Bodies in Motion: Evolution and Experience in Motorcycling


"A car, at whatever velocity, is still somehow comparable to a home. Four wheels and a chassis marry it to the ground; a bike, by contrast, is an extension of the body and soul of its rider. It expresses his power; it makes him one with the world through which he rides; it allows him to register life, its blur racing past like unspooling film, as he speeds along the horizon's edge. This is the line between dawn and dark, life and death. The thrill of the ride lies in its intensity, the need to live in the moment, never outside it. Here, everything extraneous falls away. Cocooned in his black leather uniform, masked against the night wind, hugged close as a twinned spirit with his fellow rider, my father found the happiness he'd searched for all his life. Here was the elixir of youth that could be drained over and again, and never lose its power, never fail in the effect of its ambrosia".1

Miranda Seymour's father George struggled through life to win an uncertain inheritance—the stately home Thrumpton Hall near London that he loved—and dutifully worked, married, contributed to charity, and reared daughters. When around age fifty he felt that in doing his duty he had failed himself, that he was starved for passion, lonely, and unlived, he discovered the Ducati motorcycle, which he dubbed "the Duke." A local boy in leathers named Nick came with it, for a time. Nick decamped and married, but a motorbike can still be ridden off into the sunset. Like the Lone Ranger's steed Silver (or Rostam's Raksh in Iranian epic, or the Turkic folk hero Köro lu's Kirat, the iron horse is faithful. The driver of an automobile, to a biker, is a "cager," the stationary prisoner of a moving cubicule. But we bikers are riders. Like horsemen, we employ muscle, coordination, physical grace, and rapt attention to control our mounts. A ride soothes a broken heart: it takes you away from the misery and worry of the day since you must not dwell upon anything but the road and the bike. It makes you feel good.

Bikes are, literally, about good vibrations: Thompson analyzes in detail (with numerous pages of graphs) the ones that the engines of different motorcycles produce: every rider feels some that massage and cheer him and others that grate upon and tire him, like the character, gaits, and oscillation of a horse.2 To a motorcyclist, the throb of the motor is musical; and Thompson (pp. 178–180) investigates the aspects and psychological effects of percussive sounds. Those motions are communicated from bike to rider; but riding is much more active than it may seem to an observer. Thompson points out that in riding a bike you use all four limbs, and in a long discussion of the evolution

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1 I have benefitted greatly from conversations with friends on the ride to this essay: Prof. Marcus Mosely, Northwestern University; the artist James Hobbins, Dorchester, MA; Mary Ann Wilmarth, Harvard University Health Service; Prof. Christina Marincic, Tufts University; Prof. David Wunsch, University of Massachusetts at Lowell; and my Dad, who bought me my bike and over a Guinness explained how he manufactured a cam in the United States Navy during World War II.

2 These are all employed in hippotherapy to increase pelvic mobility, balance, and locomotion. Riding horses also has strong psychotherapeutic value. See [2]. On a dramatic case of the treatment by horse riding and Mongolian shamanic practice of a boy with autism, see [3].

James R. Russell is the Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard and is a specialist also in Ancient Iranian religion and Russian literature. He rode motorcycles through the 1970s and got back on a bike last year. His E-mail address is russelldeep@gmail.com.
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Bikes are, literally, about good vibrations: Thompson analyzes in detail (with numerous pages of graphs) the ones that the engines of different motorcycles produce: every rider feels some that massage and cheer him and others that grate upon and tire him, like the character, gaits, and oscillation of a horse.2 To a motorcyclist, the thrill of the motor is musical; and Thompson (pp. 178-180) investigates the aspects and psychological effects of percussive sounds. These communications are motored from bike to rider; but riding is much more active than it may seem to an observer. Thompson points out that in riding a bike you use all four limbs, and in a long discussion of the evolution of human activity he establishes that doing this is something we instinctively like: our ancestors hoisted the skill of using legs and arms together to negotiate the low branches of trees in gathering, locomotion, or defense. On the typical (i.e., post-1975) bike, your left hand operates the clutch (as well as directional signals, headlight, and horn); your left foot kicks in the gears, pushing down into first and lifting up to fifth or sixth; your right hand controls the front brake and twists the throttle; and your right foot presses the rear brake. You coordinate all these actions while negotiating curves and turns (countersteering with the arms, bending the body, flexing the legs), constantly scanning ahead and periodically behind for danger rather as a prehistoric hunter might have done, deciding whether to speed up aggressively to avoid a threat or execute a swipe or brake in defense. The courage, physical strength, and agility needed to ride a motorcycle have another ancient cultural and evolutionary positive aspect: these are qualities attractive to a potential mate. Good riders on their mounts are sexy: think James Dean and Marlon Brando.

There is an interesting corollary to Thompson's observations. In his recent book The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009, p. 20), Denis Dutton notes that humans everywhere tend to be like painters. Get me a high vantage point of blue water, a vantage point from where one scans a Savannah landscape, some animals, and trees: few work low enough for a man conveniently to climb them. There you have it: revealing weather, the four-limb factor, the (iron) horse, and the open road with an unimpeded view (so you can scan the road and spot that SUV cager so busy talking on her cell phone, eating lunch, and painting her toenails that there's no way she's going to see you as she makes that sudden, unex- plained turn). From today back to Periclean Athens (c. 120 generations, with another 380 from then to the beginnings of agriculture and the first cities); but the Pleistocene era, the time when human ancestors roamed these well-waterscapes of Hansard, hunted and climbed trees, lasted 80,000 generations. Our sense of beauty evolved over that long, early span of time; and it does not seem to have changed very much.

Motorcycling relates, then, to what we responded to in art; and Thompson observes that the ride itself is kin- esthetic (p. 168), that it moves artifice feeling to the level of nature. He might go further with this: bikers tend to like to decorate their bodies with tattoos of things and beings in motion—daring flames, eagles—and to wear clothes that respond to movement. Like jockeys with Ekistics to the stream in the wind. Square frames with unmovvng canvases are art for cag- ers. Biker art moves with the body it adorns; and it is made to be seen, not by museum-goers, but by friends, enemies, and lovers. It cannot be kept in a locked room and bequested: its value is in its presence and vital- ity; its longevity, the lifetime of the rider or the length of the ride; its audience, those who can see his bare skin. The iconography of the ancient nomadic rider of Eurasia, the Scythians, is often similar and some- times identical; and perhaps the motorcycle culture of today may help one to fill in the lacunae in our knowl- edge of that antique civilization. And bikes themselves, with their flowing lines, are works of art. In his poem "Man and Woman" Friedrich Seidel muses, "... For instance,/Motorcycles. What definition of beauty can be excluded/ The MV Agusta racing 500-3S/ From the land of Ducatis."[4, 5]

So motorcycling, like horseback riding, seems to be hard-wired to deep, essential, and satisfying our human skills and activities, and responds also to our physical and sexual pleasures and to our archetypal aesthetic values. None of which is news to bikers who always maintain that one ride is work ten hours on a shrink's couch. Seidel in "February," a poem about a month that is not riding season in the northeastern United States, counsels: "The best way not to kill yourself/ Is to ride a motorcycle very fast/ How to avoid stupid accidents/ Get on and actually ride" [4, p. 211]. Thompson, a former racer, has an entertaining chapter on the importance of speed. He also observes that bikes invite men to link up, to attempt repairs they cannot make on our, the microcircuitry of their lap- top computers. In a world increasingly alienated from work, if not their relationships, motorcycling can be deeply satisfying. An academic turned motorcycle mechanic, Matthew B. Crawford, explores this aspect of bikes and human well being in Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work, New York: Penguin, 2009. He sees the arts and crafts movement of the late 19th century, with its reaction against the bureaucratization of work and the alienation of man from his technology, as a precursor of today's American man foolling around in the garage, wrench in hand (pp. 28-29). Working with a motor- cycle can bring people together, too. Another scholar, Hilker, Matthew B. Ribner, describes in his memoir Rig Sid's Vincenzi: The Story of a Father, a Son, and the Motorcycle of a Lifetime, New York: Hudson Street Press, 2009, how building a bike with his father, a legendary mechanic laid low by age and illness, saved them both—the author-son, from getting burnt out by the academic grind; the master craftsman-father, from a broken marriage. Vincenzi is a Vig- bondage engine in a Ducati body: perhaps imagine Arnold

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IEEE TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY MAGAZINE | SPRING 2011
Schwarzenegger's strength in harmony with the curves of Gina Lollobrigida. And too bad bicycles and the internal combustion motors to replace their pedals had not yet been invented when Turgenev wrote "Fathers and Sons."

There must be some Americans for whom motorcycles evoke only Hell's Angels, the social danger of males in groups. Another Thompson. Hunter Thompson, wrote his first great gonzo monograph about them. Our Thompson, Steven Thompson, devotes a section of his book to motorcycle clubs and gangs, too, exploring the tension between the Alpha Male who wants to ride alone, take risks, and make his own laws (Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Jack Nicholson in "Easy Rider"), and the group (the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club that buzz around the young Brando in "The Wild One") who want to bond for both company and competition, and need to share rules to survive. Casting one's mind back again to the Central Asian steppes of antiquity, one recalls the horse-riding packs of marauders the Zoroastrian sacred scripture, the Avesta, calls maityras, a word that came to mean "outlaw, scoundrel" but originally meant just "marriageable young man". Biker bands either encompass, or recall, the temporal space of freedom between being a boy and assuming the gravity of a paterfamilias. The poet Thom Gunn evoked the motorcycle gang in "On the Move": "... On motorcycles, up the road, they come; Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the Boys, Until the distance throws them forth, their hum/Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh./ In goggles, donned impersonality./ In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,/ They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—/ And almost hear a meaning in their noise" [6]. I hear an echo in this of Melville's bashful warrior whalemen, and the poem becomes America's epic a century on.

Neither Thompson nor the other writers I have cited here have much to say about the injury and death our dangerous sport brings so many. These books are about how great motorcycles make you feel; but bikers often suffer life-changing accidents. More Marines die on sportbikes than in combat. I am recovering from a recent motorcycle crash in Israel that shattered my knee and lower leg. I survived the rest of me was armored, and I can walk again, thanks to a team of superb Israeli orthopedic surgeons and several extraordinary caregivers, both physical therapists and family members. But the roads are full of squids (as we call such riders) of all ages and both sexes who ride in T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. All the gear—goes the mantra—all the time. Unless you want your body to become road pizza—and some states are actually repealing helmet laws! Books about motorbikes that downplay safety consign us to discussions of technology and medicine rather than technology and society, and they ignore another biker adage: There are two kinds of riders, those who have been down and those that are going to go down. When you go down, have that gear on. Even one drink before a ride is too many. Check your electrics, brakes, tires, and oil. Motorcycles are fun, but they're as perilous as the war horse at a gallop, or the Pequod cutting through the waves after the whale.

Still, when hospital staff passing by my broken, bleeding body in that emergency room in Jerusalem shook their heads and murmured in Hebrew Ofno'an! ("Motorcycle rider") I affirmed it with pride through the pain and terror. The hope of getting back on, got me through. Thompson imagines a future in which transportation is so fully automated, streamlined, and controlled by computers and safety features that motorbikes will become obsolete or even illegal. May such a time never come, when Steppenwolf's anthem "Get your motor runnin'" is no longer an invitation to adventure, but an elegy.

Man is a climber, a hunter-gatherer, an artist, a craftsman—and a spirit. Towards the end of his book Thompson speaks of the spiritual aspect of motorcycling; and twice he mentions the meditation of a Jesuit motorcyclist, Fr. John Staudenmaier, who wrote that riding helps him "to like being small in a large domain".

It is an autumn evening somewhere in Boston, Massachusetts. I leave the warmth and light of a dinner party, zip up my heavy, padded leather jacket, don the gleaming helmet, and pull on metal-studded gloves. The air is crisp and dark. I'm all alone with the bike now. It roars to life, the headlamp and indicator lights glow, the engine warms, the frame vibrates, I mount up, look at the world framed by the handgrips, my left foot clicks into first, my right hand turns the throttle, and now the bike and I are moving together, alert and tiny in the vast wonderful rushing ocean of night. "Oh God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small!" I murmur the Breton fisherman's prayer that John F. Kennedy loved, and my Honda CB 250 Nighthawk carries me home.

References