

AIRSHIPS

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Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

A few years ago, I wrote an article in which I confessed, in rather jocular fashion, to a fear of flying, even though – with no little show of courage – I board a plane about twenty times a year. I'm pleased to say that I now feel much more confident during flights, perhaps because I've grown used to it or perhaps, as the trail of years behind us grows, we become more scornful about our possible future life and more satisfied with the life we've already accumulated. However, over a period of at least twenty years, plane journeys – of fifty minutes, two, seven or even twelve hours – could be relied upon to transform me into a highly superstitious little boy, who reached his various destinations feeling utterly drained after the hours of tension and the indescribable effort of having to 'carry' the plane.

What I've always found so odd about my fear – although it might also be the explanation – is that I first flew in a plane when I was only one month old, in the days when, for most people, flying was still a rare experience. I was born in Madrid on September 20, 1951 and on that very date – it had been planned beforehand, so it wasn't that he took one

look at me and fled – my father set off on the first of his Atlantic crossings and travelled to America with a contract to teach at Wellesley College, Massachusetts – a college for young ladies – for the academic year of 1951–2. My mother followed a month later, taking with her my two older brothers, Miguel and Fernando, as well as me, the newborn baby. I don't know what the travelling conditions were like (apart from the fact that I was dressed all in pink, because they had been expecting a girl), or whether I cried a little or a lot as we crossed the ocean, or whether the crew members of Iberia or TWA made a fuss of me or loathed me. And I recall nothing, either, of the return journey – New York–Madrid – nine or ten months later. I do, however, have a vague recollection of my third trip by plane. I was just four years old, had acquired another brother, Álvaro, and my father had decided to take us all to New Haven, Connecticut, at the behest of Yale University. It's not a very pleasant memory: I can see myself – not crying, but very, very angry – lying in the aisle, refusing to get up and doubtless obstructing crew and passengers alike. I don't know how long the tantrum lasted – possibly a couple of minutes, possibly much longer – but I'm sure that if, as an adult, I had seen the child that was me, I would have hated him for blocking the aisle; more than that, I would have thought it a bad omen, which is always rather worrying in mid-flight.

It's probably a well-known fact – although I can't be sure because people don't talk about it much – that those of us who suffer in planes tend to invest a great deal of feverish, exhausting mental activity in our role as, how can I put it, 'imaginary co-pilots'. As I said, my fear of flying is now abating, but throughout my life I've spent many hours on board in a state of permanent alertness, attentive not only to any possible changes of mood in the engines, or to the plane's recognizable or unexpected noises, or to its scheduled or unscheduled ups and downs, but also to everything else around me, in particular the air hostesses and the stewards and even the captain's variable tones of voice over the intercom – whether he sounds calm or nervous.

I have tended to see 'signs' or 'premonitions' in the tiniest details

and, given that all superstitions are arbitrary, it always used to make me feel uneasy if a passenger stood talking in the aisle for too long, especially if he or she was Japanese, don't ask me why. Nor was I soothed, particularly on long-haul flights, by the sight of other excessively relaxed and uninhibited passengers who, far from keeping a close eye on our flight path, as is the duty of all caring and committed travellers, laughed and drank, moved around the cabin, played cards or performed other equally grave and reckless acts, or so it seemed to me. In short, I spend, or have spent, the entire journey 'controlling' and 'helping' and 'protecting' the whole hazardous crossing with my tireless thoughts. A four-year-old child blocking the aisle would definitely have strained my nerves. I'm not sure I would have been able to refrain from giving him a good slap.

No, I would doubtless have contained my irritation because since I reached the age of shaving, I've always behaved myself on board planes, unlike the callow creature I was then. I have limited myself to keeping a firm grip on an open newspaper (of the broadsheet variety, so that there's no chance of my sneaking a glance out of the windows), either pretending to read it or actually reading it – although without taking in a single word – meanwhile fending off any attempts at conversation (one doesn't want to become distracted and neglect one's duty as lookout), demolishing at high speed whatever food is placed in front of me, and all the while clutching some wooden object I've brought with me for the purpose, since there doesn't tend to be any wood – a major oversight – on those flying submarines.

It was a similar remark, made in that earlier article, and my subsequent confession that I'd worn out the wooden toothpicks and matches I grasped between my fingers, that provoked a charming Iberia air hostess into sending me a letter and a little wooden key ring in the form of a plane, so that, in future, I wouldn't have to make a fool of myself abroad, holding those grubby matches and toothpicks. And that same air hostess, as well as recounting a few anecdotes from her long experience in the air, made me think of planes, for the first time, as relatively 'humanizable' objects, which one could, in a way, and

depending on the circumstances, mentally direct. Not that there's anything very remarkable about that. Indeed, it's perfectly normal. She told me in her letter that whenever the plane she was on lurched or bumped about a bit or jolted, she would issue a silent order: 'Down, boy!' Yes, an order, an exorcism, a persuasive word.

In *The Mirror of the Sea* – a magnificent book I translated into Spanish several years ago now – the great Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad speaks of ships having their own character and spirit, their own norms of behaviour, their caprices, rebellions and gratuities. Of how, in large measure, their performance and reliability depend on the treatment they receive from captain and crew.

If treated with respect, affection, consideration, care and tact, a ship, says Conrad, is grateful and responds by trying hard and giving of its best (or, rather, her best, since curiously and significantly almost the only objects that merit a gender in the English language are ships, which are always referred to as 'she' and not, as would be more natural, as 'it'). If, on the contrary, the relationship between them is one of superiority, disdain or is simply too demanding, authoritarian or neglectful, abusive, inconsiderate or even despotic, ships react badly, and feel no 'loyalty' and fail to 'protect' their crews at moments of risk or danger.

Ships, writes Conrad, are 'not exactly what men make them. They have their own nature; they can of themselves minister to our self-esteem by the demand their qualities make upon our skill and their shortcomings upon our hardiness and endurance.' Further on, he adds:

The love that is given to ships is profoundly different from the love men feel for every other work of their hands – the love they bear to their houses, for instance – because it is untainted by the pride of possession. The pride of skill, the pride of responsibility, the pride of endurance there may be, but otherwise it is a disinterested sentiment. No seaman ever cherished a ship, even if she belonged to him, merely because of the profit she put in his pocket. No one, I think, ever did; for a ship-owner, even of the best, has always been outside the pale of that sentiment embracing in a feeling of intimate,

equal fellowship the ship and the man, backing each other against the implacable, if sometimes dissembled, hostility of their world of waters.

Later still, Conrad describes the touching words, tantamount to a funeral oration, uttered by the captain of a brig that had sunk:

‘No ship could have done so well... She was small, but she was good. I had no anxiety. She was strong. Last voyage I had my wife and two children in her. No other ship could have stood so long the weather she had to live through for days and days before we got dismasted a fortnight ago. She was fairly worn out, and that’s all. You may believe me. She lasted under us for days and days, but she could not last for ever. It was long enough. I am glad it is over. No better ship was ever left to sink at sea on such a day as this.’

Conrad sums up by saying: ‘She had lived, he had loved her; she had suffered, and he was glad she was at rest.’

We air passengers are not accustomed to perceiving, or even imagining, planes in this way, as almost animate beings, with a capacity for suffering and endurance, requiring consideration and esteem, and being sensitive, almost, to gratitude and rancour. We board them and can barely distinguish between them; we know nothing of their age or their past history; we don’t even notice their names, which, in Spain at least, are chosen in such a bureaucratic, pious spirit, so lacking in poetry, adventure and imagination, that they’re hard to retain and recognize if ever we entrust ourselves to them again. I would like to ask Iberia, in this the twenty-first century, to abandon their anodyne patriotic gestures and adulatory nods to the Catholic Church – all those planes called *Our Lady of the Pillar* and *Our Lady of Good Remedy*, *The City of Burgos* and *The City of Tarragona* – and instead choose names that are more cheerful and more literary. I, for one, would feel safer and more reassured, more protected, if I knew I was flying in the *The Red Eagle* or *The Fire Arrow* or even *Achilles* or *Emma Bovary* or *Falstaff* or *Liberty Valance* or *Nostramo*.

Perhaps reading that air hostess's epistolary revelations had something to do with the diminution of my fear. Until that comment of hers it had never occurred to me that captains might have a similar relationship with their planes as old seadogs do with their ships, and that air crews are like sailors. Perhaps the things that surprised and disturbed me during my long watches as a fearful traveller – a murmur, a squeak, a bump, a lurch – were perfectly recognizable to them, familiar, customary, the reactions of each individualized and distinguishable plane, just as we recognize the people close to us by their gestures and intonations, their silences and vacillations, so much so that, often, we don't even need them to speak to know what's wrong, what's going through their minds, what they're suffering or worrying about or plotting or waiting for.

This possibility soothes me. We live in an age that tends to depersonalize even people and is, in principle, averse to anthropomorphism. Indeed, such a tendency is often criticized, erroneously and foolishly in my view, since that 'rapprochement' between the human and the non-human is quite natural and spontaneous, and far from being an attempt to deprive animals, plants and objects of their respective selves, it places them in the category of the 'humanizable', which is, for us, the highest and most respectable of categories.

I know people who talk to, question, spoil, threaten or even quarrel with their computers, saying things like: 'Right now, you behave yourself,' or thanking them for their help. There's nothing wrong with that, it's perfectly understandable. In fact, given how often we travel in planes, the odd thing about our relationship with them – those complex machines endowed with movement to which we surrender ourselves and that transport us through the air – is that it isn't more 'personal', or more 'animal', or more 'sailor-like', if you prefer. Perhaps those who crew them haven't known how to communicate this to us. I've never seen them pat a plane, as you might pat a horse to calm or reward it; I've never seen planes being groomed and cleaned and tidied, except very hurriedly and impatiently; I've never seen them

loved as Conrad's captain loved his sunken brig; I've never seen air hostesses – who spend a lot of time on-board – treat them with the respect and care, at once fatherly and comradely, enjoyed by ships.

That's what I would like to see, less cool efficiency and more affection, and I'm sure that I, along with many other tense, vigilant passengers, would become infected by their confidence and be able to relax, because then planes, like ships in the old days, would have their 'reputation', and we would know something of their voyages, their history, their deeds, their past and their future. The pilots, instead of frightening us with their usual litany of cold, hair-raising facts ('We will be flying at an absurdly high altitude, the temperature outside is unbelievably cold, etc.'), could say: 'This plane, the *Pierre Ménard*, has had an amazing life so far. It was born ten years ago, has made five hundred flights and crossed the Atlantic on sixty-three previous occasions. It has always responded well to us, even in the most unfavourable of circumstances. It's a docile plane by nature, but very sensitive as well. Why, I remember once...'

Well, I leave the rest up to the airlines. Perhaps it isn't too much to ask for a little more literature or – which comes to the same thing – a little uniqueness; a little history and background; a little life. ■

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