

"Classicism and Romanticism"

by Robert Pirsig

from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

The world of underlying form is an unusual object of discussion because it is actually a mode of discussion itself. You discuss things in terms of their immediate appearance or you discuss them in terms of their underlying form, and when you try to discuss these modes of discussion you get involved in what could be called a platform problem. You have no platform from which to discuss them other than the modes themselves.

Previously I was discussing his world of underlying form, or at least the aspect of it called technology, from an external view. Now I think it's right to talk about that world of underlying form from its own point of view. I want to talk about the underlying form of the world of underlying form itself.

To do this, first of all, a dichotomy is necessary, but before I can use it honestly I have to back up and say what it is and means, and that is a long story in itself. Part of this back-up problem. But right now I just want to use a dichotomy and explain it later. I want to divide human understanding into two kinds...classical understanding and romantic understanding. In terms of ultimate truth a dichotomy of this sort has little meaning but it is quite legitimate when one is operating within the classic mode used to discover or create a world of underlying form. The terms classic and romantic, as Phædrus used them, mean the following:

A classical understanding sees the world primarily as underlying form itself. A romantic understanding sees it primarily in terms of immediate appearance. If you were to show an engine or a mechanical drawing or electronic schematic to a romantic it is unlikely he would see much of interest in it. It has no appeal because the reality he sees is its surface. Dull, complex lists of names, lines and numbers. Nothing interesting. But if you were to show the same blueprint or schematic or give the same description to a classical person he might look at it and then become fascinated by it because he sees that within the lines and shapes and symbols is a tremendous richness of underlying form.

The romantic mode is primarily inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive. Feelings rather than facts predominate. "Art" when it is opposed to "Science" is often romantic. It does not proceed by reason or by laws. It proceeds by feeling, intuition and esthetic conscience. In the northern European cultures the romantic mode is usually associated with femininity, but this is certainly not a necessary association.

The classic mode, by contrast, proceeds by reason and by laws...which are themselves underlying forms of thought and behavior. In the European cultures it is primarily a masculine mode and the fields of science, law and medicine are unattractive to women largely for this reason. Although motorcycle riding is romantic, motorcycle maintenance is purely classic. The dirt, the grease, the mastery of underlying form required all give it such a negative romantic appeal that women never go near it.

Although surface ugliness is often found in the classic mode of understanding it is not inherent in it. There is a classic esthetic which romantics often miss because of its subtlety. The classic style is straightforward, unadorned, unemotional, economical and carefully proportioned. Its purpose is not to inspire emotionally, but to bring order out of chaos and make the unknown known. It is not an esthetically free and natural style. It is esthetically restrained. Everything is under control. Its value is measured in terms of the skill with which this control is maintained.

To a romantic this classic mode often appears dull, awkward and ugly, like mechanical maintenance itself. Everything is in terms of pieces and parts and components and relationships. Nothing is figured out until it's run through the computer a dozen times. Everything's got to be measured and proved. Oppressive. Heavy. Endlessly grey. The death force.

Within the classic mode, however, the romantic has some appearances of his own. Frivolous, irrational, erratic, untrustworthy, interested primarily in pleasure-seeking. Shallow. Of no substance. Often a parasite who cannot or will not carry his own weight. A real drag on society. By now these battle lines should sound a little familiar.

This is the source of the trouble. Persons tend to think and feel exclusively in one mode or the other and in doing so tend to misunderstand and underestimate what the other mode is all about. But no one is willing to give up the truth as he sees it, and as far as I know, no one now living has any real reconciliation of these truths or modes. There is no point at which these visions of reality are unified.

And so in recent times we have seen a huge split develop between a classic culture and a romantic counterculture...two worlds growingly alienated and hateful toward each other with everyone wondering if it will always be this way, a house divided against itself. No one wants it really...despite what his antagonists in the other dimension might think.

It is within this context that what Phædrus thought and said is significant. But no one was listening at that time and they only thought him eccentric at first, then undesirable, then slightly mad, and then genuinely insane. There seems little doubt that he was insane, but much of his writing at the time indicates that what was driving him insane was this hostile opinion of him. Unusual behavior tends to produce estrangement in others which tends to further the unusual behavior and thus the estrangement in self-stoking cycles until some sort of climax is reached. In Phædrus' case there was a court-ordered police arrest and permanent removal from society.

His kind of rationality has been used since antiquity to remove oneself from the tedium and depression of one's immediate surroundings. What makes it hard to see is that where once it was used to get away from it all, the escape has been so successful that now it is the "it all" that the romantics are trying to escape. What makes his world so hard to see clearly is not its strangeness but its usualness. Familiarity can blind you too.

His way of looking at things produces a kind of description that can be called an "analytic" description. That is another name of the classic platform from which one discusses things in terms of their underlying form. He was a totally classic person. And to give a fuller description of what this is I want now to turn his analytic approach back upon itself...to analyze analysis itself. I want to do this first of all by giving an extensive example of it and then by dissecting what it is. The motorcycle is a perfect subject for it since the motorcycle itself was invented by classic minds. So listen:

- A motorcycle may be divided for purposes of classical rational analysis by means of its component assemblies and by means of its functions.
- If divided by means of its component assemblies, its most basic division is into a power assembly and a running assembly.
- The power assembly may be divided into the engine and the power-delivery system. The engine will be taken up first.
- The engine consists of a housing containing a power train, a fuel-air system, an ignition system, a feedback system and a lubrication system.
- The power train consists of cylinders, pistons, connecting rods, a crankshaft and a flywheel.
- The fuel-air system components, which are part of the engine, consist of a gas tank and filter, an air cleaner, a carburetor, valves and exhaust pipes.
- The ignition system consists of an alternator, a rectifier, a battery, a high-voltage coil and spark plugs.
- The feedback system consists of a cam chain, a camshaft, tappets and a distributor.
- The lubrication system consists of an oil pump and channels throughout the housing for distribution of the oil.
- The power-delivery system accompanying the engine consists of a clutch, a transmission and a chain.
- The supporting assembly accompanying the power assembly consists of a frame, including foot pegs, seat and fenders; a steering assembly; front and rear shock absorbers; wheels; control levers and cables; lights and horn; and speed and mileage indicators.
- That's a motorcycle divided according to its components. To know what the components are for, a division according to functions is necessary:

- A motorcycle may be divided into normal running functions and special, operator-controlled functions.
- Normal running functions may be divided into functions during the intake cycle, functions during the compression cycle, functions during the power cycle and functions during the exhaust cycle.

And so on. I could go on about which functions occur in their proper sequence during each of the four cycles, then go on to the operator-controlled functions and that would be a very summary description of the underlying form of a motorcycle. It would be extremely short and rudimentary, as descriptions of this sort go. Almost any one of the components mentioned can be expanded on indefinitely. I've read an entire engineering volume on contact points alone, which are just a small but vital part of the distributor. There are other types of engines than the single-cylinder Otto engine described here: two-cycle engines, multiple-cylinder engines, diesel engines, Wankel engines...but this example is enough.

This description would cover the "what" of the motorcycle in terms of components, and the "how" of the engine in terms of functions. It would badly need a "where" analysis in the form of an illustration, and also a "why" analysis in the form of engineering principles that led to this particular conformation of parts. But the purpose here isn't exhaustively to analyze the motorcycle. It's to provide a starting point, an example of a mode of understanding of things which will itself become an object of analysis.

There's certainly nothing strange about this description at first hearing. It sounds like something from a beginning textbook on the subject, or perhaps a first lesson in a vocational course. What is unusual about it is seen when it ceases to be a mode of discourse and becomes an object of discourse. Then certain things can be pointed to.

The first thing to be observed about this description is so obvious you have to hold it down or it will drown out every other observation. This is: It is just duller than ditchwater. Yah-da, yah-da, yah-da, yah-da, yah, carburetor, gear ratio, compression, yah-da-yah, piston, plugs, intake, yah-da-yah, on and on and on. That is the romantic face of the classic mode. Dull, awkward and ugly. Few romantics get beyond that point.

But if you can hold down that most obvious observation, some other things can be noticed that do not at first appear.

The first is that the motorcycle, so described, is almost impossible to understand unless you already know how one works. The immediate surface impressions that are essential for primary understanding are gone. Only the underlying form is left.

The second is that the observer is missing. The description doesn't say that to see the piston you must remove the cylinder head. "You" aren't anywhere in the picture. Even the "operator" is a kind of personalityless robot whose performance of a function on the

machine is completely mechanical. There are no real subjects in this description. Only objects exist that are independent of any observer.

The third is that the words "good" and "bad" and all their synonyms are completely absent. No value judgments have been expressed anywhere, only facts.

The fourth is that 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. But they can be named quite differently and organized quite differently depending on how the knife moves.

For example, the feedback mechanism which includes the camshaft and cam chain and tappets and distributor exists only because of an unusual cut of this analytic knife. If you were to go to a motorcycle-parts department and ask them for a feedback assembly they wouldn't know what the hell you were talking about. They don't split it up that way. No two manufacturers ever split it up quite the same way and every mechanic is familiar with the problem of the part you can't buy because you can't find it because the manufacturer considers it a part of something else.

It is important to see this knife for what it is and not to be fooled into thinking that motorcycles or anything else are the way they are just because the knife happened to cut it up that way. It is important to concentrate on the knife itself. An ability to use this knife creatively and effectively can result in solutions to the classic and romantic split.