A ZEN MECHANIC OF THE SOUL
Robert M. Pirsig's Quest For Enlightenment

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Bachelor of Arts (Murdoch University)

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in English and Comparative Literature at Murdoch University 1999.
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professors John Frodsham and Horst Ruthrof for their tuition, motivation and continual inspiration throughout my undergraduate degree and for this thesis, my comrade at arms, David Morgan, for his consistently patient encouragement and support. Thanks also to editors Geoff Bishop, Kris Thompson and my brother Tim.
Abstract

This thesis attempts an interpretation of Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and the sequel *Lila*. It treats the texts as largely autobiographical, while acknowledging the complexities of classifying the books in such a way. It argues that the texts should be read as a body of work comprising of a spiritual odyssey, influenced heavily by the Zen Buddhism of Japan. The introduction claims a distinction between Pirsig's understanding of orthodox Zen Buddhism and the 'Beat Zen' of other American writers, and explores and engages various critical reviews and articles. Chapter one provides a synopsis of Pirsig's philosophy of 'Quality' and briefly places it in the contexts of European, American and Eastern Philosophy. This chapter also examines the author's account of his mental breakdown, treatment and subsequent recovery and discusses this in terms of Western psychoanalysis and Eastern mysticism. Chapter two submits a detailed poetics of Pirsig's use of the motorcycle metaphor in the first book and the symbolism of it in the second, as a possible solution to a Zen koan. The final chapter takes a new tack and reads the two texts as an opus where Pirsig's concepts are illustrated to be compatible with both Transpersonal Psychology and a famous Japanese pictographic representation of the journey towards mystic enlightenment.
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Introduction

Mapping the Way

That slowly drifting cloud is pitiful
What dreamwalkers we all are
Awakened, the one great truth—
Black Rain on the temple roof

Dogen.

It seems that Robert Pirsig’s 1974 text, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (ZMM)* has never been out of fashion. The book continues to sell in excess of 100,000 copies a year, and recently actor and director, Robert Redford, announced his intention to make a film of the book (*West Australian* 25 May, 1998). Yet, although Pirsig’s first work was greeted with critical acclaim, the sequel *Lila* (1991) received a lukewarm reception. While *ZMM* continues to appeal to a mass market, it is still a rare occurrence to find it on any literary courses at universities, despite the fact that the text engages issues and material encountered by many undergraduates and postgraduates. As we will see the book is hard to classify in any particular genre; and because of the paradoxical nature of the work engagement with the text can produce numerous loops of dialectic. *ZMM* was published only after Pirsig had approached 121 publishers. Fortunately, James D. Landis, the then director of William Morrow and Company, told Pirsig in a letter of response to the manuscript that ‘the book forced him to decide what he was in publishing for’ (Pirsig 1984:7).

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1. After Pirsig’s own preferred abbreviation according to *Guidebook to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (DiSanto and Steele, 1990:337). Variants include ZAM and ZAAMM and Zen.

2. I have since received a letter from Robert Redford’s production company, Wildwood Enterprises, confirming a production of the film is in the making.
Landis's enthusiasm was picked up by writer and critic, George Steiner, whose review in the *New Yorker* spoke of the book's 'narrative tact and perfect economy of effect' (1974:147). Initially, Pirsig enjoyed favourable critical reception. However, despite these accolades, Massachusetts scholar, Richard Rodino, points out that the book soon attracted a 'predictable critical backlash' which he attributes to the fact that the book has been 'fairly consistently misread' (1980:21). Nevertheless, demand for the book resulted in five hardcover and ten paperback printings (Wood 1997:32). Recently, an American author, Samuel C. Florman, wrote in *Technology Review* that *ZMM* should have been included in the New York Public Library's 1997 'Books of the Century' exhibition because he thought its success would have 'inspired others to examine the same sources of human experience' (1997:59).

Debates about the text and readings of it continue to flourish on the World Wide Web, where I was able to gather some of my secondary texts and resources, in particular from 'The Lila Squad Forum' (http://www.geocities.com/Athens/forum/4670/forum) named after Pirsig's second book. Interestingly, in *Lila*, the author refers at times to the first book, and includes an account of his meeting with Robert Redford, who clinches the deal for the film rights to *ZMM*. This meeting will provide material for chapter three of this thesis and is an example of the kind of intertextuality and self-referentiality which prevails throughout Pirsig's work, contributing to numerous critical viewpoints which I will be looking at in this introduction. The way in which the texts generate discussion supports my view that Pirsig's two literary works provide a perfect arena for literary, philosophical, psychological and theological debate. Released seventeen years later, *Lila* has attracted much less academic criticism than *ZMM* to date, and due to this difference in both the volume and characteristics of the material written about each of the texts, *ZMM* will inevitably occupy more of my
attention. However, I hope to show throughout this thesis that the two texts can be read as an entire spiritual odyssey, making them an inseparable opus.

Origins.

The first word in the title of the first book seems an appropriate place to start. Zen is barely mentioned in the text. There are brief, cursory glances at orthodox Zen Buddhism, but for the main part of the text Pirsig gives the subject a wide berth warning us that this is his intention in an author’s note at the beginning of the book:

What follows is based on actual occurrences. Although much has been changed for rhetorical purposes, it must be regarded in its essence as fact. However, it should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice. It’s not very factual on motorcycles either (7).

Critics have discussed this disclaimer at length as an authorial device, but they did not have the benefit of a late insight that came from Pirsig’s own hand in a letter to Paul Douglas Renselle, dated September 30, 1997, saying, ‘If I hadn’t put it there you can be sure there would have been plenty of visceral reaction from representatives of the Zen organizations’ (Pirsig 1997). In spite of this simple explanation, as we will see later in this chapter, there may well be much more to the book’s disclaimer. For now it is of interest to note two points: Firstly, in the year the book was published, Pirsig revealed to George Gent of the New York Times that he had helped in the founding of an orthodox Zen Buddhist Centre in Minneapolis (1974:36), which attests to his dedication to Zen and secondly; that the disclaimer, in fact, bears an uncanny resemblance, in negation, to a paragraph in Zen in the Art of Archery (Herrigel 1970):

So it is my own experiences which authorize me in this undertaking…Everything must hinge on the art of archery, which I feel is even more difficult to expound than to learn; and the exposition must be carried to the point where we begin to discern those far-off horizons behind which Zen lives and breathes (28).
This ground-breaking treatise on Zen archery by German philosopher, Eugen Herrigel was, as Pirsig writes in an earlier letter to Renselle, the source from which he derived his own famous title (Pirsig 1996). It is in the light of this brief preamble, I will contend that unless a knowledge of Zen is applied to the reading of ZMM, criticisms will fall short, if not constitute Rodino’s notion of a misreading. I believe that Pirsig’s text operates as a kind of koan and in so doing amplifies the significance of the Zen content of his book, thereby making it conspicuous by its virtual absence. To clarify this position, I think it necessary to establish what I mean by the terms koan and Zen.

Because of its nature the definition of koan is not easy. The literal meaning of ‘public document’ bears little significance to this famous Oriental puzzle. The koan forms one of the keys to a monk’s progress in the Rinzai sect of Japanese Zen. The master assigns a paradoxical question to a monk who may struggle with the problem for years. One of the most famous koan is: ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ There are no definitive intellectual answers. A koan is used to separate the student from reliance on the intellect, its fundamental aim being to destroy the ego and induce enlightenment.

The need to get rid of egotism is highlighted here by Herrigel’s Archery Master, Kenzo Awa, who tells him, ‘Once you have grown truly egoless you can break off [from training] at any time. Keep on practicing that’ (75). Beside the fact that the Pirsig’s quest for ‘What is Quality?’ is a Zen-styled koan, there is also a ‘koanesque’ effect achieved by the skillful use of narrational and logical oppositions. This interplay within the text creates a hierarchy of paradoxes in many of the book’s micro and macro structures. I shall be making a detailed analysis of this koan-like effect in chapter two.
The term Zen is no less straightforward to define. The history of the migration of Zen from India, where the word comes from the Sanskrit ‘Dhyāna’, meaning ‘meditation’, through China, where it was named ‘Ch’an,’ and combined with Taoism, then onto Japan, is well documented and not within the scope of this thesis. Let us note though that Zen has its own very distinctive form of Buddhism because, as Ken Wilber explains:

The very best of Lao Tzu was, however taken up almost entirely by Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism, so that in Zen, the best of the Buddha and the best of Lao Tzu not only lived on but flowered magnificently. Such exactly was the brilliance of Zen: Buddha and Lao Tzu combined and preserved (Wilber 1981:251).

Perhaps the reason why both Herrigel and Pirsig are interested in this Japanese form of Buddhism is because as R.H. Blyth points out ‘in Japan...Zen is both universally diffused and finds its greatest exemplars’ (Ogata 1959:21). Japanese Zen Buddhism is not a mysticism which talks of ghosts, hallucinations and visions and does not advocate the use of psychotropic plants or trance. It is not interested in the ‘nature’ of the Buddha but rather is interested in ‘seeing’ what the ‘creator’ saw. Zen seeks spirituality in everyday sights and sounds rather than directing us to look for hidden meaning. We are encouraged to be satisfied with the most simple explication, which comes from within ourselves.

To attempt a definition of Zen is to enter into a paradox, because Zen starts precisely where language ends. In the words of Wu-Tzu: ‘Talking about Zen all the time is like looking for fish tracks in a dry riverbed’ (1994:370). If talking about Zen itself is so contrary to the practice of Zen, then we can see another plausible reason for both Herrigel’s and Pirsig’s initial cautionary notes because in Zen the ideal is to remain subjective at all times. However, both philosophy and literature involve
objectification. This problem of delivery within the context of Zen is explained by the leading Zen scholar, Daisetz Suzuki: ‘Zen is not to be sought in ideas or words, but at the same time ... without ideas or words Zen cannot convey itself to others’ (1973:297).

Zen in the West, the Beats and Pirsig.

Suzuki’s influence on Zen in America, after years of lectures and a proliferation of books and essays, cannot be overstated. As the American Zen monk and writer, Roshi Philip Kapleau, puts it:

In 1950 Dr. Suzuki came to America to ignite the fuse that was later to touch off the ‘Zen boom’ ... The ‘yen for Zen’ was then raging in New York, largely fuelled by Suzuki’s writings ... Almost single-handedly he ushered in the first, intellectual phase in the Zenning of America3 (1980:265).

Ken Wilber supports this view in Up From Eden: ‘As one cultural critic put it, ‘there are two types of people in the world: those who have read Zen scholar Suzuki, and those who haven’t’ (1981:325). It is my belief that Pirsig was one of the former, and these tentative connections with Japanese Zen are important for a thorough investigation of the book. This viewpoint is supported by the Canadian scholar Barnett Singer: ‘If Buddha is only the metaphor for a spiritual effect, it is a carefully chosen and important one’ (1981:214).

I am also convinced that Pirsig’s choice of Japanese Zen was derived from some affinity with the pragmatism of the doctrine, a view I shall examine more closely in the next chapter. Once again Singer concurs: ‘Pirsig’s pragmatism deals only in part with cold, philosophical problems; more, it is a religious pragmatism about the day to

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3 Echoing Charles A. Reich’s The Greening of America, widely read in the sixties and analysed in comparison with ZMM by John Cavelti in ‘Ringer to Sheehy to Pirsig: The ‘Greening’ of American Ideals of Success’ (Cavelti, 1979:147-161).
day, by a man determined to increase the soul’s earnings’ (1981:214).

In his thoroughly researched and insightful article ‘Reflections on Robert Pirsig,’ Singer insists that:

*Zen [ZMM]* descended like a charm, and critics from the high to the pop have roundly recommended it as vital ... the promises it made about how to live in contemporary America and, indeed, in world civilisation seem to have outlasted those of its glibber contemporaries (213).

The ‘glibber contemporaries,’ are the writers of the ‘Beat Generation’. Singer sees a clear distinction between the Zen of ‘youth prophets’ like Allen Ginsberg and the ‘social wisdom’ of Pirsig:

About Allen Ginsberg or clones one simply cannot grow too ecstatic in the middle of a traffic jam; whereas Pirsig, I think, can be read in *media res*, until he himself gets lost in philosophizing. But like a good naturalist writer he makes you see the poetry in basics. In processes (216).

Probably the most perfect examples of this ‘poetry in basics’ and these ‘processes,’ are to be found in the enigmatic poetry of Zen – *haiku*. *Haiku* are ostensibly simple verses written to convey universal truths. They are nearly always three lines long, seventeen syllables in a 5,7,5 format, and usually contain some hint of the season when they were written.⁴ Perhaps the most famous example is by Basho:

Furuike ya  
kawazu tobikomu  
mizu no oto

Old Pond  
frog jumps in –
the sound of the water!

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⁴ The So-Un school for example experiments with free form haiku and does not even adhere to the seventeen syllable rule.
Haiku expert, R.H. Blyth gives the unconventional translation of ‘Plop!’⁵ as the last line and discusses the problem of translating haiku from Japanese in A History of Haiku where he observes ‘a strict adherence to 5,7,5 syllables in English has produced some odd translations of Japanese haiku’ (1964:349). Apart from the fact that Japanese is an SOV (subject-object-verb) language and English is SVO, Blyth also points out ‘the fact is that “syllable” does not have the same meaning for the Japanese’ (350). The general advice given when writing haiku-styled poetry in English is that ‘the experience should be rendered freely ... the whole matter of syllables and lines is an arbitrary one’ (351). So when the Beats, including Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, composed their haiku, a fundamental change took place, which, because of its very adherence to the seventeen syllables, makes the poetry bear no similarity to Japanese haiku. In the process, however, they were able to produce some fine poetry as ‘Their Zen became identified with spontaneity, with emphasis on the innate quality of enlightenment’ (Stange 1995:63).

Nevertheless, Alan Watts, in Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen, makes a clear distinction between, ‘Beat Zen’ and orthodox Zen and accuses the Beat poets of ‘undisciplined whimsy’ (1959:23). His argument is that in Western art the concept of Zen is taken up but the nuts and bolts of the monastic life are ignored or changed beyond recognition. Watts admits ‘there is something endearing about Kerouac as a writer’ but suggests that he ‘confuses “anything goes” at the existential level with “anything goes” on the artistic and social levels’ (17). Ginsberg’s biographer, J.F. Merrill, also observed that too often the Beat poets used Zen as an excuse to behave like egocentric ‘holy madmen’ and ‘Zen lunatics’ (1969:35). Whether or not this is a fair criticism of the

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⁵ He explains that the Japanese ‘mizo no oto’ has a more onomatopoeic quality than its literal English equivalent.
authors, it is difficult to see Dean Moriarty, Kerouac’s anti-hero in *On the Road*, in any other light, despite some Zen-styled wisdom: ‘But it isn’t as simple as that,’ warned Dean. ‘Peace will come suddenly, we won’t understand when it does—see, man?’ (Kerouac 1972:122). Merrill is unforgiving when he highlights what he sees as the problem with the delivery of Beat Zen:

There is a contrast between the ‘nothing special’ of the Zen Master and the hyper-organized hoopla of the Western Beat version ... What seems to give Beat Zen away is its artificiality ... They work too hard at justifying the superiority of their strident ‘I don’t care’ attitude. It soon becomes obvious that they care a lot. In short, one suspects in many cases that the Beat brand of Zen is phony – phony because it is treated of as a means rather than an end (Merrill 1969:36).7

It is also impossible to overlook the influence which drugs had on the art of the Beat Generation, who were, as Tom Wolfe put it, ‘smoking joints and seeking satori’ (Wolfe 1969:4).

This point is not lost on Merrill either: ‘The Beat pursues his *satori* with a torturous anxiety, often enlisting the aid of modern chemistry to bring it about’ (36). This approach is a far cry from the meditative disciplines engaged in by Zen monks, for as the contemporary Zen Master, Taigan Takayama told Lucien Stryk, ‘Finally and most emphatically drug-taking is not compatible with Zen’ (Stryk 1981:113).

What is clear though, is that the Beat Generation was fundamental in the widespread interest of Zen in America, and even if their work did not endear them to Zen purists, the fact remains that they were instrumental in the promotion of Zen ideas. Master Taisen Deshimaru, who lived in Paris, and was highly influential in bringing Zen to the West, illustrates the point:

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6 The pseudonym used for Kerouac’s friend, also a Beat author, Neal Cassady.

7 In Japan, this notion of ‘phony’ Zen is known as ‘fox Zen’ because it is bewitching (a characteristic attributed to the fox) but insincere (Shibayama, 1974: 345).
A fad is a response to a need but it does not last. To endure, a practice demands effort and perseverance. There are always people who understand and continue, beyond passing fads and fashions. The fad leaves something behind. The wave ebbs but the ocean remains (Deshimaru 1985:51).

The Westernization of Zen brought strong objections from the renowned Zen Master Yasutani when his American protégé, Philip Kapleau, decided to translate certain Zen texts into English. Kapleau’s argument was that since the Chinese took Zen from India and the Japanese took it from China, his efforts would represent a natural migration. But Yasutani Roshi⁸ argued that Zen had evolved over a very long period in Japan. It is also true that Dogen, who transported the wisdom from China to Japan, was an enlightened Master, whereas Kapleau admits ‘I am not a Zen Master, much less a teacher’ (36). However, Zen did spread widely in America due to both Suzuki’s influence and that of the Beat Generation. What is interesting is that Pirsig admits he does not fall into the orthodox camp but neither could he be considered a Beat, for while Watts associates the Beat poets with ‘the cool, fake-intellectual ... name-dropping bits of Zen and jazz jargon’ (23), no critics associate Pirsig’s work with any similar folly. In fact critics tend to emphasise his sincerity, as Thomas Steele has put it:

The honesty of the narrator comes to his aid, the honesty that has made his intellectual history with all its self-destructive turnings and contradictions the main substance of the book; and with his honesty, he turns on himself – and – his reader (Steele 1979:89).

So in his analysis of Pirsig’s allusion to Goethe’s famous ballad, Earlkönig, Steele senses an honest delivery and equally Singer says ‘Pirsig’s book is all about caring’ (219).

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⁸ Roshi means teacher in Japanese and is the honorific title given to Zen masters.
These remarks, coupled with Rodino’s ‘earnestness,’ together with an anonymous reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* calling *ZMM* ‘an earnest period piece,’(1996) and many other similar accolades help us see that, while Pirsig was by no means the first American writer to be influenced by Zen, his particular method of delivery has made critics equate his work with a sincerity not afforded to his antecedents.

**Autobiography or Novel?**

Despite its recognised autobiographical honesty, many critics and theorists prefer to tackle *ZMM* as a novel in order to critique it and the difficulty in classifying the work takes up much space in many reviews and articles. Because of this I intend only a cursory glance at the discussion in this thesis. Barnett Singer sums up the problem of generic classification in his article, ‘Reflections on Robert Pirsig,’ arguing that ‘it succeeds because it does not belong to any category I can think of. At once journal, novel, essay, manual it reflects an outsider’s bold originality’ (214).

However, in ‘A Mind Divided Against Itself,’ Beverly Gross is more circumspect about this aspect of the work, stating:

> One easily (uneasily?) senses its autobiographical genesis. Still it seems that the most profound meaning of the book comes through novelistically – the human drama, brought to completeness and resolution as it almost never is in autobiography, gives ultimate meaning to the philosophic discourse and not the other way around (1984:202).

I will return to Gross’s observations toward the end of this essay, since she is one of the few critics who most embraces the importance of Zen in Pirsig’s work. For the time being, her cautionary tones about the generic classification of *ZMM* support Rodino’s view that ‘The biggest block to reading the book (not ‘novel,’ for it defies our generic categories) adequately is a facile assumption that the voice talking to us represents the normative values of the book’ (1981:63). Perhaps this problem of the
classification of ZMM is the reason book shops and libraries have long found it
difficult to place the text in one genre. During my research it was found in a variety of
sections including New Age, Literature, Psychology, Eastern Philosophy and even
Self-Help. Confusion reigns for as we have seen critics find it difficult to agree on
whether it is a novel or an autobiography and even the publishers seem uncertain. The
original publishers, (The Bodley Head and subsequently Corgi) sold it as fiction, while
the current publishers, Vintage Books, classify it as non-fiction. The Library of
Congress, however, catalogues it as autobiography. These generic idiosyncrasies add
weight to the thrust of Rodino’s argument about misinterpretation of ZMM due to the
‘simultaneous epistemological metaphors for different facets of one man’s life ... Its

Modern or Postmodern?

Owing to these narrative complexities, Rodino tells us the book is ‘self-consciously
‘post-modern,’ especially in its language,’ which appears to be something of a
tautology since self-consciousness is generally regarded as part of the postmodern
aesthetic. Postmodern theorist, Ihab Hassan has also identified ‘rhetoric, irony,
intertextuality, misreading, schizophrenia and indeterminacy’ (1975:123) as some of
the characteristics of the postmodern, many of which are highlighted in the conclusion
of Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s article:

A master of rhetoric’s devices, including the device by which he appears as a speaker within his
own text, addressing the reader, projecting himself as a character. He survives through the
mundane act of authorship, whose traces not only invoke the death of the author, as Socrates and
Derrida9 point out, but provide remembrances of the living hand, with complex relations to the
living voice. Sanity and survival in Zen, and elsewhere, can be purchased only through a full

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9 Harpham probably means Roland Barthes who wrote ‘The Death of the Author’ (Barthes 1988).
In her book, *The Cosmic Web*, N. Katherine Hayles argues that ZMM is important as much for the questions it raises, as for the answers it posits, claiming it embraces her notion of an interdisciplinary ‘field concept’ or ‘Cosmic Web.’ Hayles assumes that most of the authors she is concerned with ‘know little of science’ and suggests that her idea of a field concept, ‘is as capable of informing literary strategies as it is of forming scientific models’ (1984:25). What is most peculiar about Hayles’s book is that although she posits a theory of self-referential literature, interdisciplinary studies and intertexts from authors such as Pirsig and Pynchon, at no point does she use the word ‘postmodern’ or engage the resources of any of the post-structuralist theorists. Even Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘plasticity’ of the novel form fails to be incorporated into her argument. According to her bibliography, Hayles seems to be entirely content with the work done by F.R. Leavis, Benjamin Whorf and Ludwig Wittgenstein. She selects passages from ZMM which confirm, deny, persuade or assuage her ideas of a ‘scientific field model’ and in doing so demonstrates exactly what Pirsig highlights in this excerpt from ZMM:

There is a knife moving here. A very deadly one; an intellectual scalpel so swift and so sharp you sometimes don’t see it moving. You get the illusion that all those parts are just there and are being named as they exist (81).

Hayles also chooses an extract from the book which is probably one of the most obvious indications of his desire to reveal the intertextuality and self-referentiality in the text: ‘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’ (Pirsig 1974:86).
She then points out that, ‘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,’ while insisting that Pirsig uses italics to ‘indicate his depth of feeling on the issue’ (Hayles 1984:71). However, I think it more likely that the emphasis is there in order to draw our attention to the process of reading and examining and to see that Pirsig plays with the field of representation. This is also the view of Rodino:

The irony in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is continuous and unremitting. In no passage in the book does Pirsig not both advance and recede in some way ... it demands from us a self-conscious awareness of how we respond to ordinary sounding words and tonalities, and especially how we learn from precepts and from examples. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* warns us that ‘thinking things through’ is not the same as making everyday life better (1980:30).

If Pirsig encourages anything throughout the text it is that, when ‘thinking things through,’ we need to be aware of our response to his inferences. After all, he is well aware of the impact of stating the obvious as demonstrated by the following passage:

You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it’s going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it’s always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt (155).

This sort of pre-emptive engagement with critics, along with their subsequent observations creates a further complexity. When we consider this along with the interplay of the two texts themselves, I believe it could be argued that Pirsig’s books are either modern or postmodern, but the distinction, for this thesis at least, is unimportant.10

10 For a discussion on this subject see the article by Richard Rodino titled ‘Robert Pirsig’ which is included in *Postmodern Fiction* edited by Larry McCaffrey (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986)
Describing the Buddha

Pirsig draws our attention to Zen by subtle impressions and sketches which permeate the text and in so doing is able to implicitly incorporate it. On this point Hayles argues that:

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 (1984:84).

Despite the fact her argument is spurious since fiction is definitively not concerned with what we can say about reality, it also appears that she is unimpressed with Pirsig’s achievement in describing ‘the Buddha that lies within rational thought’ and it would be interesting to find out if this really did cost the unspoken Buddha anything at all. Dr Suzuki would be more generous about ZMM, I feel: ‘To grasp the exquisite meaning of Zen as expressing itself in words and yet not in them is a great art which is to be attained only after so many vain attempts’ (1973:297). Pirsig seems to have got it right first time although during editing, according to George Gent, he ‘was dissatisfied with the portions dealing with Zen and they became fewer’ (Gent 1974:36).

Steiner laments that the enormous eight hundred thousand word draft was not published. Allan Fotheringham observes ‘No one has said it better’ (1990:48), and as the reviewer in Publishers Weekly puts it ‘What attracted counterculture readers in the first place was Pirsig’s disarmingly seamless incorporation of a metaphysical discourse’ (1996:30). Similar accolades came from yet another unnamed writer for the Times Literary Supplement, who seemed slightly reluctant not to declare this a great literary piece: ‘Yes, it can be “roundly affirmed” that this is a wonderful book.’
He concludes, 'Perhaps it would be excessive to say that this is a great book, but it is certainly a powerfully original one - disturbing, deeply moving, full of insights' (1974:406).

Hayles, however, presents this reviewer in a light which leads us to believe his views of ZMM are unfavourable, saying 'Phaedrus's reconstruction of Greek thought comes in for some hard knocks' (65). In fact, the reviewer recognizes that the mistakes made by Pirsig's former self – Phaedrus, his alter ego, who is driven insane – may be purposefully exposed, 'Is it simply that he was mad at the time' (406).

The artistry of Pirsig is obviously lost on the scientifically inspired Hayles: 'That it is Phaedrus's presence that rescues the book from dullness has been observed by almost everyone who has written on this book' (77). Having read all the articles about Pirsig which Hayles has cited in her book, and many which she did not, I could find no evidence to support this statement. Even if it was the case, her argument could also apply to the white whale in Moby-Dick and the madness of Hamlet. But the whale is Ahab's nemesis, Hamlet does adopt an 'antic disposition' and equally Phaedrus occupies an important role in Pirsig's narrative. Indeed his pursuit of the 'ghost of rationality' can be compared to Ahab's monomaniacal obsession with his leviathan, and the court-ordered electric shock therapy may well have been what Claudius would have prescribed for the Prince had it been available instead of execution on the grounds of political expediency. That a book on madness and ghosts has passing comparisons with Hamlet is no surprise. Perhaps a more fitting comparison, though, comes from Steiner who goes far in his praise of ZMM saying 'the analogies with 'Moby-Dick' are patent. Robert Pirsig invites the prodigious comparison' (150).
The comparisons do not only appear within the narratives of the two books. In his introduction to Herman Melville’s great tome, Andrew Delbanco says that ‘Melville creates Ishmael in the image of his earlier versions of himself and then invites us to share the excitement of his self-destruction,’ and that the narrative is ‘Hostile to all conventions’ (Melville 1992:xvii). In Delbanco’s remarks we can plainly see some parallels with Pirsig and ZMM. Ahab has the powerful physical and metaphysical presence of the whale but Phaedrus’ salvation will not come in the shape of an entity which he can hate the way in which Ahab hates the whale that ‘heaps’ him. Phaedrus’ antagonist is the ghost of reason. He reaches Kant’s sublime and is subsumed by it. He dries up slowly, loses ideas and cares, and sinks into a catastrophic depression and subsequent psychosis. We will explore the corollaries between mental illness and Zen later in the thesis. For the time being let us note Zen master Yekiwo’s words, ‘If you are really desirous of mastering Zen, it is necessary for you once to give up your life and plunge right into the pit of death’ (Perry 1971:209).

Harpham suggests that Pirsig handles the description of his own destruction in a way that leads us to look beyond the words on the page, and to form an esoteric reading of the text because of ‘its marks of mortality as well as its intimations of immortality’ (1988:81). These ‘intimations of immortality’ again subscribe to the idea that a trace of Zen echoes throughout the book. In support of my argument, the conclusion to Beverly Gross’s article is probably the most apt reference when she declares: ‘Zen is the path as well as the destination ... The process of attaining and maintaining peace of mind ... Zen ... turns out to be the real pursuit of the book’ (212). However, Gross only manages a very brief summary before completing her article.
I hope to be able to make more extensive use of the similarities between Pirsig’s work, Zen and koan with the aim of showing how ZMM and Lila display ineffable concepts of Zen itself: In the delivery, rather than in the specific details and references on the subject. The reason, as we have observed in Suzuki’s comments, is that Zen can only be portrayed in the subtlest of undertones in language. Haiku express this with a breath of poetry. As Blyth puts it, ‘Haiku is a kind of satori, or enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things’ (1949:vii). If it is true that an art form such as haiku can be a key to enlightenment then I will argue that Pirsig’s work is a koan, the solution of which lies beyond the words on the page.

**Culture Bearer.**

Pirsig reflected on the success of ZMM in the ‘Afterword’ to later editions which originally appeared as an article in *The New York Times Book Review* (Pirsig 1984). He explains that he believed his success was due to the timing of the book’s release and that it became a ‘culture-bearing’ book as the hippie movement degenerated. Poignantly, in Lila, Pirsig cites Kerouac’s *On the Road* as the culture-bearing book at the time he was writing ZMM (352). In reference to the hippie movement we should note Paul Gray’s observation that ‘Although it appeared in 1974, Zen [ZMM] was and remains one of the most impressive literary expressions of the countercultural ’60s’ (Gray 1991:93). While reviewing Lila an anonymous reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* said ZMM ‘tickled the metaphysical underbelly of the ’60s holdover generation’ (1991:55). It was published in a ‘rainbow of paperback colours’ (Singer 1981:213) with the obvious intention of pandering to the ‘flower power’ generation.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) In Britain, ZMM was the first book ever to be featured on the front cover of *New Musical Express*, then at the height of its influence. (Calcutt and Shepard 1998: 220)
Wood suggests: 'it is also acute and energetic and decent, as the sixties also were and it is a ... memorial to those times' (1997:32). Wood's notion of sixties decency cannot possibly take into account the civil rights riots, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the countless massacres of people in Vietnam. In fact John Cawelti's view is that it is 'the quest for escape from a repressive culture [which] ties Pirsig's work to some of the most important novels and films of the 1960s - Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Hopper's Easy Rider' (Disanto and Steele 1990:278). However, while ZMM seems to be linked to the powerful upheaval of the sixties, it is impossible to re-invent the wheel. Once you have 'turned on, tuned in and dropped out,' to rephrase the immortal words of sixties guru, Dr Timothy Leary (Leary,1983:Jacket), you can't very well do it again. For this reason it is difficult to see the book doing as well in the nineties. In spite of this the jacket of Lila claims it is 'As crucial to the issues of the nineties as ZEN [ZMM] was in the seventies.'

If this is true reviewers certainly did not pick it up with the same enthusiasm as the first book. In The New York Review of Books critic, Robert Adams who said in a 1974 review of ZMM, that Pirsig was 'a stunning writer of fictional prose' (1974:22), but in a later article refers to Lila as 'rambling discourses' wherein the author becomes 'entangled in his private arguments' (1991:60). Paul Gray tells us that Pirsig is suffering from 'the compulsion to write a second book dwelling on the fame one has achieved with a first book' (1991:93). He suggests that Lila moves too slowly and that the 'uninitiated may have a hard time making much sense out of Phaedrus' attempt 'to go all the way back to fundamental meanings of what is meant by morality'" (94). The idea of initiating oneself with Lila by first engaging ZMM supports my theory that the books are best read as an opus.
There is also much to be said for Adams’ comment that in Lila ‘the dynamism of the motorcycle is sorely missed’ (60), for although there is plenty of discourse about yachting on America’s inland waterways, the author seems careful to avoid the style of the first narrative. Once again Pirsig seems to have had some foresight into the problem. This note appears on the frontispiece to Lila:

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance was like a first child. Maybe that will always be the best-loved one. But this second child is the bright one. I think a lot of people will argue with some of the ideas in Lila. There may be controversy. But if people are still reading these two books a hundred years from now, I predict Lila will be the one they consider more important. Robert M. Pirsig.*
Chapter 1

Zen and the Metaphysical Journey

It always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to 'creation of the world', to causa prima (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 1984:21).

Do not follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought. – Basho (Schiller, 1994).

I would like now to trace the philosophic and subsequent mystic journey which Robert M. Pirsig stretches across his two books. I will be treating the texts as largely autobiographical. However, since the sequence of events is not told as a straightforward, lineal path, I have included an appendix with the major events in the author's life set out in chronological order. This is necessary since, as Harpham suggests with reference to ZMM, 'Such a text presents not only ubiquitous opportunities for interpretation but obstacles as well, because the possible substitutions seem limitless, unrestricted, and so meaningless' (1988:71). This is echoed by George Steiner's comment, ‘“Zen and the Art” is awkward both to live with and to write about’ (1974:147).

Who's Who?

In order to simplify the narrative framework for the purposes of analysis, I would like to start sketching an overview of ZMM by establishing three narrative voices. The first two are: the Narrator - this is the first person narrator, who rides the motorcycle; and 'Phaedrus' - who is represented only through the Narrator. While many reviewers refer to the third voice as a synthesis of Narrator and Phaedrus at the end of ZMM, it is
more accurately a hybrid and I will refer to this conflation of the two as Narrator/Phaedrus. When I refer to Pirsig, I mean the author, Harpham’s ‘living hand’ (Harpham 1988:81), not represented in the narrative. The Narrator opens the story and introduces us to his thoughts on various subjects such as motorcycle maintenance, the interface of humans and technology, and the split between romanticism and classicism, while at the same time telling us of the real-time journey on the motorcycle across the heartland of America. So the narrative is roughly divided into two parts: real-time narrative and lectures (the term used for the lectures is Chautauqua, taken from turn-of-the-century travelling lecture circuits). Then, while riding with his son, Chris, we are dramatically introduced to a shadowy figure somewhere in the narrator’s subconscious who arrives at dusk during a storm:

A flash and *Ka-wham!* of thunder, one right on top of the other. That shook me and Chris has got his head right against my back now. A few warning drops of rain ... at this speed they are like needles. A second flash-*Wham* and everything brilliant ... and then in the brilliance of the next flash that farmhouse ... that windmill ... oh, my God, he’s been here! ... throttle off ... this is his road (1974:38).

Eventually the Narrator explains that this ‘he’ is himself before undergoing Electric Shock Therapy (hence the evocative thunder and lightning). He names this former self Phaedrus, (after the character in Plato’s dialogue of the same name) and explains that this alter-ego was once an intellectual heavyweight who pursued the ‘ghost of rationality’ before going mad and being committed to a psychiatric ward. Gradually, Phaedrus emerges in the text as a powerful persona. Initially he represents a threat to the Narrator who has persistent thoughts about Phaedrus’ pursuit of ‘Quality.’ The Narrator is afraid that this marks a return to his former madness and he is also

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12 The problem of identifying Pirsig’s various personae is discussed in nearly all critical studies.

concerned because his son, is showing 'the beginning symptoms of mental illness' (68). This forces the Narrator to address his past. After a dramatic scene on a Californian cliff top, Phaedrus and the Narrator become equivocal in a single 'I' at the end of the book and we learn that Chris has felt detached from his father since Phaedrus was 'destroyed by order of the court' (94). Phaedrus is essentially an idealistic intellectual, whereas the Narrator strikes us as a rather unemotional stoic. While unstable, Phaedrus nevertheless represented a more caring father to Chris. Therefore, the atonement is symbolic of the synthesis which the Narrator has been calling for throughout the Chautauqua. That is, by the end of the book, Pirsig hopes to show that dichotomies like those of romanticism versus technology, romanticism versus classicism, science versus theology, art versus science, etc., are no more than misleading constructs of dialectic reasoning.

In Lila, significant changes have taken place. The motorcycle has been traded for a boat. Chris has since been murdered in New York, where the author is travelling along the Hudson River. His companion this time is Lila, whom he has picked up in a riverside bar. Apart from these altered circumstances and setting, a noticeable change has also taken place, as far as the narrative process is concerned. The first person Narrator has disappeared and the author now refers to Phaedrus in the third person again and states that it was he who wrote ZMM: 'And Phaedrus knew something about values. Before he had gone up into the mountains he had written a whole book on values' (1991:74). The only way to reconcile this shift in perspective is to see that Phaedrus is constant in representing Pirsig's past at all times. So Phaedrus is an evolutionary reference point who develops and floats along shadow-like behind the author across the two novels.
Provisional Truth.

Now that these various personae of ‘Pirsig’ have been established, I can say something about the metaphysical deliberations which are of ‘moral’ concern to the author. The main contention of ZMM is that ‘Quality’ is indefinable, summed up in this passage from the first book:

Quality ... you know what it is, yet you don’t know what it is. But that’s self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There’s nothing to talk about. But if you can’t say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn’t exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others ... but what’s the ‘betterness’? ... So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it? (187).

This is the crucial enigmatic problem and the concept is reaffirmed at the start of Lila, albeit with more confidence:

Quality doesn’t have to be defined. You understand it without definition, ahead of definition. Quality is a direct experience independent of and prior to intellectual abstractions ... A metaphysics must be divisible, definable and knowable, or there isn’t any metaphysics ... a metaphysics is essentially a kind of dialectical definition ... a ‘Metaphysics of Quality’ is essentially a contradiction in terms, a logical absurdity. It would be almost like a mathematical definition of randomness. The more you try to say what randomness is the less random it becomes (81).

And yet ironically, throughout Lila, Pirsig endeavours to define a ‘Metaphysics of Quality’ which divides the term into ‘Static’ and ‘Dynamic’ patterns of value. It is a long treatise but can best be summed up in the idea of provisional truths. Examples of the success of provisional truths or ‘Static Quality’ are the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, flat-earth theory, Egyptian mathematics functioning without the cipher
zero, pre-Mercator maps, etc. On the other hand, Newtonian physics, Einstein’s theory of Relativity, Columbus’s voyage of discovery and the Cartesian cogito are perfect examples of Pirsig’s ‘Dynamic Quality,’ as is modern Chaos theory:

Against the trend rises the young science of chaos, wholeness and change – a new insistence on the interrelationship of things, as awareness of the essential unpredictability of nature and of the uncertainties of our scientific descriptions (Briggs & Peat 1989:201).

These dynamic changes to static provisional truths radically alter, not only scientific thinking, but philosophies about existence and, therefore, are never taken lightly as Bertrand Russell points out when considering the change wrought by the Copernican Revolution: ‘To conceive of the earth, not as the centre of the universe, but as one among the planets, not as eternally fixed, but as wandering through space, showed an extraordinary emancipation from anthropocentric thinking’ (1994: 223).

The main argument in Lila, in short, is that static patterns represented by fixed biological, social, or intellectual laws are intermittently changed by dynamic patterns in the form of revolution, or evolution. But for Pirsig, this is not as Heraclitus would have it, total and constant flux. It is more in line with William James’s notion of: ‘the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories’ (1912:93). James’s ‘conceptual categories’ can be seen best in terms of Pirsig’s ‘static latches,’ described here:

Evolution can’t be continuous forward movement. It must be a process of ratchet-like steps in which there is a Dynamic movement forward up some new incline and then, if the result looks successful, a static latching-on of the gain that has been made; then another Dynamic advance, then another static latch (176).

Having established this division of Quality into two terms, he begins to tag events, theories and things either ‘Static’ or ‘Dynamic.’ We can see that this roughly corresponds to the method used for definition of terms in the first book: i.e. Classic =
Static and Romantic = Dynamic. He then refers his hypothesis to the philosophic inquiries of the subject/object relationship, free will versus determinism, cause and effect, mind and matter and takes us once again into familiar territory by discussing a Zen-styled approach to the problems of this dualism.

An Hourglass.

A macro-structure develops which encompasses the terrain of both books in the shape of an hourglass. ZMM finds perspectives which are diametrically opposed and seeks to reconcile them while Lila splits the original cleavage term 'Quality' in order to bifurcate those values once again. However, it is not only the intellectual treatises that seem to get a two-fold hearing. There are certain similarities between characters in the books which are difficult to overlook. In the first book, Chris is portrayed as a difficult, dependant child who is developing alarming signs of mental disturbance. Similarly, Lila is difficult to deal with, showing signs of a previous mental illness and is dependant upon Phaedrus. Chris's 'values' are called into question because he is a child given to outbursts of his temper. Lila's 'morals' are called into question because she is an ex-prostitute and has a propensity to violent remonstration.

We also find what could be called an intellectual Nemesis in each of the books. In ZMM, it is the Chairman for the Committee on Analysis of Ideas and Study of Methods at the University of Chicago,14 while in Lila, it is the lawyer and fellow boatman, Richard Rigel. The Chairman and Rigel serve as sparring partners, holding contrary views which are analysed and refuted by Pirsig. This technique of setting up intellectual straw men in order to propound one's own views in a good light is exactly the technique which Socrates (or Plato) employs in Phaedrus in order to overturn a

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rhetorical speech on love set forth by Lysias. Yet this is the dialectic technique which Pirsig so admonishes in his first book:

Once it’s stated that ‘the dialectic comes before anything else,’ this statement itself becomes a dialectical entity, subject to dialectical question ... Here is this dialectic, like Newton’s law of gravity, just sitting by itself in the middle of nowhere, giving birth to the universe, hey? It’s asinine. Dialectic which is the parent of logic, came itself from rhetoric. Rhetoric is in turn the child of the myths and poetry of ancient Greece ... It is Quality, not dialectic, which is the generator of everything we know (395).

We have seen that the arguments in the first book rely on the homogeneity of the term ‘Quality,’ whereas in the second book, we witness the stratification of this term. Pirsig addresses this contradiction in Lila: ‘he himself had insisted in his first book that Quality cannot be defined ... The trouble was this was only part of himself talking. There was another part that kept saying “Ahh, do it anyway. It’s interesting.” ... To the intellect the process of defining Quality has a compulsive quality of its own’ (82).

It should be noted that the full dialectical effect can only really be brought about by the intertextual nature of ZMM and Lila, for as Socrates tells Phaedrus dialectics are ‘these processes of division and bringing together’ (Plato:535).

While initially all these points of similarity and reversal appear like an elaborate and effective confidence trick, if we consider them in the light of Zen we may find a more obscure yet satisfactory reason for Pirsig’s tactic. The founder of The Buddhist Society in London, Christmas Humphreys, suggests a four-phase way of grasping Zen which, notably, he says is particularly useful to the Westerner:
1. Unthink – Represented by the argument of the indefinable concept of ‘Quality’ in ZMM, the culmination being Phaedrus’ mental collapse.

2. Stop thinking – Suggested by the seventeen year silence between publications.

3. Rethink – Expressed in the dialectical re-evaluation of ‘Quality’ in Lila and echoed in the title of George Gent’s article A Successful Pirsig Rethinks Life of Zen and Science.

4. Beyond thought – which obviously cannot be represented except possibly by the author’s subsequent and final silence.

According to Humphreys, application of the these four phases should help induce the question: ‘And finally, can I visualize, however dimly, a Truth which is above and beyond both of any pair of opposites, which was before the difference was born?’ (Humphries 1993:106-109). We can also see this question and Phaedrus’ ‘rethink’ in Lila in terms of these words by the Zen patriarch, Dogen:

Before a person studies Zen, Mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after a first glimpse into the truth of Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and waters are no waters; after enlightenment mountains are once again mountains and waters once again waters (Schiller,1994:2).

What it appears Pirsig is trying to do in both ZMM and Lila is to funnel the major metaphysical challenges of western philosophy into the neatest package he can and apply them to the more mystically-based philosophy of Zen. The reason becomes clearer when, late in Lila, he aligns himself with William James who introduced both ‘pragmatism’ and ‘radical empiricism’ to philosophy and sought to reconcile religion and science. It is this middle territory between science and theology which represents philosophy itself for Bertrand Russell: ‘Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science ... between theology and science there is a No Man’s Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man’s
Land is philosophy’ (13). There is a recognition of Russell’s ‘No Man’s Land’ described in ZMM, albeit in the lay philosopher’s argot:

What you’ve got here, really, are two realities, one of immediate artistic appearance and one of underlying scientific explanation, and they don’t match and they don’t fit and they don’t really have much of anything to do with one another. That’s quite a situation. You might say there’s a little problem here (1974:63).

It is precisely this impasse which Pirsig is addressing and why he seeks his answers in the philosophy of Zen. It is also clear, I think, that Pirsig sees his journey as a development of consciousness and possibly conscientiousness from empirical scientist, to teacher, to philosopher, to madman, to seeker of divinity through mysticism. He tries to map this journey in a narrative by using his Zen examples in all final analyses, and never once questions their integrity with the depth and fervour with which he examines everything else. This bias is compounded by the way in which Pirsig writes his philosophy which often makes the arguments sound too simplistic. Steiner talks of his ‘potted summaries of Kant which betray the aggressive certitudes of the self-taught man’ (149-150).

We can also note that Pirsig conspicuously avoids the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein probably because, as they were heavily influenced by eastern philosophy, they would expose his own ideas as being less revolutionary than he claims. Paul Gray makes a similar observation saying, ‘Phaedrus’ insights often seem less original than he believes they are’ (1991:94). However the presentation of a relatively weak western philosophical treatise does, in turn, tend to shore up the implicit mysticism in the text.
There also appears to be a desire that the book maintain its characteristics as a novel. The reader gets the impression that the author wants to cut to the chase and talk about Zen, for which he reserves his greatest respect, even though early on he admits that he: ‘never got involved with meditation because it made no sense to him’ (1974:146). However, by the end of *Lila*, Pirig has once again reassessed his position and done an about face on this particular issue:

People in this culture are hypnotised into thinking they do not meditate when in fact they do. That’s what the purpose of boats like this has always been...and seaside cottages too...and lake cabins...and hiking trails...and golf courses...it’s the need for *dhyāna*\(^\text{15}\) that is behind all these (437).

In *Lila*, just as in *ZMM*, we are expected to grasp the importance of the doctrines of Zen Buddhism and once again the author is keen to demonstrate how they can be applicable to, and compatible with, a modern western lifestyle.

**Madness or Mysticism?**

In both books, the author relies heavily on Zen teachings to argue his case, and wants the reader to quickly empathise with this perspective. Yet, in *ZMM*, he admits that Phaedrus doesn’t make the change from philosophy to mysticism overnight: ‘He didn’t jump from Immanuel Kant to Bozeman, Montana. During this span of ten years he lived in India for a long time studying Oriental philosophy in Benares Hindu University’ (145).

Unlike the Narrator, who comes into being after electric shock treatment, the young Phaedrus is unable to forego his belief in rationality and reason. He retains an empirical response to phenomena and it seems his time is wasted since, despite being a committed student, he is unable to grasp the essence of mysticism: ‘He’d entered India

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\(^{15}\) *Dhyāna* here means meditation
an empirical scientist, and he left India an empirical scientist, not much wiser than he had been when he’d come’ (146). In Zen teaching though, there is no negation on the path to enlightenment: ‘However he’d been exposed to a lot and had acquired a kind of latent image that appeared in conjunction with many other latent images later on’ (146). In other words, once an individual has been introduced to the concepts of mysticism, traces of that teaching remain within as a potential for later understanding.

This agrees with many descriptions of how koan work. Zen master Mumon describes the koan as, ‘something like a red-hot iron ball which you have swallowed and which you cannot disgorge no matter how hard you may try’ (Izutsu 1977:176). In The Empty Mirror, Janwillem van de Watering says, ‘The koan is a time-bomb, a very complicated time-bomb. One day the bomb will explode. It may happen years later, all sorts of winding paths may be walked’ (1972:112).

Is it possible that these ‘latent images’ appear after the severity of Annihilation ECS and that a major turning point has taken place during Pirsig’s treatment? It is late in Lila, when Pirsig recalls his slip from sanity, that this is all but confirmed:

The value of shock treatment is not that it returns a lunatic to normal cultural patterns. It certainly does not do that ... It simply knocks him senseless ... But sometimes the patient, in a moment of Zen wisdom, sees the superficiality of both his own contrary patterns and the cultural patterns, sees that the one gets him electrically clubbed day after day and the other sets him free from the institution, and thereupon makes a wise mystic decision to get the hell out of there by whatever avenue is available (436).

However as we have seen, this ‘Zen wisdom’ comes late for Phaedrus and only after a period in a mental hospital. Earlier on Pirsig’s conventional study of mysticism only results in disillusionment:
The professor of philosophy was blithely expounding on the illusory nature of the world for what seemed the fiftieth time and Phaedrus raised his hand and asked coldly if it was believed the atomic bombs that had dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were illusory. The professor smiled and said yes ... that answer was hopelessly inadequate (146).

Pirsig left India as a result of this answer. The 1945 atomic bombing of Japan also provides the backdrop for a powerful scene in Mishima’s *Kinkakuji*\(^{16}\) when the master lectures the student monks on a famous *koan* on the day of the Japanese surrender, without mentioning anything of the war, the bombs, or the capitulation:

> The Superior\(^{17}\) came to the end of his lecture, without once having touched on the matter of Japan’s defeat. We felt as though we had been bewitched by a fox.\(^{18}\) We had not the faintest idea why this particular Zen problem should have been chosen on the day of our country’s defeat’ (Mishima 1990:66).

Significantly, Mishima’s monk, Mizoguchi, is dissatisfied with the answer, later loses his mind, and proceeds to burn down the famous Golden Temple in Kyoto. As with Pirsig’s work, this story is based on actual occurrences.

When we consider the point raised in both situations, both the Hindu professor and Mishima’s master agree to remain detached from the discussion of war. And it may be significant that later Pirsig adopts a similar distancing technique when writing *ZMM* where he makes no mention of the Vietnam War, despite the fact that his journey takes place through America in the late sixties. While this could be likened to Jane Austen’s refusal to allude to the Napoleonic Wars raging in Europe at the time of her novels, the examples given by Mizoguchi’s Superior and the Hindu professor seem to be a more fitting reason for the omission.

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\(^{16}\) *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion.*

\(^{17}\) Zen Master.

\(^{18}\) See footnote 7 on page 10 of this thesis.
The point is clarified late in *ZMM*:

I think that if we are going to reform the world and make it a better place to live in, the way to do it is not with talk about relationships of a political nature, which are inevitably dualistic, full of subjects and objects and their relationship to one another; or with programs full of things for other people to do. I think that kind of approach starts it at the end and presumes the end is the beginning. Programs of a political nature are important *end products* of social quality that can be effective only if the underlying structure of social values is right. The social values are right only if the individual values are right (301).

This is certainly a fundamental tenet of Zen teaching. Nevertheless, by the time Pirsig writes *Lila*, this detached stance is, typically, upended and the author is more than willing to talk about the relationships of politics and war in an intellectual style:

With Victorian spirits atrophied and their minds hemmed in by social restraints, all avenues to any quality other than social quality were closed. And so this social base which had no intellectual meaning and no biological purpose slowly and helplessly drifted toward its own stupid self-destruction: toward the senseless murder of millions of its own children on the battlefields of the First World War (314).

In spite of this doubtful and simplistic analysis, when we consider both Phaedrus and Mishima’s psychotic acolyte it seems that contemplation on Zen can either alleviate psychotic behaviour or produce the opposite, i.e. a mystic novice can be driven insane. Indeed van de Wetering advises that contemplation on a *koan* can bring on ‘despair and near insanity’ (1973:40).

In Pirsig’s case there seems to be an inextricable link between Zen fanning the flames of his madness, when he reads the *Tao Te Ching*, as well as abetting his subsequent recovery. Perhaps madness provides the ‘Dynamic Quality’ required in order to allow the patient to change his culturally established patterns of belief, with Zen providing the necessary ‘static latch.’ The author remembers his slip from sanity in this way:
It isn’t that any particular thing looked different. It was that the whole context of everything was completely different although it contained the same things ... The terrain he covered, the details of his life, were all the same, but now everything seemed open and free and all the horrible confining smell of everything was gone ... he’d been on a tightrope all his life. Now he’d fallen off and found that instead of crashing he was flying ... He remembered how he kept to himself the feeling of exhilaration, of old mysteries being solved and new mysteries being explored. He was free of a static pattern of life he’d thought was unchangeable (1991:373-374).

Is this excerpt from *Lila* a description of madness or mystic enlightenment? Beverly Gross perhaps confuses madness and mysticism when she suggests Pirsig skirts dangerously close toward the ‘mystical’ and the ‘arbitrary’ (1984:210). I doubt, however, that everybody feels the mystical, despite its possible proximity to madness, to be ‘arbitrary’ let alone a dangerous alternative to an all-encompassing ratiocination. Katherine Hayles describes the scene in *ZMM* when Phaedrus is sitting in a catatonic state on the floor, urinating freely and letting his cigarettes burn his fingers. Alarmingly, she suggests that ‘depending on one’s viewpoint, this state can be seen either as a mystical ecstasy or ... the insanity the narrator so much fears. Perhaps the two are indistinguishable’ (Hayles 1984:67).

But they *are* distinguishable. This vision of Phaedrus is not even close to the tranquil repose of the lotus position and as far as I am aware Zen masters do not normally urinate on themselves. The Zen scholar and priest, Thomas Merton, assures us that transcendent experience ‘is not a regressive immersion in nature, the cosmos or “pure being,”’ in narcissistic tranquillity, a happy loss of identity in a warm, regressive, dark, oceanic swoon’ (Merton,1968:72). Merton himself provides a good example of how to avoid the confusion which Hayles finds herself in. He is a Trappist monk and having taken a vow of silence, illustrates the difference between pre-verbal and trans-verbal. Outwardly there is no distinction and this is precisely why Ken Wilber is
insistent on an understanding of the difference between the prepersonal realms of consciousness development and the transpersonal realms of superconsciousness:

*Since development moves from prepersonal to personal to transpersonal, and *since* both prepersonal and transpersonal are in their own ways, nonpersonal, *then* prepersonal and transpersonal tend to appear similar, even identical, to the untutored eye. In other words people tend to confuse prepersonal and transpersonal dimensions (Wilber 1983:202).

I will be looking at Wilber’s work in relation to Pirsig more closely in the final chapter of this thesis. In the meantime, let me point out that these observations are taken from a highly acclaimed essay, ‘The Pre/Trans Fallacy,’ which also makes a similar divide between the magical and the divine, as well as a clear distinction between madness and mysticism.

**Strange Attractor**

What though is the ‘strange attractor,’ to borrow a term from Chaos Theory, between madness and mysticism? The question of the tacit association of Zen and the treatment of psychiatric patients is taken up in earnest by Eric Fromm in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*:

> Zen … can sharpen the focus, throw new light on the nature of insight, and heighten the sense of what it is to see, what it is to be creative, what it is to overcome the affective contaminations and false intellectualizations which are the necessary results of experience based on the subject-object split (140).

This passage seems particularly pertinent to Pirsig and indeed could have come from one of his books. Similarly, Jaques Lacan, in *The Mirror Stage* suggests:

> Psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the ‘Thou art that’, in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins (Lacan 1977:7).

But for Fromm it is not only the patient who can benefit from an open mind toward Zen: ‘Zen thought will deepen and widen the horizon of the psychoanalyst and help
him to arrive at a more radical concept of the grasp of reality as the ultimate aim of full, conscious awareness’ (140). In Lacan’s reference to Hindu mysticism’s ‘Thou art That,’ we can again see some symmetry with Pirsig who explains:

In all of the Oriental religions great value is placed on the Sanskrit doctrine of Tat tvam asī, ‘Thou art that,’ which asserts that everything you think you are and everything you think you perceive are undivided. To realize fully this lack of division is to become enlightened (146).

Pirsig is keen to point out the possibility of increased awareness in some psychiatric patients who prominent psychiatrist, ‘Karl Menninger has described as better than cured’ (1991:436) after treatment. Pirsig’s decision to quote Menninger may well rest on his book, Man Against Himself, which includes a chapter on asceticism and the correlation between mystics and some of his case histories. The reasons for the similarity in perceptions could be as straightforward as this explanation in Lila:

Both lunatics and mystics have freed themselves from the conventional static intellectual patterns of their culture. The only difference is that the lunatic has shifted over to a private static pattern of his own, whereas the mystic has abandoned all static patterns in favor of pure Dynamic Quality (434).

This would certainly concur with Socrates when he tells Phaedrus that there are two kinds of madness, ‘one arising from human diseases and the other a divine release from the customary habits’ (Plato:531). This divine madness for Socrates often ‘takes hold upon the gentle and pure soul, arouses it and inspires it to songs and other poetry’ (469). These two Socratic forms of madness would readily correspond to the differences between mysticism and mental illness. Thomas Merton underscores the important factor of choice, ‘The thing about Zen is that it pushes contradictions to their ultimate limit where one has to choose between madness and innocence’ (141).
Chief Bromden, the narrator in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, tells us that after receiving electric shock treatment, ‘You had a choice: you could either strain and look at things that appeared in front of you in the fog, painful as it might be, or you could relax and lose yourself’ (Kesey 1962:104). Polonius too, recognises choice in Hamlet’s madness, suggesting a degree of cunning: ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t’ (*Hamlet* II.2.205). Or perhaps, more disarmingly, not sanity but madness is pursued with relish and used for power as in the case of Captain Ahab: ‘They think me mad … but I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that’s only calm to comprehend itself’ (Melville 1992:183). Some, as with Pirsig, seek mysticism when faced with the possibility of madness or clinical depression. It was in the hope that studying Zen could combat depression that van de Wetering spent a year in a Japanese monastery after this advice from his philosophy professor:

> Manual therapy may help and psychoanalysis, of course, but if you ask me, most of it is useless for treating your sort of affliction. What you have is what all mystics have had, and the only way of solving your problem is to join a mystic training … find a master … and he’ll cure you or you’ll cure yourself (1973:104).

As soon as van de Wetering arrived in Japan though, the master warned his western protégé: ‘But we, in this monastery, are not engaged in psychiatric treatment, and neither are we a school of philosophy’ (51). Despite this and Pirsig’s comment that mysticism is pure dynamic Quality, Zen practice provides the equally important ‘static latches,’ not of a private madness but of a fifteen hundred year-old discipline. Yet it is made clear in the first book that Phaedrus is alone in his pursuits and does not confide in, or find support from, his friends, colleagues or family.
It is crucial in Zen as in all mystical religions that a discipline and perhaps, more importantly, a mentor is present. The Zen master is by no means incidental to the life of a monk and neither are the daily chores and monastic duties, including the stringent meditation practices. Master Taisen Deshimaru placed great importance on the presence of a master and of posture during meditation, as did Dogen, who introduced the practice from China to Japan:

Dogen wrote about the absolute necessity for a master. If you practiced Zazen without a master you would make mistakes ... Without a master you cannot maintain a correct posture, breathing and state of mind for very long” (Deshimaru 1985:124-25).

Zazen means literally ‘sitting dhyāna’ or ‘Zen sitting’ and is described in detail by Deshimaru, but is essentially sitting in the full lotus position, the eyes slightly open, concentrating on breathing out and clearing the mind of thought. This form of meditation is typically minimalist and embodied in the word shikantaza - ‘only sit’. The only point of reference to the outside world is the acknowledgement of an exhalation of breath. It adheres perfectly to the final step of the Buddha’s ‘Eightfold Path’ to enlightenment - ‘right meditation.’

Zazen is the method of attaining enlightenment without the use of koan and is considered much less dangerous. In fact Christmas Humphreys refused to introduce koan study because ‘without very experienced guidance the whole mind may crack, meaning temporary or permanent insanity’ (Humphreys 1992:112). But Phaedrus has had no such discipline, no master and does not meditate and the fact that he slips into a psychosis straight after losing faith in western philosophy and forming the self-imposed koan: ‘What is Quality?’ is pertinent. Only after a catastrophic and forced change in the form of electric shock therapy does he begin to re-evaluate his position and return to pick up the bones of his initial interest in eastern philosophy.
Pragmatic Zen.

Pirsig’s move from Hindu philosophy to Japanese Zen Buddhism possibly comes from his leaning towards a Jamesian pragmatism. As the philosopher, Toshihiko Izustu, points out: ‘It [Zen] is pragmatic in the sense that it always pictures Man as the most concrete individual who exists at this very place and at this very moment, eating drinking sitting and walking around’ (6). According to Bruce Charlton, ‘Pirsig is a Pragmatist’ (1992:114), and I think this emphasis is personified in the essential characteristic of *ZMM*’s Narrator who, monk-like, has to learn things by rote and stick to the principles of repetition, discipline, and exactitude. As Steiner reminds us:

> This is indeed a book about motorcycle maintenance, about the cerebral concentration, about the scruple and delicacy of both hand and ear required to keep an engine musical and safe across heat or cold, tarmac or red dust (149).

This deliberate exactitude applied to each and every simple or complicated daily task is the essence of ‘right action’ in the Eightfold Path and fundamental to Zen discipline. As Shunryu Suzuki put it: ‘Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine’ (Schiller 1994:301). Or as van de Wetering’s head monk explains more graphically: ‘Whatever you do, do it well, as well as you can, and be aware of what you are doing. Don’t try to do two things at the same time, like pissing and cleaning your teeth’ (42). Daisetz Suzuki tells us to ‘pour it out in work’ (1949:319) and Hakuin\(^\text{19}\) says that ‘the work is part of the *koan*’ (Schiller 1994:294). While this is subtly portrayed by the Narrator in the first book, who epitomises this dictum, in *Lila*, the author feels he must spell it out:

\(^{19}\) Founder of the Rinzai sect.
you would guess from the literature on Zen and its insistence on discovering the 'unwritten dharma' that it would be intensely anti-ritualistic, since ritual is the 'written dharma.' But that isn't the case. The Zen monk's daily life is nothing but one ritual after another, hour after hour, day after day, all his life. They don't tell him to shatter those static patterns to discover the unwritten dharma. They want him to get those patterns perfect! The explanation for this is the belief that you do not free yourself from static patterns by fighting them with other contrary static patterns. That is sometimes called 'bad karma chasing its tail.' You free yourself from static patterns by putting them to sleep. That is, you master them with such proficiency that they become an unconscious part of your nature. You get used to them you completely forget them and they are gone (448).

For Pirsig this concept of mastering static patterns is also true of most of the enlightened thinking within western philosophy. It is represented by philosophers who have mastered the static philosophies of the past and have overturned or embellished the previous findings with a new perspective. Yet, as Pirsig remarks:

They say first you should read what all the great philosophers of history have said and then you should decide what you want to say. The catch here is that by the time you've read what all the great philosophers of history have said you'll be at least two hundred years old. A second catch is ... you may be carried away by what they say (1991:377).

Nevertheless, this learning by rote is really what the rhetoricians of ancient Greece were trying to inculcate by persuasive argument. When we apply this to Pirsig's 'art' of motorcycle maintenance, we come very close to Heidegger's notion of the Ancient Greek concept of technē, where technology was closely associated with both philosophy and the production of fine art: 'Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called technē. And the poēsis [creating] of the fine arts was also called technē' (1977:34). In other words there were no hard distinctions between the philosophical, artistic and technical products of the mind. The ancient Greeks were attempting to instil arête (excellence) through poetry, philosophy, myths and legends. This is the great point of accord between Zen, Pirsig and the pre-Socratics.
Here, the distinction between science and religion is of no great importance, and Pirsig tries to return to that diversity in the path of philosophy. Like James before him, he argues science and religion – for Pirsig specifically Zen Buddhism – have evolved to a degree that suggests the possible incorporation of each others’ perspectives once again. This, we are told on the back cover, is exactly the theme of Ken Wilber’s latest book, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, which ‘shows how we can begin to think about science and religion in ways that allow for their reconciliation and union in both camps’ (Wilber 1998). Wilber, who practices Zen meditation, is an advocate of the Perennial Philosophy, popularized by Aldous Huxley who took the term from Leibniz’s *philosophia perennis*, which is essentially an ecumenical distillation of beliefs from the world’s philosophies and religions. I believe Pirsig’s work is concerned with a similar synthesis. Indeed, Huxley’s explanation of the Perennial Philosophy could read as a critique of Pirsig’s concept of Quality:

> The metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality' (Huxley 1994:Introduction,i).

In conclusion, then, *ZMM* argues that ‘Quality’ is the pre-intellectual awareness that creates the values we perceive in the world. This unification of parts is one method of dialectics. *Lila*, conversely, divides the term and then argues principles along continually divergent paths. That is the other method of dialectics. *ZMM* has the subtitle ‘an inquiry into values,’ while *Lila’s* is an ‘inquiry into morals.’ Since Chambers Dictionary gives ‘moral principles’ as one possible definition of the word ‘value’ we can see that the two words are related in terms of generality and specificity as are the major tenets of each book. One is written in the first person (subjective), the

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20 Considering this definition and more usefully for this thesis, Wilber refers to the more eclectic Perennial Philosophy/Psychology in *Eye to Eye* (Wilber, 1983:124).
other in the third person (objective). One is set on land, the other on water. One is about a man, the other about a woman. In both books there are discussions of both eastern and western philosophy. Moreover, the Narrator in ZMM has learned a great deal as a result of Phaedrus’ ‘Dynamic’ pursuit of a mystical entity while maintaining a systematic ‘Static’ discipline of mechanics. Equally, in Lila, Phaedrus is able to gain greatly by addressing his past and reacquainting himself with previous ‘Static’ patterns of western philosophy, while addressing a catalogue of ‘Dynamic’ problems brought about by his association with Lila. As a result, a sense of balance appears to have been achieved between the two books. When we consider the interplay between ZMM and Lila, the opus of Pirsig’s work demonstrates that the author is both an accomplished dialectician and rhetorician, and in this way he has achieved a remarkable kind of Zen-like synthesis. Pirsig expresses the hope that this can be achieved in all endeavours: ‘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 centre of it all’ (1974:300).
Chapter 2

Koan and the Metaphorical Motorcycle

This model pleased me. It was closer to the Golden Temple of my dreams. Observing this perfect little image of the Golden Temple within the great temple itself, I was reminded of the endless series of correspondences that arise when a small universe is placed in a large universe and a smaller one in turn placed inside the small universe. For the first time I could dream. Of the small, but perfect Golden Temple which was even smaller than this model; and of the Golden Temple which was infinitely greater than the real building - so great, indeed, that it almost enveloped the world (Mishima, Kinkakuji, 1990:25).

In this chapter I would like to examine the possibility that ZMM and Lila are texts which are analogous with a catalogued path to enlightenment in orthodox Zen Buddhism. I will argue that certain structures and authorial devices used in the two books act in macro-structure in the same way that a particular answer to a koan does in micro-structure. In order to do this I need to further establish what the meaning of koan is, how answers to koan are given, what their function is in the practice of Zen, as well as consider how contemplation upon them can lead to loss of ego and perhaps enlightenment. Having discussed what they are supposed to achieve, I will relate the findings to my reading of Pirsig’s work.

The Red Hot Iron Ball.

Etymologically, the Japanese word ‘koan’ is the nearest phonetic translation of the Chinese kung-an. It consists of ‘ko’ (public) and ‘an’ (a proposal). One of the best understandings of it in light of this thesis is ‘a public document setting up a standard of judgement’ (Ogata 1959:71). Master Zenkei Shibayama gives: ‘the place where the truth is’ (Shibayama 1974:23). It is in this sense that the word was adopted by the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism to describe the ‘contract’ between a master and his pupil.
as a means of teaching the ‘truth’. As we have seen, the *koan* becomes a question asked of a novice monk, by the master of the monastery, and appears to be nonsensical or paradoxical in its nature. Most often it is a brief question but sometimes the *koan* takes the form of a short anecdote or Kafkaesque story which is ostensibly meaningless. The student is required to contemplate the *koan* ceaselessly until a satisfactory answer is given. The total devotion necessary is manifest in this sermon from the *Zenkwan Sakushin*:

Devote yourselves to it day and night, whether sitting or lying, walking or standing; devote yourselves to its solution throughout the twelve periods. Even when dressing, taking meals or attending to your natural wants, have your every thought fixed on the *koan*. Make resolute efforts to keep it always before your mind. Days pass, years roll on, but in the fullness of time when your mind is so attuned and recollected, there will be a sudden awakening within yourselves. Then...you will never again be beguiled by a Zen master (Suzuki 1970:92).

The *koan* is personalised to suit the individual because the primary goal, as we have seen, is to destroy the ego and find one’s ‘true’ identity. In *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, Suzuki illustrates this esotericism, stating ‘The Zen “document” is the one each one of us brings along to this world at his birth and tries to decipher before he passes away’ (Fromm et al. 1960:44). In Zen, this condition of an egoless character marks a return to the state of ‘beginner’s mind.’ This phrase was coined by the famous Zen archer, Master Awa, who taught Eugen Herrigel. The reason that the loss of ego and intellect is of paramount importance in order to advance consciousness is explained by Zen monk and scholar, Shohaku Ogata who states:

Technically speaking the *koan* given to the uninitiated are intended ‘to destroy the root of life,’ or to go beyond the limits of thought ... Here logic turns into psychology, thought into conation and intuition. What could not be solved on the plane of empirical consciousness is now transferred to the deeper recesses of the mind (1959:72).
At the time of enlightenment potential meaning dissolves into a sudden clear thought of no-thinking. Ken Wilber explains: ‘A point is reached where the individual dissolves into the koan — he becomes one with the koan in a super-abundance of consciousness: not a loss of awareness but an extraordinary intensification of it’ (Wilber 1980:73). The importance of the distinction between becoming one with the koan and studying it objectively is clarified here by Shibayama, ‘Unless one grasps the koan within himself as he lives here and now, it ceases to be a real koan’ (1974:22). Izutsu explains that the ‘Two terms meditation and intellection, are absolutely incompatible with each other’ (1977:147).

As well as being the point of focus during meditation the koan is also infused with the possibility of inducing satori. Satori means ‘sudden awakening’ and a permanent state of satori is the ultimate goal in seeking superconsciousness being achieved by but a rare few. The Soto sect’s term for satori is kensho which means ‘seeing into Self-nature.’ The enlightened mind is then in a state of muga, when ‘one identifies with an object without any sense of restraint’ (Stryk 1981:12). It is at this point of awakening that koan are solved and haiku are often written, when the poet expresses his satori experience as best as he is able within the confines of language. The American poet, Lucien Stryk, observes that ‘whether designated so or not most Zen poems are satori poems’ (13). The subjectivity of the state of awakening is expressed in this haiku by Bunan:

The moon’s the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I’ve become the thingness.
Of all the things I see!
So we can see that there is an inextricable link between koan, satori and the production of aesthetic art like haiku and it is my contention that Pirsig's work is as a result of his solving the koan: 'What is Quality?' And while haiku at their best hint of this encounter with satori, my primary claim is that Pirsig's two texts are not 'haikuesque' but 'koanesque' or 'koanic' in structure.

In order to narrow down and clarify my assertion, it is necessary to observe that there are a number of methods of presenting a reply to a koan. Janwillem van de Wetering states:

Perhaps the monk will make a nonsensical remark; maybe he laughs or looks at the teacher in a peculiar way or does something, like knocking on the floor or waving. If the master nods, the next koan will follow, to deepen the monk's insight. There are rows and rows of koans, and the monk who solves them all has to leave the monastery to practice his insight in the world, perhaps as a teacher, perhaps as an inconspicuous civilian (van de Wetering 1973:40)

According to Suzuki there are one thousand seven hundred koans 'which will test the genuineness of satori' (1970:255).

The Five Steps of Tozan.

The method of presentation of an answer which I am interested in is one of the eight possible. It is the delivery known as the 'Go-i,' the 'five steps' of Tozan, a tenth century Zen master. This particular choice is most pertinent perhaps when considering Pirsig, since Ogata tells us that this method may be regarded as 'Zen dialectics.' Still, he explains that it is not easy to understand without losing 'Zen intuition' and the study is recommended only for those who have mastered previous methods of presentation. (Ogata 1959:75) The go-i in English translation are:
1) The absolute within the relative
2) The relative within the absolute
3) The emanation from the absolute
4) The identity of the absolute and the relative
5) The undifferentiated oneness of all opposites.

Before identifying the comparisons between elements of ZMM, *Lila* and the go-i, it will help to first list what leading Zen scholar, Dr. Daisetz Suzuki has established as the equivalent English categories of the absolute - *Sho* and the relative - *Hen*. *Sho*, literally means ‘right, straight, just, level, etc., while *Hen* is ‘partial, one-sided, unbalanced, lopsided. Suzuki prepares the following table in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The <em>Sho</em>:</th>
<th>The <em>Hen</em>:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The absolute</td>
<td>The relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The infinite</td>
<td>The finite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The one</td>
<td>The many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>The world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark (undifferentiation)</td>
<td>Light (differentiated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sameness</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emptiness</td>
<td>Form and Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The universal</td>
<td>The particular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Simply put, this is how the *sho* and the *hen* appear as an unsolved *koan*. The aim of the *go-i* is to reconcile all these elements, not just intellectually but also intuitively. Even a quick glance at this list will reveal that the first step of the *go-i*, ‘the absolute within the relative,’ is no longer quite as straightforward as it may have at first appeared.
It is important to emphasize that while the list is set out like this for purposes of expansion, the *sho* and the *hen* are not strictly dichotomous. In Zen, oppositions such as this need to be treated with caution. As *haiku* scholar, R.H. Blyth warns: ‘If we speak of good-bad action, the mind unavoidably interprets this as partly good and partly bad. In this way music is greater than language. We can say two things at once and the two separate melodies become one single indivisible harmony’ (1942:180).

What we have, in fact, is more like a two orchestra symphony. The *sho* and the *hen* produce an extraordinarily complex matrix, where all or some of the elements of one can be represented in all or some of the elements of the other, which in turn reflect a new version of the original *ad infinitum*. Some of the simple cross-references between the *sho* and the *hen* structures can be seen to correspond with the kind of observations made by many critics in order to tackle *ZMM*. The presence of much paradox and complexity in the text is highlighted, even in the titles of their articles. Richard Rodino recognises ‘Irony and Earnestness’ as well as a ‘Matrix of Journeys.’ N. Katherine Hayles’s ‘Web,’ and Beverly Gross’s ‘Mind Divided Against Itself,’ allude to the problems caused by the constant shift in narrative making interpretation difficult. However, when considering the *go-i* it is Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s article which most fittingly describes the situation.

Significantly, he has identified five spatiotemporal modes of narration, which he refers to as ‘chronotopes’ after Bakhtin’s term.21 As a result he observes that the text is complicated enough to:

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21 Harpham appears to use Bakhtin’s sense of ‘chronotope’ in a slightly different way.
Produce multilevel disturbances, which account for the ‘uncanny’ quality of the text, the odd and omnipresent sense of connectedness and interpretability due to cross-chronotope analogues. Such slippages and interpenetrations create a constant uncertainty about the frame of reference of any utterance or event. Any element arising within any of the four basic chronotopes can resonate on one or more of the others ... This complex harmonic resonance creates a generic uncertainty not only for the reader but also for the speaker ...

(Harpham 1981:70).

The process of constant interpenetration of texts and meanings, the infinite amount of routes to explore, fan out like a three-dimensional exploded diagram, fuelling further explosions of smaller and larger networks of potential meanings. This resembles the macro-structure of ZMM and Lila which sets up a paradox whenever interpretation is attempted, making the text work like a Zen koan. I believe it is the subsequent simplification within this kind of language network which often inspires breathtaking works of art. This massive potential of language, reduced to a focal point of poetry, was expressed briefly, yet eloquently, in a haiku by Sotoba\textsuperscript{22} nearly one thousand years ago who, upon becoming enlightened, wrote:

The mountain – Buddha’s body
The torrent – his preaching
Last night, eighty four thousand poems
How, how make them understand?

So the go-i must be seen more as a matrix of potential rather than a developmental hierarchy of meaning. Therefore, to clarify, the koan must be seen as a paradox and so must the answer. In an effort to make things a little simpler though, I would like to explore only one motif in Pirsig’s work, that of the motorcycle, and demonstrate the many different ways in which he exploits this metaphor and compare its use to the structure of the go-i.

\textsuperscript{22} A Chinese poet and statesman (1036-1101).
A Ghost of a Machine.

Before proceeding further I would like to chart the chronology of the motorcycle metaphor. In the first instance it is used as a ‘vehicle’ in order to expound various scientific theories and philosophical treatises based on the classical division of the subjective and the objective. The narrator first explains his notion of the difference between the romantic view of ‘immediate surface appearance’ and the classical view of ‘underlying form itself’ using the motorcycle and its maintenance as his example. Having told us that he formerly coined a Parkinson-styled law: ‘the number of rational hypotheses that can explain any given phenomenon is infinite,’ he explains that he doubted the humour in it enough to give up his study of chemistry. At this juncture the motorcycle is a definite physical entity: ‘That’s all the motorcycle is, a system of concepts worked out in steel’ (104). But eventually the narrator admits:

The steel? Hell, even the steel is out of someone’s mind. There’s no steel in nature. Anyone from the Bronze Age could have told you that. All nature has is a potential for steel. There’s nothing else there. But what’s ‘potential’? That’s also in someone’s mind! … Ghosts (105).

As we saw in the last chapter of this thesis, the narrator then moves into the field of philosophy, having decided that science, in general, is interested in the study of phenomenon in a largely objective framework and it is then that he begins to use the analogy of the motorcycle in a somewhat different manner. It plays an illustrative role when the narrator analyzes the theories of Scottish Philosopher, David Hume, who postulated that logical induction and deduction could only lead to certain empiricist conclusions: ‘Hume has been saying, in effect, everything I know about this motorcycle comes to me through my senses’ (136). Then the narrator introduces the parallax of first looking down the left side of the motorcycle and then down the right, emphasising an intellectual impasse:
If there's no logical basis for substance then there's no logical basis for concluding that what's produced these two views is the same motorcycle ... and when reason thus defeats its own purpose something has to be changed in the structure of reason itself (136).

This leads the narrator into his lecture which, in refutation of Hume, summarises Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, after which the motorcycle reappears:

Now stop and apply some of the concepts Kant has put forth to this strange machine that's been bearing us along through time and space. See our relation to it now, as Kant reveals it to us ... It's quite a machine this *a priori* motorcycle (136-7).

It is worth noting here that there is always the implication that the reader should also be working with the examples given. The 'us' represents the discourse between author and reader. Therefore the narrative can also be seen as the 'strange machine bearing us along through time and space.' This 'narrative vehicle' will be important when we consider the third step of the *go-i* and is one example of many devices which the narrator uses to collude with his reader in *ZMM*.

We can see now, how the metaphor of the cycle has been used both in its physical capacity, and in its functional capacity. In its functional capacity it becomes a 'bearer' of meaning and it is at this point that we can use it to climb the steps of the *go-i*. The following is an account of motorcycle metaphors from *ZMM* and *Lila*, which are best representative of the five steps. It will help to observe Suzuki's explanation that: 'The first three are noetic and the last two are affective or conative' (Fromm et al. 1960:60). It is also important to regard each step of advancement as containing the sense of all previous steps. For this reason they have been selected from the text in chronological order.
1) *Sho chu hen* – The one in the many. This is demonstrated in probably the most famous of quotes from *ZMM*:

The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of the mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha - which is to demean oneself (1974:27).

In this example the comparison could not be more straightforward, i.e. if ‘Buddha’ represents the ‘one’ in this quote, then the circuits of a digital computer and gears of a cycle transmission represent the ‘many.’

2) *Hen chu sho* – The many in the one. Here we need to remember that the principal metaphor has become the metaphorical principle. The motorcycle metaphor now has a multitude of functions as the vehicle for narrative. The ‘one’ motorcycle is used to explicate the ‘many’ theories of scientists and mathematicians, and the discourses of philosophers and spiritualists as well as letting the narrator escape time and time again when these discourses disappear into an eternal, internal dialectic:

The place to improve the world is first in one’s own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there. Other people can talk about how to expand the destiny of mankind. I just want to talk about how to fix a motorcycle. I think that what I have to say has more lasting value (301).

In spite of this claim in the true spirit of Zen, the machinations continue to ‘tick over.’

3) *Sho chu rai* – The coming from the one. This, Suzuki says, is the crucial point of transformation from the noetic to the conative and the personality becomes living and feeling, in a word – corporeal: ‘The middle one, the third “step” is the transition point at which the noetic begins to be conative and knowledge turns into life’ (1960:60). This requires a twofold illustration of the motorcycle metaphor. The first is an early allusion to the cycle having: ‘Its own, unique personality which probably could be
defined as the intuitive sum total of everything you know and feel about it’ (52). And this sentient nature appears later, when the motorcycle is described as a sentinel: ‘The cycle looms over me, ready to start, as if it has waited all night like some silent guardian’ (304). In the second, the narrator incorporates the metaphor in the self: ‘The real cycle you’re working on is a cycle called yourself. The machine that appears to be ‘out there’ and the person that appears to be ‘in here’ are not two separate things’ (328). So both cycle and rider are showing tropes of each other. However, as Suzuki explains, we must bear in mind that the whole combination of the Sho chu rai is, in fact ‘the one as coming right from the midst of the sho and the hen in their contradictory identity’ (Fromm et al.1960:63). This means we must look at all the motorcycle metaphors in all previous stages working synchronously in opposition, somewhat in the manner of this next extract: ‘The engine which has carried us halfway across a continent drones on and on in its own continuing oblivion to everything but its own internal forces’ (415). However, there is always the implication of movement in the Sho chu rai. For this reason, the final metaphorical amalgamation is best represented at the end of ZMM when Narrator/Phaedrus, Chris, motorcycle and even the world are transcended:

The cycle swings into each curve effortlessly, banking so that our weight is always down through the machine no matter what its angle is with the ground. The way is full of flowers and surprise views, tight turns one after another so that the whole world rolls and pirouettes and rises and falls away’ (413).

4) Ken chu shi – The arriving in the both. Conceptually, this step is hard to nail down. Suzuki describes it as life shorn of its intellectual paradoxes or the intellectual and conative resolved, indiscriminate and undifferential. Suzuki’s analogy is that while step three represents the self in the eye of the hurricane, step four is the self as the hurricane. I believe that this phase is demonstrated right at the end of Lila. As we
mentioned in the last chapter, the motorcycle is not present in Pirsig’s sequel but there is a strong symbolism of it in this passage:

He stood on a mound of sand beside some juniper bushes and said “Ahhhh!” He threw out his arms. Free! No idols, no Lila, no Rigel, no New York, no more America even. Just free! He looked up in the sky and just whirled. Ahhh, that felt good! He hadn’t whirled like that for years. Since he was four. He whirled again. The sky, the ocean, the hook, the bay spun round and round him. He felt like a Whirling Dervish’ (1991:472).

This is the final phase for the metaphor of the motorcycle which has eventually become anthropomorphic and completely embodied in the narrator who, in turn, spins like an engine, creating the final metaphor of the hurricane in the guise of a Whirling Dervish. Significantly, there is more than a passing comparison to a famous description of the feeling of solving a koan by Master Daiye:

The time will come when your mind will suddenly come to a stop like a rat in a cul-de-sac, Then there will be a plunging into the unknown with the cry, “Ah, this!” When this cry is uttered, you have discovered yourself. You find at the same time that all the teachings of the ancient worthies … are no more than commentaries upon your own sudden cry, “Ah, this!” (Suzuki 1962:300).

5) Ken chu to - Settling in the (undifferentiated) both. Having completed the analysis in the fourth step with the metaphorical motorcycle and narrator transcended into a single entity, we can only speculate as to how the fifth step is represented for as Dr. Suzuki explains this stage is indistinguishable from the previous:

There is not much to say about the Zen-man’s life here, because his outward behavior does not mean much; he is all involved in his inner life. Outwardly he may be in rags and working in the capacity of an insignificant laborer (1960:75).

Or, presumably as an author. It might be argued that Pirsig had arrived at the fifth step of the go-i by writing the books which might mark his enlightenment, for as Suzuki declares, ‘What Zen proposes us to do is: To seek Enlightenment for oneself and help others attain it’ (76). This form of quiet evangelism would also tie in with Bruce
Charlton’s claim that ‘Pirsig is doing philosophy for moral reasons. He is concerned with the effects of his thinking and writing on ordinary life’ (1992:111). David A. Granger agreed in a lecture given to the American Educational Research Association saying the author is ‘concerned with cultivating the appreciation of aesthetic things’ (Granger 1995). I will be examining the questions and problems arising from the idea of Pirsig’s enlightenment in the next chapter. For the time being what I hope to have achieved is an illustration of how the motorcycle metaphor in ZMM and Lila can be seen to be mapped out in the manner of the go-i. That a single metaphor can be so significant is in itself compatible with Zen for as Dogen tells us:

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in one dewdrop on the grass (Schiller 1994:189).

Finally, Pirsig’s koan, ‘What is Quality?’, transposed in Lila to ‘Does Lila have Quality?’, has a near and important correspondent in Zen with one of the most famous koans: ‘A monk once asked Master Joshu, “Has a dog the Buddha-nature or not?”’ (Shibayama 1974:19). Joshu’s answer was ‘Mu!’ which literally means ‘no’ but is not simply a negation, being best thought of as ‘void’ or ‘nothing.’ Mu is the subject of much discussion in Zen texts. The importance of this koan is explained by Shibayama who tells us that ‘this one word “Mu” has such exhaustive depth and lucidity that once one has really grasped it as his own he has the ability to penetrate all Zen koans’ (1974:22). Alan Watts explains that the Buddhist symbol of ‘the Wheel Becoming is actually a map of the human mind’ (Watts, 1957:162)23. The Tibetan Book of the Dead24 tells us ‘And thus revolves the Wheel of Life, until the one who is bound on it

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23 As we have seen, the koan is a method used in the meditative practice of the Rinzai sect of Zen which is a branch of Buddhism known as Mahayana, meaning ‘Great Vehicle’ or ‘Great Wheel.’

24 The Bardo Thödol, A Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist text.
breaks his own bonds through Enlightenment, and there comes, as the Buddha proclaims, the Ending of Sorrow' (Evans-Wentz 1972:17). For Joseph Campbell the wheel symbol is important in both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions:

In the Buddha's teaching, the image of the turning spoked wheel ... thus became a sign, on the one hand, of the wheeling round of sorrow, and, on the other, release in the sunlike doctrine of illumination. And in the classical world the turning spoked wheel appeared also at this time as an emblem of ... life's defeat and pain (Campbell 1968:72).

It might best, perhaps, be represented in the form of a motorcycle.
Chapter 3

Phaedrus and the Metapsychological Ox

It has often been pointed out that novelists and playwrights seem to be better observers of 'human nature' than professional psychologists. And there is little doubt that in the vast storehouse of literature the psychologist would find nearly all of his observations anticipated (Sherif & Cantril, The Psychology of Ego-Invovlements, 1949:437).

In all mystic religions, the most fundamental principle in the journey towards enlightenment is the loss or destruction of the ego. In light of this, I want now to conduct a brief exploration of what the concept of ego loss involves, the subsequent potential for spiritual enlightenment as a result, and see how this appertains to Pirsig's spiritual odyssey. I will be drawing from different branches of psychology as well as referring to a variety of mystics and philosophers. I will also be using verses and commentary which Kakuan wrote to accompany his famous set of paintings known as 'The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures.' In this eleventh century pictographic representation of the journey towards enlightenment, Kakuan depicts a man's journey to capture and ride an ox as metaphor. This journey according to Chinese Zen master, Pai-chang25, 'is like seeking for an ox while you are yourself on it' (Suzuki 1970:370), which conjures images of Pirsig and motorcycle in the first book. I believe that there are similarities in stages of Pirsig's journey and Kakuan's depiction. What is relevant in this case is the fact that the ox, as well as being a metaphor for the eternal principle of life, represents the ego. In the interests of concision, I will confine my study to only those parts of the verses and commentary which are most relevant to my analysis.

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25 In Japan he is known as Hyakujo (724 – 814).
Nevertheless, it should be noted that with the entire versions of the ox-herding pictures many corollaries can be drawn with Pirsig’s texts. The translations are selected from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Reps 1991:138-47) and *Essays in Zen Buddhism, Series One* (Suzuki 1970:371-376).²⁶

**The Marksman, the Bull and the Centaur.**

The first stage of the journey is called ‘The Search for the Bull’ and part of the commentary runs: ‘He now knows that things, however multitudinous, are of one substance and that the objective world is a reflection of the self’ (Suzuki 1970:371). This passage is pertinent, both to Phaedrus’ epiphany with ‘Quality’ and the Narrator’s growing perception of his former self in *ZMM*. During the course of the Narrator’s self inquiry, the problem of egotism emerges when we are told that Phaedrus ‘knew himself to be a pretty sharp logician and dialectician, took pride in this... I think now that trace of egotism may have been the beginning of all his troubles’ (234). This self-exploration is also Herrigel’s notion that in Zen archery ‘Fundamentally the marksman aims at himself and may even succeed in hitting himself’ (18), which would have found favour with Nietzsche who, using an identical analogy observed ‘we have it still, the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of its bow! And perhaps also the arrow, the task and, who knows? The target’ (Nietzsche 1984:14). This initial recognition that the problem is the ego corresponds to the third Ox-herding picture, ‘Perceiving the Bull.’ And it is at this point, I think it necessary for us to examine the concept of ego.

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²⁶ It should be noted that when referring to Kakuan’s Ox, Reps refers to ‘bull’ while Suzuki uses ‘cow.’
The problem of defining the ego is highlighted in this passage from Sherif and Cantril's *The Psychology of Ego-Involvements*: 'Since scientific studies on ego-involvements are still in their initial stages, we are not yet ready in this book on ego-involvements to give a clear cut definition of the ego' (1949:92). Interestingly, the authors claim that philosophers (they name William James) and 'mystically inclined writers' have given the term 'scientifically objectionable connotations' (92). Bearing this in mind, let us not look for a reductionist definition but rather try to build an eclectic framework from several points starting, fittingly, with Freud's *prima facie* description:

We have formed the idea that in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his ego. It is to this ego that consciousness is attached ... it is the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes (Freud 1984:355).

This definition of ego from the founder of psychoanalysis, applies primarily to what can be simply known as the 'mental ego.' The concept of the 'superego' can roughly be thought of as the 'internalized parent,' i.e. the child's concept of parental prohibitions and admonitions. The 'ego ideal' can best be viewed as one's idealised picture of oneself. With regard to these multiple facets of the ego, Carl Jung made this mysteriously-inclined distinction between the ego and the 'Self':

I discriminate between the ego and the Self, since the ego is only the subject of my consciousness, while the Self is the subject of my totality ... the Self ... embraces and includes the ego (Jung 1959:246-247).

Jung was one of the leaders in the humanist tradition or 'Third Force' of psychology and while his definition helps us to increase our understanding of the concept of ego, it is *Transpersonal Psychology*\(^\text{27}\) which will be of most use in building a psychological profile of Pirsig. The reason for this is its holistic approach to the concept of the ego.

\(^{27}\) So-called 'Fourth Force' which emanated from the Humanist Tradition.
One of Transpersonal Psychology’s foremost spokesmen, Ken Wilber, refers to it as a summary of parts: ‘The ego is a self-concept, or constellation of self-concepts, along with the images, phantasies, identifications, memories, sub-personalities, motivations, ideas and information related or bound to the separate self-concept’ (1980:31).

Wilber has been heralded as a prolific and important contributor in such wide ranging disciplines as psychology, philosophy, sociology, science and religion. His engagement with the eastern mystical concept of ‘The Great Chain of Being’ as well as with the Perennial Philosophy/Psychology make his work important with regard to Pirsig who, I will try to demonstrate, was working along similar lines. In other words, I intend to develop the idea that Pirsig’s work was, in literary terms, a brief foray into the realms of Transpersonal Psychology. In *ZMM* the Narrator conspicuously conveys a disregard for traditional psychology. Once, when asked by a friend if Chris is ‘just punishing?’ he answers ‘That’s a child-psychology term – a context I dislike’ (67). He also tells us, in reference to Phaedrus’ breakdown, ‘The psychological explanations that have been made to me seem inadequate’ (155). I hope to argue that an explanation from Transpersonal Psychology28 would have been the most valuable to Pirsig because of its acceptance of mysticism. Mysticism’s understanding of higher consciousness is precisely what this rather controversial field is interested in. Controversial, because of the idea of different ‘levels’ of understanding which make this field and the mystic disciplines seem esoteric and elitist. The argument proffered, however, is that consciousness development does not stop simply at the time of physical adulthood, but higher realms of understanding are available through contemplative techniques.

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28 unfounded at the time of *ZMM*
In the introduction to *The Atman Project*, Wilber confronts the problem of elitism saying, ‘One’s idea of ‘higher-order’ or ‘highly developed’ remains rather philosophic ... The point is we might have an excellent population of extremely evolved and developed personalities in the form of the world’s great sages’ (Wilber 1980:3).

*The Atman Project* was critically acclaimed for its brilliant analysis of individual consciousness development, tracing the stages from the infant’s first cognitive processes to the transcendental meditative states of spiritual masters where, it is claimed, the ego or the ‘I’ persona is transcended, hence the term ‘transpersonal.’ In this regard, Transpersonal Psychology is really a western psychological rendering of the ox-herding pictures.

The first time we can read of a transpersonal movement in *ZMM* is when a conflict occurs between two of the author’s personae, when the Narrator wrestles with the gradually awakening Phaedrus:

> I pause again, brace myself then lunge! My hands sink into something soft where its neck should be. It writhes, and I tighten my grip, as one holds a serpent. And now holding it tighter and tighter we'll get it into the light. Here it comes! NOW WE'LL SEE ITS FACE! (333).

In a dream the Narrator has seized his alter-ego and this crucial turning point is represented by Kakuan at stage four, ‘Catching the Bull,’ when the verse reads: ‘I seize him with a terrific struggle. His great will and power are inexhaustible.’ (Reps 1991:141). It has the comparable commentary ‘With the energy of his whole soul, he has at last taken hold of the cow’ (Suzuki 1970:373).

There is, as we have noticed, a subsequent synthesis of the Narrator and Phaedrus at this point and therefore comparative reading here takes an ambiguous turn. We can now read the Narrator and Phaedrus as reciprocal and, since they were each
consanguineous with the electric shock therapy, this allows numerous substitutions to be made in both forward and back projections. What is relevant by the end of the book is that Phaedrus has been integrated into the new ‘Self’ of the narrator. As we saw, Jung observes that the Self ‘embraces’ the ego and this is a key principal in Transpersonal Psychology. As Wilber says, ‘Each emergent level is thus not so much a total negation of the previous level, nor does it come from the previous level, but rather is a transformation (and transcendence) of it’ (1980:37). So in ZMM the Narrator ‘emerges’ from Phaedrus and then ‘embraces’ this former self. The process of development is described here, by Wilber: ‘At each point in evolution, what is the whole of one level becomes merely a part of the higher-order whole of the next level’ (1980:80). This seems to be Harpham’s view of how the narrative of ZMM works, as if echoing Jung’s ‘embracing’ Self and foreshadowing Wilber’s description when he observes:

Each element can be said to have a primary level of application ... but also to have secondary or ghost-like applications on other levels ... The text consists not of a single dominant line of thought or action but rather of an uncontrolled and constantly subversive oscillating interaction between all levels, with elements constantly switching levels and acquiring new significance as they do so ... each level suppresses, contains, and implies the others (1981:70).

And the fact that this process is a continuum is illustrated by the change in the narrational aspect of Lila. As we have seen Pirsig, the author, steps outside the frame of reference and the Narrator/Phaedrus persona is just ‘Phaedrus’ again in the third person. That is, the authorial voice is once again differentiated from the ‘I’ narrative of the earlier persona in ZMM.

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29 It may be relevant that this process was also an important factor in the process of the go-i.
This is exactly how Transpersonal Psychology sees developmental consciousness. Wilber explains that ‘the self is differentiated from the lower structure, it transcends that structure (without obliterating it in any way), and can thus operate on that lower structure using the tools of the newly emergent structure’ (80). And as we have also noted, the Narrator ‘operates’ on the former ‘structure’ of Phaedrus and subsequently, in Lila, Pirsig ‘operates’ on the former structure of ZMM.

Appositely, Wilber marks this point in consciousness development, when the Self begins to differentiate and dis-identify with the ego, as a stage he calls ‘the centaur.’ According to Wilber, the centaur ‘fuses subject and object’ (1980:57) and at this stage experiences are in the ‘immediate and vivid present’ (58). He goes on to suggest that the centaur is ‘super-sensory … in its cognitive processes of intuition, intentionality, and vision-image [which] are all intimations of the higher realms of transcendence’ (62). By comparison, Pirsig’s Narrator tells us that Phaedrus referred to ‘preintellectual awareness’ when ideas or discoveries come to us with the ‘characteristics of brevity, suddenness and immediate certainty’ (1974:269-270). The centaur is also compatible with Pirsig’s thoughts on the fusion of subject and object and is consistent with his previously mentioned ‘intimations of mortality.’ The reason for the emergence of the centaur is described here by Wilber in a way that is reminiscent of the author’s pursuit of Quality:

As all the egocentric drives wind down and go flat in their appeal, the soul is naturally drawn into a reflection on life, on self, on being - and the problem of meaning and self-actualization tends inexorably to emerge so that one’s total bodymind or centaur is drawn into the dilemma (1980:146).

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30 Wilber’s term is pre-rational, however I think that Pirsig was not aware of the distinction Wilber makes between the ‘pre’ and the ‘trans’ conditions and probably means trans-intellectual which would equate with Wilber’s trans-rational.
In comparison with the above quote, in ZMM Phaedrus’ pursuit of Quality represents both the dilemma and the problem of meaning. He was drawn into a reflection on life which resulted in the transcendence of Phaedrus to Narrator and then in an incorporation of Phaedrus once again.

Wilber’s use of the term ‘self-actualization’ which he equates with his stage of centaur is taken from Abraham Maslow, one of the foremost humanist psychologists. Maslow defines his term in this way: ‘Self-actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption ... The key word for this is selflessly’ (1971:45). Izustu also refers to ‘actualization’ which is ‘the self ... resuscitated from its death [and has] transcended itself’ (Izustu 1977:5). For Erich Fromm this would be the ‘mature and integrated personality’ (Fromm 1947:17). Notably for us, the title of Fromm’s book, Man For Himself, not only reflects Karl Menninger’s book, mentioned in the last chapter, but also carries the subtitle ‘An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics.’ Once again we see that Fromm’s words could have come from the pen of Pirsig.

Wilber’s idea of the centaur is not only graphically compatible with Pirsig on his motorbike31, but it is also illustrative of Kakuan’s sixth stage, ‘Riding the Bull,’ when the commentary tells us ‘The struggle is over’ (Suzuki 1970:373). This in turn compares favourably with the final line in ZMM, ‘We’ve won it. It’s going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things’ (416). The Narrator/Phaedrus integration also seems to suggest the stage of centaur because Wilber says that, at this stage, the Self begins to ‘integrate all his possible personae’ (1980:45).

31 In fact the representation is twofold in light of the archer metaphors quoted from Herrigel and Nietzsche. The most famous centaur, Chiron, was the mentor of many Greek heroes including Heracles, who eventually killed him with a poisoned arrow. He is the subject of the constellation Sagittarius where the centaur is depicted as an archer (Bullfinch 1978:127 and Evslin 1975:34).
We can see from Fig.1 where the centaur is placed in this representation of Wilber’s transpersonal model of the Great Chain of Being and the life cycle. The centaur is positioned in such a way as to display that it is still ego-based, rational and self-reflexive, but is also so close to the superconscious realms that it is able to intuit further reaches of consciousness development. We can also see what might be the externally perceived similarity, but nevertheless great distinction, between the prepersonal and transpersonal, which I referred to in chapter one of this thesis. I believe that Pirsig’s journey can be seen to be mapped out, albeit roughly, in accordance with this diagram. Whereas Phaedrus would be representative of Wilber’s notion of ‘advanced mind’ at the top of the circle, the subsequently Zen-influenced Narrator/Phaedrus persona would be equal to the mature ego or centaur, which is
situated just before the first of the superconscious realms. By comparison, according to Wilber, enlightened Zen masters, who would constitute the equivalent of the 'saintly,' are deemed to be in the 'subtle' realms, while the great sages, such as Lao Tzu, Socrates, Christ, Gautama Buddha and the sages of the Upanishads, he places in the 'causal' realm.

**Robert Redford, Celebrity, and Kingship.**

Assuming that at the end of *ZMM*, the Narrator/Phaedrus persona represents the newly emerged centaur or mature ego, we now need to move forward in time and pick up discussions of ego in *Lila* where, as we have observed, this dual identity is now referred to as just 'Phaedrus'. At one point the author examines the concept of the mental ego: 'This self-appointed little editor of reality is just an impossible fiction that collapses the moment one examines it' (1991:236). Towards the end of the book, Pirsig's ruminations on ego come to a head after a meeting in a hotel room with Robert Redford, who is eager to acquire the film rights to *ZMM*. Phaedrus is agitated and feels foolish when they first meet and he recognises that Redford's celebrity gets in the way of an easy discourse between them. He feels awkward about a change in himself and observes, 'there seems to be a loss of real-time awareness. A fixed image of the famous person, like the Sundance Kid\(^{32}\), seems to overwhelm the Dynamic real-time person who exists in the moment of confrontation' (299). This causes him to realise that, following the enormous success of his first book, he too had 'two crazy different cultural evaluations of himself ... One was that he was in some kind of high voltage celebrity world like Redford. The other was that he was at ground level like Rigel and Lila and just about everyone else' (297).

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\(^{32}\) A reference to one of Redford's best-known films 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.'
After Redford leaves, the narrative goes on to suggest that:

Celebrity was the culture force ... The Pyramids were celebrity devices. All the statues, the palaces ... All the Sirs and Lords and Reverends and Doctors...badges and trophies, all the blue ribbons, all the promotions ... all the compliments and flattery at tea parties and cocktail parties are celebrity enhancements. All the feuding and battling for prestige among academics and scientists (301).

Pirsig’s ‘celebrity devices’ are what Wilber calls ‘Atman Projects’ and his definition of how ‘Celebrity’ functions is extremely close to Wilber’s concept of ‘Kingship’ in *Up From Eden*, a book which focuses on the anthropological evolution of ego consciousness. Wilber argues that one stage of ego development involves the belief in a ‘king-hero’, who ‘was the first egoic-self’ (175) because people ‘even to this day [need] a visible god-hero’ (176).

For Wilber ‘*the Hero is simply the new egoic structure of consciousness*’ (184). That is, the hero or the ‘Celebrity’ is representative of both a collective, cultural concept of ego and also each person’s projection of themselves as a possible heroic ego or ‘god-hero.’ As a result of this, the hero/celebrity, according to Wilber, ‘is naturally given living expressions in the mythology of [the] period’ (184). In comparison, Phaedrus remarks that Redford ‘was probably going to cast him into some sort of heroic image’ (297). However, this makes him uneasy for he discloses that a Zen master once told him that if he got too famous he would go “straight to hell” and explains that the ‘Zen hell of celebrity’ (298) is the dualism of ‘who they think you are and who you really are’ (297). Wilber observes that the heroic-ego experiences ‘a severe lesion’ (187), that is, as Pirsig tells us ‘There’s no way of knowing whether your own view of yourself is just another distortion’ (298).
The Ego Must Die!

This recognition of duality is why it is necessary for the ego to be transcended in the first place and why the fundamental requisite of enlightenment is the ‘death’ of the ego. The very problem lies in this dualistic nature of the ego. That is, it knows it exists and has a will to live (Eros) while at the same time fearing the knowledge of its certain death (Thanatos). Richard De Martino, a psychoanalyst, explains:

Intellectually, the inevitability of its death is, of course, known to the ego all along ... Caught fully and apprehensively in the double anxiety of having to live and having to die, the ego undergoes the excruciating torment of the most piercing decision of all: to be or not to be (Fromm et al. 1960:148).

And this is why, crucially for us in light of Pirsig, Wilber tells us that ‘The whole point of the centaur ... is to create a self strong enough to die’ (147). This is said in the words of the sage by Sri Ramana Maharshi ‘Kill the one who grieves. Who will remain then to suffer? The ego must die. That is the only way’ (Perry 1971:206). It is also contained in the Muslim doctrine ‘Die before ye die’ (206). The death of the ego is represented by Kakuan’s stage seven, ‘The Bull Transcended,’ which has the commentary ‘things are one and the cow is symbolic’ (Suzuki 1970:373). And, as we observed in the last chapter, while the motorcycle is not mentioned in Lila it is indeed symbolised as part of Pirsig’s transcendent Self. At the end of Lila the author tells us that Phaedrus has cleaned the slate and walked in a ‘nothing-to-do way, thinking of nothing whatsoever’ (375). This image is redolent of stage eight ‘Both Bull and Self Transcended,’ when ‘all confusion is set aside’ (Suzuki 1970:374) and ‘all merge into No-Thing’ (Reps 1991:145).
At this point I will break off my already speculative analysis since later stages defy exegesis. What we can say is that stages eight to ten are supposedly the subtle realms of the sage and Zen masters, who, as Izustu says, abhor ‘all forms of intellectualism, verbalism and conceptualism’ in relation to the acolyte, but are nonetheless:

In complete possession of their thinking faculty, which they exercise freely and spontaneously ... The point to note, however, is that their thinking unfolds itself in a totally different form and at quite a different level of consciousness from that which we are familiar with in ordinary circumstances (1977:147).

So in order to achieve enlightenment one must not intellectualise at all, but having attained enlightenment one can once again think freely. This provocative image of the enlightened master who allows himself the luxury of thinking can be viewed in relation to Kakuan’s stage nine, ‘Returning to the Origin, Back to the Source’ where part of the commentary reads: ‘what has he to do with the artificialities of self-discipline?’ (1970:375). Kakuan’s final stage in the ox-herding paintings is entitled ‘Entering the City with Bliss-bestowing Hands.’ It is this tenth stage which marks enlightenment and subsequent anonymity.

Paul Stange explains that, ‘This final stage, of social invisibility within everyday life, but nonetheless different for having taken the quest, is finally the goal.’ (67). In other words the difference is not observable to an outsider for as an ancient nameless source in Paul Reps’s book tells us ‘The appreciation of objects and subjects is the same for an enlightened as for an unenlightened person. The former has one greatness: he remains in the subjective mood, not lost in things’ (Reps 1991:160). This again attests to the difference between the prepersonal and the transpersonal.
Did Pirsig attain higher ground? Is it possible that he solved his *koan*, ‘What is Quality?’ and that he reached the realms of the superconscious? Since enlightenment is not an observable phenomenon when ‘No glimpses of his inner life are to be caught’ (Suzuki 1970:376), we are in the realms of the verdict possible in Scottish courtrooms, ‘not proven.’

This invisible path to enlightenment is neatly summed up, as usual, by Dogen:

To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to drop off our own body and mind, and to drop off the bodies and minds of others. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly – Dogen (Schiller 1994:194).

My task has not been to prove Pirsig’s enlightenment; it has been a simpler matter of attempting a comparative reading of Pirsig’s state of consciousness, making it compatible with Kakuan’s stage six and Wilber’s notion of a centaur. Personally I believe that is as far as he got and that he did not attain the subtle or causal levels of consciousness attained by the great sages.

I do believe however that Phaedrus’ recovery from a psychotic breakdown was because he had already, albeit tentatively, embarked on a spiritual path. Unfortunately such a severe breakdown marks a huge setback as Wilber tells us, ‘failure to transform and integrate the lower levels of evolution results in neurosis’ (1981:239). We have already noted that there is a difference between madness and mysticism. Madness represents the dissolution of a weak ego when it is confronted with its own finality and this would certainly explains Phaedrus’ dilemma.

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33 A legal technicality in criminal courts where it is deemed evidence is not conclusive but nevertheless enabling plaintiffs to take out subsequent civil action.

34 Lower case ‘self’ identifies the mental ego as distinct from Jung’s ‘the Self.’
The Narrator, however less romantically, is seeking a more holistic approach to life and including insights from mysticism. Mysticism is the choice of transcending a healthy, mature and strong ‘centauric’ ego. Wilber explains: ‘A healthy ego is ‘a more-or-less “correct self concept”, one which adequately takes account of the various and frequently discordant trends of the ego’ (1980:31). This is also the view of Taisen Deshimaru: ‘Having a strong ego is not the same thing as having an egotistical ego. You must have confidence in yourself. You must find your real ego and at the same time let go of your ego’ (14).

Whether or not Pirsig was able to let go of his ego, he does seem to be aware of the broad concepts of mysticism and specifically of Deshimaru’s advice, as is evident from this passage in ZMM:

Any effort that has self-glorification as its final endpoint is bound to end in disaster … When you try to climb a mountain to prove how big you are, you almost never make it. To the untrained eye ego-climbing and selfless climbing may appear identical … But what a difference! The ego-climber is like an instrument that’s out of adjustment … Every step’s an effort, both physically and spiritually, because he imagines his goal to be external and distant (214-215).
Conclusion

The Religion of the Space Age

We are at an extremely auspicious moment in human evolution, because, for the first time in history, we have access to both Freud and Buddha. The profound discoveries of the modern West – found nowhere else – these discoveries can be integrated with the mystical or contemplative traditions, both East and West, for a more “full spectrum” approach (Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, 1996:155).

Zen seems to be able to satisfy the new spiritual needs of the West. Really, you know, in one sense Zen is the only religion capable of helping the world achieve peace ... Universal peace will be realized when men all over the world bow to the preciousness and sacredness of everything. Zen, which teaches them to do this, is the religion of the Space Age. – Zen master Wabi (Stryk 1981:123).

Master Wabi’s comments above would certainly have found favour with Pirsig, whose first book tried to show how, through an understanding of Zen, technology and spirituality do not have to be regarded in contradistinction but can be integrated. Just before Phaedrus performs his Whirling Dervish in *Lila* he looks up to see ‘a Concorde airplane slowly circling to the south then rising and speeding’ and exclaims ‘good old technology’ (472). This passage seems to provide a reminder of where it all began in the first book. I hope to have demonstrated that Zen permeates the texts thoroughly and that reading them in parallel with Zen philosophy can bring some rewarding insights. Since Zen is particularly concerned with aesthetics it can provide valuable interpretations of writings which deal with spiritual development. As we have also noted, Zen is less concerned with the material iconography of its religion and in this way represents a passive yet powerful alternative to those who wish to escape from having to logically argue that there is a distinctive and ultimate representation of their beliefs. In an era of increasing technological progress and growing dependence on the mechanistic, highlighted by the concern brought about by the threat of ‘The Millennium Bug,’
perhaps Zen master Wabi’s comments would be reassuring to those in need of a spiritual alternative. This fear and loathing of technology is precisely what fuels the first Chautauqua in Robert Pirsig’s overall quest.

I also hope to have shown a reading of Pirsig’s work which exposes a suggestion of the author’s evolution of consciousness, a movement up through a developmental hierarchy of understanding in a quest for spiritual enlightenment. The argument is that events, narrative voices and the interpretative complexities of the two texts can be unravelled in a way which allows us to look at ZMM and Lila as a macro structure describing this journey.

While the first book will probably always be regarded as the more successful and most popular, I feel that the journey is not complete without taking the sequel into account. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions imposed on this thesis I was able only to touch briefly upon certain aspects in Lila, and believe further analysis would uncover many other valuable insights. The reason is at the end of ZMM there is a postponement, a stay of execution, we are left with a romantic end to the novel, giving us the father and son riding happily off into the sunset. There are still many problems with the idea that this new combined Narrator/Phaedrus character is any better off than either of the two former counterparts. In all fairness, he should be exposed to the problems that were the concern of the previous characters. That is why, in Lila, the ‘new’ Phaedrus must be posed the almost identical philosophical problem: ‘Does Lila have Quality?’ It is due to the second koan that Phaedrus formulates his ‘Metaphysics of Quality,’ but his problems are not finally resolved until he reaches the non-committal, trans-intellectual, trans-verbal state of the Whirling Dervish. Despite, the narrator’s own euphoric state,
the sequel ends with less certitude than the first book, with Lila being taken off Phaedrus’ hands by Richard Rigel in order to undergo another stint in a psychiatric ward. In a *New York Times* interview, Pirsig told Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “I refused to end the book optimistically because life does not end optimistically and to paint it optimistically is to paint it falsely” (Lehmann-Haupt 1991). This comment seems to testify to an important change in attitude from the end of the first book, this time with an emphasis on acceptance, uncertainty and inevitability, but still displaying a very Buddhist stance. This being said however, I have endeavoured to show that while Pirsig writes from a Zen-influenced standpoint he employs a broad spectrum approach to philosophy, psychology and spirituality, making his work compatible with the mystically-inclined Perennial Philosophy.

We have seen how Pirsig engages in a ‘homespun’ philosophy which eventually has similarities with some of the concepts of Zen Buddhism. Nevertheless, I have also been keen to indicate numerous similarities between Pirsig’s books and Transpersonal Psychology and more specifically the work of Ken Wilber. Even though they approach the subject of developmental consciousness in very different ways, it seems that there is some correlation in the broader strokes of the ideas. It has not been within the scope of this thesis to do an exhaustive analysis of these similarities, but I hope to have provided an indication of the interpretative value of Transpersonal Psychology in tackling *ZMM* and *Lila* and believe it could be used as a profitable methodology for exploring other literary texts in the future. Wilber uses a thoroughly academic approach, utilising a vast storehouse of philosophical, psychological, anthropological and sociological works. Pirsig writes his philosophy novelistically and tries to reach conclusions of his own while occasionally drawing from the works of others. He questions the upholding of any
dogmatic beliefs in either science or religion, while acknowledging the paradox of his own dogma. This is one of the dilemmas of his undertaking but by no means new to philosophers. This is perhaps why Pirsig resorts to mysticism, which attributes no significance to this paradox. It is also why he is best writing literature, which allows for a less rigorous scrutiny of ideas and therefore is of greater advantage to the lay philosopher.

Aristotle points out the advantage of literature in *Poetics*: ‘Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars’ (Aristotle 1954: 235). Bearing in mind the relatively recent novel form, I think Aristotle’s observations are pertinent to Pirsig’s approach to his art. He endeavours to convey universals both in the text and in the method of his delivery, and I believe succeeds significantly in communicating his artistry if not in completely perfecting his philosophy. However, as well as writing two important literary works, I consider Pirsig’s greatest contribution to philosophy is his realisation that an understanding of Zen is ideal for transcending the uncertainties of the space age.
Appendix

Pirsig’s ‘journey’ in chronological order

Robert M. Pirsig (1928 – 1997)

1950 – 1954 Philosophy student in India.
1958 Completed an M.A. in Journalism.
1961 Return to university to write PhD thesis on ‘Quality.’
Realisation of significant corollaries between his ‘Quality’, and Zen.
Depression and then - Madness.
1962 Court-ordered institutionalisation and Electric Shock Therapy.
1963 Release from hospital.
1968 Motorcycle trip and formation of Chautauqua.
Former self – Phaedrus, awakens during trip.
1968 – 1974 Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is written and published.
1974 Zen centre opened in Montana.
1979 (November 17) Pirsig’s son Chris, is murdered.
1980 Trip down Hudson with Lila and meeting with Robert Redford.
1984 – 1991 Lila is written and published.

N.B. Dates are approximate.
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