“I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.”
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, The American Scholar

“The owner of the axe, as he released his hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it.”
—Henry David Thoreau, Walden

“The achievement of human happiness requires not the perennial and fuller satisfaction of our needs as they stand but the examination and transformation of those needs.”
—Stanley Cavell, Pursuits of Happiness

Maintenance as Romance: Recuperating Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Lee Vinsel

The author and his parents on a return visit to Durango, Colorado circa 1980, a few years after his parents left their hippie-esque life there.

Robert Pirsig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (ZAMM) is kids’ stuff. Like the writings of the Beats, if you haven’t read it before you turn twenty years old, you probably shouldn’t. Its
naiveté and preciousness grate. In college, a professor told me that he liked writers like Pirsig and Ayn Rand because they got students interested in philosophy, but, he went on, the professor’s role is to show students that these writers aren’t serious. They are meant to be left behind. Yet, there are good reasons to return to ZAMM, a perennially popular work that has sold more than five million copies, and the particular reason that moves me to revisit it is the recent interest in studies of maintenance and repair.

What are maintenance studies? There are at least two ways of thinking about the topic—narrowly and broadly. The narrow way of studying maintenance and repair is to focus on the kinds of activities and work that we call maintenance and repair, that is, to be guided by our own words, distinctions, and actors’ categories. Work of this nature, including the writings of Kevin Borg, Christopher Henke, and Steven Jackson, has taken off in the last few years. There is a great deal more research to do in this area, and it seems likely that maintenance studies should primarily consist of work of this type. The broader definition of maintenance studies requires a different perspective on life with technology and culture more generally—what Jackson calls “broken world thinking.”[1] Other thinkers have made this intellectual move before. For instance, when Karl Marx was formulating his theory of labor-power, he wrote, “The value of labor is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labor.”[2] This broad notion of maintenance includes all human activity aimed at keeping things going—which is most of it. Strikingly, in the history of technology, women have been important early leaders in thinking about maintenance broadly construed. The reason likely has to do with position and perspective. That is, the place of women in society means that they are better positioned to see important aspects of our culture—like all the work that keeps it going—that men are privileged to ignore, much to our detriment. The leader here is Ruth Schwartz Cowan, especially in her books, More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology (1983) and A Social History of American Technology (1997).[3]

I believe that we are turning to maintenance because of a discontent with “innovation,” which long ago became a meaningless buzzword. Use of the term “innovation” began increasing soon after World War II, but it reached new heights by the 1980s. The rise of innovation-speak maps onto the fall of another word, namely “progress,” which began to slip from usage in the late 1960s as the Viet Nam war mounted and people began to focus on technology’s less savory side. A critical turning point was the rise of the notion of “innovation policy” in the late 1970s. Innovation became a national—and partly natural—resource that could be fostered, encouraged, channeled, and incentivized. Congress passed the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act, which enabled academic researchers to patent work subsidized through government funding, and the National Cooperative Research Act of 1984, which fostered the development of research consortia and protected participating firms from antitrust law. At about the same time, Silicon Valley became the place to watch and to be. It turned into a model that other localities tried to emulate through tax policy and subsidization. “Innovation” became inescapable lingo on the lips of politicians, business executives, university administrators, and the kinds of authors who sell self-help books in airports. Universities opened “business incubators” and science parks and new centers dedicated to unlocking innovation’s mysteries, and influential figures came together to preach the glories of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education. Yet, anyone who was paying attention knew that most of this talk and activity was hollow bullshit and that technological change would save neither our economy, nor our selves.

There was a different kind of cultural moment centered in the 1970s, however, just before innovation policy really took off, a moment with a different vision of possibility. After the Summer of Love became a filthy fiasco, the Grateful Dead fled Haight-Ashbury, moved out into ranches in Marin County, and sang cowboy songs. The back to the land movement was on. Frances Moore Lappé wrote Diet for a Small Planet; E. F. Schumacher, Small is Beautiful;[4] Stewart Brand published the Whole Earth Catalog, full of solar panels, windmills, and geodesic domes for living off the grid. My father left Ohio to become a camp counselor near Durango, Colorado, and my mother ran away with him. People hiked up mountains and smoked pot, and my dad talked about making a living selling beaded jewelry. A few years later, when Jimmy Carter became president, he created the Department of Energy, put solar panels on the
White House, and pushed the idea of making conservation the basis of American education, including building energy efficiency into grade school math, science, civics, and literature classes. Of course, this cultural opening was eventually pushed aside by innovation and by Ronald Reagan, who removed the White House solar panels and declared hopefully, “It’s Morning in America.” But for a moment between the fall of progress and the rise of innovation, some Americans pondered and acted on an idea of social, technological, and environmental limits.

It was into this landscape that Robert Pirsig rode. ZAMM, published in 1974, recounts a motorcycle trip across the American Midwest and Northwest that Pirsig took with his son, Chris, and their friends, John and Sylvia Sutherland. Pirsig explains that he wrote the book in part to settle a disagreement he had with this couple. John eschews maintaining his own motorcycle, which he leaves to trained mechanics, and he gets testy when Pirsig raises the topic. Meanwhile, Pirsig worries that they will all be stranded in the middle of nowhere because of John’s negligence. Pirsig explains John’s resistance to maintenance by introducing a distinction between classic and romantic understanding. Classic understanding tries to comprehend the world’s underlying forms, whereas the romantic focuses on appearances and surfaces. John is an artist and musician who obsesses over jazz, and in some ways, the Sutherlands are prototypical hippies. Pirsig frets that the current generation of anti-establishment youth, alienated both from business and from government, is also turning against the deeper ways of knowing inherent in science and engineering. He never refers to C. P. Snow’s notion of the “Two Cultures,” the divide between the sciences and the humanities, but he may as well have.

Pirsig types John a “romantic,” but ZAMM is itself irredeemably and unrepentantly Romantic. It draws on a long line of mostly male authors who celebrate the beauties of the ordinary. It reproduces common tropes of this literary tradition, especially the attempt to awaken individuals to the beauty of their everyday lives and ordinary surroundings. Thus, Henry David Thoreau, the epitome of American Romanticism, writes of cocks crowing. In opposition to lives lived in “quiet desperation,” Thoreau made these words the epigraph of Walden: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.”[5] Romanticism calls us to leave slumber. Fittingly, Pirsig believes that our daydreams keep us focused only on beautiful surfaces instead of also caring about underlying reality, especially the technological and material infrastructures of human existence.

In the book, Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre argue that that since 1800 a great deal of technology criticism has been written by figures in the Romantic Movement and later individuals who have been deeply influenced by it. In this line, we see a tradition of critique. The thrust begins with Blake’s and Wordsworth’s reflections on demonic industrialism. It is not as if these early speakers gave birth to a spirit that later possessed others, though maybe that image isn’t terrible. Rather, later thinkers joined this strain by reading the Romantics. The line becomes a chain of readers and writers. Löwy and Sayre focus especially on the Marxist lineage and argue that Romanticism is a secret influence on that tradition that flows from Marx and Engels themselves through Luxemburg, Lukács, and Bloch into the British Cultural Marxists, such as E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams.

We see the same trajectory at play in the United States. The American Romanticists and Transcendentalists of the 1840s-1880s, like Dickinson, Emerson, Whitman, and, of course, Thoreau, were deeply influenced by British, French, and German Romantics. And, importantly, later American critics of technology were further influenced by these 19th century writers. To give one example, in Unsafe at Any Speed, Ralph Nader quotes from Walt Whitman’s poem, “I Sing the Body Electric”: “If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred.”[6] The problem with unethically designed automobiles, Nader believes, is that they violate the bodily sovereignty that Whitman so celebrated. In this same way, ZAMM is an updating of Thoreau’s Walden. Indeed, ZAMM’s fourth chapter is a poetic quotation of the famous “Economy” chapter of Walden. Just as Thoreau included a list of necessary things and their financial costs, Pirsig writes a catalog of objects that should be carried on any well-equipped motorcycle trip. What’s more, Pirsig includes a copy of Walden as one of the things that he takes
with him on the bike! Walden, he writes, is a book “which can be read a hundred times without exhaustion.”[8]

In drawing the distinction between classical and romantic understanding, Pirsig is not attempting to reject the latter. No, he revels in it. What he desires is to bring the two things together—and this task begins with maintenance. As he writes, “Although motorcycle riding is romantic, motorcycle maintenance is purely classic.”[9] But ZAMM is Pirsig’s response to what he saw as a problematic strain of the Romantic tradition. In Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity, Löwy and Sayre identify five features of modernity at which Romanticism took aim: the disenchantment of the world, the quantification of the world, the mechanization of the world, rationalist abstraction, and the dissolution of social bonds.[10] It is easy to see how criticism of these features could effortlessly slip into hatred of science and technology in general. And this anti-technological trend frightened Pirsig. The trend has only continued. Today, it finds its home in pop culture’s ubiquitous zombies, in disaster porn, in the school of thought called “dark ecology,” and in communities of organized despair, like the Dark Mountain Project. It’s like Slavoj Zizek says: we’ve lost the ability to imagine positive futures. Maybe we’ve even lost the ability to hope out loud.

Pirsig’s attempt to overcome the division between the romantic and the classical takes us into the heart of ZAMM. Much of the book is a pop history of (mostly Western) thought. Like Martin Heidegger (though Pirsig seems unaware of Heidegger’s writings), Pirsig believes that something went awry in the world of Ancient Greece that led to a split between “theoretical” and “aesthetic” thinking. This split was passed down through history and ended up in the philosophical reification of the subject-object divide, the insurmountable gap between mind and world. ZAMM is generally a critique of Cartesianism, but Pirsig saves a special place of loathing for Immanuel Kant. To overcome this well-known chasm between subject and object, between head and hand, Pirsig offers up something he calls the “Metaphysics of Quality.” Quality is an attribute that everyone grasps—say, in a beautiful piece of writing—but which is impossible to define, in part because notions of it undergird and precede understanding and analysis. Yet, Pirsig believes that, if we attend to Quality in everyday life by caring for the world, we overcome the division between self and object, between surface and underlying form, between head and hand, between inside and outside, between romantic and classic. For Pirsig, the paradigmatic example of attending to Quality is maintenance, especially motorcycle maintenance.

Long stretches of ZAMM are truly terrible. A friend of mine tried to re-read the book last year but gave up. He said that Pirsig “mansplained” everything. ZAMM celebrates maintenance but it proceeds by way of heady abstraction, rather than through a more grounded perspective focused on everyday relations, such as the “ethics of care” put forward by Carol Gilligan and other feminist theorists.[11] ZAMM presents complex issues around gender: the book both upholds certain images of masculinity, for instance, as being about technological mastery, and undermines them by presenting more feminine responses. Ultimately, the book is about the importance of openness and vulnerability, particularly in the relationship between father and son. Often, Pirsig acts sage-like and condescending but a lot of what he has to say is kind of dumb. Furthermore, his explanations of Kant and other philosophers are the worst I’ve ever seen. Wikipedia does a better job. Pirsig’s position in the American West and Midwest—he was a professor at Montana State University—meant that he was largely disconnected from the more sophisticated intellectual discussions happening during his day. Put another way, Pirsig is a character well-known by most academics: a slightly-crazed individual with a not great education working at a marginal university who has a theory of everything. He is undisciplined in both the best but mostly the worst sense. For example, Pirsig seems totally unaware of Thomas Kuhn’s work, even though ZAMM is obsessed with many of the same topics as The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, like how thought changes over time and how worldviews—or paradigms—determine what we do and do not see. Pirsig’s ideas about Quality seem odd and naïve because our current view on such issues is Nominalist, constructionist, historicist, sociological. People praise those things as having Quality that they have been reared to see as Quality. Enough said. The book’s long reflections on the “metaphysics of Quality” are painfully embarrassing, like those mortifying moments in John Hughes’ films where a teen commits some terrible faux pas.
But that’s enough. You can see that I am trying to intellectualize my revulsion. The real reason for this affect, my embarrassment, is that Pirsig cuts too close to the bone. In the end, all of Pirsig's wrestling with thought—both Western and Eastern—is one person’s attempt to deal with life, and as he wrangles with the meaning of it, he comes to the conclusion that we must take care of the things around us. My embarrassment—some part of me tries to flee the scene of Pirsig’s words—glows because when I read him I am reminded how many parts of my life—like the railway that takes me to and from work—are marred by neglect. My heart goes on the run because I see how often my hand, like those of so many others, passes over caring. While I cannot agree with some intellectual steps Pirsig takes to derive Quality, I grasp his thrust, which I might put another way: that caring about fundamentals proceeds from seeing the beauty—or in other words, the sacredness—of the world, and that we require both things, the fundamentals and the surfaces.

This returns us once again to the longer history of Romantic technology criticism and to the broader concerns of (critical) science and technology studies. In his historiographical writings on the history of technology—the telling of technology’s story—the Jesuit priest and former editor of Technology & Culture, John Staudenmaier attacks our culture’s narrative celebration of technological progress, which Staudenmaier calls “Progress Talk.” He holds up Disney’s EPCOT Center as the paradigmatic example of this trend. Staudenmaier, who spent the early years of his priesthood working with the Lakota Sioux in South Dakota, is particularly horrified at how Western technological change has affected Native Americans and other Postcolonial peoples. In his book, Technology’s Storytellers, and other works, Staudenmaier argues that our stories are deeply interwoven with what he calls “technological style,” or the relationship between a designer’s mindset and values and a constructed artifact or system. Of technological style, Staudenmaier writes, “Because a technological design reflects the motives of its designers, historians of technology look to the values, biases, motives, and worldview of the designers when asking why a given technology turned out as it did. Every technology, then, embodies some distinct set of values. To the extent that a technology becomes successful within its society, its inherent values will be reinforced.” If we fast forward from the publication of Staudenmaier’s book in 1989, we can see that “Progress Talk” became “Innovation Speak,” and while the official technological style of our culture is embodied in TED Talks and digital technology—envision pornography produced by Apple: cool hues, white and silver, everything soft lit, people in hoodies, precisely the mise-en-scène of films like Ex Machina—if we look deeper we can see that our real style is dilapidation. Our technological values are best embodied by collapsing buildings, rotting bridges, and abandoned, trash-strewn lots. If you want to see who we are, go to Detroit.

To take this broader maintenance perspective is also to see that scholars of science, technology, and media can and should take a wider set of topics as a study of sociotechnical maintenance. It is to see that the current fight over fast food workers’ wages is, in part, an argument for the dignity of being a maintainer. It is to spy the great irony in the tale, wherein Mark Zuckerberg, his hype machine, and all of his money could not solve the problems of the Newark public school system. It is to determine that Elon Musk is not the kind of human being we should be idolizing. It is to say that Chris Christie and other government representatives who will not raise taxes to maintain their state’s infrastructure are nihilists. It is to realize that the infrastructure report cards put out by the American Society of Civil Engineering, which always find that our roads, bridges, and other structures are degraded and failing, is simply an expression of our culture, which devalues the existent present in the name of promised but unreal novelty, novelty meant, somehow, to save us from ourselves.

ZAMM calls us back from these hollow, superficial things. It is a work of Romanticism. The danger in our ironic, or postmodern, culture is when saying that something is Romantic to imply that it is merely Romantic. We have to be smarter than that, to remember that we can use hopeful literature without falling prey to idealism or empty Utopianism, to recall that we can employ works such as ZAMM in our lives like alarm clocks. We can remind ourselves to open our eyes, even if only ever partially. Really what is the risk of such Romanticism, which wakes us and asks us to care for what we have? The risk is being naïve and
precious. I am writing these words six weeks after my second child was born. If one day, he and his sister say that I was a silly, idealistic, even utopian man, who fell in love with the idea of maintaining, repairing, and caring for the world and talked to others about it, I will not feel ashamed.

REFERENCES


[10] Löwy and Sayre, Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity, 29–43.
