

# Zen And the Art . . . : The Identity of the Erlkönig

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**I**N the late evening of the second day of the cross-country bike trip in Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the narrator is trying to explain to John and Sylvia why he won't let his son Chris see a psychiatrist: "I don't *know* why . . . it's just that . . . I don't know . . . they're not kin." Then his mind begins to free-associate the word "kin":

Surprising word, I think to myself, never used it before. Not of *kin* . . . sounds like hillbilly talk . . . not of a *kind* . . . same root . . . *kindness* too . . . they can't have real *kindness* toward him, they're not his *kin*. . . . That's exactly the feeling.

It goes over and over again through my thoughts . . . *mein Kind* — my child. There it is in another language. *Mein Kinder* . . . "Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind? Es ist der Vater und seinem Kind."

Strange feeling from that.

"What are you thinking about?" Sylvia asks.

"An old poem, by Goethe. It must be two hundred years old. I had to learn it a long time ago. I don't know why I should remember it now, except . . ." The strange feeling comes back.

"How does it go?" Sylvia asks.

I try to recall. "A man is riding along a beach at night, through the wind. It's a father, with his son, whom he holds fast in his arm. He asks the son why he looks so pale, and the son replies, 'Father, don't you see the ghost?' The father tries to reassure the boy it's only a bank of fog along the beach that he sees and only the rustling of the leaves in the wind that he hears but the son keeps saying it is the ghost and the father rides harder and harder through the night."

"How does it end?"

"In failure . . . death of the child. The ghost wins."<sup>1</sup>

The Goethe poem cited is "Erlkönig," a Gothic ballad dating from 1782. A narrator, the child, the father, and the "alderking," a goblinlike "king of the alder grove," tell the tale:

Who rides so late through night and wind?  
It is the father with his child;

He holds the boy safe in his arm,  
He holds him close and he keeps him warm.

"My son, why do you hide your face in fear?"

"Don't you see, father, the Erl-king there?"

The Erl-king with crown and robe?"

"My son, that is only a wreath of the mist."

"My pretty child, come, come with me!

Some lovely games I'll play with you.

Many a bright flower grows on the shore,

And my mother has many golden robes."

"My father, my father, now do you hear

What the Erl-king is promising me?"

"Be calm, remain calm, my child,

In dry leaves rustles the nightwind."

"Will you, sweet boy, now come with me?"

My daughters will wait on you,

My daughters will lead the nightly round

And rock you and dance you and wing you to sleep."

"My father, my father, don't you see there

The Erl-king's daughters in the gloomy place?"

"My son, my son, I see it clearly;

It is merely the old willows so gray."

"I love you, I'm charmed by your lovely appearance,

And if you're unwilling, I will use force."

"My father, my father, he's seizing me now!

The Erl-king has done me terrible harm!"

The father shudders, and now he rides fast,

In his arms he holds the moaning boy;

He reached his farm all troubled with need,

In his arms his dear child was dead.<sup>2</sup>

This ballad provides perhaps the best entry into Pirsig's novel. First of all, it provides a model for the emotions of the reader as he accompanies the narrator and Chris on their cross-country ride and experiences with them the memory of past insanity and the dread of its onset in the son, its recurrence in the father, or both. Secondly, it offers a root metaphor which is worked over again and again, finally to be stood on its head by the happy ending of the book. Thirdly, and incidentally, it may be noted that the ocean does not appear in Goethe's poem, though it does in the narrator's relation of it and in his dream; it is read in from the end of the novel.

That very night, for example, the narrator dreams:

The moon is shining and yet there is a bank of fog and I am riding a horse and Chris is with me and the horse jumps over a small stream that runs through the sand toward the ocean somewhere beyond. And then that is broken. . . . And then it reappears.

And in the fog there appears an intimation of a figure. It disappears when I look at it directly, but then reappears in the corner of my vision when I turn my glance. I am about to say something, to call to it to recognize it, but then do not, knowing that to recognize it by any gesture or action is to give it a reality which it must not have. But it is a figure I recognize even though I do not let on. it is Phaedrus.

Evil spirit. Insane. From a world without life or death. (p. 69)

And throughout most of the rest of the book the reader will be persuaded by the narrator's identification of the Erlkönig with Phaedrus, his own past personality before he underwent electric-shock treatment.

The external framework of the plot is a journey by motorcycle. Eleven-year-old Chris and his father travel on one bike, John and Sylvia Sutherland on another, from Minnesota westward to visit friends near Bozeman, Montana, where the father had taught college English some years before. While John and Sylvia return home, the narrator and his son continue west across the mountains to the Pacific, eventually arriving in California. The entire journey of son and father westward is a double allegory. It is an intellectual journey, for the narrator attempts to retrieve his own — Phaedrus' own — past speculations about its "Quality" in the reminiscences which he calls "the Chautauqua"; the narrator is thus after a manner in search of Phaedrus. It is secondly a personal and interpersonal odyssey, for the narrator is seeking his own integration and that of his son, Chris is trying to find himself and is seeking his father, and both Chris and the narrator are seeking a satisfactory meeting with one another. Neither Chris nor the narrator is ready for integration or meeting at any time early in the book. Even by Chapter 19, when the narrator has another dream, he is not prepared to interpret it for what it really is:

In the dream I was standing in a white-painted room looking at a glass door. On the other side was [sic] Chris and his brother and mother. Chris was waving at me from the other side of the door and

his brother was smiling but his mother had tears in her eyes. Then I saw that Chris's smile was fixed and artificial and actually there was deep fear.

I moved toward the door and his smile became better. he motioned for me to open it. I was about to open it, but then didn't. His fear came back but I turned and walked away.

It's a dream that has occurred often before. Its meaning is obvious and fits some thoughts of last night. He's trying to relate to me and is afraid he never will. (p. 226)

As will appear, this dream is not the usual projection of the concerns of today but instead a fragment of memory — of Phaedrus' memory — which Chris shares, so that the "I" of it is not the narrator as we know him and as he knows himself but instead Phaedrus. The narrator is correct about Chris' concern, but wrong about the object of it; his mistake is the foundation for the ironic and optimistic unfolding of the real answers to three questions: Who is seeking whom? Who is fleeing from whom? Who, in Goethe's terms, is the father, who the son, and who the unholy ghost?

When Chris wakes, he claims that the narrator talked all night long about the mountain: "You said at the top of the mountain we'd see everything. You said you were going to meet me there. I think he's been dreaming. 'How could I meet you there when I'm already with you?'" But Chris and the narrator do not go to the top of the mountain; after mentioning the Yellowstone earthquake of 1959, the narrator pursues the question of reaching the top:

"I think we'd be very smart if we let that mountaintop go for now and try it another summer."

He's silent. Then he says, "Why?"

"I have bad feelings about it." (p. 244)

He refuses to take the risk of going to the mountain — the physical risk of rockslides, the psychological risk of meeting Chris there as the dream had promised. The journey to that margin is rejected, and will have to take the form of a journey to another margin, that boundary where the land meets the ocean, though it is spoken of as the bottom of the ocean.

Another of Phaedrus' dreams points clearly to this farther journey to a true meeting. It begins in the same way as the

earlier dream, with the corridor and the glass door separating Phaedrus from his family; but then:

And now I see what the glass door is. It is the door of a coffin — mine.

Not a coffin, a sarcophagus. I am in an enormous vault, dead, and they are paying their last respects.

As he tries to communicate with Chris, a shadowy figure warns him not to do so, but he calls out anyhow:

"CHRIS!" I shout through the door. "I'LL SEE YOU!!" The dark figure moves toward me threateningly, but I hear Chris's voice, "Where?" faint and distant. He *heard* me! And the dark figure, enraged, draws a curtain over the door.

Not the mountain, I think. The mountain is gone. "AT THE BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN!!" I shout. (pp. 273-74)

So the quest remains, despite the threat of the shadowy figure, the Erlkönig. But the problems remain as well, especially the problem of the narrator's inability to get an accurate notion of whom Chris will meet at the bottom of the ocean. After thinking that at certain times Chris "seems very far away and sort of watching me from some vantage point I don't see" (p. 298), the narrator goes on to speculate in a Bradleyan manner about the dividedness of each human mind from any other:

I thought that the idea that one person's mind is accessible to another's is just a conversational illusion, just a figure of speech, an assumption that makes some kind of exchange between basically alien creatures seem plausible, and that really the relationship of one person to another is ultimately unknowable. The effort of fathoming what is in another's mind creates a distortion of what is seen. (pp. 299-300)

And yet the next appearance of the dream suggests that there is a great deal more shared experience of a vitally central importance between Chris and his father than the narrator has as yet suspected. Here, the dreamer confronts the ghost, the Erlkönig, and sees its face; Chris wakes him from the nightmare, and they talk about it:

"What were you dreaming about?"

"I was trying to see someone's face."

"You shouted you were going to kill me."

"No, not you."

"Who?"

"The person in the dream."

"Who was it?"

"I'm not sure."

Chris's crying stops, but he continues to shake from the cold. "Did you see the face?"

"Yes."

"What did it look like?"

"It was my own face, Chris, that's when I shouted."

But after he sends Chris back to sleep, the narrator realizes that "The dreamer isn't me at all. It's Phaedrus. He's waking up. A mind divided against itself . . . me . . . I'm the evil figure in the shadows. I'm the loathsome one . . ." (pp. 330-31). It is the narrator who is the Erbkönig, therefore, in Phaedrus' dream; but what does that make Phaedrus? Is he still the madman that the narrator has told us of — indeed, keeps telling us of as the story proceeds?

The first hint that we need to reassess Phaedrus completely comes when the narrator and Chris have arrived at the Pacific — have come, that is, as near as is literally possible to the bottom of the ocean. Chris is complaining about the trip in a generalized kind of way: "When I was little it was different . . . We always *did* things. That I wanted to do. Now I don't want to do *anything*," and the narrator comments that Chris seems to have returned "to somewhere that I don't know about . . . the bottom of the ocean" (p. 398). Then the dialogue proceeds:

Then I ask Chris, "Was it better before we left Chicago?"

"Yes."

"How? What do you remember?"

"That it was fun."

"*Fun*?"

"Yes," he says, and is quiet. Then he says, "Remember the time we went to look for beds?"

"That was *fun*?"

"Sure," he says, and is quiet for a long time. Then he says, "Don't you remember? You made me find all the directions home . . . You used to play games with us. You used to tell us all kinds of stories and we'd go on rides to do things and now you don't do anything."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you *don't!* You just sit and stare and you don't *do anything!*"  
I hear him crying again.

Outside the rain comes in gusts against the window, and I feel a kind of heavy pressure bear down on me. He's crying for *him*. It's *him* he misses. That's what the dream is about. In the dream. . . (pp. 398-99)

So suddenly Phaedrus becomes a source of value, though he is validated or guaranteed only by Chris, whom the narrator and therefore the reader has perceived as a spoiled boy. The dream is Phaedrus', and the resentment is the narrator's: "He wants to hate me. Because I'm not *him*." But then 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—and says, "In all this Chautauqua talk there's been more than a touch of hypocrisy. Advice is given again and again to eliminate subject-object duality, when the biggest duality of all, the duality between me and him, remains unfaced. A mind divided against itself" (p. 401). So there is hope, for the difference *is* between his two selves.

The reversal of the narrator's consciously-held role appears in the same chapter, the second-last of the book. It makes a fairly long process, because for one thing the narrator and Phaedrus have drawn closer, have depolarized; the man who bought his escape from the mental hospital at the price of Phaedrus' "death" is no longer able and therefore for practical purposes willing to destroy him. He can destroy Chris, however, and the possibility confronts him insistently if briefly:

He looks at me so strangely. I think he still doesn't understand. That gaze . . . I've seen it somewhere . . . somewhere . . . somewhere. . .

In the fog of an early morning in the marshes there was a small duck, a teal that gazed like this . . . I'd winged it and now it couldn't fly and I'd run up on it and seized it by the neck and before killing it had stopped and from some sense of the mystery of the universe had stared into its eyes, and they gazed like this . . . so calm and uncomprehending . . . and yet so aware. Then I closed my hands around its eyes and twisted the neck until it broke and I felt the snap between my fingers. (p. 406)

He spares Chris; but he is drained of the ability either to oppose the enemy or defend himself. Chris, though, is equally unable to cope with any problem; he dithers, incapable of accepting sympathy; but since the sympathy is baseless, for all his weakness he is on the right track; accepting this sympathy would be the end of it all, the final frustration of the quest for the meeting at the bottom of the ocean. Chris continues to roll about without aim or progress on the ground; the narrator briefly contemplates suicide, but then turns outward and pleads with the boy to get up:

*Everything is all right now, Chris.  
That's not my voice.  
I haven't forgotten you.  
Chris's rocking stops.  
How could I forget you?*

But Chris still has to question this voice:

"Why did you leave us?"  
*When?*  
"At the hospital!"  
*There was no choice. The police prevented it.*  
"Wouldn't they let you out?"  
*No.*  
"Well then, why wouldn't you open the door?"  
*What door?*  
"The glass door!"  
A kind of slow electric shock passes through me. What glass door is he talking about?  
"Don't you remember?" he says. "We were standing on one side and you were on the other side and Mom was crying."  
I've never told him about that dream. How could he know about that? (pp. 407-08)

And so it is simply untrue that "the idea that one person's mind is accessible to another's is just a conversational illusion . . . really the relationship of one person to another is ultimately unknowable." The father's abiding nightmare is his son's as well; and now the narrator needs only realize that this is Phaedrus' dream ("I am Phaedrus, that is who I am, and they are going to destroy me"); realize that the leading figure among the "they", the shadowy Erlkönig, is the narrator himself, the new personality which will cooperate in Phaedrus' destruction in order to be let out of the institution;

and reassure Chris that everything is all right:

"Were you really insane?"

Why should he ask that?

No!

Astonishment hits. But Chris's eyes sparkle.

"I knew it," he says. (p. 408)

But the main reassurance is that which the father himself receives from his son. " 'I knew it,' he said", the father repeats to himself several times, and he finally comes to the realization that "I haven't been carrying him at all. He's been carrying me!" (p. 409). And indeed, both physically, sitting behind him on the motorcycle all those miles, holding his father in his arms, and metaphorically, keeping the idea of Phaedrus intact, Chris has been carrying his real father, the personality that the narrator has rejected. But that of course is why his name is Chris—Christopher, the carrier of Christ. And so, evidently, Chris occupies the place of the father in Goethe's poem, Phaedrus the place of the son, and the narrator the place of the Erlkönig; and the story ends this time not "in failure . . . death of the child. The ghost wins," but in victory: "For God's sake relieve him of his burden! Be one person again!" (p. 409). And the last few pages of the book are full of positive happenings. Father and son remove their helmets, and are for the first time able to converse in ordinary tones. Chris stands up so that he can see better, and begins to take real pleasure in the scenery. He asks about having a motorcycle when he gets older, and his father can promise him not only the bike and instruction in how to take care of it, but the "right attitudes" as well: " 'Will I have the right attitudes?' 'I think so,' I say. 'I don't think that will be any problem at all ' " (p. 411). And the book ends with a deep and abiding assurance of success: "We've won it. It's going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things" (p. 412).

So at the end the former personality has successfully won through to the light by the kind of resurrection a god might undergo; and this is appropriate enough, for "Phaedrus," after all, means "bright", "shining", "cheerful", "radiant with joy",

and it names a figure resembling the bright, shining sun-god Apollo who serves in Milton's "Lycidas" as a stand-in for Christ. As such Phaedrus may fittingly be thought of as a Christ-figure indeed, in fact the very Christ that his son Christopher, "the Christ-bearer", has faithfully borne during all the miles of the journey.

The retrieval of Phaedrus, the reintegration of the personality that had been purged, means that this book is at bottom an existential work of literature. Just as Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger* and Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son* would have suffered a loss of being had they rejected their acts of killing, so Chris' father would have suffered an even more obvious loss of being had he not, with the help of his son and his own retrieval through the Chautauquas of his past intellectual history, managed to "be one person again" by integrating Phaedrus and his new personality as narrator. But Chris' father overcomes, with the help of his son, the electrically-induced loss of being at the hands of psychiatric technology and persists in his pursuit of a truth which goes beyond the usual meaning of the term as the Greeks and their philosophical, scientific, and technological heirs understand it. The personality which had first pursued Quality was loveable to Chris, and the Erlkönig personality which had rejected the quest and participated instead in the attempted murder of Phaedrus was existentially inauthentic.

Paradoxically, the success of such novels as *The Stranger* and *Native Son* is that, at the same time that they repudiate the archetypal and look for being and authenticity only in the individual life and history, they stand as archetypal patterns for their readers: this is how the hero of the age of the absurd achieves essence, how he becomes authentic. For whatever the "real" world of the philosophers may be, the world of art by its very nature insists on producing patterns and creating archetypes even as it perceives and proclaims the death of archetypes. I believe that Robert Pirsig has created for American literature a powerful and enduring archetype of personal integration for serious readers in this technological society.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), p. 67. Subsequent references will be made in the text.

<sup>2</sup>This translation is a composite leaning at times on various English versions.