

**Riding With Rilke: Reflections on Motor cycles and Books.** TED BISHOP.  
Toronto: Viking Canada, 2005. 261 p. ISBN 0-670-06385-1.

Having returned from Europe to the United States in 1939, Henry Miller embarked upon an exhaustive journey across his native land and, in his chronicles of these travels, duly excoriated much of what he came across. In *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Miller observed that he had “never been able to look upon America as young and vital but rather as prematurely old, as a fruit which rotted before it had a chance to ripen.”<sup>1</sup> Ted Bishop’s *Riding With Rilke: Reflections on Motor cycles and Books* recounts the author’s own journey, on a motorcycle, from Alberta to Texas, to visit one of the great modernist archives. An academic and avid motorcyclist, Bishop attempts to fuse the seemingly dichotomous world of scholarly research with the passionate subculture of bikers, but with only a varied degree of success.

While his gentle observations of the characters and places he rubs up against are anecdotal in nature and occasionally amusing, it is Bishop’s efforts to equate the solitude of the motorcyclist on a long highway trek to the “silence and stillness” (p. 124) of the archival researcher that serves as an accessible entry point to his book for those working in the archival community. To wit, Bishop posits that “archival work was the inverse, not the opposite, of motorcycling. For one thing, silence surrounds them both” (p. 124). His assertion that the “heart of archival work” can be found in the “discovery of surprising connections between disparate artefacts” (p. 167) would generate few, if any, opposing perspectives. Moreover, Bishop’s extremely accurate supposition that a not-insignificant reason for using archives is for the “archival jolt” (p. 33) – in the case of the author, the most visceral example of receiving the “jolt” had been in opening a manila envelope at the British Library and realizing he was holding Virginia Woolf’s suicide note – will have resonance for all those who have used or worked in archives. Similarly, the author will have considerable difficulty in generating dissenters within the archival community with his assertion that “what governs all archival events is serendipity” (p. 111). For those of us having spent years pursuing the archival jolt as researchers, or attempting to facilitate the quest for the jolt by

<sup>1</sup> Henry Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York, 1947), p. 117.

acquiring, describing and making available archival records, Bishop's belief that "we speak of solid research methods and good detective work, but the real discoveries seem to come from nowhere, to be handed to you, after days or weeks in which (it appears in retrospect) the insight has been perversely denied, as if there were not just the curators but some other power controlling the archives" (p. 111) will feel strangely familiar. His comments on the debate over use versus access (what he refers to as the "central paradox" [p. 59] of preservation and access), notions of provenance, and his fervent belief that "myth and history were impossibly tangled" (p. 197) are equally well developed.

The author's persistent attempts to cogently elucidate his notion of the oneness of abstract literary research and the world of the motorcyclist serve as both the book's underlying strength and its weakness. Bishop himself wonders if it "would be possible to combine the work of Edward Bishop the archive diver with Ted Bishop the rider" (p. 166). As *Riding With Rilke* represents his unabashed attempt at combining these two pursuits, one is left in agreement with Bishop's answer to his own question: "Probably not" (p. 166). The fact that Bishop published many of the threads discussed in the book as discrete articles in academic journals or motorcycle publications leads to a rather disjointed flow to the text. Ultimately, the bivalent manner in which Bishop attempts to unify these disparate musings through the use of a travelogue narrative diminishes the impact of his often humorous observations of the people he encounters on his journey, as well as his wry, informed commentary on all manner of literati. The author actually finds himself befuddled, at times, wondering if he is "just a wannabe writer who occasionally rides" (p. 207). This disjointed narrative flow is reinforced by his reflections on his serious accident on a British Columbia highway. Bishop's account of his rehabilitation – and gradual gravitation back to his favoured world of reading, writing, and literary deconstruction – brings to mind Joan Didion's suggestion that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Bishop chooses to place both the accident and his recovery at either end of *Riding With Rilke*, without the profundity of Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death*.<sup>3</sup>

As Bishop undertakes his long journey to the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, Texas – the "improbable location of the best archive in the world of British modernist writers" (p. 8) – he comes across an interesting array of characters, many of whom provide the underpinnings for his reflections on literature, life, and the freedom granted him by the anonymity of the motorcyclist.

2 Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York, 1979), p. 11.

3 Jean-Dominique Bauby, *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (London, 1997).

While he does not go so far as to come up with a nickname for his classic Ducati bike, there are some parallels with Graham Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*.<sup>4</sup> Greene's classic novel tells the story of a parish priest travelling through post-Franco Spain in an antiquated car he named Rocinante. The characters in Greene's novel are picaresque, while those Bishop encounters in his non-fiction travel account are merely pedestrian. The characters described by Bishop are often irreverent and inadvertently ironic, and it is perhaps unfair to hold them up to the richness of those brilliantly described – albeit in a fictionalized fable – in Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*. A more balanced comparison would be to the non-fictional *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, and Miller's rueful lamentations on the state of the American zeitgeist: "Why is it that in America the great works of art are all Nature's doing?"<sup>5</sup> Unlike Miller, who saw the Americans he encountered as lumbering "mental dinosaurs, heavy-footed, dull-witted, (and) unimaginative,"<sup>6</sup> Bishop views those he encounters as merely irreverent or insular.

Although it lacks the gravitas of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, and the picaresque, almost roguish, spirit of *Monsignor Quixote*, *Riding With Rilke* serves as an interesting montage. Unfortunately, this stylistic pastiche is not an effective vehicle to structure these seemingly incongruous elements into a satisfying whole. Taken individually, the author's philosophical musings on literary criticism and the archival milieu are at times provocative and challenging. His detailed paeans to the visceral thrill of riding a classic motorcycle across an open desert or through mountainous terrain allow the non-rider to appreciate the sensation. Ultimately, it is the inability to seamlessly fuse the two elements that prevents *Riding With Rilke* from sitting comfortably on the shelf alongside classic works within the genre. With respect to the concept of provenance, it would appear that Edward Bishop the archive diver takes a back seat to Ted Bishop the rider.

**Roderick W. McFall**  
**Bermuda Archives**

4 Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote* (London, 1982).

5 Miller, p. 228.

6 Ibid.