

# The Poetry of Flight

SELDEN RODMAN

THE poetry of flight, unlike the poetry of the sail or the wheel, has not had time in which to develop gradually. It is being forced from us with a terrible urgency, though less than forty years have passed since the first flight. A new field of mechanical mastery has opened up; but that has happened before without appreciably broadening man's horizon or deepening his spiritual perspective. It is rather that profoundly in the consciousness of the race the idea of flight is associated with human aspiration and release from physical limitations. While now, on the very threshold of achievement, the dream becomes a nightmare threatening an awful vengeance for its perversion; and in desperation the soul of man reaches backward for the untarnished symbol of his hope.

To be sure, there has always been the bird, and the poetry of the bird, but our concern is for a larger field in which everyone who writes is a pioneer. Perhaps even a new poetry of the bird lies ahead of us.

Has it ever occurred to poets that a bird's blood has more red corpuscles per ounce than any other animal's? "There is a complete separation of pure and impure blood in the bird's heart," writes Gordon Aymar in "Bird Flight," "another departure from early reptilian life and another factor contributing to intensity and vigor of life. This high pitch to which it is tuned perhaps accounts for the richness of its song." The torpedo body of the swift, the streamlined "high aspect ratio" wing of the duck hawk, the gull so perfectly designed for gliding, the quail and grouse for hedgehopping, the amphibian penguin, and the engine-crowded hummingbird may well inspire the poets of the future to a kind of bird-poetry very different from the "Ode to the Skylark." What man-made machine will ever achieve the complex perfection of even the goose's wing, guided by its 12,000 muscles? And how

good it is for our urban, mechanical arrogance to be told by Lieutenant Commander Graham that ages before the Handley-Page with its slotted airfoils, the eagle in its low-speed glides increased the angle of incidence by exactly similar automatic anti-stalling devices!

But if we were confined to the bird or the plane in our search for the poetry of flight, we would not have to search widely—or deeply. Fortunately there have been men in every age who considered flight possible. The gods flew, not to mention the demons, and was not man compounded of both? Quetzalcoatl, the departed blond helper of the Aztecs (who was to return later in such ironically destructive human shape) was the God of the Air. What child has not thrilled to the possibilities of the magic carpet and the enchanted Persian horse in the Arabian Nights? and was it accidental that the egg of the fabulous Roc that carried Sinbad was the symbol of something unattainable? In the Bible, we are told that "a bird of the air shall carry the voice and that which hath wings shall hear the matter," and the Voice out of the Whirlwind challenges Job

Canst thou bind the cluster of the  
Pleiades,  
Or loose the bands of Orion?

The legend of Icarus and Daedalus, provoking Ovid's tale and Breughel's

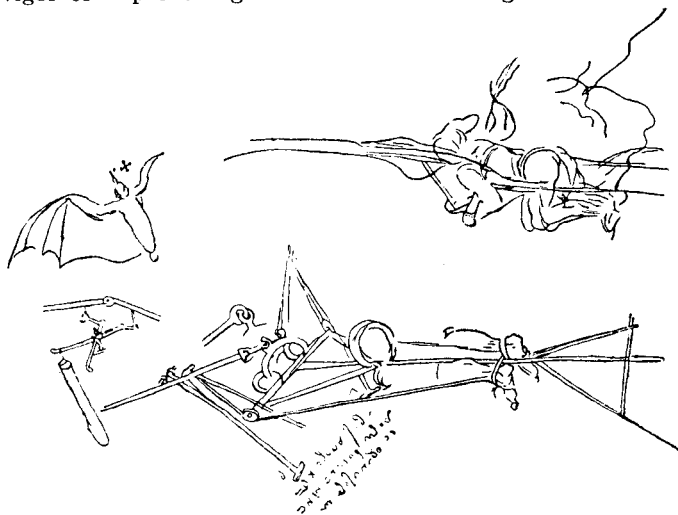
great painting, achieved most lasting renown. But down through the Middle Ages we hear of Oliver, the Malmesbury Monk, Kaspar Mohr, the Flying Priest of Württemberg, and Father John Dampier who is said to have taken off from the walls of Sterling Castle on hens' feathers without fatal consequences. "Princes of the Air," Burton called them, "those aerial devils that corrupt the air and cause plagues, thunders and fires, above and beneath the moon."

In modern times, from the genuinely scientific experiments of Leonardo to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the legend assumes more credible shape, but hardly more so. Scientist, no less than poet and legend-maker, is thrown off the track by Montgolfiers's balloon. Rousseau's "New Daedalus," Poe's "Balloon-Hoax," and the phantasies of Jules Verne and the early H. G. Wells are creatures of the same delusion. Even Count Zeppelin believed that man would never be able to fly well on wings because the wing-tips, unlike the extremities of the bird's pinions, would be nerveless.

Cayley and Stringfellow knew better. Otto Lilienthal and Langley and the Wright brothers knew better. It happened.

What was it about the idea of flight that dazzled the imagination of man? Was it merely the prospect of a greater freedom? of an unattainable swiftness of transportation and communication? Perhaps that was all. Perhaps the desire for this ultimate liberation, this intimation of immortality, was all. But the psychologists think otherwise. And the evidence, conscious and unconscious, of the poets of flight corroborates them.

If psychology and psychoanalysis were exact sciences it might be easy to interpret the symbolism of aviation. Since they are not, and since, furthermore, they happen to be in their infancies, with no two schools subscribing to the



Sketches for a flying machine, by Leonardo da Vinci.

same methods, we will accept their evidence as evidence and not as proof. The only extended discussion of the subject with which I am familiar occurs in Freud's monograph on Leonardo da Vinci. After tracing, plausibly enough, the connections between the great artist's recollection of a childhood erotic dream, his apparently celibate maturity, and his lifelong concern with flight, the psychologist asks why it is that people dream of flight, and concludes that the dream is a concealment of another wish—the wish for the ability of sexual accomplishment. He points to the linguistic connections between flight and sexual activity in many languages. He surmises that the child's unhappiness, springing from lack of knowledge and the desire to emulate the grown-up, seeks release in this form of violent fantasy. He theorizes further that Leonardo's special personal relation to the problem of flight indicates the one childhood problem which escaped repression and later estranged him altogether from sexuality. "It is quite possible that he was as little successful in his cherished art in the primary sexual sense as in his desires for mechanical matters; that both wishes were denied him."

It would be unfortunate to consider this conjecture of Freud's an "explanation" of flight. Equally suggestive, no doubt, would be interpretations from the biological, social, economic, or religious points of view. Its importance and interest attaches to showing, as one instance, how deeply rooted in man is the idea of flight. So let us check this theory against the evidence of the poets and airmen,—being careful not to make the mistake of generalizing that all pilots fly because they are "repressed" or that every story of the air must have a double meaning! Lawrence of Arabia, who spent the last years of his life in what he called the "monastery" of the Royal Flying Corps, and whose life seems to have been uniformly misogynous, is the closest modern analogue of Leonardo. Both men were possessed of enormous physical and intellectual vitality. Both bitterly spurned the compromises of the world of men, and, unable to accept either the formulas or the mystical experiences of religion, sought salvation in the remoteness or untarnished comradeship of the air. "In speed," wrote Lawrence in his curious "Confession of Faith," "we hurl ourselves beyond the body. Our bodies cannot scale the heavens except in a fume of petrol. We enter it. We come."

"The airman's profession," writes Antoine de St. Exupéry, "is one of renunciation . . . he renounces the love of women. And by renunciation he dis-

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covers his hidden god." "It was beautiful to see him," wrote Hawthorne of Pegasus, "this solitary creature whose mate had never been created." Langewiesche bears witness time and again to those experiences which every sensitive person who has flown a plane has felt: the disembodied but strong attraction between pilot and instructor, the fraternity of airmen, mechanics, and fans at an airport, the affection of a man for his ship. "Every time an airplane landed or took off you watched it the way sailors watch a woman walking by the pier." "Crack-up stories are to these men what sex jokes are to ordinary men: a way to handle stuff that is too strong to be taken straight." But Langewiesche ascribes another reason, which may or may not be analogous, to the fascination which danger has for airmen: "A man likes to test his nerve and get closer and closer and still a little closer to the edge of life."

Sensitive women who have flown describe other but related experiences. Is Anne Lindbergh, for example, groping for a pre-natal peace and security when she relates her sensations in the radio-operator's cockpit during a trans-Atlantic flight? "There were, in the first place, the oval walls of the fuselage, curving up around me in a way that was curiously comforting and secure. They seemed to surround me in a friendlier, warmer fashion than the straight inanimate walls of a room." More consciously, Muriel Rukeyser in "Theory of Flight" looks for a symbol of love that will contain the fulfillments of both personal physical union and collective revolutionary revolt:

Now we can look at our subtle jointures, study our hands, the tools are assembled, the maps unrolled, propellers spun, do we say *all is in readiness:?* *the times approach, here is the signal shock:?*

Master in the plane shouts "Contact!":  
master on the ground: "Contact!"  
he looks up: "Now?" whispering: "Now."  
"Yes," she says "Do."  
Say yes, people.  
Say yes.  
YES

The invention of the airplane by men with no interest in organized brutality or profits was completed just in time to assist at the explosion of these forces in the first World War. Technically, the art of flight advanced enormously as a result of the bloody competition. And from 1914 until today aviation has been intimately associated with war. Modern wars are not designed to kindle the inspiration of poets; the wonder is that they have produced any poetry at all. But they have, and perhaps they will continue

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# In the Froude Tradition

CATHERINE OF ARAGON. By Garrett Mattingly. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1941. 477 pp., with index. \$3.50.

Reviewed by CRANE BRINTON

MR. GARRETT MATTINGLY has written an admirable book in an admirable tradition. This life of the first wife of Henry VIII of England stems from a body of writings on Tudor history which goes back, in spite of his glaring religious and national prejudices, to Froude, and comes down through Pollard and Fisher to such American representatives of the tradition as Mr. R. B. Merriman and Mr. Conyers Read. It is regrettably true that in some circles, even among historians, the word "tradition" has overtones of dispraise. Such overtones are not here indicated. Though in the natural sciences the reality of cumulative knowledge of fact and interpretation is such that usually only the newest approach is the sound one, in the writing of history there is no such cumulation. Perhaps the incredible advances of engineering and technology have led us into false analogies. An airplane is faster than an automobile, and an automobile faster than a horse: therefore the horse is obsolete, and the automobile soon will be. Such reasoning is not altogether valid even in the field to which it is originally applied. Carried over as an analogy, it is quite false. You cannot fairly say that Marx, Freud, Pareto, and the "new" historians have made Froude, Macaulay, Fisher, and Merriman "obsolete."

This life of Catherine is written without benefit—and without harm—of Freud and Marx. It tells the story of a determined, sensible, and courageous lady cast by fate for a tragic part in one of the great dramas of high politics. It tells her story skillfully and simply, with the aid of rhetoric in the good, subdued sense. Mr. Mattingly has passed up possible aid from Lytton Strachey as well as from Freud. He shows no malice even toward characters he does not at all like, such as Anne Boleyn. If he makes Catherine a heroine, he does not make Wolsey a villain, certainly not a cheap or melodramatic villain. Henry himself, always a trial to biographer or historian, comes out in the round, a believable and, in some ways, especially in his youth, likable human being. But Mr. Mattingly is almost invariably successful with his characters, accessory as well as principal. In particular, the varied succession of Spanish ambassadors—Dr. De Puebla,

Fuensalida, Caroz, Mendoza—is properly shaded and described, and escapes the usual deadening abstractions of diplomatic history.

The story and the setting are as well done as the characters, and the whole book moves. It moves because, for one thing, Mr. Mattingly has the talent to make it move, and because the school of historians to which he belongs has never forgotten that by no mere etymological accident "history" and "story" are related. But it does not move with glib overconfidence. Mr. Mattingly has lived for years in the sixteenth century, and though the *apparatus criticus* of his book is never obtruded, and need never disturb that mythical creature, the general reader, he makes no statements not based on thorough, painstaking research.

In the sense of a grand philosophical or sociological generalization, this book is not primarily a work of interpretation. But one could hardly, in these days, write about Catherine without considering why she was worth writing about, what "difference" her life made. Mr. Mattingly wisely does not come to grips with the old metaphysical teaser: do great individuals—kings, queens, prelates, statesmen—alter the course of history? The best historians have always left such insoluble problems to the philoso-



Adapted from the portrait by Michiel Sittow  
Catherine of Aragon

phers. As a good historian, Mr. Mattingly sees that the divorce of Henry VIII played an important part in the establishment of the Church of England. Had Catherine acted differently—notably, had she put herself at the head of an English Catholic rebellion against her husband—he thinks that the history of that Church and of the whole English state, might have been very different. Catherine's quiet decency may well have spared England a St. Bartholomew's massacre. Surely only a very determined historical determinist would quarrel with Mr. Mattingly's temperate conclusion.

## A Heroine of Banditry

BELLE STARR, THE BANDIT QUEEN. By Burton Rascoe. New York: Random House. 1941. 340 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT WHITEHAND

THE legends of Belle Starr are some of the most famous in southwestern bandit lore. Once, disguised as a man, she spent the night with a judge, revealed herself the next morning, then dashed out of town on her horse. Another time, to prevent her husband's killer from getting a reward, she looked up from the corpse and faced expectant officers with: "If you want a reward for Jim Reed's body, you will have to kill Jim Reed." At night her favorite mare can be heard pawing the ground near her grave. So the legends say.

But Burton Rascoe has examined myth, fact, folklore, and he reports in this volume that many brave tales of outlawry were born in the fertile imagination of *Police Gazette* writers who had never been west of Hoboken. The Jameses, Youngers, Daltons,

Starrs, even Belle herself (née Myra Shirley), were not so daring or desperate as old-timers with a vague memory would have one believe. Nor were they outcasts, wronged by a malignant society, Robin Hoods who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. They were thieves, murderers, often cowards.

Belle met her first bandits in Texas through a love affair with Cole Younger. Later lovers and husbands included many notorious robbers and killers, yet throughout a lurid career she served only nine months in prison. For many years her cabin at "Younger's Bend" on the Canadian River was a refuge for outlaws on the scout. She was the intelligence behind them, and could "fix" pardons or paroles. Her son shot her in the back on February 3, 1889.

As historian Mr. Rascoe has rendered genuine service in exploding the crackpot mythology perpetuated by oldsters; but, as Rascoe well knows, Belle Starr without the legends is as drab as a Paul Bunyan without the tall stories.