²³³ “My hair is turning gray, but that is a poor disguise and I have not really aged very much, though I must now be nearing my eighth year.” (333)

pendant si longtemps – une contribution de l’homme et de son progrès – il ne reste même plus l’illusion lyrique” (*Les Œuvres complètes d'Emile Ajar* I).

CONCLUSION

La jeunesse, par l'exubérance de ses forces et la nativité de ses espoirs, est lyrique; la virilité, active et disciplinée, est épique; la vieillesse, qui constate les défaillances, les ambitions avortées et qui perçoit déjà ce morne océan où tous les êtres sombrent, la vieillesse est dramatique. C'est ainsi que chaque parcelle est un résumé de tout, et que l'harmonie totale est faite d'une infinité d'accords.

(Bovet 214)

By revisiting Ernest Bovet's study, *Lyrisme, Épopée, Drame*, I hope to once again shed light here on the predominant unity in the trilogy of this study. In doing so, my aim is also to demonstrate that the characteristics of the author-aviator figure in World War II apparent in these works correspond to the feelings and conditions in France during its Occupation, its Liberation, and its Reconstruction. If we consider these three works as a story told over this time period, we see at work something similar to the aging process Bovet explores in his work on genre. At the onset of the war, with inevitable occupation by Germany, Saint-Exupéry depicts the youth in France; his style in *Pilote de guerre* is lyrical and pure. Toward the end of the war, Jules Roy defines a new type of mature virility; in the epic *La Vallée heureuse*, he shows how Chevrier and his crew negotiate their own sense of discipline and prefer "action" to anxiety. Finally, Romain Gary's nostalgically retrospective look on the war becomes like a "Reconstruction" of its own; the dramatic anecdotes of *La Promesse de l'aube* take us from the ocean and back to it again as he tries to perpetuate his optimistic hope of reifying a universal image of France.

The attempt to ascertain some sense of unity, in the same spirit as Bovet's genres, helps to reassemble the pieces of the fallen aviator figure, exposed through these authors as more multifaceted and less seamless. We started with the image of a glorious warrior in Guynemer, an

image that Roland Barthes would mark as the emblematic standard for an aviator-warrior. Yet, the image of Guynemer also reveals the ambiguity in myth – he was equally celebrated by the Vichy government as a symbol of subservience to the nation as he was an iconic hero for Romain Gary, a model to follow as Gary aimed to meet his mother's expectations.

As Saint-Exupéry depicts his role as an aviator in *Pilote de guerre*, the confrontation with death is a constant reminder of the absurdity of war. Odds were against the few French aviators who worked to defend France against the vastly superior German Luftwaffe at the beginning of the war, and Saint-Exupéry's reflection on his own role evolves into a larger negotiation of the martyrdom of France. Through his lyrical writing, through its *immobility*, the duration of his flight expands to include memories from his childhood and the cultural heritage of France. In the process of his reflection, Saint-Exupéry exposes the many contradictions of his thoughts, lost in the overall "shipwreck" of France. In the end he enacts his a Christ-like philosophy during his flight to Arras, where he accepts his presumed death for France, and broadcasts hope for its cause, and the cause of Man in general.

Jules Roy revisits the discipline and virility that Bovet mentions in his view of the epic genre. Yet, Roy is the "disenchanted airman" who is torn between the codes and values of past chivalrous times and the industrialized, massive forces of bombers in World War II. He is the mature soldier who has grown in the military culture and now must reconcile the changing face of his exclusive society with the present reality of France, as well as the changing face of the country he protects. Much of Roy's personal ambivalence regarding his loyalties to Marshal Philippe Pétain and his obedient reverence for the army is transmitted through the character of Chevrier. As his name implies, he is the herder of the "troupeau" (flock), which establishes his sense of responsibility. Nonetheless, he is depicted as a *solitary, wandering knight* who is

personally detached from the crew as he combats his own anxieties and feels the ever-present burden of the next mission. Roy describes the episodes of *La Vallée heureuse* as a chain of movements, as active engagements in the struggle against the threat to freedom.

Finally, Romain Gary presents his life story as a path that leads to the dramatic events of the war. Despite what may be considered a youthful age – forty-four years – Gary evokes all the weathered perspective of a man at the end of his life. “C’est fini,” he writes in his opening. His *picaresque* style is removed from the image of a glorious hero, though, and he exposes all the tenderness of a young boy clinging with devotion to his mother as he moves from each encounter of the war experience to the next in reactionary fashion. Gary’s story is also the dramatic evolution of his identity as a Frenchman and hero to his dear mother; for her he is prepared to “play the clown or the hero.” The ambivalence in Gary’s anecdotal *auto-fiction* revolves around the continual self-reinvention that is characteristic of his overall work and his personal life.

THE RESPONSIBLE MAN

The perception of masculine responsibility by the authors is in part a legacy of the aftermath of World War I, which left much of France’s male population decimated as it approached the interwar years. In conjunction with the widespread loss of manpower due to the 1918 flu pandemic, it is understandable that the culture in which the generation soldiers of World War II was raised is connected to two truths: the prevalence of death and the absurdity of Man’s condition. Furthermore, in France the national education under the Third Republic was built around the notion of revenge against invaders and preparation of its boys and men for national service, albeit preparation for a strategically obsolete militarily by the time of the invasion in 1940.

Saint-Exupéry writes of being “ushered across a certain threshold” as a young man, feeling the ensuing responsibility of filling the role of a defender. Through the purity and lyricism of his writing, however, we see the image of a child rather than the grown responsible man. Even in the midst of the air battle en route to Arras, Saint-Exupéry enters the memories of his childhood, praying to Paula, his Tyrolian governess. Therefore, part of the ambivalence in *Pilote de guerre* is simply this alternation between imagining a childhood past and acting in the reality of the moment. As he pilots his aircraft, Saint-Exupéry compartmentalizes his actions and focuses on his operation of “switches, levers, taps.” His struggle against the enemy is reduced to these simple actions. Yet, the overall effort of Saint-Exupéry becomes a Christ-like passion for the salvation of Man.

Jules Roy’s convergence of virility and tenderness in *La Vallée heureuse* represents a similar ambivalence in the aviator figure. Because, for Roy, the masculine figure is realized through *action*, periods of *inaction* or passiveness become associated with more feminine characteristics. Therefore, he exposes men that serve in supporting roles to the flying crews (intelligence, administration, etc.) as not clearly understanding the magnitude of their task, and he reduces them to a place of envy or submissiveness. The “demons” that Roy illustrates in the crews, however, show that they, too, are vulnerable and tender. Their anxieties overwhelm them as they prepare for the highly risky game of probability they face with each looming mission. In their effort to make sense of it all, it seems they can only be content in the midst of the action over the “Happy Valley.”

Romain Gary writes in *La Promesse de l'aube*, “je sais aujourd’hui que l’homme est quelque chose qui ne peut pas être ridiculisé” (53)²³⁴ His sense of honor is formed by his mother’s expectations for him to become a man. This involves an acceptance of suffering for the protection of women, something that Gary demonstrates in humorous, yet lucid detail in his anecdotes. Furthermore, his maturing into a man, although he denies it, involves a self-analysis and self-creation that he derives from his writing. Gary’s description of his constant search for pseudonyms as a writer is indicative of the Protean nature of this cycle of his *devenir* (becoming).

THE ANTIHERO AND THE AUTHOR-AVIATOR

Each of the authors, in fact, is an amalgamation of this creative spirit of the writer’s identity, which one would presume to be at odds with the man of action as exemplified in the image of the aviator. Rather, as Robert Kanters suggests in *Des écrivains et des hommes*, the male writer in the first part of the 20th century can be characterized by a combination of action and authorship. As he writes, these men oscillate between two roles of fulfilling their duties and writing about their observations; the literature is comprised by “écrivains qui, en même temps que par leurs livres, se sont signalés par leurs exploits” (176) This duality is present in the figure of the author-aviator: it is embodied in the writer who is at the same time engaged in a “littérature critique” while projecting an exclusivity of their perspective as what Kanters calls “pères du désert” (fathers of the desert) (316-317). In this way, the author-aviator fits Kanters general view on the writer figure up to the 1950s: “À la fois isolé et lié au monde, quelle est donc la figure de l’écrivain du XX^e siècle ? Il me semble que c’est la figure de l’aventurier solitaire” (317).

²³⁴ “I have learned that man is something that cannot be ridiculed.” (40)

This solitary image of the writer figure has the effect of going against the grain of a national hero type because the very notion of isolation implies an excessive concentration on one's self. On the contrary, the *ego* that we find in these writers is more a back-and-forth relationship, alternating between self-perception and self-projection in an attempt to make sense of the world around them. Using Mokhtar Atallah's terms, the authors can be seen from three angles: *egotism* (where introspection refines one's personal sensibilities to the surrounding world) in the case of Saint-Exupéry; *egoism* (where only the "self" exists, as an escape from the surrounding world) in the case of Roy; and *egocentrism* (where the "self" is projected into the center of the surrounding world) in the case of Gary. In any of these cases, the aviator in the literature, by virtue of exposing his reflections and emotions, offers an antithesis to the terse bravado of the heroic figure.

Furthermore, as engaged writers these men run the gambit of personal negotiations as they attempt to calcify an obscured image of France during the period of the war. Their ambivalent allegiances are indicative of the French sentiment during the Occupation. *Pilote de guerre*, as much as it is a testimony to the resolve of the reconnaissance crews in Group 2/33, is a cry for help under shattered leadership and inadequate resources. Saint-Exupéry as a "savior" sees the rest of France as if it had fallen asleep – like Christ's disciples while he prays in Gethsemane. Roy's "soldier" figure in *La Vallée heureuse* is constantly reminded of the patriotic imagery of his seemingly futile tasks; he maintains his disciplined action if only to remain loyal to the rigor of going "down the pit" with the other crewmembers.

Finally, in *La Promesse de l'aube*, Gary leaves his ailing mother in order to enter character as the "heroic son." Yet, his picaresque tales of the aviator figure and his prominent sensibility as "boy in a man's body" remove the aura of grandeur in his exploits; he is attached to

his leather flying jacket as a “carapace,” as if it were a baby’s blanket providing comfort and protection. Even as he asserts his confidence in having declared allegiance to General Charles de Gaulle and the Free French Forces, he describes it as if is acting in an adventurous role: “J’avais enfin consommé ma rupture avec l’armistice, j’étais enfin un insoumis, un dur, un vrai et un tatoué” (308)²³⁵. Gary’s exploration of his identity, like his developed “pseudonym,” revolves around his connection to this hero figure and to his commitment to a romantic idea of France.

THE IDEA OF FRANCE

Outside of the personal struggles of these author-aviators, the very idea of France as a nation was in turmoil during the period of the Occupation and well after the war. What becomes apparent in the literary works of these three men is the search for seemingly reliable signs to connect with the soul of France. As Ernest Renan already exposes in his discussion on nations, ambiguity reigns in the traditional views of “blood and soil.” For these men too, fighting in exile for the liberation of France, the idealism they hold for their identity in France is more than the land or *terroir*. Yet, Fascism was alive and well in France as much as in Nazi Germany during World War II; these men join the fight against its principles in hopes to regain freedoms with revolutionary fervor.

By looking at France’s cultural and Christian past, then, Saint-Exupéry finds the reflective *immobility* and collectivity in France, where “chacun est responsable de tous.” Jules Roy, for his part, can’t help but look to republican songs and symbols as they integrate into his military ethic of fighting to protect France from oppressors. In the ambiguity of images projected by Marshall Pétain, he opts to choose the course of resistance. His character, Chevrier, gives the

²³⁵ “I had finally consummated my break with the armistice. Now, at last, I was a rebel, a desperado, dangerous, iron-willed, tough – the real thing.” (263)

impression that all the overt patriotism of the Resistance borders on the embarrassing, but the universal messages in the symbols of France keep him connected to his image of home while operating from afar.

One of the unifying allegories of the works is the republican figure of France as a woman. With its roots in Marianne of the French Revolution, this allegory is prominent in the convergence of the masculine hero image of these authors, who aim to uphold a responsibility to protect her. Yet, the face of “Marianne” takes various forms that reflect an aging process across the time period: Saint-Exupéry depicts a young farmer’s daughter – pure and mystical; Roy depicts a mature woman – his “Infanta” is his ideal mate – an image fertility and affection; Gary depicts France through his aging mother, dying from diabetes and walking with a cane while smoking her *Gauloises* cigarettes – her strong-willed perseverance and mythical stories endure in his memory as the one who once nurtured him as a young man.

Of the three, Romain Gary provides the most easily recognizable myth-forming ideals of what it means to be French. In large part this is due to his late start of actual French citizenship, at the age of thirteen. At least from the perspective of pulling from ready-made forms and recycling them in the present, as described by Barthes, Gary creates a myth-like public figure of himself as a writer who has done his part for the country. His model also lies in the myth of de Gaulle, “the man who was France” according to Gary.

Much like de Gaulle who pulls from the rhetoric of figures from the Revolution and depicts an image of an eternal France, Gary also calls on the lineage of literary and historic figures of France. He often does this in wide strokes, with little elaboration, as if to assume his readership will recognize the deep Frenchness of the references, thus enhancing his own image

as belonging to the same lineage. At times he embellishes, however, to further engrain the known symbolism of the figure, as he does here with the aviator:

J'aimais les avions, surtout les avions de cette époque révolue, qui comptaient encore sur l'homme, avaient besoin de lui, n'avaient pas cet air impersonnel qu'ils ont aujourd'hui, où l'on sent déjà que l'avion sans pilote est une simple question de temps. J'aimais ces longues heures que nous passions sur le terrain revêtus de nos combinaisons de cuir dans lesquelles on avait toutes les peines du monde à entrer – pataugeant dans la boue d'Avord, bardés de cuir, casqués, gantés, les lunettes sur le front, nous grimpons dans les carlingues des braves Potez-25, avec leurs allures de percheros et leur bonne odeur d'huile, dont j'ai conservé jusqu'à ce jour le souvenir nostalgique dans les narines. (241)²³⁶

Of course, as we see in this passage, there is a point where nostalgia becomes lost in its own time and the reality of the present prevails. The insouciance of early flying days is replaced here, for example, with the “longues heures que nous passions sur le terrain [...]” Reaching for the nostalgia in myths is a tool in Gary's writing style but, as he humorously shows here, exposing the real toils involved with flying in a machine diminishes the idealism of the aviator figure. In similar fashion, his language of reverence for France – he goes as far as to call it his “fatherland” – alternates between images of universal hope for man and the harsh realization that he can never be considered *truly* French because of his foreign, and Jewish, background.

²³⁶ “I loved the airplanes of that long-vanished day, with their open cockpits, their primitive instruments, which left such a margin to individual flair and initiative, and the devil-may-care attitude of the pilots who flew them in a sky still free from regulations, channels of approach and radio guidance. I enjoyed the long hours which we spent on the airfield in our heavy one-piece leather suits – and a hellish business it was to get into them – floundering in the mud, encased in leather, helmeted, gloved and with goggles on our noses, climbing into the cockpit of the good old Potez-24, which ambled along at about the speed of a draft horse, in a glorious reek of oil, which my nostrils still retain in nostalgic memory.” (206-207)

In the end, these three works are an example of negotiating identity through language. The cultural past that the men bring to the fore in their reflections is part of the perpetuating cycle of myth. Like Arthur Koestler's expanding growth of crystals, as he describes in "The Birth of a Myth," they express some "diffuse sentiment latent in the social medium which strives for expression" (227). Through the telling of their own first-hand experiences of negotiating their idea of France, the writers permeate the myths of its past with the reality of the present. They were part of what Koestler calls "a new type of writer" that had taken over from "the cultured middle-class humanist: airmen, revolutionaries, adventurers, men who live the dangerous life; with a new operative technique of observation, a curious alfresco introspection and an even more curious trend of contemplation, even mysticism, born in the dead centre of the hurricane" (240). Romain Gary, for example, was the recipient of his mother's stories of the glory and honor of France; she molded his ideal image of his "fatherland" with its literature. In turn, Gary incorporates the imagery of France in his own literature while creating the next branch of myth-forming crystals. Therefore, the roles are reversed: instead of talking of the stories his mother shared, he writes: "Elle aimait les jolies histoires, ma mère. Je lui en ai raconté beaucoup" (251)²³⁷.

NEW MYTHOLOGIES

Jérôme Garcin introduces his 2007 *Nouvelles Mythologies* as a continuation of Roland Barthes's commentary on modern myths in French society. His collection of articles from novelists, sociologists, philosophers, historians, economists, neurologists, and psychoanalysts carries the ambition of giving a "sign of the times" that Barthes captured in his own *Mythologies*

²³⁷ "My mother loved beautiful stories. I told her a great many." (215)

fifty years earlier. In addition to celebrating Barthes, the original “empereur des signes,” Garcin suggests that this tradition be continued in half-century cycles, so as to write a history of the notion of Frenchness. No analysis or further explanation is offered, as Barthes does with his chapter on “Myth Today,” but a trending preponderance of the contributions do indicate increasingly consumer-based observations. Nonetheless, three articles connect with this study’s figures of masculinity, heroism and nationhood.

“Le 11/9 est la litote extrême,” begins Claude Lanzmann in his article entitled “Le 11 septembre 2001” (99). The impact of terrorism on society today is beyond doubt.; although acts of terrorism were not something new, the pervasiveness and horror of this reality now permeates societies around the globe. What emerges more from Lanzmann’s article, however, is the notion of masculinity that drives this movement: “Les soixante-dix vierges qui attendent au paradis d’Allah les sexes calcinés des suicidés assassins n’énoncent rien d’autre que le désir honteux et la haine des femmes, en même temps que le désert irrémédiable des civilisations de « frères »” (100). Leo Braudy similarly highlights that terrorism thrives in societies where there is “the seamless identification of the warrior image with general masculinity” (548). However, we already have seen the masculine face of terrorism change. What motivation are the sixty-nine virgins to the young girls who have been sent in to bomb fleeing refugees in camps that contain even their own family members?

Likewise, if Aude Lancelin’s image of “viriles talonnettes” in “Le déclinisme” should incite a modern hero, keeping fit *à l’américaine* and pushing on like Sisyphus in the era of economic woes, then have we moved beyond a predefined figure to an ever-increase sense of entitlement without sacrifice? “Le déclinisme singe la hauteur,” she writes; “Il pleure sacre de

Reims, mais pense baisse des charges. Il frissonne Guy Môquet, mais soupire service minimum garanti” (98).

Lastly, Paul Virilio’s “La délocalisation” suggests a “dénationalisation du peuplement” where today’s global economy grooms a nomadic culture to the tune of Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat*. With his reference to deported, displaced, and delocalized people, however, he seems overly focused on the urbanization of society as if to imply that people are now free to move as tourists and international entrepreneurs. How would this explain the exodus from countries in the Middle East, where local oppression and the threat of extremism are more to blame for these trends than the world market?

The above examples have, in less than a decade, already changed form. The imagery they invoke is already renewed and now more ambiguous. The point of this brief review, though, is to argue that the creation of myth has as much more to do with distance, collective memory, and nostalgia than with conflicting views on truth.

Garcin rightly points out a paradox in Barthes’s view of myth: “[il] mythifie si bien ce qu’il dénonce qu’on peut lire aujourd’hui son encyclopédie avec une tranquille nostalgie ; elle est devenue une littérature d’ambiance, comme on le dit de la musique” (9). However, the point of his *Mythologies* is more than to be “un merveilleux bric-à-brac” or “une foire à tout,” as Garcin states. Perhaps in another fifty years, the “myths” of speed-dating, GPS, Star Academy, or Wifi – to name a few in Garcin’s inventory – will take on nostalgia of the early 21st Century. For now, they are vehicles to view certain aspects of social interaction and indicators of social issues that concern us. Sadly, some of these are things that, at least temporarily, define a culture.

But the basic premise of what Barthes states is still this: “myth is a language” (11). He further adds that “myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the

‘nature’ of things” (110). This notion of arbitrariness is also at the heart of the ambivalence of the figures in this study. The aviator is not necessarily as one might expect because of the multitude of variations to the apparently seamless image of him (or her)²³⁸. The hero figure is also subject to interpretation, based on the moral or ethical premise from which it is reviewed. Finally, a person’s national identity is not a simple matter of bloodline or territory. For the men in this study, despite the connection with the “savour” of France, their allegiance was more rooted in the “spirit” of France, or the cultural heritage of republican ideals.

HORIZONS

The figure of a national hero, which this dissertation has explored, may leave some impression that heroism is a myth in general. On the contrary, I would like to offer that unraveling seams from existing myths is a healthy endeavor. It allows for a more complete awareness of the preconceptions we tend to pull from our cultural icons and heroes. I offer here two recent cases involving aviators that touch on this: the story of Robert Piché and the terrorist attempt on the train to Arras.

Robert Piché is a Canadian pilot who, on 24 August 2001, saved the lives of his crew and 306 passengers aboard Air Transat flight 236 en route to Lisbon, Portugal from Toronto, Canada. During the in-flight emergency, he quickly responded to losing fuel and, therefore, all power in the engines. His successful maneuvering of the Airbus A330 to a safe landing that day, despite his thousands of hours of experience, was seen as nothing short of a miracle. He was heralded immediately as a national hero in the Canadian press. It was not until later that Piché’s past

²³⁸ That largely masculine figure was already not exclusive in the early days of aviation; Amelia Earhart and Baroness Raymonde de Laroche, among others, are testimony to that fact. During World War II, for that matter, over one thousand women flew in the United States as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), created by Jacqueline Cochran.

emerged. He had been incarcerated for drug smuggling from Jamaica as a freelance pilot two decades earlier. Additionally, he was still battling alcoholism that was tearing his family apart. He was not the pristine image of the aviator who had saved this international flight.²³⁹

On 21 August 2015, an attempted terrorist attack was thwarted by the efforts of several passengers on a Thalys train 9364 traveling from Paris to Amsterdam. Notably, two American soldiers were among the group: Alek Skarlatos and Spencer Stone, the latter an Airman First Class in the United States Air Force. Within three days, French President François Hollande decorated four of the “heroes” as *Chevaliers de la Légion d’Honneur* (Knights of the Legion of Honor), France’s highest decoration. Coincidentally, the train was stopped for emergency investigation in the town of Arras, over which Saint-Exupéry during his reconnaissance mission in *Pilote de guerre*.

These are just two examples of the instances of heroism in our midst today. The hero figure in the former reminds us that there is more man in the myth of the aviator, whereas the latter involves an awareness that opportunities for heroism emerge every day, often at times where there is no expectation to need it and in contexts where no immediate national interests are at stake. The point in tying these examples to this discussion on myth and ambivalence is that literature is a depiction of a certain idea of our reality. Often the ideals we admire in mythical heroes are imperfect in real life, but they are nonetheless valuable in their permutations.

Romain Gary wrote in *Promise at Dawn* of “longing for perfection, my dream of dealing with life as if it were ink and paper, and my destiny as if it were literature” (269) His mythical conception of himself and of France is derived from this statement. It recognizes that myth is

²³⁹ A full account of this story is told in Pierre Cayouette’s *Robert Piché: Hands on Destiny* as well as in the film *Piché : entre ciel et terre* (2010), directed by Sylvain Archambault.

based on creation through language and tries to project a seamless sign that appears natural and pure. Yet, at the age of forty-four, he admits that he is “beginning to ask myself certain questions” (134). Asking questions, reflecting on meaning, accepting imperfections – these are all part of understanding the ambivalent reality in which we live. Consequently, myths evolve over time. Instead of accepting Gary’s stylistically ironic, yet highly introspective statement at the beginning of *La Promesse de l’aube* – “C’est fini” – a more open-ended interpretation of these myths might argue... Ça commence (It begins).

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