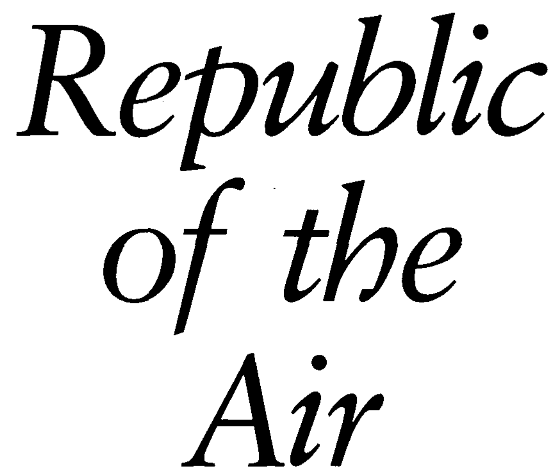
"We [Futurists] believe in the possibility of an incalculable number of human transformations, and we say without smiling that wings sleep in the flesh of man."
—F. T. Marinetti



Republic of the Air

Not many years after the Wright Brothers took to the air in 1903, a vast popular culture of aviation took flight with them. Ranging from Mussolini to Russian Futurism to the Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers classic Flying Down to Rio, *historian Robert Wohl shows how aviation came to represent the hope of cultural and moral renewal—and how the cult was eventually brought down to earth.*

BY ROBERT WOHL

As we scurry through the endless concourses of today's airports on our way to catch a plane, how many of us pause to think that we are about to undertake an essentially *aesthetic* and *moral* experience? Yet only 60 years ago Western culture, high and low, celebrated aviation in just such terms. Hollywood's big studios glamourized the miracle of flight in a spate of star-studded films. Charles Lindbergh acquired the divine sobriquet "the new Christ." And the Modernist architect and city planner Le Corbusier proclaimed the airplane the foremost symbol of the 20th century and the "vanguard of the conquering armies of the New Age."

For Le Corbusier, aviation was not only a technology that held out the promise of moving people and goods more rapidly from one place to another; it was also, and more importantly, a source of aesthetic *energy* and *faith* capable of inspiring new forms

of cultural creation. Le Corbusier insisted that the flying machine and the new perspective it offered on the world, if interpreted correctly, could provide invaluable lessons for architects and urban planners. Indeed, in his unbounded enthusiasm for the new technology, Le Corbusier went so far as to claim that the airplane embodied the same spirit of imagination and "cold reason" that produced the Parthenon. The implication was that the West was on the verge of entering a new classical era of rationalism in which machine-inspired functionalism would dictate design.

But the Age of Aviation, while it left a lasting imprint on the way we live our lives, failed to realize the cultural hopes that Le Corbusier and others had placed in it. Born during the century's first decade, aviation culture reached its apogee during the 1930s and lost much of its vigor and self-confidence during the years that followed the Second World War. To review its history today is to be reminded that our century has been a voracious consumer of ideals and a relentless shatterer of dreams.

Popular enthusiasm for aviation was slow to develop. Though the Wright brothers achieved their first powered flight in December 1903, it was not until they demonstrated their flying machine under controlled conditions at Fort Myer, Virginia, and Le Mans, France, in the fall of 1908 that skeptical observers began to concede that human beings were now capable of navigating the air. Public enthusiasm for the new invention took a quantum leap the following summer when Louis Blériot crossed the English Channel in a daring flight of 36½ minutes. This aerial beau geste set off massive demonstrations in France and England. To capture the public's imagination, Blériot explained, it was necessary to risk everything by flying over water. Nothing could duplicate the sensation of seeing an airplane disappear alone into oblivion over a boundless sea. Generations of aviators would follow Blériot's example in search of fame and fortune.

Journalists and intellectuals lost no time explaining the meaning of the new technology to their readers. What is striking is how quick they were to interpret the new invention in cultural and political terms. As the Italian man of letters Gabriele D'Annunzio confided to a French interviewer in 1910 soon after taking his first flight, aviation carried within itself "the promise of a profound metamorphosis of civic life" that would have far-reaching consequences for aesthetics as well as for war and peace. New idols would appear; new laws would have to be written; relations among nations would be transformed. High in the sky, above the clouds, customs barriers, property rights, and frontiers lost their meaning. Aviation would create a new civilization, a new way of life, and a new elite. The "Republic of the Air" would exile the wicked and the parasites and would open itself to "men of good will." The "elect" would abandon the "chrysalis of weight" and would take flight.

D'Annunzio's novel *Perhaps Yes, Perhaps No*, published the same year, provided a portrait of the new elite. Its protagonist Paolo Tarsis, like Blériot "a builder of wings" and a record-setting competitor in air meets, escapes from a destructive love affair and a psychologically twisted mistress by flying 135 nautical miles from the west coast of Italy to the island of Sardinia, where he is spiritually reborn. D'Annunzio intuited what would become the recurring refrain of aviation literature. For him, aviation was not a sport, still less a new mode of transportation; it was a means of moral and spiritual transcendence that elevated man above his fate, and this justified the sacrifice of lives that conquering the air would inevitably entail. By accepting the

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terrible risks of flight and challenging death, he believed, the new elect of pilots could create a religion of speed and escape from the limitations of everyday life. The aviator, in short, was "the messenger of a vaster life," a technological superman whose mission was to triumph over space and time. The earthbound would have to settle for the vicarious identification they could feel with these "celestial helmsmen" who looked down on those below with a scornful smile.

D'Annunzio's countryman, the founder of Futurism, F. T. Marinetti, took D'Annunzio's message one step further. In his view, technology did not merely offer a topic for literature; it had *replaced* literature and rendered the romantic and sentimental sensibility of the 19th century obsolete. Men would merge with motors. Their will would become like steel. Their vital organs would become as interchangeable as a flying machine's spare parts. The motor was man's "perfected brother" because it was capable of eternal youth. "We [Futurists] believe in the possibility of an incalculable number of human transformations, and we say without smiling that wings sleep in the flesh of man."

If wings slept in the flesh of man, why go on producing literature? Why not fly? One Russian Futurist writer came to just this conclusion. In 1910, soon after publishing his first novel, Vasily Kamensky abandoned literature in order to devote himself to aviation. He later wrote: "I wanted to participate in the great discovery not merely with words, but with deeds. What are poems and novels? The airplane—that is the truest achievement of our time .... If we are people of the motorized present, poets of universal dynamism, newcomers and messengers of the future, masters of action and activity, enthusiastic builders of new forms of life—then we must be, we have no choice but to be, flyers."

Kamensky went on to become a professional pilot and flew exhibitions until he was nearly killed in 1912, when he lost control of his Blériot XI and crashed into a Polish bog. Thereafter he wisely limited his aeronautical activities to the realm of the imagination and produced an impressive body of avant-garde poetry, in which he evoked the coming age of flight. In his airminded vision, boys and girls climbed rainbows instead of trees; "clean" and "sublime" technological achievement had rendered the wisdom of the ancients obsolete; electric lights shone brighter than the sun or moon; and aviators, with their record-breaking flights, had taken possession of the earth. Capable of flying anywhere in the world, his pilots spit contemptuously on the subhumans who remained attached to the ground.

To be sure, not all Western poets and intellectuals greeted the coming of the flying machine with the unqualified enthusiasm of D'Annunzio, Marinetti, and Kamensky. Some, like the Viennese journalist and critic Karl Kraus, feared that their contemporaries were becoming the prisoners of their own inventions. They had been clever enough to create sophisticated machines, but they lacked the intelligence to use them properly. Because the air had been conquered, the earth was now condemned to be bombarded. Instead of raising humanity toward the stars, then, aviation had only extended man's misery to the skies, "as if it did not have ample room down below."

The British novelist John Galsworthy also deplored what he called "the prostitution of the conquest of the air to the ends of warfare." "If ever men presented a spectacle of sheer inanity it is now," he wrote in 1911, "when, having at long last triumphed in their struggle to subordinate to their welfare the unconquered element, they have straightaway commenced to defile that element, so heroically mastered, by filling it with engines of destruction. If ever the gods were justified of their ironic smile—by the gods, it is now!"

But Kraus and Galsworthy were exceptions. Even writers who deplored the building up of nationalist tensions and the cult of violence in pre-1914 Europe could not suppress

their enthusiasm for aviation. The passion for flight and the willingness of young aviators to risk their lives, they felt, was a sign of vitality and a demonstration that, contrary to what many claimed, the Western peoples were not in decline. Ancient virtues that many feared had been eroded by urban civilization had reappeared. Heroism had been reborn. The "huddled masses" had been forced to raise their faces away from the dirty city pavements toward the purity of the sky. Or as Edmond Rostand, author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, put it in a long poem, "Hymn of the Wings," which he devoted to the new technology and its apprentices:

> Higher! ever higher, pilot! and glory to men
> Of great will!
> Glory to those stealers of the flame that we are!
> Glory to Humanity!

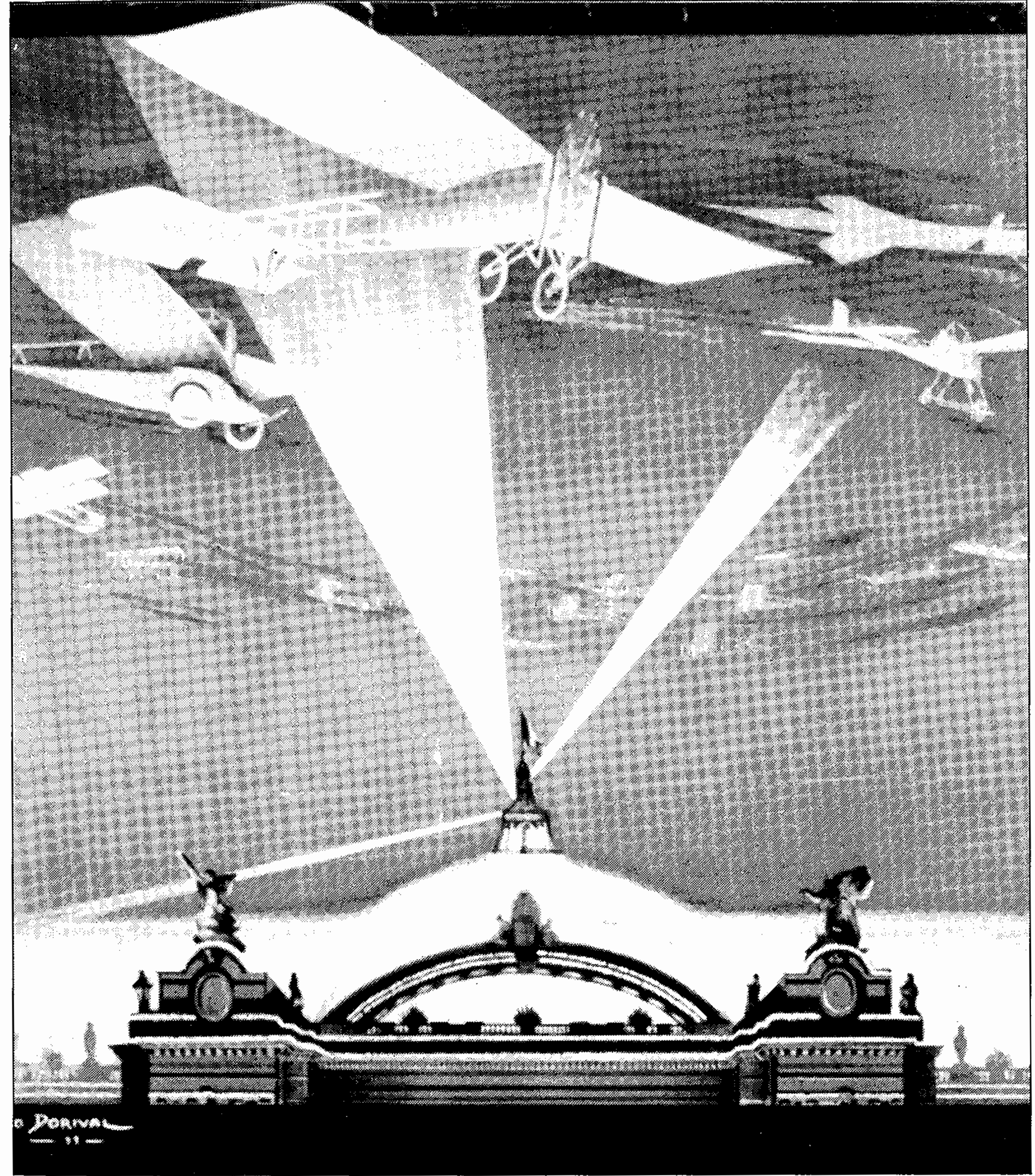
Looking at pre-1918 Western culture, one cannot help be struck by the variety of contexts in which aviation metaphors appeared. Flight could signify the act of imagination and artistic creation, escape from the constraints of a dreary bourgeois world, triumph over the limitations placed on human beings by nature, ascension toward a new system of perception, or sometimes union with the angels and God. The aviator, in the hands of a painter like the Russian Kazimir Malevich, became a symbol for the man of the future who would liberate himself from the limitations of gravity and earthly space. The connection between avant-garde art and aviation was so natural and so accepted that when the young photographer Jacques Lartigue attended the *Rite of Spring* in June 1913, what he liked about Stravinsky's music was that its throbbing rhythms—*vroum, vroum, vroum*—reminded him of the roar of airplane engines taking off at the airfield he frequented outside Paris, Issy-les-Moulineaux.

For most people, of course, the matter was simpler, though the feelings aroused by the flying machine were no less intense. Coming as it did on the heels of an apparently never-ending series of technological innovations, the flying machine was interpreted as a confirmation that the Western peoples had subjugated Nature to their will and intelligence, and hence as a promise, even a guarantee, of greater victories to come. To a civilization that had recently extended its dominion throughout the world by means of imperialist expansion and annexation, it seemed natural to turn its energies and its attention to the mastery of the sky. Now that Western man had successfully escaped from the earth and invaded the heavens—a realm formerly preserved for birds, angels, and God—who could say with any certitude where his limitations lay? Time, space, even death might be overcome.

Aviation, then, was the realization of the Promethean dream that had tormented the peoples of the West throughout their history. Through the miracle of flight, myth had been transformed into technological reality. Henceforth technology would take the place of myth. The sky was no longer a limit, but a frontier to be explored and mastered.

The external sign of the flying machine's deepest meaning was the rapidity with which it moved through the air. Born of the "Spirit of Speed," as one pre-1914 poet put it, the airplane was "the youngest child of motion"—the younger brother and successor to the locomotive, the bicycle, and the automobile. Its exploits thrilled the audiences who flocked to air meets and, as a metaphor for modernity, it promised to shrink the world, collapsing days of travel into hours and by doing so enriching and extending life.

Yet paradoxically, because of the aircraft's fragile construction and the perils of the ever-changing weather, the airplane put the men and women who dared to fly in intimate and dangerous contact with the elements, thus bringing to an end the alienation from nature that many had come to associate with modernity and industrialism. How exhilarating to feel the lash of the wind on one's face and to feel at one with the world as one flew above it! Could there be an experience more intense than pitting one's flying skills against the



The airplane is nothing except a supporting plane—a means of propulsion.
CLEARNESS OF FUNCTION!
The airplane flies direct from one point to another indifferent to the contours of the earth.
—Le Corbusier

fickle moods of the "wayward air"?

Above all, the airplane held out the prospect of freedom: "Freedom," wrote the French aviator and memoirist Francy Lacroix in 1918, "this leap that detaches you from the ground and opens to you the sky. Freedom,

this road without limit that can cross all roads at any altitude and in any direction. Freedom, this infinite conquest of trees, of towns, of plains, and mountains." The freedom to come and go as you pleased and to leave behind the mundane cares of a corrupt world.

Small wonder, then, that the apostles of the new religion predicted that aviation would bring about a moral and physical regeneration of the Western peoples and a profound renewal of culture. "The music of new times stood above us in the heavens," an air-minded German novelist wrote in 1914; "the song of the future roared confidently; a new world had been born of a different kind and a different form." Those who truly believed in aviation knew that life would never be the same again.

One might guess that the trauma of the First World War would have had the effect of inspiring second thoughts about the conquest of the air. This turned out not to be the case. True, the inhabitants of Paris and London got a preview of aircraft, as H. G. Wells had described them in his 1908 novel *War in the Air*, "dripping death" from the sky. Watching a zeppelin raid over London, D. H. Lawrence had visions of apocalypse and the birth of a new cosmos symbolized by the German airship "calm and drifting in a glow of light, like a new moon, with its light bursting in flashes on the ground." "So it is the end," he wrote in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell. "Our world is gone, and we are like dust in the air."

But the dominant image of the aviator that emerged from the war was not that of the merciless bombardier who threatened an end to civilization but rather that of the flying ace, a knight of the air who jousted with blazing machine guns in chivalrous combat above the stalemated and entrenched armies of the ground. Heroes larger than life were driven to seek combat in the clouds—in W. B. Yeats's stirring phrase—not by law or duty nor by cheering crowds but by "a lonely impulse of delight."

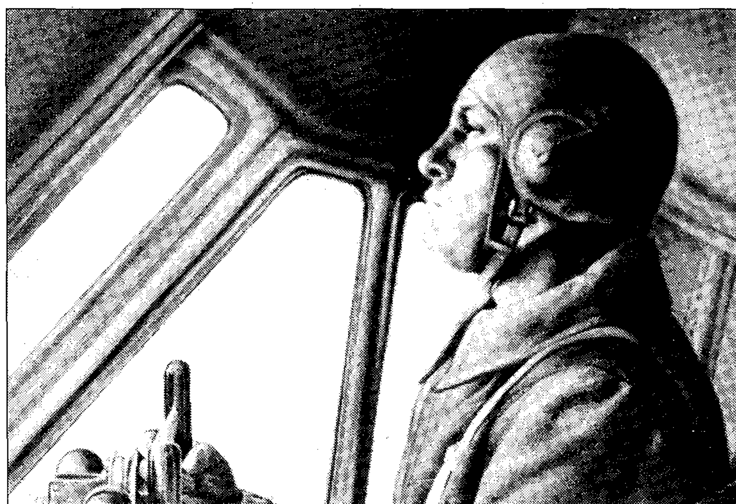
In retrospect, it is astonishing how deeply this image of the aviator became embedded in the popular culture of the Western countries. Scores of books and films were devoted to this theme. Among other things, they testify to the longing for a different type of war from the one most combatants knew during the years between 1914 and 1918.

Charles Lindbergh was only one of thousands of young boys who decided to become an aviator after reading an account of the adventures of a World War I ace. After a brief apprenticeship as a barnstormer, wing-walker, army air force cadet, and airmail pilot, he went on to become the most famous airman in history. Even today, it is difficult to explain his extraordinary and persisting celebrity. Contrary to what many people believe, he was not the first person to fly the Atlantic. A long train of aviators before him (beginning with the American pilot A. C. Read and his crew in 1919) had made spectacular overseas flights that had captured the imagination of the public and the headlines of newspapers throughout the world. But no one before Lindbergh had made the flight alone, and no one before had ever so charismatically incarnated the promise of the airplane to change the world, a mission he invoked when he entitled his 1927 autobiography *We*, suggesting the fusion that Marinetti had earlier predicted between human beings and their machines.

To be sure, when Lindbergh made his prize-winning flight from New York to Paris in May 1927, the groundwork had already been laid for the explosion of aviation culture that would occur over the next decade. In Italy, for example, Mussolini understood that aviation could be used for ideological purposes to identify the new fascist movement he had founded with speed, audacity, and domination of the air. Aviators figured prominently in Mussolini's entourage when he came to power in October 1922 and one of his first actions as premier was to create a Ministry of Aviation, whose portfolio he personally assumed. His goal was not just to develop a powerful air force—indispensable to Italy's imperial expansion—but to cultivate an

aviation consciousness among the Italian people. As he explained to a gathering of aviators in 1923, not everyone could learn to fly. Flying would remain the privilege of an aristocracy. But everyone must long to fly and regard aviators with envy. "All devoted citizens must follow with profound feeling the development of Italian wings."

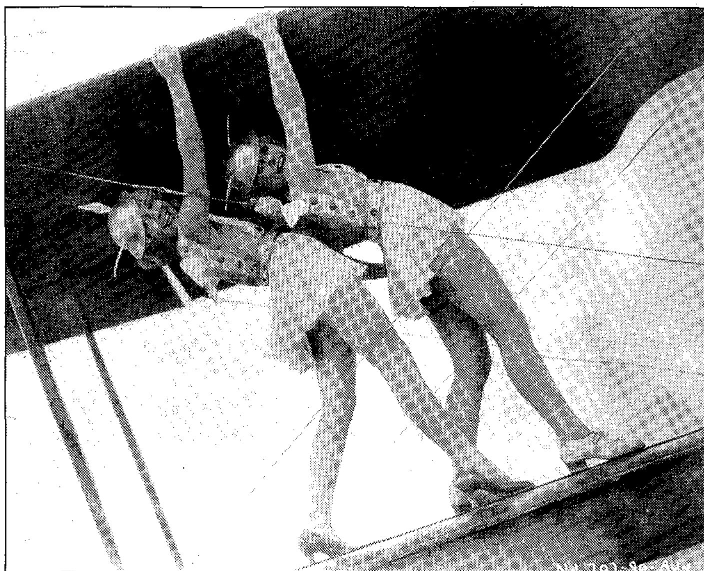
To implement this program, Mussolini sponsored highly publicized record-breaking flights by Italian aviators and built a monumental Air Ministry in the center of Rome whose lavish murals suggested the omnipresence of Italian air power. His minister of aviation, Italo Balbo, led flotillas of Italian seaplanes across the South and North Atlantic, reaching in 1933 as far as Chicago, whose city council erected a monument to Balbo along Lake Michigan and named one of the city's streets after him. Italian artists were encouraged to paint on aviation topics, postage stamps were issued to commemorate Italian aerial triumphs, and Mussolini, who had himself learned how to fly, was often photographed at the controls of Italian military airplanes.



Mussolini endowed his fascist movement with the glamorous aura of airpower. Art from an Italian government calendar of 1941 depicts Il Duce *at the controls of an airplane.*

In France aviation had also become a major cultural theme. Ever since Wilbur Wright had first flown near Le Mans in August 1908, French writers had been inclined to identify aviators with poets and airplanes with objets d'art. Marcel Proust found the metaphor of flight so compelling that he used it in his novel *In Search of Lost Time* to express his ascension toward "the silent heights of memory." Jean Cocteau wrote elegant verses celebrating the exploits of his friend, the famous aviator Rolland Garros, and identifying himself as an "aviator of ink." Several best-selling books dealt with the adventures of French aviators during the Great War, the most influential being Henry Bordeaux's biography of the ace Georges Guynemer. In 1924 Louise Faure-Favier, author of the first novel devoted to commercial aviation pilots, called upon French writers to "go up in planes."

But it was not until the publication in 1931 of *Night Flight* by Antoine Saint-Exupéry that the aviation novel was sanctioned by the French literary establishment. Drawing on his friends' and his own experiences as airmail pilots for the line that came to be known as Aéropostale, Saint-Exupéry created a portrait of a group of men whose dedication to their craft as aviators was such that it bore no relationship to the cargo that they carried. Flying, for them, was a means of spiritual transcendence that raised them above themselves and allowed them to achieve nobility, even if doing so required their death. Their monk-like



The dancers in Flying Down to Rio *(1933) perform their routine high above the Brazilian city. Aviation movies were ideal fare for American audiences intent upon soaring above the hard realities of the Depression.*

leader, Rivière, lived by a code so austere that he never considered putting the safety of the individual above the common mission: The mail must go through, no matter what the human cost. In a preface to the novel, André Gide, the reigning pope of the French literary establishment, expressed his gratitude to Saint-Exupéry for having elucidated a paradoxical truth that the French badly needed to understand: namely "that man's happiness is not to be found in liberty, but in the acceptance of a duty."

Saint-Exupéry liked to compare the craft of the aviator to that of the carpenter or simple tiller of the soil. The pilot, he said, was an artisan who lived in close communion and harmony with nature. "The machine, which at first seemed to isolate man from the great problems of nature, actually submits him to them with greater force. Alone, amidst the great tribunal that a stormy sky creates for him, the pilot defends his mail against three elementary divinities, the mountains, the sea, and the tempest." But the book with which Saint-Exupéry followed *Night Flight*—*Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939)—gave the impression that the aviator represented a new breed of man, a creature both freer and nobler than the ordinary run of human being. And this was precisely the way the book was interpreted by its more authoritative critics, and one of the reasons for its great popular success.

One of the features of aviation culture from the beginning was the ease with which themes and images traversed the intellectual distance separating Modernist and avant-garde culture from mass culture. Hollywood discovered aviation in the 1920s and quickly learned how to adapt the airplane aesthetic to its own commercial ends. The translation of the culture of flight to film was all the smoother because many of the directors, actors, and writers who participated in the making of Hollywood aviation films were themselves pilots, some of whom had flown in Europe during World War I.

In view of this and the flourishing cult of aces in popular magazines and books, it is not surprising that the aviation topic for which Hollywood showed the most enthusiasm during the late 1920s and 1930s was combat in the skies of France in 1917–18. William Wellman's *Wings*—winner of the first Academy Award in 1928 and dedicated to Charles Lindbergh, whose flight preceded by only a few months the release of the film—portrayed in unforgettable images the mechanical ballet of scout planes making deadly passes in the air. *Wings* managed to give the impression that the actors had fused with their machines, an uncanny realization of Marinetti's prewar Futurist fantasies, but one which, unlike his, reached an audience of millions. Determined to go *Wings* one better, the millionaire aviator Howard Hughes invested $4 million of his

own money—a fortune in those days—to produce an even more elaborate reconstruction of the aerial war. As late as 1938, in the aftermath of the Munich agreements, Hollywood was busy remaking *Dawn Patrol*, a bitter yet exhilarating look back at the life (and death) of British fighter pilots during the last phase of World War I.

A second theme of aviation culture that Hollywood adopted with alacrity was misogynism, which had already played a leading role in D'Annunzio and Marinetti's prewar writings. Flight in their novels and poems had been a means of escaping from the sordid and demeaning world of women. Hollywood screenwriters could not allow themselves the luxury of such unwholesome literary conceits, but they often presented the female lead as a greater threat to the aviator and his companions than wind, fog, sleet, or snow. In *Wings* the perfect friendship of Buddy Rogers and Richard Arlen is destroyed and Arlen dies because of a quarrel caused by their rivalry for Clara Bow's affections; in *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), the appearance of Jean Arthur at a tropical hotel-airdrome results in the fatal crash of Noah Berry, Jr., the wounding of the Rivière-like head of the airmail service, Cary Grant, and the death of his best friend, Thomas Mitchell—all because a woman is incapable of understanding the virile feelings and higher ethic that drive aviators to fly and risk their lives.

Watching these films, one would never guess that the 1930s was the great age of the aviatrix. Amy Johnson and Beryl Markham in England, Helène Boucher and Maryse Bastié in France, Thea Rasche and Hanna Reitsch in Germany, Elinor Smith and Amelia Earhart in the United States all showed by their record-breaking flights that women were as good, if not better, at handling airplanes than men. Flying, said Rasche, was "more thrilling than love for a man and far less dangerous." It was also a means by which women could explore and expand the boundaries of newly acquired freedoms. But on the few occasions during this decade when Hollywood put women behind the controls of a plane, its (mostly male) writers either identified the female flyer with adultery and sent her crashing to her death, as in the 1933 *Christopher Strong*, or they suggested that their protagonist had taken up flying in order to impress or to get closer to the man she loved, as in the 1938 *Tail Spin*. In Hollywood's vision of the world, women aviators invariably ended badly.

Hollywood was much more comfortable when celebrating the marriage of macho men and cutting-edge technology. This was nowhere more evident than in the 1933 musical *Flying Down to Rio*, in many ways Hollywood's most astonishing and exuberant display of aviation madness. Rising above an inconsequential plot based on a triangle between a sultry Brazilian beauty played by Dolores del Rio, her rich Brazilian fiancé, and an American aviator-band leader, the film throbs with Latin rhythms, the roar of aircraft engines, and the excitement of exotic settings. The genius of this vibrantly air-minded movie lies in the realization by its makers that flight had become a form of spectacle. Deprived of the use of the nightclub in which they had been appearing, the dancers take to the sky and, strapped to the wings of airplanes, perform their act above the city. Afterwards, in a surprising twist, Del Rio's fiancé arranges for her to be married to the American aviator by the captain of the airplane, then parachutes out over the city, leaving the couple to fly away toward eternal happiness. The entire film is full of aviation motifs, designed by Carroll Clark and Van Nest Polglass, and leaves an impression of irrepressible aeronautical enthusiasm and the limitless possibilities of love and international communication opened up by the new technology.

From such romantic heights the cult of aviation was soon to fall. When *Flying Down to Rio* was released, Adolf Hitler had been in power for 11 months. With every year thereafter, the prospect of war seemed more threatening, and many believed that if war came, it

would be decided in the air. The bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War provided a brutal example of what lay in store for civilian populations. But flying lost none of its glamour, particularly among the young men who were going to fight the coming war. As the future RAF pilot Richard Hillary explained to a pacifist friend at Oxford: "In a fighter plane . . . we have found a way to return to war as it ought to be, war which is individual combat between two people, in which one either kills or is killed. It's exciting, it's individual, and it's disinterested." The ace myth was clearly still alive and well in 1939.

Hillary and his fellow RAF pilots saved Britain from defeat and probable invasion in 1940, prompting Churchill's eulogy "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." But for millions of people in Europe and Asia the droning sound of aircraft engines, and the sight of airplane wings, became identified during the years between 1939 and 1945 with death-dealing explosives raining from the sky, gutted buildings, shrieking children, and crowded air-raid shelters in which families huddled together as the ground above them shook. The incineration of entire cities, such as Coventry, Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo, was a cruel reminder that, far from bringing an end to war as many had claimed or hoped it would before 1914, the airplane had instead made it impossible to maintain a distinction between combatants and civilians. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world would live with the knowledge that the age of aviation might culminate in the end of civilized life in entire sections of the planet.

Driving through the ruins of Munich in May 1945, Lindbergh, the leading apostle of aeronautical faith in the 1930s, felt a sense of rising apprehension for the future. "A formation of aircraft passes high overhead; a button is pressed; black dots tumble through the air; a pinpoint on earth erupts, and civilization is rubble, smoke, and flame." What was to prevent what had happened to Germany from happening to the United States? "Our atomic bombs return from Japan to haunt us, and in our science we foresee our doom."

By 1948, when he committed these thoughts to paper in a little book entitled *Of Flight and Life,* Lindbergh's memory of his "mail plane boring northward over moonlit clouds" during the idyllic 1920s had become mingled in his mind with the images of tracers from his fighter, "flaming comets of warplanes, and bombs falling irretrievably through the air." Why, he asked, should he devote his life to developing aviation, "if aircraft are to ruin the nations which produce them? Why work for the idol of science when it demands the sacrifice of cities full of children; when it makes robots out of men and blinds their eyes to God?"

Lindbergh acknowledged that Western man could not live without science and technology. And indeed the great expansion and democratization of commercial aviation began precisely at the time that Lindbergh wrote *Of Flight and Life.* More and more people began to travel by air; airports were expanded into self-contained cities; and airline pilots began to acquire the reputation for unflappable regularity and safety that they possess today, high-tech bus drivers distinguished by the fact that their highways are thousands of feet above the ground and their salaries correspondingly lofty. As airspace is more and more controlled, as airports become increasingly congested, as liability problems drive more and more aircraft manufacturers to abandon the building of light aircraft, the idea of flight as liberation has inevitably lost much of its former meaning. And so too has the belief that aviation was a source of cultural inspiration, "the vanguard of the conquering armies of the New Age."

Not that aviation is incapable of arousing popular enthusiasm. Enter any museum of air and space, and you will find milling crowds—consisting of people of every age—admiring the flying machines and aeronautical icons of the past. Flick on your television

set, and you will have trouble avoiding *The Spirit of St. Louis*, *Twelve O'Clock High*, or *Top Gun*. Glance at the collection of glossy paperbacks in your supermarket, and you will see that the aviation novel continues to sell. Browse through a computer software store, and you will notice that flight simulators are in ample supply. Visit an air show, and you will be astonished to discover how many people still thrill to the sight of airplanes booming through the sky. The opening weeks of the Persian Gulf War, the most extensive and concentrated air operation in history and the first one to be watched as it happened by a mass public, kept Americans glued to their television sets and convinced many that their tax dollars had been wisely spent.

Yet among these devotees of aviation, who believes that the airplane has the power to renew culture, abolish war, create a new type of civilization, cultivate deeper human relationships, or produce a race of supermen? Would it occur to anyone to think that the members of the Navy's Tailhook Association represent a higher form of morality that brings them—and with them, us—closer to the mythical heroes of old?

Is this because the place of aviation was taken by space exploration? I think not. Though most of us are fascinated by space technology, we do not see it as a source of new values and meanings. No astronaut has ever inspired the popular enthusiasm or cult that Lindbergh and other famous aviators and aviatrixes of the pre–World War II period did. Instead of being seen as heroes, the astronauts are perceived as highly trained technicians, which in fact is what they are.

On reflection, it is clear that the waning of aviation culture was implicit in the logic of aeronautical progress. Once flying was no longer dangerous and the skies had become friendly, aviation's role as a means of transcendence was doomed to disappear. The hundreds of passengers who are herded into today's jumbo jets have scarcely any sensation of having left the ground. They have lost almost completely that intimate contact with the elements that was such an important part of the early charm of flying. For much of their flight, they are unable to see the ground. They know that at 33,000 feet they are safer than they will be when driving home from the airport in their car.

No danger, no mystique. Then, too, the democratization of air travel has deprived the airplane of much of the sacred aura of elitism from which it derived so much of its glamour during the first 30 years of its existence. Familiarity has bred indifference, if not contempt. Who now can appreciate the sense of risk, adventure, and singularity with which the first air travelers committed their lives to the hazards of the sky?

Or does the explanation go even deeper? Could it be that we have lost some of our enthusiasm for the conquest of nature? Perhaps the sense of pride at having dominated the air no longer thrills us in the way it did our predecessors? If so, Charles Lindbergh will once again turn out to be a pioneer. As a young man, Lindbergh believed that the development of commercial aviation was a means of increasing human freedom and bringing the peoples of the world together in understanding and peace. During the last decades of his life, he came to the conclusion that rapid communication brought in its wake "deadly standardization" and the destruction of the environment. The secret of cultural renewal and survival for the human race lay, he now thought, not in the lessons of machines but in the "wisdom of the wildness." Having longed to flee the limitations and constraints of the ground as a young man, Lindbergh spent his last years getting to know the earth. For him, as for us, aviation no longer held the answers to the questions that really mattered.