The Cosmic Web

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PART II

LITERARY STRATEGIES
CHAPTER 2

DRAWN TO THE WEB

The Quality of Rhetoric in Pirsig's

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

He who without the Muses' madness in his soul comes knocking at the door of poetry, thinking that art alone will make him fit to be called a poet, will find that he is found wanting and that the verse he writes in his sober senses is beaten hollow by the poetry of madmen.

*Plato, Phaedrus*

Robert M. Pirsig's version of the field concept derives in part, as his title suggests, from the Zen concept of a fluid, dynamic reality that precedes and eludes verbal formulation. Yet it is also informed by the Western tradition that sees the Word as the ultimate reality. The concern with language that was one of the keynotes of the last chapter is central to Pirsig's attempt to find a rhetoric capable of meeting these conflicting premises.

The emphasis on rhetoric is apparent in the "Author's Note" that introduces the narrative. In it, Pirsig claims that "what follows is based on actual occurrences," but adds that "much has been changed for rhetorical purposes."¹ In this ambitious autobiography that is also a novel,² three distinct rhetorical strategies are evident: those of the au-

¹Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam, 1980), p. 1. I use the Bantam page numbers since this is the most widely read edition. They can be converted to the page numbers in the Morrow edition (*New York, 1974*) by multiplying by 13/12.

²Apparently there are extensive parallels between the author's life and the biography he presents in *Zen*. He did teach at Montana, was a technical writer, and had a son who was institutionalized for a time for mental illness. This information on Pirsig's life is not firsthand; it comes from mutual acquaintances.
thor; those of the unnamed narrator, whose ideas obviously overlap with the author's, but who is also treated ironically; and those of Phaedrus, the shadowy other self that the narrator used to be. The three have in common the desire to find a rhetorical mode that will allow them to represent in words the field view of reality that they call "Quality." Contrary to what the "Author's Note" implies, rhetoric is not peripheral to this enterprise; it is at its center.

Phaedrus's approach to defining and disseminating this field view is as bold as it is naive. According to the narrator, Phaedrus was technically a genius, scoring 185 on the Stanford-Binet I.Q. test. His ambition, and his failure, were proportionate to his intelligence. His attempts to reform the entire structure of classical reason ended in a mental breakdown, a court-ordered institutionalization, and an eventual eradication of his personality by electroshock therapy. "He was dead," our narrator affirms.

Destroyed by order of the court, enforced by the transmission of high-voltage alternating current through the lobes of his brain. Approximately 800 mills of amperage at durations of 0.5 to 1.5 seconds had been applied on twenty-eight consecutive occasions, in a process known technologically as 'Annihilation ECS.' A whole personality had been liquidated without a trace in a technologically faultless act that has defined our relationship ever since. I have never met him. Never will. (p. 77)

But Phaedrus has left behind a legacy—trunks of notes, recollections of him by family and friends, even fleeting memories that, like flashes of lightning, illuminate the narrator's quest for him. From these the narrator reconstructs Phaedrus's story; it centers on trying to understand the relationship between language and the holistic, dynamic reality that he calls "Quality."

Almost from the moment that Phaedrus conceives of Quality, he senses that it cannot be defined. His initial insight is confirmed when he has a sudden intuition that what he has been calling Quality is the same as the Tao of classical Zen thought. As he reads through his handwritten copy of the Tao Te Ching, he makes a "certain substitution" that confirms his insight: "The quality that can be defined is not the Absolute Quality" and "The names that can be given it are not Absolute names" (p. 227).

But Phaedrus, teaching rhetoric at the University of Montana, is pressed by academic colleagues for a definition. Under pressure as
much from his own commitment to reason as from his fellow English teachers, he decides to risk a definition, proclaiming that Quality is the moment when subject and object meet, the instant of "preintellectual awareness" from which flow all of our conscious images of the world. The reader will recognize in this formulation a model very similar to the one Bohr proposed in his interpretation of the Uncertainty Principle. Pirsig, however, chooses to locate Phaedrus's response as part of the much earlier tradition of Western rationalism. "Why he chose . . . to respond to this dilemma logically and dialectically rather than take the easy escape of mysticism, I don't know," the narrator confesses.

But I can guess. I think first of all that he felt the whole Church of Reason [Phaedrus's term for academe] was irreversibly in the arena of logic, that when one put oneself outside logical disputation, one put oneself outside any academic consideration whatsoever. Philosophical mysticism, the idea that truth is undefinable and can be apprehended only by nonrational means, has been with us since the beginning of history. It's the basis of Zen practice. But it's not an academic subject. (p. 207)

The decision marks a turning point. From there Phaedrus's path takes him to the University of Chicago to write a doctoral dissertation on Quality. At Chicago he enrolls in "Ideas and Methods 251," a course in classical Greek rhetoric. Already tending toward megalomania and paranoia, Phaedrus sees in the Chairman's conduct of the class a plot to defeat the rhetoric whose champion Phaedrus conceives himself to be. The plot is appropriate, for in pitting the Aristotelian Chairman against him, it re-enacts the struggle Phaedrus imagines took place in ancient Greece between the rhetoricians and dialecticians, which in his view was a struggle over whether reality could or could not be captured in words.

The narrator presents Phaedrus's reconstruction of Greek thought at face value, but this highly conjectural scenario is of interest more for what it reveals about Pirsig's text than for what it teaches about Greek history.³ According to Phaedrus, the Sophists, dedicated to rhetoric,
had already formulated an idea of Quality, which they called “the Good.” Like Quality, the Good “was not a form of reality. It was reality itself, every-changing, ultimately unknowable in any kind of fixed, rigid way” (p. 342). Because it cannot be known directly, it must be presented through analogy. The purpose of rhetoric is to create the analogies that can awake the apprehension of the Good in the listener’s mind. To Plato and the dialecticians, however, reality was not the dynamic interaction the rhetoricians believed it to be, but a “fixed and eternal and unmoving Idea” (p. 342). Hence it can be spoken directly, without need for analogy; the proper tool for its representation is not rhetoric but dialectical analysis.

From this initial schism between the Good and the True evolve the modern dichotomies that are the subject of the narrator’s discourse. When the Truth-lovers won over the Sophists, the narrator conjectures, Western civilization was started on the path that led to stunning technological feats, but emotional and aesthetic sterility. In this long decline into a society that believes in doing what is reasonable even when it isn’t good, rhetoric is demoted from that which is best suited to represent the Good, as the Sophists see it, to the illegitimate emotional persuasion that Plato alleges it to be, and finally to the classification to which Aristotle consigns it, a branch of pandering.

This long, pseudo-philosophical disquisition has a suspense not easily conveyed here, for running alongside Phaedrus’s reconstruction of Greek thought is his own battle with the Chairman. After some preliminary skirmishes, Phaedrus finally defeats the Chairman on a point which any rhetorician instinctively appreciates, but which Truth-lovers tend to overlook: that the spoken word is only an analogy to reality, not reality itself. Seated at a classroom table that has a crack running down the middle, in keeping with the cultural schism being re-enacted there, Phaedrus defeats the Chairman by locating in the Platonic dialogue from which his name is taken the moment when Socrates admits that

4This scenario suggests that the author is innocent of knowledge about developments in the philosophy of science since the late 1800s. This is not the only example of such naiveté; whenever the narrator attempts a discussion of the history of philosophy, he betrays what George Steiner calls “potted summaries” of very complex issues (Steiner, p. 149). That he should nevertheless be concerned with issues that have dominated the philosophy of science in this century is striking evidence that the cultural matrix is capable of guiding individual inquiry in parallel directions, even when there is little or no direct influence between the different inquiries.
his parable of the chariot drawn by two horses is not truth itself, but a representation of truth. Thereafter Phaedrus regards the Chairman with a mixture of contempt and pity; in his mind, his triumph has reversed the ancient triumph of dialectic over rhetoric.

But though Phaedrus believes he won the battle, he finally comes to see that he has lost the war, for he "is doing the same bad things himself" as the dialecticians do when they use words as if they were reality.

His original goal was to keep Quality undefined, but in the process of battling against the dialecticians he has made statements, and each statement has been a brick in a wall of definition he himself has been building around Quality. Any attempt to develop an organized reason around an undefined quality defeats its own purpose. The organization of the reason itself defeats the quality. Everything he has been doing has been a fool's mission to begin with. (p. 357)

Thereafter he turns to silence, sitting in the corner of his bedroom letting his urine flow naturally, letting his cigarette burn down naturally until it is extinguished by the blisters forming on his hand. Depending on one's viewpoint, this state can be seen either as a mystical ecstasy in which Phaedrus is finally at one with the Quality moment, or as a withdrawal into the insanity that the narrator so much fears. Perhaps the two are indistinguishable.

Though Phaedrus's failure is an extremely poignant moment, on reflection we can see that failure was the only possible outcome of his struggle with the University. That this realization is apt to strike us only after we have finished reading testifies to the narrator's evocative skill. But to try to imagine Phaedrus actually writing his dissertation on Quality is to realize how futile the effort must have been. The proposition that Quality could be defined in a dissertation, let alone defended, is apt to inspire incredulity in anyone who has experience with dissertations. Phaedrus fails because he cannot find a suitable rhetorical mode in which to embody Quality. Committed to reason, he cannot resist being drawn into definitions and dialectical argument, and he then inevitably loses the Quality he pursues.

The failure is not, however, the end of the quest to capture Quality in words. Pirsig's narration is a fresh start from a different direction. Pirsig, cannier and more wary, begins with the recognition that analyt-
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critical discourse alone is not enough; his narrative differs from Phaedrus's aborted dissertation in its fuller use of rhetorical resources. In a sense, the dissertation has been written after all; but it is now combined with the emotions that electrify Phaedrus's quest, and encapsulated within the philosophical discourse that Pirsig calls his "Chautauquas." Surrounding the narrator's intellectual, abstract analysis of Quality is an extraordinarily complex rhetorical superstructure—all the more complex because it poses as a simple transcription of events.

Like Phaedrus, the narrator's focus is on reason. "About the Buddha that exists independently of any analytical thought," Pirsig writes, "much has been said—some would say too much, and would question any attempt to add to it. But about the Buddha that exists within analytic thought, and gives that analytic thought its direction, virtually nothing has been said" (p. 70). The goal, then, is not to abandon rational thought, not to attempt, as the Zen koan does, to involve the conscious mind in contradiction and paradox until it gives up and comes to rest. Rather, the attempt is to combine rational analysis with a fuller use of rhetoric so that the reader experiences Quality even while hearing about it. The means by which the narrator attempts this synthesis is deceptively simple: an alternation between past- and present-tense narration. The narrator begins, for example, by saying "I can see by my watch, without taking my hand from the left grip of the cycle, that it is eight-thirty in the morning," but then moves into the past-tense narration characteristic of the Chautauquas. The narrative thus proceeds in two different modes: the narrator's evocative descriptions of the immediate scene, and the analytical discourse of the Chautauquas. The divisions correspond with what the narrator identifies as the Romantic and Classic modes of understanding, one based on an intuitive appreciation of immediate surface, the other on an intellectual analysis of underlying form. At the very beginning of his tale, the narrator remarks that he prefers motorcycles to cars because "on a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it any more, and the sense of presence is overwhelming" (p. 4). Talking about Quality in the Chautauquas helps us to understand the concept intellectually, while coming back to the "scene" maintains our ongoing relationship with the Quality moment.

Of course, this involvement is a rhetorical illusion. What the narrator tries to occlude from our immediate consciousness is the obvious fact
that such descriptions are not experiences at all, but verbal reconstructions of sensory stimuli which may or may not have happened in the first place. The narrator’s description of the “immediate” moment in fact embodies the very duality that the Quality event is meant to circumvent. As Pirsig defines the Quality moment, it is an undifferentiated unity that precedes and eludes intellectual concepts; it is therefore analogous to the turning kaleidoscope that we imagined in Chapter 1, whose fluid, inclusive dynamics defy classification into “patterns.” But when the narrator writes as a person describing a world “out there,” he has already bifurcated that fluid, dynamic whole into a subject regarding an object. What the narrator knows but does not admit is that even his immediate “scene” is an artifact that comes after the moment, a division imposed by the conscious mind as it seeks to understand the world as distinct from itself. As the moment that precedes intellectual awareness, the Quality event has passed by even before we read the narrator’s present-tense descriptions. Between any verbal construct and the Quality event is a difference that is by its nature not sayable, because to speak inevitably implies that one is not the Quality moment but separate from it. At best language can only describe what has been, not what is.

That the narrator’s rhetoric, though more complex than Phaedrus’s, is still not adequate to the enormous task he sets himself becomes apparent as he keeps getting caught in the fundamental dilemma involved whenever Quality enters the realm of discourse. In the following passage, the narrator tries, as Phaedrus did with his students, to convince us that we already know what Quality is. Using his favorite metaphor of the mechanic who cares about and is involved in his work, the narrator describes the Quality experience.

What produces this involvement is, at the cutting edge of consciousness, an absence of any sense of separateness of subject and object. ‘Being with it,’ ‘being a natural,’ ‘taking hold’—these are a lot of idiomatic expressions for what I mean by this subject-object duality, because what I mean is so well understood as folklore, common sense, the everyday understanding of the shop. (p. 266)

The paradox of speaking Quality is implicit in the images the narrator uses to describe it. He talks about an “absence of any sense of sepa-
rateness,” but then identifies this awareness as taking place at the “cutting edge of consciousness.” The knife imagery, as we shall see, occurs elsewhere as a metaphor for Aristotelian analysis. But the narrator too wields a knife when he speaks, as the “cutting edge” of his consciousness divides his pre-intellectual awareness of the event into the verbal abstractions of language. A variation of this dilemma appears in the narrator’s repeated assurances that the ordinary people who are his readers already know what Quality is from “folklore, common sense, the everyday understanding of the shop.” If he can achieve consensus, he can avoid defining Quality. But in order to achieve it, he must speak; his voice is what invites (or if we are more skeptical, creates) consensus by revealing to us how his thought and ours are the same. Consensus can be established, then, only by speaking; but speaking distorts the essence of the Quality that we are presumed to share. As the voice continues to enlarge the area of discourse, bringing more and more of Pirsig’s thought into the common consciousness of reader and narrator, the problem only becomes more acute. For as the voice continues, more and more “bricks”—words, definitions, statements—stand between us and the Quality moment.

The narrator’s problem with rhetoric is endemic to his narrative. The narrator warns that in classical Aristotelian analysis there is an “invisible knife moving,” cutting the world into parts. But as we have seen, his own discourse does exactly the same thing, as his bifurcated narrative form suggests. Though this double form is an attempt to combine into one text both immediate experience and rational analysis, its effect is to further cut up into pieces the unity that Quality presupposes.

But the pursuit of Quality is only one goal of the narrator’s speech. More pressing, and for him equally as important, is the need to prove his sanity. This he does by asserting his difference from Phaedrus. The narrator’s pretense that Phaedrus is a person separate from himself is part of an elaborate defense mechanism, for we gradually realize that the narrator is the personality that emerged after Phaedrus’s personality was annihilated by electroshock therapy. The narrator’s relationship to this former self is intensely ambivalent. On the one hand he admires Phaedrus, spending countless hours attempting to reconstruct his ideas and planning a motorcycle trip so he can revisit Phaedrus’s former haunts. But he also fears and flees from him, or more precisely from the
possibility that this part of the self will return to assert that Pirsig, not Phaedrus, is the ghost.

For the narrator, the self has thus been artificially divided into a speaking subject and a passive object. If form is itself a message, then the message conveyed by this split narrative, and split narrator, is the same: his rhetoric is not overcoming duality, but reinforcing it. As he says when he discovers that the hairline fracture in his friendship with John is representative of a much larger schism within the culture, “You follow these little discrepancies long enough and they sometimes open into huge revelations” (p. 47).

I should like now to enlarge the framework of the discussion by referring to a distinction that the narrator rightly insists is crucial. “The application of this knife, the division of the world into parts,” the narrator points out, “... is something somebody does. From all this awareness we must select, and what we select and call consciousness is never the same as the awareness because the process of selection mutates it. We take a handful of sand from the endless landscape of awareness around us and call that handful of sand the world” (p. 69). What Phaedrus and Pirsig seek is to “direct attention to the endless landscape from which the sand is taken” (p. 70). In a passage whose italics indicate his depth of feeling on the issue, the narrator insists that “it is necessary to see that part of the landscape, inseparable from it, which must be understood, is a figure in the middle of it, sorting sand into piles. To see the landscape without seeing this figure is not to see the landscape at all” (p. 70). The figure in our landscape, however, the figure we must see if we are “to see the landscape at all,” is not the narrator but the author.

The narrator explicitly denies that his rhetorical intent extends beyond the simple strategy of a bifurcated narrative. “I suppose if I were a novelist rather than a Chautauqua orator,” he writes, “I'd try to ‘develop the characters’ of John and Sylvia and Chris with action-packed scenes that would also reveal ‘inner meanings’ of Zen and maybe Art and maybe even Motorcycle Maintenance. That would be quite a novel, but for some reason I don't feel quite up to it” (p. 120). If the narrator is not quite up to it, however, the author is. As we shall see, increasingly Pirsig is developed as a “character” who engages in “action-packed scenes” that reveal a great many “inner meanings.” Only when we turn
to consider the author’s rhetorical strategies do the full complexities of the attempt to capture Quality in words become apparent.

The subtlety of the author’s rhetorical strategies can be seen in the ironies that emerge at the narrator’s expense. The most important, perhaps, occurs in the narrator’s relation to his son Chris. Richard H. Rodino notes that the narrator at the very beginning of the book “makes an *a priori* acceptance of the limitations of motorcycle travel that becomes a staggering threat to the Quality of his everyday life” when he commits himself to an internal monologue rather than an active interaction with his son.5 “Unless you’re fond of hollering you don’t make great conversations on a running cycle” (p. 6). Lost in what Rodino calls “the cottony silence of his own thoughts,”6 the narrator turns more and more from the real child on the back of his cycle to the hypothetical and abstract audience of the Chautauquas. It is from his readers that he hopes to gain the consensus that will validate his sanity and justify the Quality of his discourse over what he characterizes as the dangerously insane tirades of Phaedrus. But the deteriorating quality of his relationship with Chris shows that such introspective discourse works against Quality in his immediate surroundings, and ultimately against the consensus with his readers that he strives so hard to achieve. For as the ironies multiply, doubts grow in the reader’s mind that Phaedrus was quite as inadequate as Pirsig claims, or that Pirsig is as fully adequate as he would have us believe.

In retrospect we can appreciate that the signals begin very early, for example in the narrator’s remark, when he first begins to talk about Phaedrus, that “the purpose of the enlargement is not to argue for him, certainly not to praise him. The purpose is to bury him—forever” (p. 60). The narrator is not aware, at least consciously, of the Shakespearean echo; it is a signal not from the narrator, but from the author. How appropriate the irony is becomes apparent as the narrator continues his Chautauquas, for it is increasingly evident that the effect of his talking about Phaedrus is precisely the opposite of what he intends. Rather than “burying” Phaedrus, the narrator’s discourse is resurrecting him, in more than one sense. From the viewpoint of the text as a

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6Ibid.
rhetorical structure, for the narrator to talk about Phaedrus is to create him as a character; the only claim the narrator has to being more “real” than the Phaedrus he describes is that he is able to frame and encapsulate Phaedrus within his discourse. The first intimations that this strategy of encapsulation will not be successful come in Chris’s repeated references to mysterious conversations that he has had with his father, but which Pirsig is unable to recall. Gradually it becomes clear to us—and eventually to Pirsig—that Phaedrus is breaking out of the frame of the narrator’s discourse. The voice talking with Chris while Pirsig “sleeps” is not Pirsig at all, but Phaedrus.

The author’s rhetorical strategy is perhaps now apparent. He has created a narrator who claims to be able to represent Quality within his discourse. At the same time, he has subtly involved the narrator in the contradictions that speaking Quality implies. But the narrator is only half of the persona; behind him, hidden from view and almost, but not quite, barred from discourse, is the shadowy Phaedrus. He is the part of the narrator, and the part of the narrative, that cannot be spoken. His nonetheless very real presence in the narrative haunts and animates it, as the Quality that eludes verbal formulation haunts and animates it. Phaedrus is the rhetorical analogue to the Quality that cannot be spoken.

We are now in a position to consider the narrator as what he insists he isn’t: a character in a highly wrought, and at least partly fictional, rhetorical structure. The author’s rhetorical strategy puts the ideas presented in the Chautauquis into ironic tension with complex image patterns that contradict, rather than extend, the intended message of the narrator’s discourse. The effect of this tension is to draw into the discourse the central fact that the narrator tries to suppress: Phaedrus’s existence. Two highly charged moments illustrate the technique. One is significant because in it a vital confrontation is avoided; it occurs when the narrator refuses to continue to the top of the mountain. The second occurs when Pirsig’s quest ends at the ocean. Together the examples posit a central question. If the rhetorical strategies of Phaedrus and Pirsig are both revealed as inadequate to express Quality, how adequate is the author’s strategy?

All along the narrator has talked in his Chautauqua about the “high country of the mind” and the “mountains of thought” that Phaedrus attempted to scale in his quest for Quality. His reaction to this awesome height is ambivalent; he clearly appreciates the grandeur of the moun-
tains, but is himself more comfortable on the plains. When he commits himself to climb the mountain alone with his son, he is entering Phaedrus’s terrain in both a metaphysical and a literal sense, for Phaedrus used to retreat to these mountains to help him crystallize the “mountains of thought” that Pirsig also attempts to scale. Moreover, now that John and Sylvia Sutherland (with whom they have been traveling) have left and there is no one around but the narrator and Chris, the tensions between them become more apparent. It is in this setting that Pirsig realizes the conversations Chris keeps mentioning are not Chris’s childish fantasies or Pirsig’s own incoherent mumblings, but the voice of the emerging Phaedrus.

The narrator’s reaction to entering this emotionally charged terrain is complex. He knows that to climb the mountain is to invite a confrontation with Phaedrus, a prospect that he finds terrifying as well as potentially liberating. His response to this dilemma is to repress the conscious recognition that he is in some sense climbing to meet Phaedrus. So it is indirectly, through his Chautauqua during the climb, that we see the complexity of his reaction. The Chautauqua is a discourse on “selfless” as opposed to “ego” climbing; Pirsig uses as his example Phaedrus’s attempted pilgrimage to Mount Kailas in India. Though Phaedrus was physically stronger than those who came to the mountain to worship, he never made it to the top, while they did. Phaedrus, an ego climber, was trying “to broaden his experience, to gain understanding for himself” (p. 189). But for the selfless climbers, “each footstep was an act of devotion.” The goal for them was not to reach the top but to participate in a process that reached its natural culmination at the mountain’s peak. The narrator implicitly identifies himself as a “selfless climber” by comparing his attitude as he climbs to Chris’s egoism. Chris had been to a summer camp where the emphasis was on achievement, and he climbs the mountain to prove how tough he is; reaching the top, not enjoying the climb, is his goal. Pirsig, on the other hand, concentrates on the present reality of each step, refusing to think beyond to the next. To give Chris an object lesson in selfless climbing, he allows the child to

7Rodino points out that many readers have been insufficiently sensitive to the author’s ironic treatment of his narrator; he suggests that the obvious sincerity and earnestness of the narrator, as well as the book’s own claim that it is “in its essence” fact, contribute to the problem. Readers, according to Rodino, are “reluctant to admit there might be anything artful or fictional” in this text (p. 21).
overextend himself so that Chris must either admit defeat or drive himself to exhaustion.

The narrator’s attitude is apt to infuriate his readers, for what the reader sees is a father who deliberately drives his son to tears and rage, and then refuses to comfort him. But Pirsig’s motives are more complex than this reading admits. Refusing to think beyond the present step is indeed what lets the narrator continue, for to anticipate the top would be to realize that each step takes him closer to confrontation with Phaedrus. So he goes along, one step at a time, always moving closer to the goal that his conscious mind cannot admit. His personality, terrified by the knowledge that it is not the complete self, would discontinue the climb if this goal were fully conscious; but the deeper self, desiring to heal the division within, keeps this knowledge from the narrator’s consciousness. The contrast between ego climbing and selfless climbing is thus true in a sense that the narrator does not fully realize.

These conflicting desires are brought to the surface when Pirsig learns from Chris that Phaedrus’s voice has told Chris he will be waiting for him at the top of the mountain. With the hidden goal now made explicit, Pirsig refuses to continue to climb. The psychological complexity of the refusal is enriched and brought into focus by the reason Pirsig gives for going back; he tells Chris he has “bad feelings” about spring rockslides. “Underneath us, beneath us right now,” he says, “there are forces that can tear this whole mountain apart” (p. 218). As we shall see, resonating behind this remark are extensive metaphoric patterns of substance and motion that reveal the fallacies and contradictions in the narrator’s stance.

The narrator likes to think that the metaphors of substance he appropriates to himself testify to his solidity, while the watery, insubstantial metaphors with which he surrounds Phaedrus confirm Phaedrus’s non-existence. But substance can be set in motion; and motion overcoming inertial mass is how the narrator describes Phaedrus’s union with the Quality moment. A recurring nightmare for Pirsig is the fear that his substance will be buried, or carried away, by the same violent motion that swept Phaedrus into the “no-man’s land” of insanity. When he visits Phaedrus’s old office at the University of Montana, for example, he experiences an “avalanche of memory” (p. 160). As he advances farther into the room, he likens the returning memories to violent motion: “Now it comes down!” (p. 160).
For the narrator, this wild, uncontrolled motion has a double connotation that reveals the essence of his dilemma: it is associated both with Phaedrus's insanity and with the quest for Quality. For example, when Phaedrus has his mystical intuition that Quality and the Tao are one, the narrator describes the realization as if it were an avalanche.

Then his mind's eye looked up and caught his own image . . . but now the slippage that Phaedrus had felt earlier . . . suddenly gathered momentum. . . . Before he could stop it, the sudden accumulated mass of awareness began to grow and grow into an avalanche of thought and awareness out of control; with each additional growth of the downward tearing mass loosening hundreds of times its volume, and then that mass uprooting hundreds of times its volume more . . . until there was nothing left to stand.

No more anything.

It all gave way from under him. (p. 228).

According to the narrator, then, Phaedrus's insanity began with a bifurcation of the self—the mind's eye detached from and observing "his own image"—and progressed like a rockslide to sweep him out of the mythos of his culture, into the no-man's land that society calls "insanity." When Pirsig refuses to continue up the mountain, what he fears is not the physical rockslide, but this mental avalanche.

But in other contexts substance in motion has a positive value for the narrator. One of the major faults he finds with classical Aristotelian analysis is that it cannot account for motion in the material objects it dissects. According to the narrator, the omission is crucial because, by preventing us from realizing the essentially dynamic nature of reality (in the field view), it consigns us to a dualistic universe in which motion and matter, mind and body, are separate and distinct. Determined to avoid this split, the narrator always chooses moving objects as his metaphors for Quality: the motorcycle in action, or the moving train of consciousness being guided by the track of Quality. Without this motion, the narrator asserts, the train is "static and purposeless": "A train really isn't a train if it can't go anywhere. In the process of examining the train and subdividing it into parts we've inadvertently stopped it, so that it isn't really a train we are examining. That's why we get stuck" (p. 254).

What the narrator fails to see is that in his anxiety to portray himself
as a man of substance, he is separating himself from the metaphoric motion that, in other contexts, he recognizes as essential to Quality. The motion characteristic of Phaedrus’s quest, like Phaedrus himself, has been consigned to a realm the narrator wants nothing to do with: waves of crystallization, avalanches of awareness, rocksides of memory. The result could be predicted, since it is the same fate that classical analysis suffers when it regards every material entity as static. The incipient division of self that Pirsig describes in Phaedrus has not disappeared. Rather, it has deepened, and two entirely different personalities have crystallized. The cautious part of the mind that retains its footing and observes the rest has become Pirsig; the part in violent motion, detached from society and consensus reality, is Phaedrus. The narrator, by identifying only with the substance and regarding motion as an alien quality, has not overcome the subject-object split. Rather, he has rendered it even more powerful by incorporating it into the structure of his personality.

The metaphoric patterns that help bring these psychological subtleties into focus reveal how much more sophisticated are the author’s rhetorical strategies than those of the narrator. In the author’s technique, form and content collaborate in a way they do not in the narrator’s discourse, giving extraordinary depth and complexity to what one critic has called the narrator’s “flat Midwestern” tones. If Phaedrus is too abstract and esoteric, the narrator is too prosaic. It is neither one alone, but the two together, that infuse the narrative with Quality. The author’s rhetoric, by revealing the inconsistencies in the narrator’s attempt to speak Quality, brings the narrative as a whole closer to Quality by establishing the connections between Phaedrus and the narrator that the narrator himself would deny.

As these metaphoric patterns of connection become more concentrated, the narrator begins to accept that the confrontation with Phaedrus cannot be postponed indefinitely. In a way he almost welcomes it; his trip is a quest for Phaedrus as well as a flight from him. The ambivalence the narrator feels toward his alter ego becomes increasingly clear as he nears the ocean. Though he remembers from his dream that the Phaedrus-voice has told Chris he will meet him at the bottom

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8That it is Phaedrus’s presence that rescues the book from dullness has been observed by almost everyone who has written on this book.
of the ocean, he does not run from this encounter as he did from the mountain top; rather, he embraces it. "It's hot now, a West Coast sticky hotness . . . and I'd like to get to the ocean where it's cool as soon as possible" (p. 313).

The narrator's longing for the ocean is significant, for he has consistently identified Phaedrus with water and moisture. When he recalls Goethe's "Erlikönig," for example, he describes the ghostly pursuit as taking place by the ocean, though in Goethe's poem the setting is inland, with no mention of water. As Thomas S. Steele points out, this appearance of water in the poem "is read in from the end of the novel," for it is at the ocean that the final encounter between the two halves of Pirsig's bifurcated self takes place. As he nears the ocean, the Midwestern Pirsig meditates on its significance. "Coastal people never really know what the ocean symbolizes to a landlocked inland people," he muses, "—what a great distant dream it is, present but unseen in the deepest levels of subconsciousness" (p. 364). It is no wonder that Pirsig associates the ocean with Phaedrus. Nor is it surprising that he manifests considerable ambivalence toward the ocean; though he is attracted by its promise of cool relief, he suggests that actually to arrive will be to experience disappointment. When the "conscious images are compared with the subconscious dream there is a sense of defeat at having come so far to be stopped by a mystery that can never be fathomed" (p. 364).

As the end point of the journey, the "source of it all" (p. 364), the ocean brings into focus the ambivalence Pirsig has felt all along about arriving somewhere as opposed to just traveling. "Sometimes it's a little better to travel than to arrive," he remarks early in the journey (p. 103). Countering this affection for "just traveling" is the narrator's predilection for putting things in their proper sequence. John Stark has noted that the narrator "seeks to arrange correctly sequences of causes and effects," the most physically immediate example is the arrange-


10John Stark, "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," Great Lakes Review: A Journal of Midwest Culture, 3 (1977), 50. The contradiction between the narrator's reliance on causality, and his vision of a Quality moment that precedes and negates causal interactions, is reminiscent of the contradiction between the strict causality of Newtonian mechanics and its undermining by quantum mechanics. The correlation suggests how rooted the narrator still is in the Newtonian world view.
ment of his journey as a linear sequence of points across the continent.

In many instances the inclination toward sequence goes almost un-noticed, because it is appropriate and commonsensical. When the narrator warns about out-of-sequence assembly in repairing a motorcycle, he is merely describing a common problem that most novice mechanics encounter. In other contexts the predilection is more obvious, because less expected. Many of Pirsig’s major “discoveries” consist of determining the proper sequence of events, as when he figures out that the mythos preceded the logos, or that those who embraced the Good were displaced by those who believed in Truth. Though he pays homage to the virtues of just traveling and the importance of “lateral drift,” then, he reveals himself as very concerned to discover and reinforce the proper linear sequence.

Why should linearity be so attractive to the narrator, despite his disclaimers? We may conjecture that the attraction originates in the narrator’s anxiety to construct a linear sequence between Phaedrus and himself. Phaedrus is the self who existed at an anterior point; Pirsig is the self who occupies the present point in time. When the linear journey begins to break down, it signals the narrator’s resignation to the fact that the linear relationship he has constructed between himself and Phaedrus must also dissolve.

The mounting tensions in his relationship with Chris accelerate this dissolving linearity. It is Chris who forces the narrator to revalue what the narrator considers a nightmare of non-linearity, the memory of a deranged Phaedrus who is so disoriented that, unable to follow ordinary directions to find the bunk beds his wife sends him to buy, he wanders aimlessly through grey, dusty streets. Chris, reacting more to the deteriorating relationship with his father than to their seemingly purposeless journey, begins a “strange, unworldly rocking motion, a fetal self-enclosure” that seems to shut the narrator out and be “a return to somewhere that I don’t know anything about . . . the bottom of the ocean” (p. 360). “Remember the time we went to look for beds?” Chris asks. To Pirsig’s astonishment, Chris remembers it as “fun.” With this comes the narrator’s realization that Chris is crying not for Pirsig, but for the lost Phaedrus: “It’s him he misses” (p. 361).

Though the breakdown of the linear journey is a source of panic to the narrator, in other contexts he has given a different value to this kind of “lateral drift.” The state of mind in which one is completely baffled
and stopped is the moment when, according to Zen discipline, the mind is ready to receive new insight. It is when the mind is freed from the stricture of linear thought that it can respond to the guidance of Quality. "If your mind is truly, profoundly stuck," the narrator affirms, "then you may be much better off than when it was loaded with ideas . . . stuckness shouldn't be avoided. It's the psychic predecessor of all real understanding" (pp. 256–257).

So important to the narrator is the principle of "lateral drift" that he repeatedly uses it to structure his narrative. He begins with some apparently "minor" fact or event, then slowly brings it into focus, at the same time exploring its interconnections with other phenomenon. The Sutherland's dripping faucet, John's dislike of the beer-can shim, a chance remark from an elderly lady about quality—these are the small, everyday occurrences that lead to major new insights. In each case they seem peripheral, timid, unimportant; but revaluing them begins a train of discovery breathtaking in its scope.

Several times the narrator is on the brink of recognizing that his own linear sequences are keeping him from seeing something important, especially in his relationship with Chris. After explaining that the South Indian Monkey Trap works because the monkey cannot revalue his freedom over the rice, the narrator confesses, "I keep feeling that the facts I'm fishing for concerning Chris are right in front of me too, but that some value rigidity of my own keeps me from seeing it" (p. 282). Finally, at the edge of a cliff by the ocean, his plans in chaos, the linear sequentiality of the Chautauquas broken by the prospect of impending mental collapse, the journey westward stopped by the margin of the sea, the narrator allows the fact that he has all along been suppressing to come into the center of consciousness: "In all this Chautauqua talk there's been more than a touch of hypocrisy. Advice is given again and again to eliminate the subject-object duality, when the biggest duality of all, the duality between me and him, remains unfaced. A mind divided against itself" (p. 363).

With that the narrator is ready for Phaedrus to emerge from his shadows. As he stands on the cliff, he feels a "sense of inevitability about what is happening." "I'm being pushed toward something," he realizes, "and the objects in the corner of the eye and the objects in the center are all of equal intensity, all together in one" (pp. 399–400). As Phaedrus emerges from the periphery, for the first time the narrator can
hear his voice, though he does not immediately claim it as his own: “We’re in another dream. That’s why my voice sounds so strange.” A few moments later, however, he opens himself to the full realization that he and Phaedrus are one person: “That’s what Phaedrus always said—I always said—” (p. 370). As the lines of communication open between Phaedrus and Pirsig, they open also between father and son.

In his repeated dreams of the glass door, the narrator had always assumed it to be a private symbol. But now Chris also mentions the glass door, and “a kind of slow electric shock” (p. 369) passes through the narrator, a faint echo, perhaps, of the electric shocks that annihilated Phaedrus.11 Earlier the narrator, in a moment of depression, had wondered whether real communication was possible: “the idea that one person’s mind is accessible to another’s is just a conversational illusion, just a figure of speech, an assumption that makes some kind of exchange between basically alien creatures seem plausible” (p. 269). But now, when Chris identifies the door as the hospital glass through which Phaedrus last saw his family, the narrator realizes that it is not a solipsistic image, but a shared experience.

With that recognition Pirsig’s memory joins that of Phaedrus. Where before there was a bifurcation between the two memories—Phaedrus’s memory stopping at the glass door and Pirsig’s extrapolated backward to the “party” he imagines he attended—the two now become one continuous whole: “It has all come together.”12 When the journey resumes, it is with a new sense of joy and purpose. For the first time father and son remove their helmets and talk together naturally, undoing Pirsig’s original assumption that “you don’t make great conversations on a running cycle” (p. 6). Amid these symbols of union and harmony, the narrator appears finally to have solved his rhetorical problems.

But has the author solved this? His rhetorical strategy has been to create a narrator who talks explicitly about Quality in an intellectual way but is simultaneously involved in situations that show he does not fully live Quality, however well he may understand it intellectually. The strategy allows the author to render dynamic the static intellectual dis-

11 Thomas Steele argues convincingly that the ending reverses, point by point, Pirsig’s earlier failures to communicate (Steele, pp. 90–91).

12 John Stark uses the dislocation between the two memories to suggest that there are two bouts of mental illness, but the “party” memory is more likely a rationalization.
course of the Chautauqua, creating a series of strong internal tensions between what the narrator says and what he lives. As a result, the narrative becomes far more densely textured than is the discourse of either Phaedrus or Pirsig alone. The dichotomy within the narrator especially is a master stroke, for it allows the author to hint at the ineffable without having to speak it. The discourse thus operates on many levels at once: as intellectual inquiry; as a physical and spiritual quest; and as a dramatic embodiment of Quality as it were between the characters, in the unspoken tensions between Pirsig and Phaedrus.

Despite this inspired stratagem, however, the author has not escaped the central dilemma. As we have seen, the thrust of the narrative, from the first pages on, has been toward synthesis: synthesis between art and technology, between Classical and Romantic modes of understanding, between thought and feeling, and most important, between the speaking subject and passive object into which Pirsig has made himself and Phaedrus. When the narrator finally accomplishes the internal synthesis that makes him again a whole person and a responsive father, the design is carried to its logical conclusion. This is its triumph—and also its most significant limitation. The completion of the design has been accomplished by moving what had been peripheral into center consciousness, but at the cost of losing the periphery that had been the text's greatest strength. As Phaedrus joins with Pirsig, and as they speak again with one voice, there is nothing left unsaid, no aspect or part of Quality that has not been drawn into the realm of discourse. Hence the synthesis that allows formal closure also sabotages the text's rhetorical strategy of making the hidden Phaedrus the rhetorical analogue to the unspeakable Quality.

This failure accounts, I think, for the uncharacteristic murkiness at the end. The symbols have obviously been carefully chosen to indicate synthesis. The cliff recalls the mountain top Pirsig did not reach, while the ocean waiting at the foot provides the new element necessary to make the situation echo, not repeat, the earlier retreat from confrontation. Pirsig had earlier contrasted the "mountains of achievement" with the "ocean trenches of self-awareness" (p. 264), suggesting that both are necessary to make a culture or a life complete. On the cliff overhanging the sea, the two come together. As Pirsig and Chris arrive, the cliff is "surrounded by banks of fog," recalling the fog in Pirsig's retelling of the "Erlkönig." More subtly, the fog shrouds the scene in a kind of twilight, creating an ambiguous light that is halfway between the
daytime when Pirsig rules and the night when Phaedrus speaks. After such a powerful concatenation of symbols, the author is almost obliged to suggest that the union is full and complete, the quest at an end. But Pirsig is too honest a writer not to acknowledge also that such quests for self-knowledge can never really reach a point that can be proclaimed "the end"; self-awareness is not a single goal, but a continuing process. So at the end the author tries to renege, implying that the goal has been reached and yet also suggesting that the journey is unfinished. As Pirsig and Chris continue on their trip, the narrator acknowledges that "trials never end, of course. Unhappiness and misfortune are bound to occur as long as people live" (p. 372); but at the same time he proclaims, "We've won it. It's going to be better now. You can sort of tell these things" (p. 373). The author can avoid having to deal with the paradox because here he ends his text. But strategic withdrawal at the point where the problems become insoluble, though certainly one of the options an author has (as we shall see in the next chapter with D. H. Lawrence and The Rainbow), does not solve the deeper underlying problem.

The narrator's desire for synthesis and completion is, I suspect, a less sophisticated version of the author's own drive toward closure. The mind at work here—whether that of author or narrator—clearly has a very strong bias toward order, synthesis, and union. That it should be fascinated by the possibilities of a field concept of reality is therefore not surprising. At its best, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance gives powerful expression to the harmonies that the cosmic web can suggest: "Peace of mind produces right values, right values produce right thoughts. Right thoughts produce right actions and right actions produce work which will be a material reflection for others to see of the serenity at the center of it all . . . —a material reflection of a spiritual reality" (p. 267). But because of its lingering problems, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is important as much for the questions it raises as for the answers it posits. In devising a rhetorical strategy to cope with the paradoxes that arise when one attempts to speak from within the field, it has raised what is perhaps the most important issue for a literature that attempts to embody this view. That it finally yields to its own consuming desire for order means that, at the end, rational synthesis wins out over the ineffability of the whole.13

13For a very different valuation of Pirsig's inclination toward reason, see William
In this light, the epigram that Pirsig chooses for his text has perhaps unintentionally ironic overtones. It comes from the *Phaedrus*:

And what is good, Phaedrus,  
And what is not good—  
Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?

By attempting to “tell us these things,” Pirsig indeed may have described the Buddha that lies within rational thought—but at the expense of the Buddha that cannot be spoken. What Pirsig knows, but cannot fully accept, is that (as Heisenberg said of science) literature is not about reality but about what we can say about reality. In allowing the distinction to become blurred between his verbal representation of the field and the field itself, Pirsig in the end draws back from his encounter with the paradox at the heart of the cosmic web. For a full exploration of what it means to try to speak the ineffable, we shall have to wait until the final chapter, on Thomas Pynchon. In the meantime, we shall turn to other writers who respond to the dilemma of trying to represent reality through a field model by transforming or subverting the model itself.