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Note: Thompson's Bodies in Motion is reviewed, page 8

The Importance of Showing Up

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JAMES R. RUSSELL

Bodies in Motion: Evolution and Experience in Motorcycling

By Steven L. Thompson. Duluth, MN: Aero Design & Mfg. Co., Inc., 2008, 417 pp.

"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].[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 unloved, 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 Rakhsh in Iranian epic, or the Turkic folk hero Köro lu's Kırat), the iron horse is faithful. The driver of an automobile, to a biker, is a "cager," the stationary prisoner of a moving cubicle. 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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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 like paintings that contain lots of blue water, a good vantage point from which one scans a savannah landscape, some animals, and trees that fork low enough for a man conveniently to climb them. There you have it: great riding weather, the four-limb factor, the (iron) horse, and the open road with an unimpeded view (so you can scan ahead 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, unsignalled left turn). From today back to Periclean Athens is 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 those well-watered landscapes, 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.

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Motorcycling relates, then, to what we respond to in art; and Thompson observes that the ride itself is kinesthetic (p. 168), that is, it marries artistic feeling to the experience of motion. One might go further with this: bikers tend to like to decorate their bodies with tattoos of things and beings in motion—darting flames, eagles—and to wear clothes that respond to movement, like jackets with fringes that stream in the wind. Square frames with unmoving canvases are art for cagers. 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 bequeathed: its value is in its presence and vitality; 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 riders of Eurasia, the Scythians, is often similar and sometimes identical; and perhaps the motorcycle culture of today may help one to fill in the lacunae in our knowledge of that antique civilization. And bikes themselves, with their flowing lines, are works of art. In his poem "Man and Woman" Frederick Seidel muses, "… For instance,/ Motorcycles. What definition of beauty can exclude/ The MV Agusta racing 500-3,/ From the land of Donatello"[4], [5].

So motorcycle riding, like horseback riding, seems to be hard-wired to deep, essential, and satisfying 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 worth 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 suicide?/ Get on and really 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 tinker, to attempt repairs they cannot make on, say, the microcircuitry of their laptop computers. In a world increasingly alienated from hands-on craftsmanship, this relationship to one's motorcycle 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 fooling around in the garage, wrench in hand (pp. 28–29). Working with a motorcycle can bring people together, too. Another scholar-biker, Matthew Biberman, describes in his memoir *Big Sid's Vincati: The Story of a Father, a Son, and the Motorcycle of a Lifetime*, New York: Hudson Street Press, 2009, how building a Vincati together with his father, a legendary mechanic laid low by old age and illness, saved them both—the author-son, from getting burned out by the academic grind; the master craftsman-father, from despair. A Vincati is a Vincent engine in a Ducati body: imagine perhaps Arnold

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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 *mairyas*, 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 very 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 because 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 motorcycles 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.

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[1] M. Seymour, *Thrumpton Hall: A Memoir of Life in My Father's House*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2008, pp. 208-209.

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[3] R. Isaacson, *The Horse Boy: A Father's Quest to Heal His Son*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, 2009.

[4] F. Seidel, *Poems* 1959-2009. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009, p. 415.

[5] *The Art of the Motorcycle*. New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum, 1998.

[6] T. Gunn, "On the move," from "The Sense of Movement" (1957), in Collected Poems. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994, p. 39.

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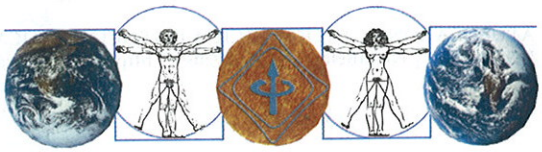

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