

The Jet-man

The *jet-man* is a jet-pilot. *Match* has specified that he belongs to a new race in aviation, nearer to the robot than to the hero. Yet there are in the *jet-man* several Parsifalian residues, as we shall see shortly. But what strikes one first in the mythology of the *jet-man* is the elimination of speed: nothing in the legend alludes to this experience. We must here accept a paradox, which is in fact admitted by everyone with the greatest of ease, and even consumed as a proof of modernity. This paradox is that an excess of speed turns into repose. The pilot-hero was made unique by a whole mythology of speed as an experience, of space devoured, of intoxicating motion; the *jet-man*, on the other hand, is defined by a coenaesthesia of motionlessness ('at 2,000 km per hour, in level flight, no impression of speed at all'), as if the extravagance of his vocation precisely consisted in *overtaking* motion, in going faster than speed. Mythology abandons here a whole imagery of exterior friction and enters pure coenaesthesia: motion is no longer the optical perception of points and surfaces; it has become a kind of vertical disorder, made of contractions, black-outs, terrors and faints; it is no longer a gliding but an inner devastation, an unnatural perturbation, a motionless crisis of bodily consciousness.

No wonder if, carried to such a pitch, the myth of the aviator loses all humanism. The hero of classical speed could remain a 'gentleman', inasmuch as motion was for him an occasional exploit, for which courage alone was required: one went faster in bursts, like a daring amateur, not like a professional, one sought an 'intoxication', one came to motion equipped with an age-old moralizing which made its perception keener and enabled one to express its philosophy. It is inasmuch as speed was an *adventure* that it linked the airman to a whole series of human roles.

The *jet-man*, on the other hand, no longer seems to know either adventure or destiny, but only a condition. Yet this condition is at

first sight less human than anthropological: mythically, the *jet-man* is defined less by his courage than by his weight, his diet and his habits (temperance, frugality, continence). His racial apartness can be read in his morphology: the anti-G suit of inflatable nylon, the shiny helmet, introduce the *jet-man* into a novel type of skin in which '*even his mother would not know him*'. We are dealing with a true racial conversion, all the more credible since science-fiction has already largely substantiated this metamorphosis of species: everything happens as if there had been a sudden mutation between the earlier creatures of propeller-mankind and the later ones of jet-mankind.

In fact, and in spite of the scientific garb of this new mythology, there has merely been a displacement of the sacred: after the hagiographic era (Saints and Martyrs of propeller-aviation) there follows a monastic period; and what passes at first for mere dietetic prescriptions soon appears invested with a sacerdotal significance: continence and temperance, abstention and withdrawal from pleasures, community life, uniform clothing - everything concurs, in the mythology of the *jet-man*, to make manifest the plasticity of the flesh, its submission to collective ends (chastely undefined, by the way), and it is this submission which is offered as a sacrifice to the glamorous singularity of an inhuman condition. Society eventually recognizes, a propos of the *jet-man*, the old theosophical pact, which has always compensated power by an ascetic life, paid for semi-divinity in the coin of human 'happiness'. So truly does the situation of the *jet-man* comprise the sense of a religious call, that it is itself the reward of previous austerities, of initiatory proceedings, meant to test the postulant (passage through the altitude chamber and in the centrifugal machine). Right down to the Instructor, greying, anonymous and inscrutable, who is perfectly suited to the part of the necessary mystagogue. As for endurance, we are definitely told that, as is the case in all initiations, it is not physical in nature: triumph in preliminary ordeals is, truth to tell, the fruit of a spiritual gift, one is gifted for jet-flying as others are called to God.