

Class Meeting 2

Themes: Human Systems:

Levels and aspects of organization and development in human systems: from the level of molecules and cells and tissues and organs and organ systems and organisms to the individual people and groups of persons.

Review of Handouts and Questionnaires and Assigned readings.

Optimism and Pessimism and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies.

On reading a difficult book -- class discussion.

Organization and development of Affect in Human Systems (From cells and organisms to persons and societies; from origins to endings)

For Next Time: Why an MFA field-trip? Why Now?

PREPARATION - READ: ON COURSE WEB SITE

2-1 This syllabus and all accompanying handouts.

Read carefully. Underline important passages. Do you feel a need for clarification on any of the issues mentioned? Do you have any questions? Comments? Take note of them in the margins. Write about them in your journal. Discuss them with your groupmates— via email or at your first study group meeting. Bring list of significant resolved and unresolved issues to class next time.

You are about to begin reading a difficult book (Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance). Maybe you've "read it before." That's great. Treat this as a chance to read it again: to add to your knowledge and understanding of the issues it raises.

Before doing so, Read and heed the following essay full of good advice.

2-2 Adler, M. J., How to Read a Difficult Book

ALSO: BEFORE READING PART 1 OF ZAAMM

WRITE: Reaction Paper #1

Then begin reading

2-3 Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance... (hereafter ZAAMM)

Part I: Chapters 1-7 (pages 1-93)

2-4 Guidebook to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

By Ronald DiSanto and Thomas J. Steele

Section 1: Chronology (pp. 15-17)

Section 2: Map (pp.18-19)

Section 11: Notes to ZAAMM (pp. 364-403)

Section 12: Analytic Index (pp. 405-407)

And so we embark with Robert Pirsig's nameless (autobiographical?) narrator, his son Chris, and a couple of friends (the Sutherlands) on what is – on one level – a narrative recounting of a cross-country motorcycle trip.

But here is no ordinary travelogue. There are lots of "side-trips" into strange and fascinating areas. And there be ghosts! Indeed, before long Pirsig introduces us to the narrator's mysterious alter ego, (a former

persona he identifies as "Phaedrus"). Together they lead us through what we are asked to imagine as the "high country of the mind". The rhetorical framework that Pirsig uses for this purpose is a "Chautauqua".

Pirsig invites his readers to accompany his narrator, the narrator's son and a couple of friends on a cross-country motorcycle trip. The journey is meant to symbolize the process of living our everyday lives in an increasingly technologized world. The motorcycle -- the machine as a metaphor -- becomes the medium for moving Pirsig's narrator and his companions through space and time, carrying us along and bringing both them and us face with both routine and unexpected things and events of obvious relevance to any "inquiry into values."

Be prepared for an uneven ride! Lots of up and downs. Some passages are very easy to read--clear, concise, simple, down to earth, and concrete. But you will also encounter some rougher stretches where the narrative becomes intellectually abstract, verbally dense, philosophically esoteric, academically recondite or otherwise impenetrably confusing.

As befits a work that has become something of a "cult classic", ZAAMM is also the subject of many websites (not all of them equally trustworthy). A useful list of links to relevant web resources has been prepared and continues to be maintained by a professor of English at Kansas State University: http://www.k-state.edu/english/baker/english287/Links-Pirsig_ZAMM.htm

It is quite easy to find readable copies of ZAAMM on line, but, for purposes of this class, let's all agree to stick with the large format paperback edition to avoid confusions about pagination, etc. PLEASE BE SURE TO BRING YOUR COPY TO CLASS WHILE WE ARE INVOLVED IN READING AND DISCUSSING IT.

Some interesting information on Pirsig and the Chautauqua movement will be found at: http://www.univie.ac.at/Anglistik/easyrider/data/zen_and_the_art_of_motorcycle_ma.htm

Additional Chautauqua info is available at: <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/sc/tc/>

Try to get as much of the reading done as possible before your first study group meeting; (as a general rule: you should, without fail, all try to be sure to complete all of the relevant reading and viewing portions of the weekly assignments before the pertinent study group and class meetings. We expect everyone to come to all study group and class meetings fully prepared to discuss the assigned materials. (NOTE: We will be reading Parts I, II, III, and IV of ZAAMM in successive weekly installments between now and March 19).

2-4 The previously cited excerpts from the "Guidebook to ZAAMM" are well worth careful reading. They will help you orient yourself within the text and deepen your sense of appreciation for the history of ideas and intellectual traditions to which any "inquiry into values" belongs

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT AS YOU READ, TO TALK ABOUT IN STUDY GROUP MEETINGS AND TO BRING TO WHOLE CLASS DISCUSSION, AS APPROPRIATE:

- a) In Pirsig's Author's Note, he says "much has been changed for rhetorical purposes". Is he saying the book is fact or fiction? How does his use of a first person narrator/storyteller make this a complex question? What is your initial view of the relationship between the author (or narrator) and yourself?

- b) At the beginning of their trip, the narrator reports a conversation between himself and one of his traveling companions, John, in which the latter objects to the narrator's characterization of education as "mass hypnosis". Pressing his point further, the narrator puts forth an idealistic and disembodied view of human knowledge in which (e.g.) Newton's law of gravity is "nothing more than a human invention – like laws of logic, mathematics, and ghosts". What do you think (how do you feel?) about this argument?
- c) As you proceed with your reading, think about this (the above) episode from time to time. Why does this dialogue take place at the outset of the book, as opposed to somewhere in the middle or near the end of the trip? How is Pirsig preparing the reader for the book's future scenes?
- d) In setting out the topic for his Chautauqua, the narrator introduces one of several strikingly strong visual-spatial/temporal metaphors that punctuate his narrative. He compares the then-current (circa 1970s) consciousness of his (our) culture to a stream that has gotten out of control and is overflowing its channels, causing destruction and havoc ... "There are eras of human history (he writes) in which the channels of thought were too deeply cut and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and 'best' was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now. Now the stream of our common consciousness seems to be obliterating its own banks, losing its central direction and purpose . . . Some channel deepening seems to be called for" (p. 8).

Now, in 2013, we are reading these words in what some see as a culturally transformative moment. What is the present state of "our common consciousness"? Are we at a decisive turning point? Amid national and international economic collapse and escalating violence; facing the specter of drastic climatological alteration and extreme local, regional, and global impacts; and awed by the outcome of our recent presidential election; it certainly seems arguable that we are living in a watershed moment. Can you relate to and explain this metaphor of the 'watershed moment'? What sorts of change is he referring to? What does he mean by "channel deepening"? Is the image compelling? Do you find merit (value) in his analysis? (cf. William James: "The stream of consciousness.")

- e) As a writer of technical manuals, the narrator decries what he sees as extreme alienation in contemporary society. At one point he focuses on the question of "what or who a person is" and "what a person does". He argues (among other things) that in our ideas about what it means to be a specifically human being are seriously confused and that in this state of affairs lie some clues to "what the hell has gone wrong with the twentieth century". How does this concept strike you? Can you point to any contemporary situations in which the concept of "person" has become seriously problematical? How does this issue relate to Pirsig's classical/romantic dichotomy? (see g. below).
- f) Despite his disclaimers, the title and theme of Pirsig's book seem to reflect the author's interest in Zen Buddhism (an ancient religious tradition that is notable, among other things, for its celebration of the oneness of the universe and all of life). Here we aim to bring the matter of who we are and what we do still closer to home: How do you feel about the quality of the relationship between who you are and what you do? Is "the person that you are" at one with the personal and social (e.g. academic/professional career) path that you are following? Explain why or why not. If not, what prevents you from feeling totally identified with what you are training to do for a living? Would you feel more or less satisfied, be a better or worse student/worker, if you did feel that connection more completely? How would you characterize your present "frame of mind" (optimistic or pessimistic)?

- g) Over and over again, Pirsig has his narrator dividing up human understanding and breaking it down into two categories: “romantic” and “classical”. Discuss the distinction between the two as you see it. How do you relate to this dichotomy? Are these best understood as attributes of persons or modes of response to situations? Give examples of any tendencies that make you think of yourself as either a classical or romantic person. Is there any sensible alternative to thinking about people in such either/or terms? (Are you familiar with "Aronson's First Law" or what social psychologists call the "ultimate attribution error")?
- h) Who (what?) is “Phaedrus”? How does Pirsig have his narrator introduce and develop his character. Is he to be understood as the former or the latter's former self (alter ego)? How do you know? Can we trust the narrator to offer a credibly valid and accurate picture of “Phaedrus” and his "insanity"? Does it matter either way? Why or why not?
- i) What do you think of the narrator's description of his past and present relationship with his son Chris? Does Chris seem to you to be a particularly troubled boy? Or is he just a typical kid impatient with his father's behavior? Who do you think was a better father to Chris – Phaedrus or the narrator?

NOTE: THE LENGTH OF THE FOREGOING LIST OF QUESTIONS IS PARTLY INTENDED TO SUGGEST THAT YOU "JIGSAW" SUCH BIG ASSIGNMENTS, WITH EACH PERSON BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR ADDRESSING A DIFFERENT ONE (OR TWO) OF THE ITEMS IN YOUR GROUP DISCUSSION.

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9.68 Affect: Neurobiological, Psychological and Sociocultural Counterparts of "Feelings"
Spring 2013

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