When the Wolves Were Flying:  
*The Box of Delights* and Flight in 1930s Children’s Literature

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Children are consistently and powerfully associated with flight in interwar literature and culture. This association challenges, for reasons this chapter will explore, any characterization – contemporaneous or retrospective – of the relationship between aviation and modernity as inevitably productive of violent destruction and totalitarian power. The child in literature registers the ambivalence of flight between its experiential and political implications, and provides a suggestive trope for the temporal rupture promised by modern flight and the fraught questions of how, if at all, to manage it.

In John Masefield’s strange yet persistently popular children’s novel, *The Box of Delights* (1935), children – who, here as throughout modern cultural history, dream of flight – are suddenly offered the prospect of really flying. Two newly-discovered objects of engineered magic make this possible: the eponymous box of delights, and the aeroplane. The euphoric excitement and potentially infinite knowledge promised by flight is alternately offered by the sacred magic of the box and the darkly modern aeroplanes of Abner Brown’s gang. *The Box of Delights*, and its place within 1930s children’s literature, indicate the centrality of children – real, imagined, and written for - to the airmindedness of interwar literature and culture as a whole. The ambiguity surrounding flight in this novel requires, moreover, a revised reading of the relationship between the politics of modern technology and the associations of flight with the child.
Often the tendency in theory and cultural history assessing the technologies that obsessed literary and artistic Modernism, prominently including aviation, has broadly viewed them as endogenously associated with fascist hero-worship, mass destruction, warfare and surveillance. Both the theoretical virtuosity of Paul Virilio (1977, 1984), and the more restrained historicism of Valentine Cunningham (1988), for example, influentially read the cultural importance of flight in the 1930s in these terms, despite their significant differences of scholarly approach. More recent works of cultural history have continued to emphasize airmindedness in the 1930s as defined by awareness of threat (Haapamäki, 2014).

In *The Box*, aviation’s role as accessory to totalitarian modernity is frightenningly evident, but it is challenged by other possibilities. This novel not only provides a case study in the richly imagined – and often materialized – relationship between flight and children in this period, but also a productively subtle frame for the understanding of that history today. This is because it offers two distinctive versions of flight – which I characterize below as sacred and modern – but also, through its child protagonist and his uncanny adversary, makes the distinction between these apparently oppositional forms of flight itself ambivalent.

The child heightens the questions of what modernity’s technological achievements are, and could be, for. Yet the modern child is famously ambivalent and evasive (Kuhn, 1979; Bond Stockton, 2009); they are always imagining and re-imagining what they are taught, and finding out some of what they aren’t. It is unsurprising, then, that Masefield’s protagonist, Kay Harker, a ‘dreamy, idle muff’ according to his former governess (99), enters into a relationship with flight that challenges the still-unresolved tensions between the pleasures of modern technologies and their use by powerful organizations and perverse leaders.

**Sacred and Modern Flight**
Masefield published *The Box* in 1935 as the sequel to his earlier children’s novel, *The Midnight Folk* (1927). They share the same protagonist, Kay Harker, and adversary, Abner Brown, yet they are thematically and tonally different: *The Box* gains a sharper plot focus from its greater sense of threat, and from the intrusions of modernity into a landscape which was previously, in *The Midnight Folk*, one of almost uninterrupted pastoralism. Both novels have remained influential in literary and popular culture. Melissa Harrison’s recent novel *All among the Barley* (2018) notably features a child protagonist who is an enthusiastic reader of *The Midnight Folk*, and the reference frames Harrison’s concerns with childhood wonder and its vulnerability to co-option by esoteric but dangerous interwar political interests, a major theme of *The Box*. Overall, *The Box* has had the most significant afterlife of Masefield’s two novels featuring Kay Harker, with multiple adaptations for radio, theatre, and television, including a particularly successful BBC serial in 1984, which visually emphasized the 1930s periodicity of the story.

*The Box* opens with Kay returning by train from school for the Christmas holidays, when he encounters first a Punch-and-Judy man, Cole Hawlings, and then two members of a gang pursuing Hawlings, who has warned Kay that ‘the wolves are running’ (15) – the novel’s subtitle and repeated motif. For safety, Hawlings (actually a disguised, immortal Ramon Llull) entrusts his ‘box of delights’, which his enemies are seeking, to Kay. He reveals that the box can make him ‘go small’ or ‘go swift’ (66-67) - the latter means to fly (159) - and it allows travel through both time and space. The gang – led by Abner Brown, a magician, fake clergyman and proto-fascist leader, abetted by Kay’s former governess amongst other assorted oddballs – increasingly closes in on the box (and Kay), using motor cars, aeroplanes and magic to kidnap a series of targets whilst Kay outwits them with a combination of the box’s powers and his own resourcefulness and curiosity, aided by the Jones children, who are sharing his house, the aptly-named Seekings, for Christmas.
The box functions as a magical and sacred object with the power to create visions and reveal hidden truths. Its capacity to enable flight is auxiliary to this, bringing a felt excitement and risk; it also operates alongside multiple sacred symbols in the novel, which has an expansive and inclusive approach to spiritual traditions (34, 41). The aeroplane, meanwhile, appears as a parallel modern tool for flight. It is also (like the box) the object, and an enabler, of the children’s fascinations: When the gang kidnap Maria Jones, they promise ‘an interesting world for our younger agents: lots of motor-cars, lots of aeroplanes […] one long, gay social whirl’ (148). This promise echoes how the aeroplane, and the ancient dreams of flight that it renders into modern materials, is powerfully associated with children and particularly with young men (Maria acts against the conventions of her gender). Who, after all, would attempt flight, with its ambitious exhibitionism and attendant risk of death, but the young man (or rare woman, like Amelia Earhart or Amy Johnson), who retains some untempered childhood (or childish) fantasy? Wyndham Lewis tellingly castigated Marinetti and the other Futurists for their ‘extraordinary childishness […] over mechanical inventions, aeroplanes, machinery etc.’ (Lewis 9).

Yet the aeroplane’s childish appeal in The Box is complicated by its deployment as a tool of spying, kidnapping, even (albeit in comic form) of bombing (292). The different modes of flight that surround Kay embody both the threatening and transformative possibilities of flight: the aeroplanes are used for surveillance, abductions and imprisonment; the box, to undermine both established and emerging – fascistic – sources of authority. Masefield had been directly exposed to the sinister potential of human flight during his Great War experiences, which gave him both close contact with the war on the ground (through his extensive service at a hospital for the wounded in France (Babington Smith, 122-132)) and with the British political leadership (the social circle of Masefield and his wife included Prime Minister
Asquith), whilst Constance Masefield heard and saw Zeppelin bombing raids on London (Babington Smith, 135).

The sinister possibilities of aeroplanes are manifested when the gang kidnap Cole Hawlings, not knowing that he has already given the box to Kay:

In five seconds they had the old man trussed up and lifted. [...] There came the roar of an engine from beyond Rider’s Wood. “That’s an aeroplane,” Kay said [...] the engine became much louder and an aeroplane lurched into sight past the covert-end, giving across the snow to take off in the wind. “It will stick in the snow”, Kay said, “and then they’ll have to leave him.” However, it didn’t stick in the snow. It lifted after a short run, and at once lifted higher and higher, with great lolloping leaps.

Now that it was in the air it was silent [...] and swifter in going and climbing than any he had seen. It had almost no wings and was in the clouds in no time. (72)

This aeroplane, superbly modern, has capabilities beyond what the boys previously could imagine (they have enough aviation awareness to be surprised by the plane’s ability to take off in snow\(^2\) and fly silently). It overcomes the challenges of nature; is capable of hiding from, whilst simultaneously observing, human society; and is extremely fast (the gang’s planes later turn out to also function as motor cars, and can rapidly transform from one to the other). In the quaint rural English setting, characterized by acceptance of nature still dominating life (the snow disrupts rail and road transport), the aeroplane is aggressively modern. Combined with the other attributes and accessories of the Brown gang – a charismatic male leader, press manipulation, a concealed radical agenda, strange sexual dynamics, glamorous fashions – it suggests the mid-1930s as a moment of potentially dangerous temporal rupture.
Against the foreboding modernity of the gang, emerging under the noses of the complacent, English authorities (represented by the Inspector, who has swallowed Abner Brown’s cover identity as the Reverend Boddledale), the box offers a rupture in time of a different kind. It allows access to the past, even the ancient past, but (unlike the claims of the modern technologies) only an ambivalent grasp on the future. It is sacramentally attuned to nature (as during Kay’s use of the box to run with Herne the Hunter, 81-87), rather than seeking to dominate it. The box allows one to go swift (to fly), but also to go small, a feature of which Kay makes use to spy on the gang’s plotting, and which contrasts with the aggrandizing surveillance perspective offered by the plane.

The box, then, offers sacred flight in contrast to the aeroplane’s modern flight. Yet Masefield treats the relationship between these two enablers of flight with subtlety and ambiguity; they are not entirely unalike, and the technologies that appear in *The Box* are morally ambiguous, but never unequivocally or endogenously malevolent. Sacred and modern flight mirror each other, as indicated by the naturalistic similes Masefield uses for the gang’s aeroplanes, seen ‘poising just like a kestrel’ (165) and hovering ‘like a sparrow-hawk’ (204). Masefield uses his sense of the sacred, rooted in the natural world, not to contrast the sacred flight at work through the box with the euphoria of modern flight in order to exorcise and defeat the latter, but rather to offer a kind of sideways look at it, via the child’s fascinated gaze.³ Masefield suggests that attempts to create a perfect, totalitarian order of knowledge (identified here with the total aerial vision offered by the aeroplane) are hostile to any humane modern society; equally, his avoidance of any absolute distinction between the sacred flight of the box and the modern flight of the aeroplane, and their uncanny doublings of one another, undermine an account of modernity as inevitably catastrophic or technology as inherently inhumane. Here it is worth considering Masefield within the contexts of the cultural history of flight and the contemporaneous and subsequent theorizations of that history.
Flying Bodies: Wolves, Aeroplanes and Children

Modern technologies of war and surveillance enable a visual intake of information about something at a distance, so that the body doing the looking (from a position of power) ‘takes in’ something far away without having to move and thus place itself in jeopardy. Paul Virilio, one of the most prominent theorists of speed (particularly, but not only, in aviation) as a defining characteristic of modernity, claimed that ‘by 1914, aviation was ceasing to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records […] it was becoming one way, or perhaps even the ultimate way, of seeing’ (War and Cinema 17). Enabling this position of power projected and protected is, Virilio argued, a central goal of modern technology, which sought the ‘art of hiding from sight in order to see’, an ‘ominous voyeurism’ (War and Cinema, 49). Whilst of course in practice the aeroplane in warfare (at least, in the 1930s) cannot truly be hidden and thus does come into jeopardy, the aim of offering the pilot a fixed, secure position from which to observe the world still holds. In this account, which Virilio has developed to its fullest extent, the pilot’s position is a disembodied one, and this disembodiment constitutes his power. This is exactly the way in which Abner Brown seeks to use his aeroplanes, with their impossible silence and ability to climb high above the clouds.

However, the development of machine-powered human flight in the first half of the twentieth century was actually a highly embodied phenomenon, not only in the physical risk evident in its appalling casualty rates, but in their necessary counterpart, the bodily excitement of flying – in fast movement, control of the aircraft and new possibilities of human vision that provoked wonder rather than exclusively violent control. These were the characteristics recognized by the Futurists in their ‘Manifesto of Aeropainting’, which affirmed that ‘the changing perspectives of flight constitute an absolutely new reality that has nothing in common with the reality traditionally constituted by a terrestrial perspective’ (Marinetti et al. 283). The
earlier Futurist Manifesto had emphasized the embodied basis of the new perspectives offered by speed, declaring that ‘we intend to exalt movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the slap and the punch’ (Marinetti 51). Virilio tends to elide these embodied characteristics and perspectives with the disembodied power he sees as fundamental to the adoption of flight by state regimes (not an unreasonable move, given the political complicities of Marinetti and other Futurists; but it still downplays part of the story). This potential elision was already fearfully identified in 1930s literary culture, where, as Cunningham notes, the aeroplane became ‘the machine that most precisely apotheosized Fascism’s yearnings for dangerous dynamism and the test to destruction’ (189).

Yet the elision of regimes of (technologically-enabled and thus, ideally, disembodied) power with the bodily attractions of flight was also rejected, or at least made ambivalent, in other responses to emerging aerial technology during the period, just as the relationship of Futurist celebration of technology – and of flight particularly – to Fascism is itself not straightforward. Cunningham sees acceptance of ‘the prospects of imminent suicidal death’ (88) through flight as a Fascist gesture; but such celebration of flight as means to heroic and violent death was largely theorizing and theoretical, a translation of flight (and its risks) into symbolism rather than a motivation for actually flying; it is a reconciliation of the anxieties that flight provokes. (After all, even Fascists and Futurists did not in reality seek to crash – even if using aeroplanes to kill others was a different matter.) Although fantasies of flight transforming time and space into a single moment were indeed culturally powerful – they appear in the ‘Futurist Manifesto’, and in The Box via Abner Brown, as we shall see below – they were not as dominant as they sometimes appear in retrospective history or theory, and were in a degree of tension with the experiential and embodied aspects of flight, as I shall go on to discuss.
The supposed ‘childishness’ of ambition to fly, in the face of early aviation’s overwhelming risks, itself undermines the elision of flight with disembodied totalitarian power, because of the child’s awkward relationship to the adult authorities. This is apparent in *The Box*, where the authorities are totally unaware of the sinister purposes of the flights being carried out by Abner Brown’s gang, and both the opportunity for alternative forms of flight and any effective response to the gang’s technological abilities is going to have to come from Kay and the other children.

There are several episodes of flight in *The Box* that dispel any motivation of totalitarian power and heroic violence; when Kay uses the box to meet Herne the Hunter (84-87), they fly alongside the other animals rather than in domination of them (and become themselves potential prey). Even the proto-Fascist gang, seeking to groom Maria, associate aeroplanes with exhilarating life rather than with power to effect death. The box and the aeroplane combine the pleasure of sight with the pleasure of movement, creating a form of embodied looking – pleasures signalled in the name of Kay’s residence, Seekings House. ‘Seekings’ suggests its near-homonym, *seeing*, but in a multiple, moving form; anti-aggrandizing, it evokes the body that is looking for something. Seekings *House* implies a point of stability and hospitality, the embodied banalities of food and warmth (and ‘buttered eggs’, 16), in symbiotic relation to the movement beyond the house to *see* and to *seek*. This relation between cyclical stability and new movement is, as I go on to argue, central to the novel’s response to the possibility of flight becoming a dangerous modern rupture or enabler of totalitarianism.

The most ambiguous figure here is the wolf, identified with Abner Brown, but also with the sacred natural world that excites Kay’s fascination and provides the animal prototypes for human flight. The wolf, apex predator, embodies the power to suddenly conquer distance that the aeroplane brings to power and warfare in modern societies. The aeroplane stands alongside the wolf as two of the novel’s key motifs, symbolic and material embodiments of the gang and
especially of Brown himself; yet the wolf (a real Fascist leader’s preferred ego-animal, too) remains embodied, a part of nature, thus emphasizing the fundamental ambiguity over modern flight, and the child’s relationship to it, that runs throughout the novel. Both aeroplane and wolf are versions of the human body transfigured beyond its ordinary capacities by technology or magic. The box also transforms the human body, giving it speed and power whilst also shrinking it – to a smallness, in fact, where Kay can comfortably converse with a mouse.

All these objects and tools for flight appeal particularly to the child who has not accepted and internalized limits on his fantasy, creativity and movement. The Box presents two such awkward children, Kay and Maria, along with several adults who have not grown up insofar as they still seek to fly; they reflect how, in the 1930s, the link between airmindedness and ‘childish’ ambition (per Lewis’s earlier complaint) was powerfully evident. The aeroplane’s place in the litany of pleasures that Sylvia Daisy Pouncer uses to attempt to groom Maria is a trap, anticipating childish enthusiasm for an adult-world characterized by its ‘whirl’ (148) of endless technologically-enabled pleasures. Yet not only does this attempt fail, it is doubtful that the gang’s cynical adult knowledge of the ‘real’ purpose of the aeroplane even ultimately turns out to be definitively superior to the childish vision of it (even their own motivations are not necessarily less childish than the child’s, but rather simply deprived of the self-awareness Maria shows when her own motivations are being manipulated).

Like the surveillance plane, the box gives the possibility of seeing without being seen. It thus both offers a potentially deadly power and attracts the child who hopes to evade total educational surveillance (as Maria boasts of doing, and as Kay also does – Abner’s partner Sylvia Daisy Pouncer is his former governess). When Kay and Peter Jones witness Cole Hawlings being kidnapped, they see without being seen; this extends one of the few ways in which children can exercise control by virtue of relative smallness, a smallness that the box offers to greatly increase. Here as elsewhere, the children register the relationship between
flight and the body, and thus trouble the apparent unity of connections between flight and disembodied power.

**The Child and the Aeroplane in Interwar Culture**

Masefield wrote *The Box* whilst literary culture itself was riven between realist claims to historical-social reference and the Modernist emphasis on texts and objects (which the Futurists famously extended to the aeroplane) as site of transformative experience. It ‘is not about something; it is that something itself’, Samuel Beckett declared of Joyce’s work (quoted in Cunningham 4). The Futurists, celebrating the euphoria of speed, similarly emphasized the thing itself – not least when that thing was an aeroplane – but acknowledged that such submission to the experiential was itself a politically consequential move. The child – him- or herself a figure for the future that new technology makes both knowable and unknowable at once - dramatizes precisely this ambivalence between enjoyment of the technological object for itself, and the potential taint in the political uses of that object. The simultaneous wonder of flight and the extent of its destructive potential makes the child fascinated by the aeroplane a trope *par excellence* for the troubled Modernist relationship between the experiential and the political.

Seemingly far from the artistic disputes of the decade, during the 1930s the association between children and airmindedness was reinforced and exploited not only by merchandise and advertising emphasizing the excitement of flight (over its practical constraints), but also by literature that sought to resolve the (already extensive) moral and cultural difficulties it presented into an acceptable narrative of masculine bravery and virtuosity, in service to sound ideals. Adult culture of the ’30s was certain that flight was a source of wonder to children – certainly to boys. Five of W.E. Johns’s ‘Biggles’ books had been published by 1935, and they focussed on the character’s youth (Biggles enters the Royal Flying Corps underage, at
seventeen) and on the excitement, though also the casualty-heavy reality, of early military flight. As Cunningham observes:

[Never] had English literature ever been so air-minded [...] Flying would help sell any piece of literature from humble detective stories [...] to the most respectable of novels. [...] Where a First-War heroic carried on at all uninterruptedly through the anti-heroic ‘20s and into the ’30s, it was in air-warfare fictions, and those largely for small boys (‘the air is the thing now’, declared Betjeman in his 1938 review of boys’ books), stories by WE Johns and Percy F. Westerman and their tribe, the sort of tale published by Christopher Caudwell’s brother T. Stanhope Sprigg in his magazine Air Stories (founded 1935). Flying had remained, as Auden put it in a Listener review, unquestionably ‘heroic travel’. (167-168)

Air travel’s development during the 1920s and its increasing economic stability by the mid-1930s – with Imperial Airways and Croydon Airport now established as underpinning the industry in Britain – had provoked a startlingly wide set of political, social and practical questions: over the role of the state in technological development, the relationship between business entrepreneurialism and military expansion, the future of the Empire (see Bluffield 13-38), the politically ambiguous heroism of young men like Lindberg and even the gender-breaking achievements of Earhart and Johnson. Whilst The Box’s world may initially seem a long way from the arguments between proponents and opponents of economic protectionism and subsidy that characterized the British civilian air industry’s attempts to become viable, it is not altogether so distant: The benign but useless Inspector, local representative of governmental authority, has a vague notion of what the young men at the aerodrome might get up to, but no sense of responsibility or capability for properly understanding, let alone
controlling, what happens there or in the sky over his district. This irresponsibility is not merely quaint; playful young men, and the broader culture of heroic and reckless masculine individualism associated with flight, were profoundly implicated in politics.

Several of Imperial Airways’ key routes were established through the pioneering flights of Sir Alan Cobham, who had a considerable public profile, in the late ’20s. Whilst the British air industry thus established itself, its relationship to narratives of aeronautical heroism from Cobham and others, and its use of these to seek government support, had disturbing parallels amongst rival powers. In 1933, Italian Fascist and aviator Italo Balbo led an expedition of twenty-five seaplanes in a mass crossing of the Atlantic, reaching Chicago for the World’s Fair, a flight intended to assert the power of Fascist leadership and the industrial and technological progress the Italian state had made under Fascist direction (Segrè 230-265). Nazi Germany, meanwhile, had begun to re-establish its air forces almost immediately on taking power in 1933 (see Muller 91-94). As Michele Haapamäki notes, ‘the interwar period was characterized by doomsday scenarios of the next war’ (3), in which aviation – and bombing – featured heavily (2). No surprise, then, to find Abner Brown’s quasi-fascist group considerably ahead in their mastery of air technology in The Box; Dennis Butts compares The Box to Rex Warner’s novel The Aerodrome (1941) and Grahame Greene’s film Went the Day Well? (1942) in presenting a concealed airborne fascist threat in rural England (97). In retrospect and at the time, the aerial threat in the early to mid-1930s was marked by unpredictability, by uncertainty over exactly how, if and when the threat would fully manifest, and this unpredictability echoed aviation’s more general characteristic as an enormously significant, but practically and politically unstable, development within modernity. Yet airmindedness was by no means all sinister. Bernard Vere notes that:
The aeroplane was many things in 1914: an engineering marvel, signifying the conquest of nature, a technology that seemed to render national borders useless, an emergent, rather than a developed, military force, but above all it was a spectacle [...] at meetings and increasingly [...] at dedicated aerodromes. Moreover, aviation was one of the major topics for the illustrated press. (4)

In the two decades between the year described by Vere and the writing of The Box, the military potential of aircraft was, though significantly developed, still primarily a potential rather than an active threat (even if a widely known one, as Masefield’s incorporation of it into his novel indicates), and the popular emphasis on the spectacular, euphoric or visionary aspects of flight remained strong.

While trying to get technically and economically off the ground, the British air industry targeted children in building an appreciative base of potential customers. Croydon offered regular, short and cheap pleasure flights, some of the most enthusiastic customers for which were children, taken up with limited safety precautions (Law 60-61). Between 1932 and 1935, when Masefield was writing The Box, Cobham began his National Aviation Day displays, which combined colourful spectacles to be admired from the ground with opportunities for passenger joyriding. The popular name for these events, ‘Cobham’’s Flying Circus’, emphasized the spectacle’s suitability for children, welcoming their appetite for airminded fun (Law 60).

Alongside such exposure to the real thing, toy and model aeroplanes were marketed heavily, including through the Meccano company, which sold construction kits for children (boys were the presumed and targeted audience) to build their own aeroplanes. Meccano organized its young following into Guild clubs, linked through the circulation of the Meccano Magazine (subitled, ‘Published in the interests of Boys’, or just ‘For Boys’); between 1930
and 1935, the magazine featured aeroplanes or other air transport on its cover eight times, often in highly imaginative, exotic and futuristic contexts (Manduca and Love 179-203). Similar themes were reflected in annual pictorial books for children, such as the ‘Wonder Book of Aircraft’ series, published throughout the 1920s and ’30s (Golding). The world of flight in children’s toys and literature was – as these publications indicate – heavily associated with a utopian modernity characterized by visions of experiential thrill and pleasurable discovery. As the father of two young children in the 1910s and ’20s, Masefield would have been aware of such offerings for children’s delight.

In The Box, the boundary between toys and real technology is highly porous. Flight is presented to children through Christmas gifts; the box is itself an unusual version of such a gift, and Hawlings also distributes ‘little paper balloons, in the shapes of cocks, horses, ships and aeroplanes […] one of a different shape and colour for each child there’ (45). Later, when the children attend the Bishop’s Christmas party, they find the ‘most glorious Christmas tree that had ever been seen’ (111), covered with an array of gifts, including ‘aeroplanes which you could wind up so that they would fly about the room. There were others which you made to fly by pulling a trigger’ (112). It seems Christmas has already begun to fulfil Maria’s earlier demands:

‘Christmas ought to be brought up to date’, Maria said; ‘it ought to have gangsters, and aeroplanes, and lots of automatic pistols’. (24)

Maria is an enthusiast for modernity’s violent spectacles; like an instinctive Futurist, she declares, ‘I shall shoot and I shall shock’ (48). Yet the unlikely object of her desire to ‘update’ here is Christmas, the central event in this novel’s temporality: The Box begins with Kay’s journey home for the holiday and ends at Tatchester Cathedral’s Midnight Mass and
millennium service, whereupon it cycles back to Kay’s opening journey again. This Christmastime is simultaneously transformational and cyclical, countering the modernity of the gang. Christmas queers the temporality inherent in giving the child a gift (especially a toy or model as miniature but functioning pieces of modernity): Such gifts can lead to premature ambitions on the child’s part, as echoed in Kay’s wish to drive a car (17) – which, his guardian reminds him, he is not yet old enough to do (though this wish is ironically replaced by the more extreme forms of movement the box fulfils) and in Maria’s love of guns and gangsters, alongside her extreme resistance to formal education (she has been expelled from three schools, 104). Access to flight-as-play makes young people both futuristic and frivolous, according to the hapless Inspector when Kay reports Hawlings’s kidnap:

‘We were just spellbound [Kay said], they ran out, scrobbled him up, put him in the aeroplane and away they went.’

‘Well’, the Inspector said, ‘it sounds like the fellows at the aerodrome to me: these young fellows, Master Kay, serving their country and away from the civilising influence of their mothers, just full of spirits […] It was a Christmas gambol and a bit of what you call “ragging”’. (74)

The (real) aeroplane is itself a toy, the Inspector implies, flying a ‘Christmas gambol’. The Inspector’s assumptions about the young men at the aerodrome reflect The Box’s preoccupation with both education in the broadest sense – the child’s wayward wishes to discover more of the world – and with the limits of institutionalized education. Christmas embodies this ambivalence, as both an instructional religious festival and a time when institutionalized life gives way to ‘delights’: With Christmas gifts and ‘gambols’, now the
child gets what they want, perhaps even something inappropriate, like the weaponry Maria so desires.

The box is itself such a dangerous toy; it gives Kay what he wants, but puts him in danger both practically and spiritually, in the tradition of ambivalent gifts that promise to make fantasies of omniscience real, like Aladdin’s lamp, or Tolkien’s ring. The box’s capacity to offer time travel also parallels how the opportunity for modern flight appears as a *temporal* disturbance and excessive gift to the fantasies of young men (and transgressive young women), which underlines the question of how far its experiential excitement and wonder could be managed, if not by embracing this rupture as violent destructive potential, only safe for a disembodied participant – which, as we shall see, is precisely Abner Brown’s fantasy and hope. How are the fundamentally *unpredictable* (and childishly indulgent) pleasures and implications of flight to be reconciled with the need to sustain an ecologically and socially stable basis for human life, both individual and communal? Masefield approaches this question through the conflicts over time and control of time in his novel.

**The Odd Temporality of The Box of Delights**

There are several temporalities at work in *The Box*. Seekings House and its environs seemingly inhabit a mostly timeless rural England attuned to the rhythms of the natural world, but overhead the aeroplanes are flying and outside the gang is lurking (even without their malicious modernity, there is apparently a legitimate aerodrome nearby). The children are all in various stages of education, preparing for their own futures, and Kay’s life has itself moved on since *The Midnight Folk*. Yet time is also *stuck* for much of the novel: Snow increasingly cuts off the Tatchester area from its rail, road and telephone connections; the events entirely take place during the school holidays and Maria is already
expelled; Abner Brown seeks to prevent the Cathedral marking its millennium; and the novel’s ending cycles back to its beginning. There are conflicts between cyclical time, progressive time and modern rupture here, conflicts that mirror the apparent contrast between sacred and modern flight.

Abner Brown believes he can resolve these conflicts by stealing the box, with its ability to travel across time and space and to access spectacles of hidden knowledge, and by acquiring Hawling’s elixir of eternal life (271). What Brown actually wants is not to sustain the infiltration of the British state he is establishing in a rural corner of its territory, but rather to escape – by aeroplane – to a secluded island and live with his wealth and power alone. He will substitute for his dictatorial potential a final vision of spectacular and pleasurable destruction as he flies away:

I will open the sluices now. I have emptied six gallons of petrol in the older parts of the house […] With what splendour shall I pass from here: a gurgling flood deep down in the caves and a roaring bonfire above. (261)

So, all the promise of modernity, all its spectacle and violence, ultimately resolves (so Brown plans) into a single consummating moment of destruction-in-creation; yet Brown also intends to make all time simultaneously available from his fixed but disembodied position on the island (disembodied, in that with the box he can go anywhere in time and space whilst yet always remaining secure, detached from the dependencies that bodily human existence involves). Brown seeks something like the Futurists’ ‘velocity which is eternal and omnipresent’ (Marinetti et al. 51) - the totalitarian fantasy that constitutes one version of the promise of flight. To achieve this, Brown would have to defeat Kay and the Jones children, and he is also willing to murder other children (the
choirboys locked up beneath his fake theological college) along the way. The child, with the uncertain futurity he represents, is the natural enemy of Brown’s drive for a consuming end of time, and has an embodied materiality and an unpredictable curiosity that challenge Brown’s fantasies of disembodied omniscience. For all that Brown’s gang perform modernity, their relationship to the future is an awkward one – demonstrated, classically, through their queer antagonism towards children. Brown and Sylvia Daisy Pouncer (Kay’s former governess, a malevolent mother-substitute) have a relationship characterized by camp performativity (“‘Not necessarily, my Brightness’, Abner said […] ‘May a weak woman make a suggestion, my starlike Abner?’ Sylvia said’ (100)) – certainly not a conventional marriage, despite being presented to the community as such in their cover personae. Brown’s sleeping arrangements, discovered by Kay whilst made small by the box and searching the college, involve ‘a hard, little camp-bed that had not yet been made’ (234); the Browns’ romance remains, perhaps, rhetorical. Whereas a Christian marriage is conventionally devoted to raising children, the Brown-Pouncer partnership is a violent conspiracy against them; for all their mastery of futuristic technology, they are firmly (and queerly) disqualified from normative futures and progressive time. Hence their peculiar futurism is unsuccessful in controlling the child: When the gang begin to groom Maria, they astutely present their gangsterism as a wish-fulfilling adult lifestyle that perfectly matches Maria’s love of technology. Maria, perhaps in an equally astute intuition that such a perfect match between childhood wishes and an adult organization is not to be trusted, refuses. In a sense, they, the gang, are the ones who refuse to grow up, even though – or because – they have adopted the tools of modernity. Like many enduring works of children’s fiction, The Box is about a failure to grow up ambivalently shared between adults and children. This ambivalence is expressed above all in the various doublings that structure the novel. Brown, like many villains of children’s literature, is an uncanny double
of the child protagonist (he is what Edelman (2004) calls the ‘sinthomosexual’, the queer enemy of the virtues embodied in the child (Edelman 41-44)). Kay has the box; Abner wants the box. Abner has secured the power of flight for himself; Kay is fascinated by flight, and is given its power by Hawlings. Both Brown and Kay delight in access to esoteric knowledge of history and the natural world. Both are leaders of their respective gangs but only ambivalently so; Brown’s gang is disloyal and dysfunctional, and he intends to eventually abandon them and escape alone. This doubling between Abner and Kay emphasizes the moral ambiguity and practical difficulty of translating and sustaining powerful childhood desires – and the toys of modernity – in adult society.

Christmas, the supreme alternative to school and regimented institutions, offers better fulfilment of the child’s desires than Abner’s gang – but only by also indulging those wishes, refusing to patronize them and allowing them the toys of modernity. As this suggests, and as with the distinction between sacred and modern flight, the relationship between cyclical time and modern rupture is not so straightforwardly antagonistic as it initially seems; whereas Brown offers one, absolutist, answer to the apparent conflict between them, the child, Kay, registers quite another.

(Air) Power and the Child

In this novel, modernity – as emblematized in the aeroplane – appears as wish-fulfilment, whilst flight offers an exciting expansion of vision that puts the body both into ‘delights’ (and risk); but it also gives a potential for violent domination to a single unmoving, totalitarian consciousness: Abner, as he visualizes himself finally alone on his island, a wolf as a static and carnivorous body, rather than as a running/flying body (in a parallel Masefield cannot have intended, this end eerily recalls that of the real fascist leader, Adolf Hitler, who loved to think of himself as a wolf with a lair, but ultimately ended in
stasis - his movement across Europe, like his Luftwaffe, grounded). Brown’s is a vision that both incorporates the tools of fascist manipulation and power-building, and yet plans to ultimately discard them. As observed by Kay (234), Brown both longs for pleasures of spectacle and knowledge, yet is willing to set them aside for some ultimate resolution of time and space themselves. All this reflects the great ideological conflicts of the 1930s and their complex claims on technology and its pleasures: Were the pleasures afforded by technology and modernity a proper aim in themselves, or means to a (potentially violent) end? And how, therefore, should the receptivity of the child, figure for the future, towards these technologies, these toys and weapons, be understood and guided, if at all? The latter is a question that both Brown and the box complicate. It is also complicated by the role of bodily comforts in literally sustaining the children, in the novel’s emphasis on the warmth of Seekings House, on sleep, the rich possets that comfort Kay and Maria and Christmas as a feast of both food and gifts. If Brown creates a quasi-fascist order that ultimately seeks to resolve itself into an act of epic destruction and escape into atemporal stasis, then the cyclical existence of sleep, food, teatime and Christmas provides a parallel, counter source of stability that provides acts of exploration and transformation (above all, in flight) a stable place from which to emerge. This place, with its cyclical time, is, unlike Abner’s island, fundamentally embodied; it sustains the body so that it can go off and have adventures; so that it can grow up, but not in predictable ways. The toy aeroplanes and other lively gifts here – never securely distinct from real aeroplanes – may be ‘just’ for pleasurable play, or they may open visions of consequence for the world. Masefield’s essentially generous narrative suggests that fear of flight and modernity’s potential for violence arises less from anything inherent in the technology, and more from anxieties over deprivation and unpredictability (as seen, on a larger scale, in the rivalry between nations in the race for air power and its military potential). The Box implies that visions of spectacular knowledge
and the embodied experience of flight may be dangerous, but are only deadly when used to serve the desire for absolute predictability, absolute knowledge-as-power, that finally amounts to desiring to stop time itself. Ultimately, *The Box* is successfully resistant to that desire. This resistance derives from Masefield’s sense that the euphoric and disruptive experiences enabled by modern technology are not inevitably productive of violent totalitarian power, but can be made humane if they are understood as dependent on, rather than in antagonism with, the cyclical and stable sources that sustain human life (the home, food, festivals, etc.). Kay and Maria as children, with their appreciation for such sustenance that matches their fascination with flight, speed and modernity, allow Masefield perfectly to register this point. The subtle radicalism in Masefield’s reconciliation, through the figures of the child and the aeroplane, between modern rupture and cyclical sustenance, lies in how he refuses to let the latter compromise or dilute the former. As Maria’s determination to shoot and shock, coupled with her refusal to let the gang exploit such desires, suggests, modernity can be made humane but not safe, static or smooth. This conclusion reflects the child’s presence as materially thwarting the desire to resolve modernity into a single moment. Jacqueline Rose argued of an even more foundational children’s story, *Peter Pan*, that its incompleteness as a text, which produced a history of constant re-writing, reflected an epistemological difficulty in adult views of childhood that both gave the story its popularity and invited endless attempts to re-write and resolve the questions that it posed. *The Box* is not uncompleted in the same literal sense, but nevertheless it – like the box itself, and even the aeroplane that is finally stolen from Brown – resists integration into a total vision like Brown’s. Here the child’s experiences remain invested in futurity, and thus impossible to completely know; but it is possible to give them, Masefield suggests, time and space of their own, the time and space that require material comforts that are sustainable and cyclical, providing a humane basis for the ruptures of
modernity and its technology. As the aeroplane’s development – and its cultural reception in the 1930s – makes clear, childish fantasy is not merely the stuff of which dreams are made, but of which the material world is made too. Hence the texts of children and flight are also continually re-made, because they not only narrate our wishes for the pleasures of flight, they embody their unpredictable potential to become real – but this is a potential that can only be sustained when material culture is humane and generous. This resists, inter alia, any cultural history of flight as endogenously violent and totalitarian.
Works Cited


Notes

1 Babington Smith quotes Masefield describing military hospitals as ‘like an impressionist-futurist picture’ (131); he was, therefore, aware of Futurism to some extent.

2 The combination of deep snow and aeroplanes in The Box may have been inspired by recollection of a recent winter: Bluffield records that in late 1927, ‘Britain was gripped by one of its severest winters. Villages were cut off by deep snow drifts and Air Taxis, the Imperial airways charter division […] was fully occupied in delivering food parcels that were dropped on isolated communities’ (68).

3 I have taken the idea of the child requiring us to ‘look sideways’ from Bond Stockton, 2009.

4 The Futurist Manifesto is itself ambivalent; it emphasizes the embodied dimensions of speed, but also gestures towards some disembodied final state: ‘Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent’ (Marinetti et al., 51). For Virilio’s account of Futurism, see particularly Speed and Politics, 84, 134.

5 On the relationship between Futurism and Fascism, see Gentile 2003, especially Chapter 2, ‘Conflicting Modernisms’.

6 See note 4, above.

7 It is unlikely, but possible, that Masefield had heard about Hitler’s personal wolf imagery before The Box’s publication; Hitler had been using the ‘wolf’ nickname since the early 1920s (Butts 98).

8 By ‘progressive time’, I mean time understood as developmental, for example in the child’s education and development towards adulthood, but also in the larger sense of human ‘progress’ in modernity.