



**LACUS
FORUM
XXXVII**

**Communication and Cognition:
Multidisciplinary Perspectives**

McMaster
University 

Reprint

LACUS Forum 37 Referees

Barbara Bacz
David C. Bennett
Lucas van Buuren
Douglas W. Coleman
Kara VanDam



Patrick Duffley
Connie Eble
Sheila Embleton
John Hewson
ShinJa Hwang



Michael Kliffer
Sydney M. Lamb
Alan K. Melby
Robert Orr
Alex Sévigny



H. Stephen Straight
William J. Sullivan
Patricia Casey Sutcliffe
Bernard Sypniewski
Sarah Tsiang



YOUR RIGHTS

This electronic copy is provided free of charge with no implied warranty. It is made available to you under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license version 3.0

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>)

Under this license you are free:

- **To Share** — to copy, distribute and transmit the work
- **To Remix** — to adapt the work

Under the following conditions:

- **Attribution** — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- **Noncommercial** — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

With the understanding that:

- **Waiver** — Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- **Other Rights** — In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:
 - Your fair dealing or fair use rights;
 - The author's moral rights;
 - Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights.

Notice: For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to the web page cited above.

For inquiries concerning commercial use of this work, please visit

<http://www.lacus.org/volumes/republication>

Cover: The front cover of this document is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/>) and may not be altered in any fashion. The LACUS “lakes” logo and McMaster University logo on the cover are trademarks of LACUS and McMaster University respectively. **The McMaster University logo is used here with permission from the trademark holder. No license for use of this trademarks outside of redistribution of this exact file is granted. This trademark may not be included in any adaptation of this work.**

LACUS FORUM XXXVII

**COMMUNICATION AND COGNITION:
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES**

EDITED BY

**Michael D. Kliffer
Alex Sévigny
Patricia Casey Sutcliffe
William J. Sullivan
Daniel S. Mailman**



VIII



Text



**A STUDY IN TEXT ARCHITECTURE:
PERSIG'S ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE**

Robert E. Longacre
SIL

Abstract. Persig's book is ultimately an essay in post-modernist philosophy, but the didactic portions are skillfully woven into a narrative on two levels: (a) a narrative-descriptive structure; and (b) a narrative-didactic structure. In the former, the author recites what he sees and feels in a trajectory that extends from Minnesota to the Pacific Coast. The latter could be separated into didaxis and a narrative that emerges in disconnected pieces. Doing this would give us a threefold narrative like a rope woven of three strands: ongoing narrative, backgrounded narrative fragments, and didactic portions. I discuss these three strands briefly here, but postpone most matters to be discussed later in this paper.

Keywords: Narrative Structure, Didactic Structure, Discourse Analysis

Languages: (none)

CONSIDER FIRST THE TRIP. The narrator of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (hereafter *Zen*) assures us that traveling on a motorcycle is very different from taking a trip encapsulated in a vehicle: "In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore."⁽⁴⁾¹

Then the narrator explains "Chris and I are traveling to Montana with some friends riding up ahead, and maybe headed farther than that."⁽⁴⁾ Thus is established the primary storyline which is maintained throughout the book. When motion verbs occur they are typically in the present progressive, but reference to *the road* in one form or another is the main device that keeps the narrative going. The road is, the narrator explains, preferably a back road or relatively unused road, rather than a main highway or freeway.

But the narrator is concerned with his sights and feelings on the trip. These he gives in a running commentary, beginning with his attempt to point out red-winged blackbirds to his son Chris, who is on the motorcycle with him. This is a long travelogue, as befits a long journey.

Next, consider the didactic portions. Unobtrusively, the narrator explains (7) that a motorcycle trip provides an occasion for one to "think about things at great leisure and length without being hurried" and proceeds to loose upon us the main purpose of his book as per the subtitle "inquiry into values". Right here he harks back to an all-but forgotten institution of the early twentieth century, the Chautauqua (such as

¹ Bare number references are to Persig's *Zen*.

this author attended on a few occasions in his boyhood) when lo! a big top came to town to give intellectual stimulus instead of providing a circus. Using this metaphor, Persig is now set to give a lecture series which starts when he pleases and stops when he pleases—often with an overt reference to the **we are on a trip** motif. This is a masterful way to bring in philosophical concerns which, had they been presented more baldly, might not have found ready readers. Come hear a lecture series presented from a motorcycle! It's as if he is saying, "You'll let me ramble on to my heart's content—until I cast my philosophical net and catch you." We are informed here at the outset of his Chautauquas that the concern will not be with the question of what's new—which he artfully calls "the silt of tomorrow"—but with the more basic question of what's best. So, as thus forthrightly stated, the volume will be "an inquiry into values". Hold your seats; this motorcycle ride, both literally and metaphorically, will involve hills, sharp curves, and occasionally rough terrain.

Finally, consider the fragmentary backgrounded narrative. A shadowy character with a checkered career lurks in the background. In the Dakotas, coming out of the Red River Valley (storyline 1) they are overtaken by a severe thunderstorm. In a brilliant flash of lightning the countryside is lit up, and the narrator suddenly recognizes a farmhouse, a windmill, a fence, and trees where he—not really he but his shadowy former self—has been. The shock of recognition is greater than the shock of the thunderclap. We, the readers, are alerted that there is an untold story in the background. (30). Seven pages later, discussing ghosts and ghost stories with his son Chris, Persig dubs this former self Phaedrus (the name of a pre-Socratic philosopher). The stage is now set: there is a backgrounded drama and its principle actor has been named—albeit not yet identified with Persig, the narrator. From now on, this character will cast a long shadow over the ongoing story as bits and pieces of his story come out (cf. Ricoeur's 1985 discussion of Proust 1981). This secondary story will finally emerge more clearly at the denouement of the over all narrative, where the two narratives and their two principal participants merge. Such, in brief, is the architecture of a masterfully told story—along with its emerging philosophy.²

I. "PHAEDRUS" IN THE BACKGROUNDED NARRATIVE. While Phaedrus' intellectual history crops up in the course of the Chautauquas in Part I—along with narrator's disclaimer that all the good ideas he has are from Phaedrus—it is evident that Phaedrus is a quite antisocial person. It finally comes out that Phaedrus is racked with internal tensions that eventually get the better of him. He goes to a rather heavy drinking party one night, and when he comes to after apparently sleeping off his drunk, he finds himself in strange surroundings. His clothes are changed, there are doctors and nurses around, and he finds that he has been committed. He even has a paper in his hands with his name on it that says so. He is puzzled when others explain, "You have a new personality now." He later learns that he has had 28 electric shock therapy treatments (86-88). Part I concludes with a return to the ongoing narrative punctuated by frequent flashbacks, as he recognizes that he is retracing Phaedrus' journey to Montana.

² The interplay of these strands in a novel and its analysis here illustrate the application of the general methodology derived from the system put forth in Longacre (1989, 1990).

Chapter 10 of Part II continues to present what Phaedrus does: “Phaedrus breaks from the mainstream of rationality in pursuit of the ghost of rationality itself” (109). Another island narrative tells us that Phaedrus, who finished his first year at the university at the age of fifteen, was at the age of 17 expelled from college for failing grades. He was more interested in the theory of hypothesis formation than in the hypotheses themselves. He began to drift laterally (115) and finally joined the army and went to Korea where, at least on his trip home, he falls under the influence of a book on Oriental philosophy—and returns to the University to study philosophy (his earlier studies were in biochemistry). Somewhere along the line it is mentioned casually that Phaedrus spent ten years in India studying oriental philosophy. Eventually his lateral drifting ended.

A brief reference (229) introduces a recurring motif: that of his son Chris’s fear and of a glass door that Phaedrus can’t open. Only on the last pages of the book is it explained that the door refers to a partition that once separated him as a psychiatric patient from his family. Here the narrator asserts that it is Chris that is trying to get through to him—a hint of the role reversal that occurs in the last pages of the work.

It would be selling the book short not to mention Phaedrus’ imaginary dialogues with Einstein, Poincare, Hume, Kant, and Aristotle—only to be driven back to look behind Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Here Persig turns out to be a typical post-modernist in his love for the pre-Socratic philosophers. Away with the gang of intellectual hoodlums—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle—who hijacked the train of Western philosophy and consigned us all to follow their lead!

Of considerable interest here is Phaedrus’ struggle at the University of Chicago with the tail-end of the Great Books movement. He apparently frightened his professor out of coming to class, while at the same time his own teaching of rhetoric at the University of Chicago, Navy Pier, steadily deteriorated. Interior tensions continue to pull Phaedrus apart. Insanity? Maybe it’s not he that is insane, it’s rather “the underlying mythos that is insane.” He argues that Reason and Quality had become separated and in conflict with each other and that Quality had been forced under and Reason had become supreme somewhere back then” (368). In a rereading of a passage from Homer, Phaedrus believes that the ancient Greek *arête* ‘excellence’ is simply a way of talking about Quality, which is becoming focal in his thinking. Finally, the Professor of rhetoric and what-have-you attempts to close in on Phaedrus via the study of a Platonic dialogue of that name. At this point his student Persig/Phaedrus routs him in class and is left in undisputed possession of the field. But Phaedrus, suffering heavily from sleep deprivation, is by now on the second link of the cycle, “Pride, madness, destruction,” and as already narrated, is committed to an institution where shock-convulsive therapy was the order of the day back then.

Returning to the main storyline, the motorcycle trip finds relations between Phaedrus and his son Chris progressively deteriorating. The stage is now set for the grand denouement of the book in which the primary and secondary storylines converge (412 ff). Persig at this point intends to put his son on a bus and to take his own

life by driving off a precipice into the ocean. Chris is uncontrollably shaken. Persig admits that he is Phaedrus, answers Chris' query "Were you really insane?" in the negative, and things take a turn for the better with Chris repeating "I knew it." There is a role reversal of sorts, as Persig realizes that all along Chris has been carrying him instead of he carrying Chris.

2. THE CHAUTAUQUAS. I had originally intended to discuss the content of the Chautauquas, but I find this a staggering assignment. Nevertheless, since the subtitle of the book is an inquiry into values, something of this sort is needed. I will merely summarize the main Chautauquas as Persig gives them. He begins with a discussion of preventive motorcycle maintenance, as he advocates it, against the philosophy of the Sunderlands, which is "don't worry about maintenance, just get it fixed when it breaks down." From this Persig goes on to a discussion of technology and the human spirit, wherein he pleads for some sort of peaceful symbiosis rather than polarization. Further on, he discusses form and function, romantic and scientific views, using the motorcycle and its components as illustrative material. The "Church of Reason" is introduced but never wholly takes center stage. The teaching of rhetoric is criticized as a somewhat hopeless assignment; rather students must be brought to acknowledge quality—which they intuitively recognize—as the measure of their own work and that of others. This brings up the matter of the futility of giving grades, even though the system demands that it be done.

Finally, the matter of quality as a primitive and not a derivative is discussed at great length. Here Persig's dialogues with the great minds of history and philosophy fill page after page. It is really great and exciting reading. Eventually quality or excellence, emerges as the *summa bona*. It is the story of the pilgrimage of a great mind and we need to listen in reverently. I trust that I have had this attitude in spite of the comments that immediately follow.

3. ZEN IN THE TITLE. Persig's whole argument might be summarized in a sentence: Tranquility and making oneself one with the machine is the key to good maintenance. Beautifully put!

But what is this Zen which factors into the equation? It is summarized, e.g., in some ten pages of Google, as Buddhism with its practical foot put forward. As such is Zen simply a pragmatic philosophical discipline or is it inescapably religious? Although apologists for Persig's book might tend to emphasize the former, Persig's own comments point more in the direction of the latter. Buddha is presented as all encompassing in the environment, in the maintenance man himself and in the very machine that he is working on. Affirmations such as these are made that would rather fit Brahma in a system of all encompassing pantheism (80-81). But never mind, eastern religions are seen to grade into each other, not sharply set against each other as are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (141). And under the familiar metaphor of one mountain with many roads leading to its summit, Christianity is presented as no longer of great relevance (188-89). Zen is certainly not presented to us as simply an ecumenical handbook of pragmatics.

All of this prompts the present author to a dour observation: As countries in Asia, such as South Korea and even mainland China with its ever growing house-church movement increasingly buy into Christianity, thinkers in such post-Christian cultures as North America and Western Europe turn to such religions as Buddhism from Asia for renewed inspiration.

There are those of us who feel that the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition should not be lightly laid aside, lest we come under the ban of the ancient prophet Jeremiah: "My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living water and have hewn out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jer. 2.13)."

REFERENCES

- LONGACRE, ROBERT E. 1989. *Two hypotheses regarding text generation and analysis*. Discourse processes 12.413-60.
- . 1990. *Storyline concerns and word order typology in East and West Africa*. Studies in African linguistics, Supplement 10. Los Angeles: UCLA press.
- PERSIG, ROBERT M. 1999. *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. New York: HarperCollins [republished 2005 as a First Harper Perennial Modern Classic]
- PROUST, MARCEL. 1981. *Remembrance of Things Past*. trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrief, Terrence Kilmartin, and Andreas Major, 3 vol. New York: Random House.
- RICOEUR, PAUL. 1985. *Games with Time, Part III*. The configuration of time in fictional narrative. Time and narrative Vol 2, 61-99. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

