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## The Mystery of Aviation<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly the Mazowian landscape reared, it swerved askew from its logical angle and absolutely refused to straighten out no matter how much mental effort was put into it doing so. The gray curtain of clouds was perforated. Blue sky, always present here at these altitudes, brushed against the pupils of my eyes. By now a cozy, calm smoothness reigned beneath the wing. Cotton candy spread out over the spacious sky. I am free from rain, torrential storms, inundation and all sorts of excesses of nature, I am getting a rest from myself. In a state of suspension I belong nowhere. At the controls is an important surrogate for God.

For the last seven years I obstinately stuck to the earth. This dearth of take-offs would have lasted longer were it not for Józef Wittlin.

I did not imagine that this artist would join, as a clamp could, my two American experiences: the one from the mid-eighties with the present one. It is due to Wittlin that I am making my way to a conference organized to celebrate the centennial of the poets birth, that I am being displaced a great distance. Down below the enormous ocean is splashing.

There isn't anyone among us who has never flown: in reality, at an inconceivable altitude of 39,000 feet, or in dreams; no one who has never risen above a generally flat life, or levitated during a moment of rapture. This roughly sketched-out experience does not stand out as anything out of the ordinary. Extraordinary flying became ordinary. This is supported by the fact that it does not provoke any tremors in our hard-shelled psyche. It only appears that figures of stone are occupying seats in planes. We would do better to remain silent when dealing with the metaphysical strangeness of flight; otherwise, we could be judged for lacking in simple good manners... If I make a permanent record of the vestiges of a voyage, if I document fragments of emotion, I do so with clear premeditation. I would,

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however, like to recall the most interesting essay on this subject in Polish literature: *First Flight* by Józef Wittlin<sup>2</sup>.

The poet went through the “initiation to the mysteries of aviation” when he had already passed his sixtieth year. The flight from New York to Munich took place towards the end of November 1958 on board the “four engine super clipper Georgia.” The heavenly adventure was linked with a congress of PEN clubs in exile. Wittlin undertook the challenge of a confrontation with the remembered image of a pre-war Europe with the “real Europe,” after the cataclysm of war, the hecatomb of blood. The flight across the Atlantic was also a temptation because it promised an artistic voyage. In Florence a “de-Bronxization” of the author of the essay was to take place; that is to say, with the help of Mediterranean beauty, a shedding of the New York mold would occur, the liberation of the sensitivity of the person from the Bronx, as well as bronzing. The authenticity of *First Flight* depends on a conscientious gathering of facts. The story of how the conquest of the space dividing America from Europe was accomplished back then is by now a historical document. We are rather moved by the now somewhat old-fashioned modernism of the technical details, which, if not recorded, would disappear forever. All in all, the essence of creating an aura of safety and quiet has not changed, nor has the staging of a carefree excursion. Flight is a theatrical oeuvre and at the same time a therapeutic session. A passenger, as if he were some luxurious package endowed with a consciousness (being an actor, a visionary and a patient is a requisite), must be delivered to his destination without experiencing the least bit of harm. The subjectivity of the descriptions does not preclude the literary task. Flight is also a happening from a different dimension. Besides, to get to the core of the experience, one must reach for metaphors, archetypes and cultural images. To comprehend also means to give a deeper meaning, to distance as well as to familiarize oneself. For Wittlin biblical as well as classical costuming seems to be the most appropriate. Calling a plane “metal ark,” “winged vessel,” “messenger of heaven,” the stewardesses “nymphs of the air,” and the pilots’ cabin *sanctissimum*, transport the speaker to a scenario where, according to learned thought, the parables of destinies play out. Here the solemnity comes with a grain of salt. Disguise is a joke, a caprice and a trial of the mind, a language joke of a higher caliber which disarms premature apprehensions, even though of course it cannot run away from life’s ephemeral nature.

“Flight” develops as a narrative about heroes. In the rhythm of the engines, the artist hears a poetic metre. Would any of the newest poets write: “The motors breathe like poems of an ancient epic?” It is more than doubtful. On his voyage, Wittlin took with him inestimable riches of the worlds

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<sup>2</sup> See: J. Wittlin, “Pierwszy lot” [in:] idem, *Pisma pośmiertne i inne eseje*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 382–400.

of Homer and Dante. Ancient Greek and the Italian *dolce stil novo* were resurrected from the dead in the study of the star studded sky. Among the stars, over the waters of the earthly flood, the thinking subject becomes touched with *Final Matters*. He experiences ecstasy or “a coming out of himself” as well as *ataraxia*, that is peace of mind. In this position, of being able to dissolve the clarity of the ego into thin air, generally available to all due to the intervention of a machine, perhaps an appearance of an illusory insight of a state, enjoyed only by those “rewarded by heaven,” could take place.

When our inner being is locked inside a flying tin can, immersed in a false non being, we become strangely free and open for many possibilities, as if someone were to erase important fragments of a biography...

For Wittlin, the mysterion of flying takes place amidst the triviality of facts in their poetic pronunciation, between a pleasurable curiosity of the mind and a deep-skinned unrest, a reverie on angels yet with diabolic whisperings flowing from earthly regions. Flying brings a moment of relief, a freedom from the ignoble matters of history. “Elevation over human evil” was achieved here. The winged mortal is tempted, nevertheless, with a mirage of omnipotence. The art of aviation is a notoriously two-faceted discovery, since Satan taught humans to fly and a human being soon adjusted this new knowledge to his own murderous plans. The motif from the essay “First Flight of heaven defiled”, where the impure bodies of killing machines are streaming by, I would categorize, with Wittlin’s poem “Ascent to Heaven 1958” where “the time of the action” is simultaneous, the texts complement each other, the convergence of the reflection is striking:

For ages fallen angels Return to heaven – by the will of man.  
 The tree of knowledge of good  
 and evil  
 they hewed with hatchets  
 And they return – return – whence they  
 came.<sup>3</sup>

*Translated by Elżbieta Wittlin-Lipton*

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<sup>3</sup> The Polish version, see: J. Wittlin, “Wniebowstąpienie roku 1958” [in:] idem, *Poezje*, Warszawa 1981, p. 146.