



The Aerodrome, A Love Story

REX WARNER (1905 - 1986)

Dates: First published in 1941 (London, The Bodley Head)

Summary: The setting is a small English village and the adjoining, newly established military aerodrome which will disrupt deeply the life of its inhabitants. Roy, the 21 years old protagonist, undergoes a long series of upsetting disadvantages: he is not, as he believed, the son of the Rector; the Rector is not a pious man, but a murderer; his newly-wed wife betrays him with his friend, the Flight-Lieutenant; she is probably his sister, etc. Disgusted by the hypocrisy and moral disorder of the village, he decides to abandon civil life and join the Aerodrome. Here, after a very hard training, he will become first secretary of the Chief, the Air Vice-Marshal. Roy is completely fascinated by the Air Vice-Marshal's personality and ideal program: "parents, homes, ownership, locality and marriage must be put out of mind. A man, and particularly an airman, must free himself from the stupefying bondage of the past but also of the future. No airman is to be the father of a child. He can't attach himself permanently to a woman." The Air Force "are in the process of becoming a new and more adequate race of men", as "this discipline has one aim, the acquisition of power, and by power – freedom". (ch. XII)

After further disadvantages and a love story in the Aerodrome, Roy gradually opens his eyes and recovers from his infatuation for the ideals of the Air Vice-Marshal (who turns out to be his real father). In the end the Vice-Marshal will not hesitate to kill the mother of another son of his (the Flight Lieutenant), his son himself and his unborn grandson, in order to keep Roy by him in the achievement of his ideals.

Analysis: Considered by some critics the best written novel of the 40s, even superior to *1984*, *The Aerodrome* owes its intense originality to a subject-matter too complex to be merely political as it is shown by the flexibility of its allegorical and symbolical language which is both kafkaesque in the use of large-size metaphor and at the same time very much in the English fictional tradition (1st person narrative, three-dimensional characters, humour, irony, and the smell of the English earth) (A. Burgess).

The Village and the Aerodrome represent two juxtaposed and yet intimately connected worlds: the second, like the Frankenstein's monster, is born from the first and wants to destroy it.

The degenerate village may represent the wretched human condition or the complex human family, but certainly it represents that contemporary civil society the Air Vice-Marshal so deeply despises: if, on the one hand, the village with its «mud» is the ground where fascist dreams of Overmen and Dictators can easily take root, on the other hand, underneath this mud, the village, with its church, manor and pub, keeps the healthy traditional structure of Morris' medieval village.

The aerodrome, the first cell of the clean and efficient coming *brave new world*, is the anti-human product of the alliance between science (in the years between the wars the aircraft had become the Machine *par excellence*) and will-to-power; it is a self-sufficient totalitarian state which absorbs the village, converting the manor house into a club, the rectory into a gymnasium, agricultural land into airfields in a paroxysm of iron discipline, in the mad attempt to dominate life even through destruction.

More than Orwell, Warner seems to trust in the strength of our collective instinct and in the final triumph of the love of life, and his death machine will not survive the mad mind by which it was conceived.

Bibliography

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