I believe I am rather a fine fellow when I am flying!
—J. M. Barrie, Tommy and Grizel (1900)

The decade of the 1950s kicked away gravity for a new postwar generation of baby boomers. Buoyed up on Icarus’ wings, Galileo’s dreams, and Mephistopheles cloak, we flew, as the poet sang, “into that uncharted gulf and abyss where no bird-song or shout of man could follow…”1 Things seemed to be happening all at once—and just for us…. Almost every day the newspapers reported rocket launches and flying-saucer sightings. Science fiction stories about young spacemen flooded the libraries. Even the tail fins of Dad’s family car rivaled the spaceship designs of the movies Rocketship XM and Destination Moon. Best of all, though, were the “live” telecasts of space adventures that were flying into our living rooms via the eight-by-ten-inch Motorola television sets.

And it is of these latter flights of fancy—“commotions in the firmament,” as J. M. Barrie put it—that I speak. Tom Corbett, Space Cadet (1950–1955) had all the scientific realism of the best scientific speculation of the day and all mythic resonance of Barrie’s immortal child, Peter Pan. Indeed, it can’t be just coincidence that the Walt Disney and Mary Martin revivals of Peter Pan coincided with the arrival of our new space hero, Tom Corbett. Corbett and Pan seemed like brothers. Indeed, as I shall demonstrate, the resemblances between them border on identity. So intimate, so real were they both to the “extravagant gaze” of my own boyish eyes, that I was either down in the basement building my own spaceship with Corbett or up on the roof leaping into space with Pan (with predictable results!).2 Nothing else mattered, neither the atomic science of Corbett’s cosmos nor the melodramatic claptrap of...
Pan’s Neverland. It was the flying that stole the show. “I’ll teach you how to jump on the wind’s back,” cried Pan, speaking for all of his flying brethren, “and then away we go . . . saying funny things to the stars!” It was a potent seduction for those of us just on the verge of puberty, when the timelessness of youth was first threatened by the terrors of impending adolescence. Flight represented, on the one hand, an escapist leap, and, on the other, a tentative step toward maturity.

Just as Pan abducted Wendy and her brothers away from the nursery to Neverland, Corbett plucked his viewers away from the cozy living rooms of the 1950s to his own cosmic Neverland. I don’t use the term “abduction” lightly. It has been charged that fantasies like these “stole” the lives of children, fixing them forever in their texts. An amusing newspaper cartoon at the time illustrated the point: while two children are watching a television image of a rocket in flight, their parents exclaim: “They think nothing of a trip to some planet, but just try to get them to go to the corner store!” (Wade Williams archives). In her controversial The Case of Peter Pan, Jacqueline Rose darkly hints that this is an adult desire to arrest the child’s development: “The child is used (and abused) to represent the whole problem of what sexuality is, or can be, and hold that problem at bay.” In any event a few of us never returned from those Neverlands, as it were, “lost boys” trapped in the unrelenting grip and nostalgia of youth. However, those of us who did, admits Rose, have found that a childlike sensibility could remain a vital and healthy component of our maturity—“something which we endlessly rework in our attempt to build an image of our own history.”

Learning to Fly

The stories of Peter Pan and Tom Corbett are modern-day fairy tales. They embody the archetype of the Eternal Child. As Harold Schechter notes, “They are part of a mythological symbol of the puer aeternus—the ‘divine youth,’ the indestructibly childlike parts of the human personality. They are crucially important qualities too easily forgotten in our intense focus on the world of getting and spending . . . whose purpose is to compensate for the extravagances of the conscious mind.” In a recent letter to the author, Schechter confirmed: “I love the notion of Tom Corbett as a space-age puer aeternus and definitely think it’s a subject worth exploring. I agree that we boomers have maintained a deep allegiance to Neverland, though I’m starting to think that, in comparison to the current crop of American man-boys, we seem to be models of maturity.” Consider: Pan in his costume of leaves and cobwebs, and Corbett in his silver space suit hover weightless over the mundane world. Their Neverlands are fairy realms where time and direction are meaningless, where strange creatures threaten, but death has no meaning. If Pan always returns to the Darling nursery and Corbett to the Space Academy, they ultimately recoil from worldly mortality and fly away again. Pan is essentially androgynous, and traditionally portrayed by a girl. Corbett is oblivious to the charms of his female