

REFLECTIONS ON READING ROBERT PIRSIG'S *ZEN AND THE
ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE*

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I read Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*¹ as a woman, as a feminist, as a mother, as an adult who was once a child, and as the child of a mentally-ill parent. Being who I am makes *ZAMM* a hard book to read. First, it is a very male book. My high school English teacher once said, referring to *The Odyssey*, that the idea of having to take a journey in order to find oneself and come of age applied only to men. Women didn't need to do this. The observation angered me at the time and it still does. I've undertaken a number of journeys, though never on such a grand scale, for the very purpose called into doubt by my English teacher. *ZAMM* is not a male book because it involves a journey by which the author, Robert Pirsig, rediscovers himself (or, perhaps, more accurately, reunites himself). In my reading, the journey motif simply makes *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* a human book.

But when we see Chris crying softly into his sleeping bag and Pirsig ignoring him in order to sleep, I can't help but think that Chris deserves a better parent. "Callous" is how one blogger describes the author's behavior. That word struck a chord, but I wonder whether callous is meant to imply a degree of malice, or something different, like emotionally disabled. Thinking back to my own childhood that began just after the Pirsigs' and Sutherlands' motorcycle trip, it seems to me that, especially at that time, and to a lesser extent now, there was a societal expectation that men project indifference. Being in touch with one's emotions, and being emphatic to others' emotions, seemed, especially then, to be considered a failure of strength for men. I remember feeling, as a child and as a young adult, that my own father's failures as a parent stemmed partly from his attempt to be the man that society expected. My father is a sensitive person but he often tried to put on the front of someone who wasn't sensitive and who was above all of that fathering stuff. Reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, I tried not to be too hard on the narrator in his treatment of Chris, but that sometimes proved difficult. I did feel a huge sense of relief when the narrator finally realized, as the book ends, that he'd been lying to his son throughout the journey, and I was heartened that a door to a more humane interaction with Chris was being opened.

¹ Robert Pirsig, *ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE* 336 (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999).

Another difficulty I had with the book was Pirsig's romanticized view of mental illness. Pirsig seems to view his commitment to the mental hospital and his insanity as the result of his advanced metaphysical understanding of Quality. At one point, I had a similar view of the mentally-ill people; I wanted to think of them as seers that society can't tolerate and of mental hospitals as institutions that sanction meaningless oppression. But, from my own experiences growing up with a mentally-ill parent, I also know what it's like when the person who is in charge of the family cannot function. In one of my poems, I describe my childhood as "following in the wake of a capsized ship."

Pirsig's idea that Phaedrux went insane because he stepped away from the cultural and philosophical backstory that the rest of us use to filter our perceptions of reality seems simplistic and idealistic to me. In my view, Phaedrux went insane in large part because of a chemical or neurological imbalance that caused him to urinate on the floor, threaten his family with guns, and stare for hours at a time at the wall of a bedroom. The image, described in *Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, of Pirsig holding a gun to his then-wife's head while she cowered in a corner haunts me and seems to contradict Pirsig's notion of himself as having gone insane because he experienced "hard enlightenment."² I see insanity not as a philosophical crisis (or the product of such a crisis) but as a physical condition. And yet, I can see that Phaedrux' obsessive preoccupation with Quality (after his colleague asked him about it in an offhand way) probably contributed to his insanity. But was that obsession a symptom of his imbalance or a symptom of genius? In that, I admit, we do not have a ready answer.

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I may not have liked the narrator of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* at times and my skepticism about his portrayal of his insanity persists, but there are aspects of the book that speak to me deeply. I agree with Pirsig that *ZAMM* is a "culture-bearing book"³ and has the capacity to help us heal a profound cultural wound. Pirsig's description of the Classic/Romantic split and how these two disparate world-views can be united seems revolutionary to me. And his idea that

² Mark Richardson, *ZEN AND NOW: ON THE TRAIL OF ROBERT PIRSIG AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE* 171-72 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

³ *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, at 414.

we should treat technology as part of our individual selves sounds right to me, revealing as it does, a serious personal failing on my part.

Pirsig doesn't draw in any significant way on Descartes in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but I see Descartes's idea of mind-body dualism as another manifestation of the classic-romantic split that Pirsig reveals to be a pervasive illusion. Because of my own experience growing up Christian, distancing myself from the religion, and then majoring in philosophy in college, I've long been preoccupied with Descartes's dualism. I see one's brain as a physical object that is part of the body; what sense does it make to see the brain as opposed to the body? And this idea of brain equals good, body equals bad, so prevalent in the Protestantism I grew up with (and which I associate in some ways with Descartes) seems to me to have caused a great deal of cultural pain and even oppression. I believe that this cultural association of women and physicality and sex is responsible for much of the oppression of women in our society. Women are a problem, goes the popular subtext, because they are all body, all emotion, and no mind. And the repression of sexuality, which leads to a fear of homosexuality and oppression of homosexuals, can be linked back to the mind-body split because sexuality is viewed as bodily and therefore bad.

While it's not clear to me either that Pirsig recognizes the mind-body split as one of his targets or that he's concerned about the oppression that it supports, he does note the common Western association of the classic mode with masculinity and of the romantic mode with femininity.⁴ Thus, there is, arguably, a refutation of the mind-body split implicit in Pirsig's philosophy. For example, he talks about the "separation of the subject from the object" as being presumed by logic (and thus by the classic mode) and as being illusory.⁵ Moreover, Pirsig avers that Quality is the basis of, and therefore has the power to unify, "three areas of human experience that are now disunified. These . . . are Religion, Art, and Science."⁶ A union of science, art, and religion suggests the falseness or at least superficiality of a rigidly dualistic view of the world. If science (or the classic mode) and Art (the romantic mode) are actually unified, then there is no basis for seeing them as genuinely oppositional.

Pirsig's discussion of the relationship of art and science and religion reminded me of a discussion in a Native American Literature course I took in college. One of the teachers, a Native woman, talked about her participation in her tribe's Sun Dances and the ritual piercing that took

⁴ *Id.* at 74.

⁵ *Id.* at 143. *See also, id.* at 282, 296 (discussing the artificiality of subject-object dualism).

⁶ *Id.* at 257.

place during the dances. She told us that she had to turn off her rational mind to participate in the Sun Dance. This troubled me, though I was shy and didn't raise a question about it in class. Another student, of Native descent, questioned the teacher's statement. In response, the teacher merely affirmed what she had already told us. I found it strange to hear a Native person say that traditional Native culture was somehow opposed to rationality, although I understood that this was part of the culturally dominant view. I wondered then, as I've often wondered before and since in other, related contexts, whether we really have to choose between, and hierarchically order, different parts of ourselves, even temporarily.

Understanding *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as an effort to unite the universe of knowledge and ways of knowing in a philosophy that was innately non-hierarchical felt like an affirmation of something I've always intuitively known to be true. This is true even though, at times, I wasn't sure that Pirsig was himself on board with all the implications of his own theory. For example, his denigration of "primitive tribes" and so-called "primitive" ways of life⁷ seemed to contradict his own, later conclusions. However, as is often true with great books, *ZAMM* as a book may be bigger, and more broad-minded—more revolutionary—than Pirsig himself.

And that brings me to his portrayal of technology as part of the self, which is the other part of the book that I found enormously compelling, as well as challenging to my own way of being. For example, Pirsig tells us: "The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called yourself. The machine that appears to be 'out there' and the person that appears to be 'in here' are not two separate things. They grow toward Quality or fall away from Quality together."⁸ This idea unsettles me and yet strikes me as unquestionably true. As someone who struggles with (and against) dichotomies and dichotomous ways of thinking, I was struck with the fact that the dichotomy between the human and the technological, or, more personally, me and my computer is one that I've taken for granted, even relished, and certainly not one that I have thought to question. If my computer is uncharacteristically slow or locks up or auto-corrects incorrectly, I wallow in anger at the computer's malfunctioning.

Reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, I had to acknowledge that this whole mode of relating to computers and other technology was wrong. I had to admit that Pirsig had it right: "the

⁷ *Id.* at 128.

⁸ *Id.* at 325.

workability of the machine *is* just an objectification of . . . peace of mind” and relating to technology “isn’t separate from the rest of . . . existence.”⁹

Pirsig’s observation suggests a whole new realm in which to cultivate peace of mind. It also deepened my appreciation for those who approach technology intuitively as parts of themselves. To my spouse, a self-taught mechanical and computer guru, a technological malfunction, whether it occurs in an engine or a computer, may be frustrating, but it is ultimately an engaging puzzle to be approached with patience. Failed attempts at fixing the problem add to his knowledge base and facilitate his interaction, even communion, with the machine. For me, who struggles mightily to change a bicycle tire, that kind of communion is a long way off, but, thanks to Pirsig, I now recognize it as something to aspire to.

⁹ *Id.* at 165, 325 (emphasis added).