HOMO AVIATICUS: A BOHEMIAN, A WORKER, AN APOSTLE, A FAILURE[1]

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Abstract: ***The essay analyses Bohemian avant-garde poetry and popular aviation literature of the 1920s and 1930s, trying to reconstruct a typical poetic figure of the period technological imagination, i.e. the figure of "homo aviaticus". To organize the scattered sources, the essay first outlines Jünger's conception of "the worker" and presents him as the model aviatic figure. The key elements of this "Gestalt" – his Ahasuerian nature, his mobile and mobilizing character, and his utilization of death – serve as the key coordinates on which the essay triangulates the Bohemian "homo aviaticus" in question. The essay subsequently interprets the poetry of Vítězslav Nezval, Jaroslav Seifert, and others (the authors published in the almanacs Devětsil, Disk, Život...), and reveals their ambivalent attitude to the aviation which they seemed to praise. The last third of the essay uncovers the intrinsic ambivalence of the figure itself: while the aviatic man used to be defined in terms of his spiritual superiority, the real problems concerned his body, so that in the end, he could only meet the expectations pinned on him at the price of self-destruction.***

Keywords: ***aviation; aviator; pilot; avant-garde; Jünger; Haldane; Bernal; transhumanism; infrastructure; Czech poetry***

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"I repeat that we live in the heroic age. Maybe you will say that this age is less heroic, since an individual dwindles in importance, that this is the age of betrayals. However, is not betrayal a sign of the heroic age?"
J. B. S. Haldane, 1949

"Once we have the mechanical ability to fly as one of our qualities, personalities will evolve by a manifold of bird attributes. New characters will emerge; Shakespeare will have to write addenda, even Dr. Čupr will have to republish his Leitfaden der empirischen Psychologie."
Jan Neruda, 1869

Who is this man?

Homo aviaticus should have been careful what he wished for, as there seems to be a certain conflict in his heart, a discord deeply rooted already in his ancestry. Is it not symptomatic for him that while he identified himself with Icarus – a boy with courage, but also the one who did not make it – his true line of descent derives from Daedalus, the designer who managed not only to fly, but, first and foremost, to survive his own heavier-than-air invention? Yet despite of his actual aerial victory, Daedalus was displaced into the hangars as "the patron of the aircraft designers while Icarus [remained] the patron of the daredevils" (Hartman 1926: 4).

The actual aviation reality even amplifies this peculiar divergence. The thing is, in spite of the official ethos, the real problem of aviation was not so much how to get up, but how to get back down. After all, balloons rise up just as naturally as smoke, and even the pioneering bird men Otto Lilienthal, Octave Chanute, or Wilhelm Kress managed to fly long before they could proclaim themselves pilots. The efficient technological combination of the existing instruments, including propellers and engines, and last, but not least, the mimetic match with open-air phenomena, did not do the trick. It was the ability to turn a fall into a landing that made us aviators.

Now who was he anyway, this *aviatic man*? Or at least his Bohemian offshoot, whom we will try to portray here? He surely did not thrive before the Wright brothers, as even the devoted Zeppelin captains – let alone the resigned balloonists – soon understood that although they sailed the airy seas with an unprecedented grandeur, they rode their Leviathans of the skies towards

Fig. 1. "Leviathans of the skies." Zeppelin over Stará Paka, probably 1916, photograph, Státní okresní archiv Jičín

inevitable extinction.[2] The inflamed dispute over the lighter- or heavier-than-air principles naturally continued to radiate some residual heat, and it is fair to admit that even in the mid-1930s, it rather remained an undecided issue. But no one really opposed the fact that the airshippers sold the gravity down the air streams, while the pilots, cumbersome as they were, managed to outperform its power. Regardless of his strength, however, *homo aviaticus* discreetly retired with the 1940s. Not only because the heroic times were simply over; he matured into a wholly different character. The aviator, for a while a jubilantly greeted hero or even an angelic saviour who was supposed to fly mankind to the promised land, proved to have much greater talents for an unprecedented destruction. The undisciplined boy quickly learned to obey orders, and the former knight of the sky, still more a sportsman than a soldier, turned into an anonymous serviceman.

Yet during the 1920s and 1930s, he still represented a most curious figure, a man born out of the hopes pinned on the new infrastructure that embraced

[2] One of the key figures of the German airship scene, Hugo Eckener, recognized the air ships as "monsters", while another passionate apologist, Ernst Lehmann, called them "the mammoths of the skies" or "the Leviathans of the near future". What is especially telling is that even when they celebrate the spectacular achievements of their protégé, they do it in a distinctly defensive tone. See, for example, Eckener 1910: 9 or Lehmann 1927: 89, and compare Lempertz 1925: 123–128 with Eckener 1925: 130–137 and 1928: 108–114.

both air traffic and elevated ways of thought. The period in question created an extraordinary split personality: a man of steel with his feet on the ground but with his mind in the clouds, a chosen one who was meant to lead mankind while he needed to leave the all-too-human people behind.

So let us run a background check on this man as he has risen from Bohemian popular aviation literature and avant-garde poetry. And let us do it with one specific question in mind: what were the limits of the pioneer that should not have had any?

Ahasuerus at work

It has to be said first that the Bohemian sources are rather scattered, and to make some sense of them, we need to perform a certain methodological trick. We need to see them from a distance, and we need to insert them into a prosthetic framework which would help us reveal their essential coherence – which is undoubtedly there – that may otherwise remain unnoticed. If the choice fell on Ernst Jünger's conception of "the worker" (*der Arbeiter*), then already for the reason that it represents a rare attempt not only to nominate, but also to expose a new social type with all of its uneasy controversies. Obviously, we cannot afford to go into much detail; but it will be more than sufficient to highlight the features that delimit our man's territory.

First, contrary to his alienated Nietzschean father, Jünger's worker was a street urchin, a child of "our daily life, with its inexorability and merciless discipline, its smoking, glowing districts, the physics and metaphysics of its commerce, its motors, airplanes, and burgeoning cities. With a pleasure-tinged horror, we sense that here, not a single atom is not in motion – that we are profoundly inscribed in this raging process" (Jünger 1930/1992: 128).

The worker is the figure of such a world: tireless, he works everything to his own wilful image. He is actually closer to a performance than to a man, representing something as a function of will and energy, corresponding to the wholly new levels of entropy, which had themselves mobilised the world into a flux of disposables. The worker is a wilful work *at* work, we might say, and no wonder that the "total mobilisation" Jünger talks about finds its proper fulfilment in war: a process which turns everything either into a source or into a target. In fact, the division line is blurry, and war no longer represents a trivial conflict; it is a universal transformation. The combat does not divide, but unites the soldiers, as in the case of the "wreath that was placed on Richthofen's grave

by an English pilot" (Jünger 1926: 393). Unfortunately, the same communion applies to the rest of citizens, as well, and "giving out the night-flight bombing order, the squadron leader no longer sees a difference between combatants and civilians". There are no uninterested observers any more; the total mobilisation is "far less consummated than it consummates itself" and "in war and peace, it expresses the secret and inexorable claim to which our life in the age of masses and machines subjects us" (Jünger 1930/1992: 128).

Even death does not exclude itself from this claim. Quite the opposite. If the goal is a permanent transformation of the world, death represents a logical conclusion of the exploitation of life's energy. In Jünger's words, "dying itself has become easier" and "death is taken for granted as something to be anticipated while flying a glider or participating in winter sports".[3] In a like manner, the "victims claimed by technological processes seem unavoidable", as for example "the countless victims of aviation" that "are not in a position to affect the process in the least". Death, which we used to see as a stroke of fate, turned into "a special touch of dry necessity" (Jünger 1932/2017: 152 and 1934/2008: 54).

Again, such a "heroic realism" manifests itself best in war, since a man who is up to the "heroic consciousness" can "handle the body as a pure instrument, and extracts from it, beyond the boundaries of the instinct for self-preservation, a range of complex achievements". Which is exactly what is catalysed "in the whirling flames of shot-down aeroplanes" or "in the airtight compartments of sunken submarines", where "work still occurs that truly lies beyond the realm of life" (Jünger 1932/2017: 116). The only thing missing is will, which can be nevertheless easily implemented, as in the case of the "manned planes [that] can be constructed as airborne missiles, which from great heights can dive down to strike with lethal accuracy the nerve centres of enemy resistance" (Jünger 1934/2008: 42). But if such a useful suicide is only able to produce "a breed of men that can be sent off to war as cannon fodder", then we can safely infer that the real worker, to meet his technological destiny, has to metabolize himself in the act of self-destruction.

The aviatic allusions are by no means coincidental (see also Ingold 1980: 232–238). The worker may indeed be represented by a soldier or a submarine captain, but it seems that he does his best as an aviator. As the early war diaries

[3] To quote one of the Bohemian sources in advance, compare Jünger's notions with the exalted words about acrobatic flight and a pilot whose "spirit burns all the bridges of his previous life and boldly rushes towards death" (Novák 1922: 101).

Fig. 2. "Death is taken for granted as something to be anticipated while flying a glider or participating in winter sports." Unknown artist, Ex libris Aeronautae Francisci Aloisi Willwerth, 1920s–1930s, print, paper, Památník národního písemnictví

already show, Jünger was truly a member of his generation who watched the deeds of the aviators with heightened attention. So it should not surprise us that when he "shared (the) room with a young fighter pilot from Richthofen's squadron", he did not hesitate to call him "one of the tall and fearless types (*verwegenen Gestalten*) our nation still produces" (Jünger 1920/2004: 194). Now it may not sound *that* laudatory, but the term "Gestalt" is far from being innocent. In Jünger's context, it represents a "fundamental ontological status, the very form of being itself" (Novák 2006: 37). And if the "worker-type" already stands above the obsolete bourgeoisie, flying introduces a proper elite of the new offspring, an evolutionary prodigy favoured by the technological force majeure. "Aerial combat" is thus "the activity not of a particular class, but of a race" and "the number of individuals within a nation who even qualify for such elevated elite achievements is so limited that pure aptitude must suffice as legitimation". After all, the ideal is not just to breed, but to fabricate these men in full accordance with the total self-mobilisation of human resources, and so "in the application of psycho-technical methods we witness the quest to get hold of these things by scientific means" (Jünger 1932/2017: 117).

But the true reason why to identify the worker with the aviator is that no other figure is more apt to dominate the space that has itself become totalized – we might even say virtualised – by its mobilisation. "In the total space there is [...] no centre, no central residence. Every point possesses the potential significance of a centre at one and the same time" and "any sector of this space – be it a threatened province, a great trial, a sporting event, a natural catastrophe, or the cabin of a transatlantic aeroplane – becomes the centre of attention and thereby of action" (Jünger 1932/2017: 284). Notice the very strange cascade of the events in question, not to mention the fact that Jünger elegantly substitutes the space coordinates – a point or a sector – for incidents, i.e. time coordinates. If they have anything in common, it is their permeability, so to speak, a potential to be lived, experienced, gone through. And of course a man worthy of his times is obliged to do so, as the "Ahasuerian" type whom we shall not "lead into libraries but into streets and squares, into houses and yards, onto aeroplanes and underground trains", that is, to the places where "man is at work" (Jünger 1932/2017: 141). The modern Ahasuerus, in contrast to the obsolete home-based citizen, does not accumulate the results of his actions to secure his presence in space and time. He proceeds the other way around, which is: if all the events in question are themselves moveable phenomena of the mobilised world, he has to work in the epicentre of every action to be truly present. And if aviation offers

both the most up-to-date infrastructure and the catalyst of the world at work, who else than the aviator, the fastest and the most energetic wanderer, would be the best candidate for the figure of Ahasuerus?[4]

Yet Ahasuerus is also the figure of mobilised thought. The advantage of the "homeless consciousness" lies in the ability to associate an otherwise dissociated world; it can understand the poetic semanticity of the new phenomena long before the domestic artists even notice the change (Jünger 1932/2017: 102). Instead of reflecting the things already done, Ahasuerus is able to recognize and interpret the signals of the reality of which he is an instigator, so that where the bourgeois citizens "carelessly ignore [the signs] as they pass", our wanderer is able to read them off the "broken down fences and crossroad posts". However brief and insufficient such a summary would be, we might say, for example: where the citizen considers an aircraft to be a mere useful object, something that does not have any aesthetic or symbolic value of its own, the Ahasuerus-worker registers these "nameless forms" (*namenlosen Gestalten*) (Jünger 2015: 12), appreciates their character, understands their symbolism, and reads their message. An aeroplane is still a tool, of course, but the Ahasuerian "stereoscopic vision" (Blok 2017: 42–50) is able to decode the technological shapes and figures as the expressions of the world (Novák 2006: 37–56; Novák 2008: 22–50).

The result is that reality reveals itself "as if in a dream" (Jünger 1932/2017: 102), and the civilizational or technological figures that the Ahasuerian aviator discerns from above – characteristically, fortifications or orderly patterns of deployed troops – are even "magical". Yet, however hallucinatory these magical figures may seem, "visions of this kind possess something immediately intelligible"; they unravel the truth of the otherwise unintelligible world (Jünger 1934/2008: 45).[5] It is only significant that these images are themselves Ahasuerian; in the world completely "hammered by roads and rails, by cables and radio channels, by flight paths and shipping lanes, it is becoming ever more difficult to decide in which country, on which continent the images captured by the photographic lens were taken" (Jünger 1932/2017: 227). Let

[4] When Jünger, after the Second World War, complains about the "frontiers, variations in political and economic forms which hinder the exchange of men and goods" in context of the potential of "flight, radio, and the forces streaming out of the atom", it leads us back to the aviator as a delegate of the world that should have, but did not come (Jünger 1948: 45). Luckily.

[5] It is worth mentioning the observation that the aviators, the new types of the warriors, defend themselves against the "unbelievable" shrapnel by photographing it and thus making it real (Dessoir 1916: 16, 25–26).

us remember the fusion of a soldier with a civilian, or of an ally with an enemy; the ambivalent *universal* images of the new world only echo the universality of the wandering worker.

So here we have our aviator: he is at the top of the ontological food chain, he represents the totally mobilised worker, half-way to becoming a sort of machine himself, consciously embracing death, which fulfils his transformation. He speaks the language of the new world: and that speech unfolds in things rather than in words.

Icarus is dead, long live Icarus

The Bohemian *homo aviaticus* developed exactly into these contours: if an aeroplane is "a bird representing the boom of our spiritual strength, constantly singing a work song" (Pánek 1927: 6), then we ourselves are the "people of accurate and responsible work. Free from the past, we work with every movement of our hand to create the world to our own image". Speaking of images, we are "interested in statues, paintings or poems only if they embody the acting human force" and "to ease our existence of a burden, we want to transform time and space. For in order to get by our nature, we have to subdue matter which resists our desire; the substances that need to be transformed are space, time, light, stone, colour, word and everything that sets its own being against us". Which includes "solving the problem of an aircraft heavier than air" (Kassák 1927: 9). In another period manifesto, we read that we "immerse our hearts in today's proletarian life [...] to create [...] archetypes of the new worker-creator, new forms of life, love, marriage, a new world at the heart of which will be a good, pure man" (Berák et al. 1922/1971: 335).[6]

The traditional aviator Icarus, whose flight primarily represented a spiritual ascent, had to adapt, and the boy who used to chase nature's mysteries has become "the first who declared war on mysterious nature", as we read in one of the 1920s commercials of Masaryk's Aviation League, the official aviation association of the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic. Elsewhere, we read that Icarus may have "lost his thing before the gods, but the modern pilot will prevail, he flies in God's face. For him, the heavens are open" (Honzl 1922: 92). The modern Icarus is clearly treated as a figure of victory, yet this triumph no longer accounts for individual salvation. It is a collective achievement, and the

[6] This manifesto was brought to our attention by Miloš Zapletal's study. See Zapletal 2014: 112.

Fig. 3. “Icarus is dead, long live Icarus.” Rudolf Adámek, Icarus, 1912, woodcut, paper, private collection

pilot disappears behind "the mask [that] ironically clings to a human body [...] You know, the pilot's clothes. Their moderate grey effects the modern man with much stronger emotions than the light effect of Icarus. Can you see the mask's rationally shaped boldness in the hard leather helmets of the pilots behind the engine wires? Its horror is calculated and accurate. Its pathos is perfectly serious despite its extravagance. Its typical, comprehensible shape involves hundreds of variations of dramatic situations. It does not promise what it cannot give – it promises a victory" (Honzl 1923: 5). In one word: the modern Icarus matured into a modern *type*, fully compatible with the Jüngerian *Gestalt*.

The flight itself becomes the new poetry, and when Karel Teige dramatically asks: "Shimmy, blues, tango, festive aviatic foxtrots above the city rooftops – is it still a dance and choreography?" (Teige 1924/1971: 549), the answer is definitely *yes*. The modern artist "ignores fatigue, symbolism, sleepwalking or expressionism and owns up to the artistic 'Americanism' in its most revolutionary form", which, among other things, includes "air traffic" (Černík 1923: 14). For Vítězslav Nezval, it is thus necessary to utilize the "superiority born out of the modern urban realities [which] increased the visual powers of the contemporary artist", to look up "at a flying aeroplane and hear the lark's song" (Nezval 1924/1971: 567) and to "ride on the luminous wings of the avions" (Nezval 1928/1966: 118).[7]

There is a flip side of that coin, as well, because the new poetry may very well be the death of the old one. After all, if the real poetry is written in the grammar of technology, should not the poets humbly resign? Let the poets listen to the songs of the aeroplanes as much as they like, but as "a product of mankind's poetic and economic endeavour, filled with gasoline and oil, shiny and fresh", the aircraft "pass into the hands of the airmen". These are "the eternally modern beings in the sense that they are in constant motion. They cannot stop just to admire something, since the loss of speed equals death. [...] There is no sentimentality in the clouds". To be fair, even these men still "smell the stars" and hear the calling of the "faraways and depths", but such affects are just "rapid outbursts" and what counts is the "beautiful roar of the aircraft engine" and the moment when the "live sun of the propeller finally shines at maximum performance" that we know so well from Jünger (Štoll 1927: 7–8).

[7] Let us quote aside one of the later coincidental references: the aviators are "almost poets, perhaps because they rise up, to heaven, closer to the Unknown" and because, "detaching themselves from the earth and its pain, they fly towards the source of life: to the sun" (Charous 1937: 32).

Even optimistic Nezval notices that the new "free man" may well resemble God, but as he "reaches for the new stars" and transforms the "crystals of the old reality into the new forms", he inevitably "*violates*" it. The aviator is a destroyer of a calm night and makes it "burn just like a necklace" and the "mad airmen", who "who woke up tonight from a sleepwalking dream" are responsible for a catastrophic "miracle" (Nezval 1923: 49) when

> the aeroplane suddenly took off into the night
> to raise the flag on the battlements of the [diamond] crown [of night]
> and behind it thousands of aeroplanes flew
> some of them burned like rockets
> raising the number of stars
> some of them returned like the tired builders of Babylon
> and those which raced relentlessly
> made constellations out of letters
> to rule the world
> to rule the world, to the avant–garde!

The aviators themselves

> resemble a sower who piles up the stars into his lap
> and throws them to the ground just like seed
> which would resist the fire in the years to come
> when the whole planet will look like Jean d'Arc at the stake
> who won't recant a single word from what has been said.

Let us not be mistaken, the aviators *do* write poetry. Only that, in wholly Jüngerian fashion, they "inscribe the clouds with the poems more fiery than the Versailles gold" (Nezval 1926/2017: 108–111).

Even more interesting is the case of the Nobel prize winner Jaroslav Seifert, but before we proceed further, let us recall a certain aviatic poem that (especially after its 1919 translation by Karel Čapek) fostered the talents of many of the Bohemian poets, including Nezval or Konstantin Biebl. In his groundbreaking *Zone* (Apollinaire 1913/2011: 5), Guillaume Apollinaire wants us to

> behold the Christ who flies higher than aviators
> he holds the world record for altitude

as

> they say this century mimics Simon Magus in Judea
> it takes a thief to catch a thief they cry
> angels flutter around the pretty trapeze act
> Icarus Enoch Elijah Apollonius of Tyana
> hover as close to the airplane as they can
> sometimes they give way to other men hauling the Eucharist
> priests eternally climbing the elevating Host
> the plane descends at last its wings unfolded
> bursts into a million swallows
> full speed come the crows the owls and falcons.

Seifert himself confessed to the "fanatic fervour for Guillaume Apollinaire" in his collection *On the Waves of TSF* (1925), where he explicitly alludes to the "Shepherdess Eiffel" that is "tired of this elderly world" at the beginning of Apollinaire's poem. It might thus seem that Seifert's own variation on the theme *All the Beauties of the World*, opening the techno-optimistic almanac *Život – La Vie* (1922), falls in line with the never-look-back attitude. Except for where Nezval hears the larks, Seifert listens to the "aeroplanes [that] sing the song of evening like the nightingales" (Seifert 1997: 91–92). Consider for yourself:

> At night, the black skies of streets were ablaze with lights,
> how beautiful were the ballet dancers on bills between black type,
> low, very low grey aeroplanes like doves had swooped down
> and the poet remained alone among flowers, stupefied.
> Poet, perish with the stars, wither with the flower,
> today no one will mourn your loss even for an hour,
> your art, your fame will wane forever and decline,
> because they resemble flowers in the graveyard;
> for aeroplanes, which are fiercely soaring up to the stars,
> in your stead now sing the song of steely sounds
> and beautiful they are, just as lovelier are the jolly electric blossoms
> on the houses in the street than the flower-bed variety.

Where Apollinaire's Icarus and Christ lag behind the aviators, Seifert's melancholy poem stylizes the singing of the planes into the swan song of art. When

he looks down on “all the beauties of the world”, he sees the inevitable demise of the poet, for

> that which was sacred art only yesterday
> suddenly was transformed into things real and plain,
> and the loveliest pictures of today were painted by no one,
> the street is a flute and it plays its song from dawn till night
> and high above the town to the stars aeroplanes glide.

In other words, “art is dead, the world exists without it”. Even the “Shepherdess” is not innocent, considering the fact that the “falling stars [are] trapped in the iron constructions of lookout towers” (Seifert 1997: 91–92). In the end, aviation is nothing but vulgar (Seifert 1997: 144): to prove the point, it suffices to enter

> the radio bar [where] a drunken pilot wagers
> that he will reach the stars before you finish your cigarette
> what countless pleasures life could allot
> but poets do not have wings.

These doubts are far from being an isolated occurrence within Seifert’s oeuvre (Seifert 1921, 1923/1997: 49, 89). First, there are the early and wholly negative social connotations, as only the “masters” dominate the skies, while the poor boy hopes that one day

> high, high, high above Prague
> [he too] will fly in an aeroplane.

The poet himself

> sits in the train station’s restaurant,
> over civilization’s beauty he silently cries,
> what use are aeroplanes, those metal birds, to him
> when in them he cannot fly
> and in clouds above him into the distance they fade.

But even on the level of poetry, Seifert addresses the phenomena with a distinct distrust, as in the poem *Electric Lyre* (Seifert 1923/1997: 53) where he

begins to sing of the beauty of propellers,
advancing in the supple caress of clouds with force,
and thrusting the eagle, about to fly higher, back below,
about the machine's iron that burns with a luminous glow,
about the power of the crowd, which marches and annihilates.

The aeroplanes are at one with the devastating forces, and so, in the *City in Tears* (1921), Seifert refuses their reality altogether (Seifert 1997: 40):

To the wisdom of [his] heart more eloquently the bird speaks
in the dust of streets
and the aeroplane into the sky may it fly,
be it to Mount Blanc or Mount Everest!"

Later on, he only confirms these positions. The memories of how he

used to dream as a kid
back then, the road of aviation wanted I to hit

and how

helpless in an unrest that was [his] lot
the white machines [he] used to spot

are openly self-depreciating, especially in context of the introductory exclamation:

Jarmila, where's Hynek, oh my fears
he fell asleep over Mary's tears

paraphrasing Karel Hynek Mácha's *May* (Seifert 1933/1954: 65). The poem characteristically called *The Petřín Lookout Tower* (where is the Shepherdess now?) first and foremost expresses sorrow, and everything suggests that there is more to this sadness than just a blurred memory of being young. When, a few years later, Seifert alludes to Mácha and his poem *The Night*, he mourns for him in a somewhat Phaetonian fashion (Seifert 1936/1957: 15–16):

With you I walked, whispered your verse
While you dashed above the shores
Just like a torch whose fiery hair
Wrenched it from its mundane forms.

Not the aviator, but the poet is the real airman; the aviator only violently took over his traditional dominion. Even when Seifert celebrates *Army Day*, he cannot resist the notion that the airplanes "shatter the clouds" and "disturb" the lion on the cathedral (Seifert 1957: 114).

And, of course, there is war, whose atrocities degraded the old mythopoetic imagination as when "the thunderous battles followed one after another on the far horizons. It was just too boring to devote the healthy youth's precious seconds to the Trojan War, suddenly so small and so ridiculous. [...] What was the famous wooden horse in front of the walls of Troy against the bombers and heavy artillery?" (Seifert 1929/1957: 303). These bombers are giving "lessons from above" to the "cultureless barbarians" (*Abyssinian Lullaby*, 1935), they should "burn the whole nest down" with the incendiary bombs (*Prague During the War*, 1956), and the promise that "the aeroplanes will be here in a moment" (*Children Play*, 1938) is no longer an expression of curious hopes but a sinister warning, horribly echoing Jünger's vision of "a child in the cradle who is threatened like everyone else – even more so" (Seifert 1957: 101–102, 154 and 1957a: 74; Jünger 1930/1992: 128). When Seifert's friend, František Hrubín, keeps on repeating his Icarian mourning "and that's how the world looks to me now, seven years after Hiroshima" (*A Metamorphosis*, 1957), we may add that the world of aviation looked to Seifert the very same way, only seven years earlier.

Should we return back to the period between the wars, the question remains whether the poets did not announce their departure without leaving the room. And if we stretch yet another axis through the Bohemian references, it is hard to resist the temptation to see it that way.

Consider the paragraph from Svatopluk Čech's novel *Icarus* (1885/1908), where the young daredevil Vysocký is about to jump and fly: "'What a bright, dazzling night today!' said Vysocký in a lowered voice, agitated by a powerful excitement. 'Memorable night! The night man will make a new great step again on the path towards the noble end that is set for his earthy existence, the night he ascends one brilliant step closer to perfection, closer to the superior beings, to the angels, to the mysterious ancient soul of the universe. The night he throws away the shackles that bind him to the earthy dust!" (Čech 1921: 234).

Fig. 4. "Military airplanes shatter the clouds." Anonymous, poster for Czechoslovak Air Force Day, 1953, published by MNO, lithography, paper, private collection

Now compare the excerpt with Konstantin Biebl's tribute to Apollinaire's *Zone*, the poem *New Icarus* (Biebl 1929/1978: 23, 37): "The poet New Icarus" first

> floats lightly in space and time
> from the plaster statue up to the foundation of Rome, from the foundation of Rome
> to the history of the first rose
> from the first rose to all the women in the world
> from China India to Java
> and then back through Egypt and through the blue Italian sky
> directly to your straight nose
> its beauty my love
> my love only the air and the sea.

Then, at the end of the poem, he unburdens his memory-loaded conscience:

> How many times in all
> oh you sweet vanity
> will I feel the dreadful fall
> straight into infinity

and confesses:

> I love the change
> I sail all the seas.

Notice that despite Vysocký promises to "bring the revival and renewal to the whole human society [...] on his wings", he speaks fully in terms of a spiritual ascent, long before and – judging from the later re-editions – long after the first manned flight. It is true that the exalted boy dies trying, which only emphasizes his somewhat ridiculous character, but unlike Čech's character "Mr. Littlebug", a sort of Švejk of Bohemian aviation, he is rendered with all gravity. The aviator is primarily a poet, somebody to be treated with dignity. And so is Biebl's Icarus, whose novelty is not exactly new. As much as both writers draw on the aviatic metaphors and realities, their heroes remain men of letters instead of men of air; the only difference is that Vysocký wants to ascend through the spheres to reveal the mysteries, while Biebl's Icarus descends through time and enjoys the zone experience.

By the way, the tradition of such Icarus-poet treatment proved its power since it tended to rewrite even an actual pilot's life narrative, as it happened ten years after Milan Rastislav Štefánik's death in 1919. The writer and the soldier Rudolf Medek (Medek 1929: 183) thus saw him

> closer to the stars which he knew and trusted
> more than the evil chatter of men
> he'd like to embrace our land in his ken
> she gave him life and her he fostered.

His fall was not one of those accidents Jünger happily embraced. It was as fatal as *fated* (Medek, 1929: 182; Hartman: 192–193). No wonder he is mourned much more as a fallen Phaetonic visionary than as a general: "Just like a genius struck by lightning or a burning and glaring meteor, he fell from the heights onto the native soil, where he was awaited by the crowds and his own mother who was trembling with joy and love among them. They all awaited him just to stare dumbfounded at the death of their national hero" (Tavík 1929: 217). Not wholly undeservedly; Štefánik's diaries are not short of the romantic musings on the soul entering the cosmic "palace of beauty and goodness" and "the kingdom of harmony" (Štefánik 1906/1935: 69).

But there is another paradox: if we accept that the new Icarus was an escapist (whether through the cosmos or the film strip of his memories), he would be much closer to a balloonist than to a pilot.[8] A typical balloonist wants to "break away from this vale of tears" and to be "alone in the universe, few thousand meters high, surrounded by a magnificent silence, far away from everything earthly" (Churý 1927: 2). He does not really care where he goes; he just wishes that his "voyage will continue for ages" (Rumples 1928: 150) in order to "wander these endless plains ceaselessly" (Mládek 1909: 88). That is also why the "romantic voyages through the air will not perish" despite that the aeroplanes "seized the air", for "wandering through the air without a destination has its charm even in our deeply practical age", as one of the enthusiastic late balloonists, Rudolf Rumples, said in 1909 (Ditrych 2005: 41).

The balloonist is not a subject of work, we might add with Jünger, and here we touch on the much important, if not key, attribute of our hero: the balloonist

[8] For the connection of a balloon flight to 19th and 20th century art, including dance (and opium), see Lahoda 1988: 205–213.

may climb higher than any existing aircraft, he may almost live in the air, but only for the price of giving up his volition and letting it go with the wind. But the real *homo aviaticus* is a man of *will*.[9]

May his will be done

Not that the aviators were born like that. Even in the mid-1920s, "many consider them [to be] the careless elements who pointlessly and 'sinfully' gamble with their lives" (Dvořák 1925: 8). Some of the pilots even seemed to doubt their will, as they succumbed to outdated superstitions, relied on talismans, refused to light their cigarettes before take-off, and so on (e.g. Corso 1920: 14, 17; Hamšík 1925a: 27; Štoll 1927: 20). Yet the vice that Thomas Mann so aptly mocked was only an insignificant detail in the general image of a knight in shining armour.[10]

So there he was, a flier strengthened and toughened by combat, yet "changing the workplace of Mars for the one of Mercury" (Lynx 1932: 5). Unlike the poets, the propagators of aviation were quite sure that the aviators "are not murderers" and that "only the aviators' high culture of spirit and heart can provide an eternal lasting peace between the people of different nationalities" (Rypl – Pánek 1918: 141). Their solidarity and the readiness to help each other "no matter the affiliation" was legendary (Stanovský 1927: 54, 66; Baťa 1937: 68; Forejtník 1936: 31), and their sensitivity alone did not tolerate any petty quarrels since "for the pilot, the world is so small and the individual countries so close to each other that he feels more vividly the panhuman unity and the

[9] That is – with the exception of women. One of the period articles mentions that "women are so fearless because they lack fantasy. They ride in the air as blithely as in the car on the ground" (unmarked newspaper clipping probably from 1928, archived in the collections of the State District Archives in Kutná Hora). However ridiculous as this opinion is, it is an irony that one of the Czech female pilots, Ely Hamšíková, speaks in the same way: "All your senses are free during the flight. They can wander through the cosmos, and that is probably the most beautiful thing about piloting. [...] I have to confess that [...] I liked the magical dreaming much better than the precaution and thoughts about a forced landing" (Hamšíková 1930: 420).

[10] We should add that despite the general ardour and despite the apparent omnipresence of aviation in the public space, the actual experience of flight was still rather scarce, and there were not many pilots around. For example, in 1935, Masaryk's Aviation League started the "One thousand new pilots for the republic" campaign, the fact of which reveals a simple truth: the republic desperately lacked professional aviators. To sketch in the situation, in the same year, the private Czechoslovakian Airlines had only 10+ planes at its disposal (if we deduct those that were grounded), no Bohemian transport plane could carry more than 10 passengers, and the best Bohemian fighter biplane, Avia B-634, could fly only 415 km/h, falling way behind the rivals Messerschmitdt Bf 109 or Hawker Hurricane. Just to compare, on 13 September 1935, Howard Hughes flew his H-1 to a new world speed record of 567 km/h.

necessity of fraternal conditions" ("Letectví..." 1926: 5). They are the ones who will bring up the whole society: "Nothing in the world is as qualified to teach us to love one's neighbour as the flight sport. The aeroplane can take us to distant lands with its extraordinary speed and without losing much time. There, we learn the customs and characters of different nations, which will change our understanding of their demands. Meeting other people can get us over the various prejudices, which the personal acquaintance tends to correct [...] We will make friends and the friendships will pass from the individuals to the whole families or even to the whole nation". To sum it up, "aviation, by its very speed, is destined to propagate peace" (R. Š. 1925: 5).

Paradoxically – yet not unlike the German or Italian scene – as much as aviation carries general ideals on its wings, it is also a "Czechoslovakian national profession just like seafaring is a traditional occupation of coastal nations" (Žežula-Marcelli 1922: 100). That "our sea is in the air" has actually become the official motto of the Czechoslovak Air Force. Yet the metaphor goes way beyond the geographical deficits and their substitution. "A spirit needs the sea", says the premise, and since "our sea is in the air", aviation will help us to grow, prosper, and flourish, just as the sea helped the ancient Greeks. Aviation will become an "instrument of the Slavonic mutuality", and the aviator thus represents much more than an exceptional individual: he is our "specific cultural type" (Pánek 1933: 7).

Or a saviour. Apollinaire's reference to Christ may have been (more or less) ironic, but the popular aviation imagination proved to be an ideal breeding ground for the martyrs "with the halo of the saints [who] accept [the challenge of the old gods] and die smiling as they are overcome by the servants of hell" (Vaňhara 1928: 37).

Of course, the very process of taking off evokes religious images almost spontaneously, as "when a plane starts rolling, when it lifts off lightly and turns into a glaring point, fading into an endless blue of a summer sky, you feel as if the heavy matter dispersed in the radiant ether right before your eyes, and you want to sing the praises and bow to this miracle of ascension of a son of man!" (Plass 1927: 8–9). There is something in flying itself that makes it similar to faith, since "what is the difference between a dead man who fell from the sky and a man who fell from a scaffold? The death of the first appears to us as the death of a believer, for a mental state responsible for our determination to enter a plane is closer to faith rather than courage". And however this "unconditional, fanatic, the body and soul pervading faith" (Štoll 1927: 11–12) is a matter of

youth and should be better called a lack of imagination, the distinct religious overtones are clearly present, at least latently.

And being such a latent believer, the pilot is the ideal evangelist of the new church. If an aircraft workshop is a "workshop of humanity [that] sends out messengers in the form of machines and technical achievements to save humanity", then the pilots represent "an avant-garde of progress. On the wings of their airplanes they carry the desire for something better, for the world of brotherhood", seeing that "all is so petty down below. Up there, every endeavour acquires its real and true form" (Pánek 1927: 9, 37, 51). This we already know, certainly, but there is one important word missing that we have not heard yet: as the minister of defence František Udržal put it, if "a plane becomes the most pervasive propagator of culture and the most prominent pioneer of mutual recognition", then it becomes an "*apostle* of peace and quiet" (Udržal 1927: 7).

There is, of course, the traditional Bohemian heresy, by which these apostles must defend the country "by the spirit of Hussites" ("Československý..." 1925: 2) or spread the word in the sequence "first a plough, then a chalice, then the wings" (Pánek 1930: 9). But if we overlook the local oddities including the bizarre fantasy that pilots will sprinkle an anti-alcohol agent so that the people will stop drinking, flying is generally in harmony with God's will. In fact, the first flight opens up the heavens for man: it is a *baptism*: "The creator himself has inspired man with the idea of an aircraft to raise the human kind from the dust up to his heights" and with the first flight we "have received the baptism of the high human culture" (Pánek 1929: 31, 304–305). Similarly, a boy who is well aware that "he is part of something big, something that the human spirit won over matter", feels, when he is about to fly for the first time, "just like at the first communion" (Felix 1936: 57).

Even one of the key players of the period aviation scene, Tomáš Baťa, approached aviation as a chapter in the story of salvation. Man "underwent a change as great as when he [...] pulled his head out of the dust and raised his mind to God". Aviation, then, among the other things mentioned above, "brings up in man the need to serve and to forgive" and the reason why Italian aviation stands out is the fact that its minister "was raised by the real aviation, the celestial one that brings man closer to God and teaches him to serve the people" (Baťa 1932: 12–13).

Last, but not least, the religious imagination has naturally found its way into the period anxieties and dreams, as when the general Jaroslav Plass tried to interpret the apocalypse in terms of an aviatic event (not unlike Thomas Burnet

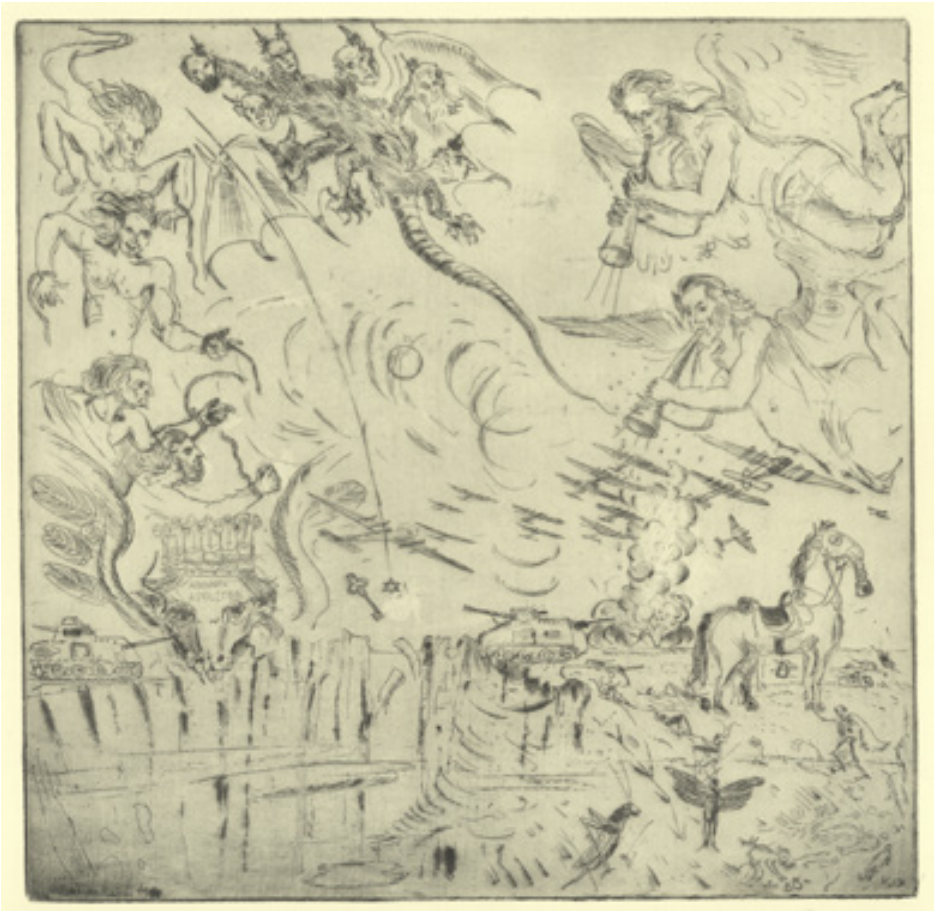

Fig. 5. "Apocalypse in terms of an aviatic event." Vladimíř Pecháček, Apocalypse, Chapter IX, 1947, etching, paper, private collection

in his *Telluris Theoria Sacra* in 1681), and warned of the devastating effects of the aero-chemical war (Plass 1929: 153–158, 277–279, 340–341). Or when one of the novelists shared this most uncanny dream: "Franta really flew [...] until his monoplane landed [...] in the tall grass in a spacious, wide landscape. Soon his smile disappeared from his face. He started to be scared and he began to sweat. The black figures were creeping out of the darkness and the crosses were outlined [against the sky]. At first Franta thought that they whisper: crucify, crucify him! But then he realized that he had landed in Australia and that the black natives were sneaking towards him with their boomerangs" (Přikryl 1932: 9).

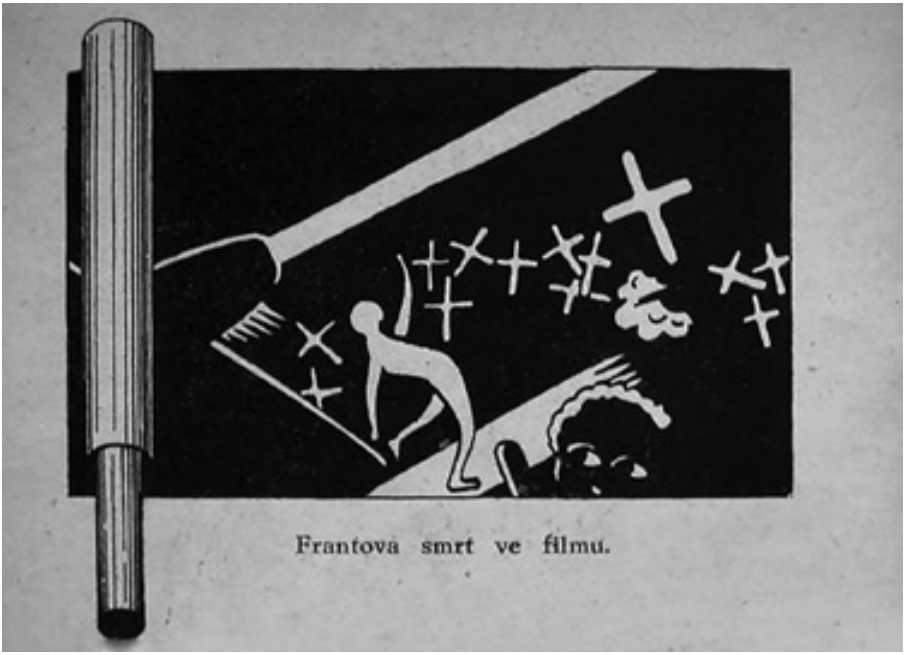

Fig. 6. "Crucify, crucify him!" Illustration from Josef Přikryl's book, Ikaros (1932)

This is his body which will be given up...

But what is truly characteristic of *homo aviaticus* is that he does not remain untouched by the "Gospel of his wings" (Pánek 1931: 65). He is a man of *transformation*.

In some ways, his experience may resemble the original impressions of the balloonists. He does "bathe in the absolute, he is getting closer to the canopy of the heavens, passionately and fiercely. The wind [...] connects him with the universe". But contrary to a balloonist, who always sobers up from his trip, the aviator "*drinks* the absolute" and his "soul that triumphed over the matter" is forever altered by this victory (Pánek 1930: 22–23, 47; Pánek 1930a: 6, 8).[11]

[11] If we frequently refer to Pánek, it is because he was one of the leading and most exalted popular propagators of aviation; nearly all of the aviation magazines regularly published poetry and prose that drew on the same metaphors, only in poorer quality.

Together with this experience, he "breaks free from the mean thoughts that used to keep old man to the ground, he rises into the breadth of the brighter knowledge. [...] He will do what the wiser tiny voice of his heart tells him" (Hartman 1926a: 30). The flight is a rite of transition; where old man "killed a bear with an axe", new man "becomes a pilot by the age of eighteen" (Pánek 1948: 14–15).

Needless to say, man should not have to fly just to be able to do what is right, but the transformative demands of aviation entail much more than that. Because once we accept aviatic man to be the man of will and transformation – can there be one without the other? – a certain repressed element starts to resurface.

Let us return back to our initial avant-garde crossroad, this time going the route of the 1922 poem *Aeroplan*. Miloš Jirko first prods his "victorious Icarus" into rising "higher and higher, farther and farther from the Earth's gravity". Which he does, but judging from his final cry "Gods! Where are you?", he is not too happy with the loneliness of his triumph (Zapletal 2014: 108–109). Up to this point, the poem falls under the traditional category of the falling (and failing) Icarus-poet, be it face down or head up. But in the middle of the poem, Jirko comes to the exalted futurist paraphrase of Luke 22:1–2:

> This is my body
> this is my blood
> gas, metal and metal
> young aviator sits in my airy head
> my brain
> engine thrust
> the heartbeat, counting

We have to add that besides some sporadic offshoots and vague or coincidental analogies, futurism had only a limited impact on Bohemian imagination. Yet the motif of an engine-heart was, of course, quite widespread. Baťa's often quoted memory of his flight to India reflects the "left engine. Its regular clatter is as important to us as our heartbeat. I can feel the friendship growing between us. It is the same friendship that exists between a man and a horse" (Baťa 1932: 17–18). Which is not far from the image of a perfect machine whose "harmony of purpose and external form [...] impresses us the same way as the look on the beautiful, perfectly cultivated body of an athlete" (Krejcar, 1922: 189). No

wonder that there is only a little step from this admiration to an actual sexual fantasy. "Whenever [the pilot] approached the plane, he always thought of the delicate shape of the wooden struts connecting the wings – a shape formed by the aerodynamic laws – and how they had something in common with the fresh firmness of Héla's calves! [...] And the other way around, both awesome columns of Héla's delicate body, the shapes purer and rarer than any Greek could carve, always reminded him of the airplane's struts. After all, besides the beauty, the correspondence went much further: both represent columns standing at the gates of life and death" (Hartman 1926a: 17).

How does this affect the aviatic man? However improbably, one of the threads leads us onto the pages of the official military newspaper, *Officers Papers*. The essay on the air force officers begins in the usual spiritual fashion: the pilots are the "guests of the future – the representatives of today before the future", and aviation is the expression of all those who "long for a higher life; indeed, aviation symbolizes the desire of the modern soul to rise above matter and merge with the universe again!" What is worthy of our attention is how smoothly the author moves on to the qualities of the body: "Nerves, hearts, lungs must be unharmed, since the flights in higher altitudes place great demands on a body structure. Already getting in the plane is not easy; it requires great physical dexterity, which is all the more needed for all the work that an aircraft officer does on an aircraft" (Hartman 1923: 2).

The ease of the transition and a perceptible imbalance between the two arguments – the more poetic is the former, the more compelling is the latter – betrays that something important is going on under the surface of the prevalent spiritual definition of the airman. Is the elevated spirit really that what makes him special?

Something suggests already the relationship of the aviator to the element of air: the pilot must be somewhat "up" to the air, as an animal living in the air which is "the most sensitive environment. The true feeling of air must be innate – it is impossible to learn" (Kalva 1919: 25). Needless to add, in the air, "you are something more than man", but what should catch our attention is the emphasized predisposition. The requirements on the pilots often seem to look for somebody chosen rather than just apt to be trained: the pilot has to be mature, self-possessed, have an increased sense of stability, perfect hearing, nerves, courage, willpower, lungs, heart, he must be able to act with sangfroid, yet to be decisive at the same time, he must be determined, disciplined and, of course, he must be free of any physical defects and he must not know fear (Hamšík 1924: 12 –28; Leonhardy 1928: 141).

The overshadowed body-problem comes into sight especially once the pilot is presented as someone to be followed. The youth is instructed to accomplish a "beautiful harmony of perfect body and noble soul" (Čihula 1926: 390), and flying offers a wide range of spiritual pleasures, indeed, but it stands out only because it accompanies them with the benefits to both the mental (nerves) and the physical (lungs, stomach) (Zdeněk 1923: 154–155). As another author resolutely says: "No other sport is as demanding as the flying sport. And no other sport, I say no other sport, can bring up people so calm, prudent, and clever as the flying sport. If any sport is destined to change the character of man, i.e. to bring the human soul and the heart to goodness and to teach him a quick and correct assessment of circumstances and situations in his life, then it is above all the flying sport". Which nevertheless leads to a term that explicitly brings in the body as the indispensable part of the aviatic education: "The flying sport can bring us what the Greeks called *kalokagathia*" (R. Š. 1925: 5). One of the most important Czech aircraft designers of the interwar period, Pavel Beneš, goes even further and does not doubt that "the ancient Greeks would surely love this sport, if it were to arise at that time" (Beneš 1919: 5).[12]

But it did not and the question is if it even could. Should not the aviator be a man of the future, after all, a future that is near, but has not happened yet? If "an individual who wants to become a good aviator must be physically and mentally ahead of time" (Malkovský 1930: 503), another and not wholly rhetorical question is what time and what specific condition we are talking about. To use yet another fragment of the period imagination, if the pilots develop "their own

12 The subsequent innocent remark on the "Icarian devices" and Gabriele D'Annunzio's "incomparable novel" *Forse che sì, forse che no* (1910) should not be overestimated, despite of the fact that the novel was translated into the Czech language immediately after it was published and contains many motifs we have come across. For example, D'Annunzio synthesizes Dante Alighieri, Leonardo da Vinci, Friedrich Nietzsche, and himself (Demetz 2002: 30–38) into a figure of the victorious Icarian Übermensch who makes the nature to "lift its bans one by one" and steals the heavens for the "ascension of his kind" (D'Annunzio 1910: 68). Then he draws an image of how "each machine had inside its craftsman just as a cobweb has its spider, inseparable. [...] Man was a prisoner of the monster he gave birth to" (D'Annunzio 1910: 80), and continues with the various instances of the to-be-one-with-the-machine fantasies, including a very unusual encounter. The pilot first admires a puzzling sculpture: "Was it Daedalus? Was it Icarus? Was it the Demon of the mad human flight? [il folle volo, another reference to Dante] That wasn't the Athenian craftsman [...] nor his careless son, for the well-built middle-aged body revealed adult vigour, grew into perfection, completed." (D'Annunzio 1910: 462). Then, immediately after the sculpture evokes Michelangelo's slave that takes on the wings and breaks free of his chains, the pilot spontaneously recalls his aeroplane and cries its name: "Heron!" (for the complex analysis see esp. Esposito 2015: 132–139). But again, Bohemian aviation only echoed rather than adopted the futurist poetics.

peculiar physiognomy" (Hamšík 1924: 26), does it regard only their ontogeny, or do we talk about a phylogenetic transformation as well?

From a certain point of view, it would seem so. Aviation represents "an old idea", a "simple principle" that is "woven into the fabric of the universe" and is "similar to an etheric wave. [...] Our brains are the devices that detect it" (Hartman 1925: 6). Aviation is subjected to "the law which governs everything in the universe", and that teleological law is responsible for "the conquest of the air [...] as a necessary, practical ability of the new humanity to be enjoyed in the happy future" (Žežula-Marcelli 1922: 100). In other words, aviation is *providential*. Is it not telling how easily these excerpts echo a note from one of the first serious analyses of a heavier-than-air flight? "The act of flying, when properly adjusted by the Supreme Author of every power, requires less exertions than, from the appearance, is supposed" (Cayley 1810: 87), says George Cayley in 1810, and the quote is for a change suspiciously similar to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's "Supreme Author of all things" from 1809 that is "bringing into existence so many wonderful things" (Lamarck 1914: 40).

So, "who knows if the desire to rise in the air like a bird or a butterfly that has haunted [us] from everlasting" does not stem from "a dark memory of the days when [our] huge and clumsy ancestors, the winged reptiles, had brought the flesh of their body – surely 'heavier than air' – to carry quite well through the air when pursuing their prey?" (Hartman 1926: 3). No wonder that as far as the rising generation is concerned, one of the period articles speaks about "training of the aviatic embryos" ("Rodí se letci..." 1930: 30–33); aviation is a matter of *evolution*.

But once we reach this point, the dominant spiritual rhetoric suddenly acquires a wholly new meaning, or, to be precise, a slightly different balance with a most ironic consequence. Let us walk the path for the last time at an accelerated pace: first, the flight provides "a divine enjoyment that brings the aviator into ecstasy", thanks to which he "feels the magnificence of the universe. He feels the being and infinity of the primal force, he feels God. There he is not a human like on earth, there is somebody else, more perfect, better" (Budín 1925: 2). This better man is – that would be the second step – "the soul of the aircraft while the engine is the heart and fuel is the blood. [...] An aviator is not just a driver, he becomes more and more part of the aircraft. His whole intelligence must penetrate matter to animate it, to lead it". Which leads us to the claim – and this would be the third step – that finally admits the true imperfective nature of aviatic man: "The aviator must simply represent the ideal of the *eugenics* of body and spirit" (Hamšík 1925: 4–5).

Fig. 7. "The conquest of the air [is an] ability of the new humanity to be enjoyed in the happy future." Max Švabinský, Satyr Foretells an Ascent to Space, 1945, lithography, paper, private collection.

Yet it is not the spirit that needs improvement, but the body, and while the spirit roams the universe as fast as light, "the constitution of the human body is not designed for these crazy speeds". Of course that the spirit "does not accept [...] the boundary beyond which man, as he was created, cannot go" (Budín 1925: 2), but what the spirit does or does not accept is already of secondary importance. If "further intensification of the requirements on the aviator for his physical fitness and mental acuity" is only "*probably* impossible", which means that man simply "*has to* overcome himself", then the celebrated victory over matter does not really consist in its humiliation as in its effective metamorphosis. The end that our aviatic man is heading to, the logical consequence of his aspirations, is not so much an Icarian spiritual transcendence, as a Daedalian physical transformation, and what ascends to heaven is not a liberated soul, but enhanced flesh.

More human than human

If we should render some general conclusions, there is something alarming about where this path does lead to, especially if the aspiring aviatic man "has not reached the final destination" (Budín 1925: 2). It seems almost inevitable that if he followed his own ambitions to accelerate beyond all earthly limits – for where exactly should he stop and why in the stratosphere? – he would have to go to space and "drink the Absolute" up to the point of becoming cosmic. Should not he then follow the steps that John Desmond Bernal described in his futuristic (as well as worrying) book *The World, The Flesh and The Devil* in 1929, i.e., in the age of his prime?

Let us only briefly recall that Bernal in all seriousness envisions the transformative expansion of the human race involving the enhancement of the human body up to its complete remaking. Then, "bit by bit the heritage in the direct line of mankind, the heritage of the original life emerging on the face of the world, would dwindle, and in the end disappear effectively, being preserved perhaps as some curious relic, while the new life which conserves none of the substance and all the spirit of the old would take its place and continue its development. Such a change would be as important as that in which life first appeared on the Earth's surface and might be as gradual and imperceptible" (Bernal 1929: 57). But the process does not stop – and if it follows its own logical imperative, than it cannot stop – until there is nothing left, including the memory of what used to be a human: "consciousness itself may end or vanish in a humanity that

Fig. 8. "Aviatic man has not reached the final destination." Jan Konůpek, In Space, 1930s–1940s, etching, paper, private collection

has become completely etherialized, losing the close-knit organism, becoming masses of atoms in space communicating by radiation, and ultimately perhaps resolving itself entirely into light" (Bernal 1929: 57). In other words: the total resurrection of man into a fully operational *worker* of the whole universe is the end of the human condition.

So, should not the aviatic man have been more careful what he wished for? And is it not telling how willingly Icarus did hand over the reins to the drone operators and automatic pilots, sending the body away while his soul remains comfortably chained to the ground? In fact, it almost seems that all our unfortunate aviator did was break the sound barrier of conscience, thus failing all of the metaphors and expectations pinned on him. He was supposed to bring Heaven to Earth, but left us with the jets that are helping ruin the planet. He was supposed to bring peace, but he dropped the atomic bomb. He was supposed to begin the new era, but on September 11, 2001, he practically ended the millennium in the worst way possible.

Of course, the question is why any driven driver should be trusted as a prophet, when even the Red Sea was crossed on foot.

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