Harley Buddha. On the Road in America’s West

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“Like a true nature’s child / We were born, born to be wild.” How I wish I had written those immortal lines. Because little does the wider populace know about my true calling: lyrics. But then, my poetic passion at least provided me with the perfect excuse to go on a trip fuelled by adrenaline and other things epinephrine that I can’t possibly talk about. If you think that this trip was a midlife crisis with bells on, I might point out that for this to be true, I would need to live to be 120.

Anyway, the untamed anthem counsels, “Get your motor runnin’ / Head out on the highway / Lookin’ for adventure / In whatever comes our way”. I did exactly that — riding thousands of miles under a blistering September sun and into autumn fogs through Nevada, California and Arizona, across painted deserts and serene mountain ridges that would have prompted any Donner party to engage in unbridled cannibalism. What’s more, I negotiated megapolitan gridlocks, sheering winds on suicide bridges, hairpin needle curves along the Pacific coast — and I camped in foggy redwoods and motel rooms right out of Coen Brothers movies.

For this, of course, I did not mount any old motor-powered moped, but a badass Harley-Davidson. To be specific: a Road King. Such an ogre weighs 800 pounds and propels its 7 feet of length with a little help from 1584 cc and 80 hp. Basically, it’s a car on two wheels. It sure costs as much as a decent convertible.
But as they say: travelling in a car is like watching a film; riding a Harley is like starring in one.

The trick for any actor is to keep the shiny side up. That part is easy when doing 80-90 on some freeway. Not so much when manoeuvring through a simple sandy creek or while trying to bring the beast to a gracefully balanced halt. That’s when gravity – Isaac Newton, I hate you! – in an instant might unceremoniously fell the 400 kilograms, resulting in a sudden and complete understanding of what “heavy metal” means. You’d then better keep your legs away from the smouldering exhaust pipe or the roll bars, lest you risk multiple fractures from simply sitting on a bike. Another potentially fatal mistake is marked by using the handlebars to steer through curves. Mind you, a hefty Harley will not obey such feeble instructions, but instead will guide you straight into the haze and over a cliff. On the contrary, you have to become one with the apparatus and lean your way through serpentines. Only then can your guardian angel fly as fast as you drive.

Sometimes, even angels get sidetracked. In mid-July 2008, I waited in my UCL anthropology office to discuss research with my colleague next door, a star in palaeoanthropology at age 37. But he never arrived. Charles Lockwood had duly set out on his motorbike, but just before reaching the campus, he collided with a truck. My trip thus had an element of remembrance (and exorcism) to it: to honour Charlie’s tragic death. And also to touch base with Brian Villmoare, who had worked with Charlie and then filled his position. Coincidentally – or not! – Brian is also a biker. We met up in Vegas, where Brian mounted his 1930s BMW with spectacular coolness, his leatherjacket sporting vintage striae that had surely been scraped by some Homo erectus when they butchered large game.

I excelled in human-machine fornications only because I was tutored and accompanied by an experienced biker-guru who made sure that our Road Kings roared their patatopatatopatatosymphony ever so serenely. Like myself, Horst “Happy” Hoppe hails from the tiny village of Holzhausen in the forested German heartlands. Consequently, we wore leather jackets with the stitching “Deutschholzhäuser go West”. This was
meant to elicit respect from those lucky Americans who happened to bump into us – as nothing is more awe-inspiring to members of God’s own nation than a seemingly endless German word garnished with a confusing Umlaut. (That’s why Häagen Dazs ice cream works over there.)

This is where metrics meets metal. To those of you who were born after the Pleistocene had already climaxed: I probably need to point out that Steppenwolf’s Born to Be Wild is heard in the opening credits of Easy Rider. That’s when the freewheeling hippies Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper kick-start their Harley choppers to ride through the America of the late 1960s – an era when counterculture and redneckism didn’t easily mix.

The band’s name alludes to Der Steppenwolf by German author Hermann Hesse, a novel that centres around hallucinations and carnalities to be experienced in the “Magisches Theater” (courtesy of a local guide-ess named Hermine; you are welcome to speculate about connections to the Hermione of Harry Potter fame…).

The Easy Rider characters willingly reenact such hedonistic dimensions: skinny dipping in pools, getting stoned in brothels, weeping on headstones. Captain America and Billy the Kid thus join a time-honoured stream of tradition – that Jack Kerouac, 15 years earlier, had set in motion on an endless type-written scroll that became his novel On the Road. A key persona is Carlo Marx – in real life known as Allen Ginsberg. Kerouac’s follow-up narrative, The Dharma Bums, features Japhy Ryder – based on Gary Snyder, also known as the “poet laureate of Deep Ecology”.

This is a lot of reference to poetry, innit? It is, however, entirely justified because, of all the unlikely places on Earth, the vicinity of my village harbours hardcore factions of German beatniks. Here, founding heroes of the movement such as Peter Orlowsky and Allen Ginsberg felt at ease to squat, and the German clique still travels to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada where the camp takes up its last stand – to fraternise with a superannuated Gary Snider and accomplished acolytes such as Chris Olander and Will Staple.

By now you might have guessed that my bike ride was actually a historic mission in lyricism. Such a trip might not seem like noble environmental activism, given that a Harley, according to the Urban Dictionary, is “the most effective way to turn gasoline into noise without producing any horsepower”. Even so: doing something utterly useless and unnecessary is the whole point of a dignified quest!

Therefore, the saddlebags of my Road King held heaps of a freshly printed Trompete 8. This bilingual 2014 collection, edited and produced in my neck of the woods, assembles poetry from extant German and American beatniks – and those that aspire to be such (like myself, but don’t tell anybody). Each poem is congenially translated into the reverse
language. Of course, we could have FedExed the anthologies to the anti-establishmentarianist community in Nevada City. But, slowm0 delivery across the pond by hand and Harley seemed much more noble. And so I drove my mighty two-wheeler across high Sierra passes into the flaming horizon of where the West is about to end. To celebrate the cross-Atlantic recognition that poetry is to dancing as prose is to walking – and to convey hardcopies of this message.

My pilgrimage thus came to a crescendo. Still, finding the Harley grail cannot suit an orthodox beatnik. Because the spiritual odyssey is about transient bliss, it is about beatification: the recognition that salvation is not found on arrival, but On the Road.

Don’t believe me? Whatever – here’s one for the road: “I like smoke and lightning / Heavy metal thunder / Racin’ with the wind / And the feelin’ that I’m under. / Yeah Darlin’ go make it happen / Take the world in a love embrace / Fire all of your guns at once / And explode into space.”

Peter Orlovsky’s dedication to Volker Sommer’s hometown friend Peer Schröder


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