

Girl Power/Grand Prix Sex, Speed, and the Motorcycle Racer

Few Canadians know the name of Mike Duff, one of the most remarkable athletes this country has ever produced. In most of Canada, riding a motorcycle is only possible for two-thirds of the year, yet Mike Duff became the first North American and *only* Canadian World Championship Grand Prix motorcycle racer. He won the Belgian Grand Prix 250 in 1964 and both the Dutch Grand Prix 125 and Finnish Grand Prix 250 in 1965. And then, between 1984 and 1988, he became a woman, Michelle Duff.

The 1966 film *Ride for Your Life*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, documents Duff's 1966 Grand Prix season, a season in which his hip was shattered in a horrendous crash in Japan. In this brief documentary, Duff says, "When the kids get to school age, I'm gonna pack it all in and settle down . . . [My wife] would like to see Mike Duff settle down. She wants a home. She worries all season. Every season, three or four of our friends get killed." These comments reveal Duff's ambivalence toward his sport, but they also remove motorcycle racing from the traditional feminine sphere of domesticity ("home," "kids," and "school"); the dream of settling down might be understood to imply that motorcycle racing is essentially masculine. However, Duff's story undermines such simplistic binary and oppositional positioning of male and female, and Duff's ambivalence toward motorcycle racing is inextricably linked in her narrative to her ambivalent sexual subjectivity. In a 2004 interview with Hana Gartner on CBC News, Gartner refers to an earlier 1987 interview between the two right after Duff's transitional surgery, and says, "You were dreaming that one day you would have someone in your life." Duff wistfully replies, "Yeah, that was important.

It still hasn't happened." Later in the 2004 interview, Duff notes, "I've often thought if I could go back to being a guy, I could probably live my life more comfortably . . . uh . . . I won't say more comfortably than I am now but more comfortably than I was before as a guy." Duff elaborates: "My recommendation is . . . to think very carefully that if you can live the way you are, do so, if you can deal with it, do so, because the change is not something that is taken lightly. A person should be very, very careful before they do something irreversible." These comments, coming from a retired Grand Prix racer, are remarkable. Surely every race that Duff rode, though "careful" in the mind of the motorcycle racer, had potentially "irreversible" physical outcomes? As Duff writes in her 1999 autobiography, *Make Haste, Slowly*, "Motorcycle racing is unquestionably a dangerous sport. It is not without its personal rewards that can fully justify the act, but the risks are so costly when families are involved" (121). As Duff's comments to Gartner imply, she might say the very same thing about sexual reassignment.

Duff's poignant life story calls into question cultural values and assumptions associated with the athlete's body, particularly the relation between that body and gender, injury, and machines. I propose that each of these bodily dialectics—by which I mean the often oppositional subjective oscillation between the body and gender, injury, machines—is, in the context of speed, blurred, perhaps accelerated. My argument has two sides: placing the body in the context of speed reifies simplistic gender categories, as speed has a highly gendered cultural history, which I will briefly trace. But contradictorily, placing the body in the category of speed undoes gender, perhaps even sex, in profound ways because speed in some senses undoes the body. Duff's story limns at least two bodies: one that is encased in stereotyped gender distinctions as immobilizing as the cast that encased Duff's leg after the 1966 accident; but also one that transcends itself, through speed, to disembodiment, beyond the cultural imperatives of gender. How is it possible for the body to perform both physical delimitation and physical transcendence simultaneously? In the context of motorcycle racing, one might say that one form of speed ends in a crash, a certain descent into the body's limitations. Another form of speed leads to disembodiment or the defiance of the body's limitations, a physical (or metaphysical) state that Japanese Boso-zoku (street-racing gangs, known in English as "Speed Tribes") have described as "*kaanibal* [carnival]" (Sato 19) or "wandering" (Sato 58) or "liquidity" (Sato 58). Duff speaks of motorcycle racing in similar terms of cultural dissolution, describing the Grand Prix race circuit as "The Continental Circus" ("The End" 1). She also notes that

the RD56, a two-stroke 250 cc Yamaha Grand Prix bike, ridden by Duff in the 1964 season, “required a state of schizophrenia to ride properly” (“The End” 2). Alternatively, the contradictions of the racing body might be seen to parallel the contradictions of the racing bike: at speed, in a full lean into a corner, a racing motorcycle floats on the miniscule piece of rubber that is the portion of tire in contact with the track at any given moment; a portion of tire touches the track for an incomprehensibly short period of time before revolving away under the rider, who is suspended between air and very hard ground by this liquid, motion-full miracle of speed. In other words, the motorcycle at full speed is, in some ways, performing beyond physical limitations—and so is the racer’s body, for certainly a person could not run so fast, balanced on so little. But take that same motorcycle, cut the engine, and ask the racer to step away: without a stand, a crutch, it falls over; it falls with certainty and drama into the mundane imperatives of gravity and its own materiality.

A very brief history of speed, specifically of the equation between speed and masculinity, provides illuminating context. In describing her life as a Grand Prix motorcycle racer (as Mike, before she became Michelle), Michelle Duff acknowledges her aversion to a conventional career and life:

The 1961 Belgian G.P. had introduced me to the lifestyle of European racing at its best. I wanted more, not just the partying and celebrations, but the entire package of the racing, the traveling, the food, the culture, the freedom of spirit and expression, the carefree labours of racing success, and the ultimate reward of personal achievement. I deplored the life-long endeavour of punching a time-clock, working from nine to five in an endless battle against the pressures of a society bent on social destruction. I have never been afraid of work, but so many people end their day in tired depression. I needed the freedom of expression, I mean real freedom, to answer to no one, to have no bigger brother constantly feeding an insatiable machine information and data about me through an impersonal number. Grand Prix racing gave me this freedom; I answered to no one. (98)

A conflicted attitude toward technology and, by extension, speed pervades this passage, reflected in the oxymoron “carefree labours.” Duff describes a dread of the “life-long endeavour of punching a time-clock,” which implies repetition and slowness; ironically, though, it is hard to imagine a career oriented more rigidly around a time clock than motorcycle racing, where each circuit of the racetrack is timed and signaled to the rider. It is also ironic that Duff resists a life which reduces an individual to “an impersonal number,” because racers are often known and referred to by their racing numbers—ultimately the number of a racer becomes a metonym for the racer, imbued with a particular racing history. The point is not that Duff is self-contradictory,

but rather that placing bodies in the context of speed reveals the contradictions of embodiment itself and all that embodiment entails, including gender. For instance, the anxiety in Duff's celebration of the "carefree" is associated not only with technology and the "time-clock," and the restrictions they impose on a body, but also with "the pressures of a society bent on social destruction." That is, Duff conflates social pressure with conformity and gender ("bigger brother") and then contrasts this complex with "the freedom of spirit and expression" of motorcycle racing, a somewhat more gender-neutral constellation of values. For Duff, the strongest value associated with racing is "freedom," particularly "freedom of expression." Just as embodiment is not a fixed state but rather a fluid subjective dialectic, freedom as Duff conceives it is not a state to be finally inhabited but rather a way of being, or a form of subjectivity ("expression"), which emerges through speed.

This modern understanding of speed as both fixed within cultural biases (especially masculinity) but also highly mutable is perhaps first clearly articulated in Thomas De Quincey's 1849 panegyric to speed, "The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion." In this essay, De Quincey describes the novel and thrilling high-speed experience of riding on an English mail-coach:

seated on the old mail coach, we needed no evidence out of ourselves to indicate the velocity. On this system the word was—*Non magna loquimur*, as upon the railways, but *magna vivimus*. The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed; we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling; and this speed was not the product of blind, insensate agencies, that had no sympathy to give, but was incarnated in the fiery eye-balls of an animal, in his dilated nostril, spasmodic muscles, and echoing hoofs. This speed was incarnated in the *visible* contagion amongst brutes of some impulse, that, radiating into *their* natures, had yet its centre and beginning in man. The sensibility of the horse uttering itself in the maniac light of his eye, might be the last vibration in such a movement; the glory of Salamanca might be the first—but the intervening link that connected them, that spread the earthquake of the battle into the eyeball of the horse, was the heart of man. (194)

This description of the sensual pleasures of speed builds toward the Battle of Salamanca, which occurred in July of 1812 during the Napoleonic Wars. At a glance, De Quincey seems to present an explicitly masculine experience of speed, as the coach passenger (and narrator) almost inhabit the muscular frame of the horse. But as much as this passage equates speed with masculinity and a panoply of masculine values, including war, muscles, and "the Glory of Salamanca," and locates its "centre and beginning in man," De Quincey also undoes this equation with simultaneous descriptions of speed as mutable, as "radiating," "maniac," and a "vibration in . . . movement."

Linking masculinity, speed, and violence occurs in many texts after De Quincey's "English Mail-Coach," perhaps nowhere more notoriously than in the Futurist Manifesto penned in 1909 by F. T. Marinetti, prominent member of the Italian Futurists, later associated with the Italian Fascist movement. As his fourth point in the "Manifesto of Futurism," Marinetti writes: "We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*" (n. pag.). The "great pipes" and "serpents of explosive death" might represent masculinity, while the reference to "grapeshot"—small balls shot from a cannon—again conflates speed, masculinity, and military violence. However, these extremely masculine descriptions of speed are also oddly feminine: the word "beauty" is repeated throughout, the hood of the racing car is "adorned," and the proposition ends with, and hence emphasizes, the winged female form of the *Victory of Samothrace*. Surprisingly—or perhaps not surprisingly at all—this most notoriously misogynistic text is ambiguous on the subject of masculinity, largely because masculinity is described here in the context of speed.

This uneasy equation of speed, violence, and masculinity has survived the transition from flesh to metal, as horses have given way to machines. And arguably the machine which makes this effect of speed on gender most visible is the motorcycle, perhaps partly because the driver is not hidden but almost merges with the surfaces (and certainly with the physics) of the machine.

As a boy reaching puberty, Mike Duff first learned to ride a motorcycle to defend (or define) his masculinity to a group of peers, admitting that his "popularity amongst [his] peers . . . stood somewhere near average," a status he decides to improve with the following boast: "I ride my brother's motorcycle." Duff tells not his peers but his readers that

What I meant and what my classmates understood me to say were totally different, their interpretation was that I rode on the front, mine was that I rode on the back as a passenger. . . . Obviously no one believed that at 13 I actually rode a motorcycle. A victim of my own big-mouth I was ridiculed throughout all the grade eight classes and even down into two of the lowly grade seven classes. As time passed and the situation had not been forgotten, I became increasingly more embarrassed and was even reluctant to go to school. (19)

Duff arrives at a solution, one that only a future Grand Prix champion would choose: he teaches himself to ride his brother's BSA motorcycle, a bike made by the Birmingham Small Arms company, manufacturer of firearms and military equipment, in addition to being the largest motorcycle manufacturer

in the world in the 1950s (one of many instances where motorcycles and military history are linked). Duff rode the bike in front of his school at lunchtime after which, in his words, he “became a local hero, admired by all [his] friends” (20). Thus, the implicit violence of bullying and the status of victim is supplanted by the masculine role of “local hero”—though at the cost of further violence, for Duff must submit to his “brother’s wrath” when the brother uses “physical means to express his displeasure” (20). So again, on one level masculinity is reified in this anecdote, but recall the passage already cited: “I needed the freedom of expression, I mean real freedom, to answer to no one, *to have no bigger brother* constantly feeding an insatiable machine information and data about me through an impersonal number” (emphasis added, 98). A “bigger brother” is a source of social coercion and gender typing, but he is also someone who can be escaped through motorcycles, later through motorcycle racing, through speed. It is as though Duff is racing away from the “bigger brother”—or perhaps from a strictly masculine identity. The motorcycle brings masculine “hero” status followed by the emasculating “brother’s wrath.”

Even the traditionally masculine category of the “hero” is deconstructed at high speeds. For example, it has been argued that motorcycle leathers invoke hero narratives. In his book *The Black Leather Jacket*, Mick Farrer suggests that leathers are styled in the tradition of armour:

The parallels between the leather jacket and the armour of the middle ages is neither so far-fetched nor romantically fanciful as it might at first appear. . . . For a start, a leather jacket does afford a good measure of physical protection. Any motorcyclist sliding along the abrasive surface of the highway having just dropped his bike will attest to this, as will the experienced barroom brawler, who is well aware that leather is a great deal better protection against knives, brass knuckles, broken bottles, chains and straight-edge razors than seersucker. . . . [Likewise,] at the sight of a man in armour, the patched and threadbare peasant was well advised to make himself scarce . . . until the human tank had gone by. (18)

In *All About Motorcycles*, Australian author Pedr Davis describes modern full-face motorcycle helmets, first made by Bertone, as having “a futuristic shape styled after the visor set up worn during the Middle Ages by Knights in armour,” which he sees as “fitting gear for modern Knights of the road” (33). The phrase “Knights of the road” suggests a historical contradiction, but the supposed toughness implied by leathers is also contradictory, for surely leathers foreground nothing more clearly than the soft vulnerability of the flesh beneath? They are practical, of course; Michelle Duff recalls her early use of leathers, describing a crash in which she “suffer[s] nothing more

than a scraped elbow” in her heavy leathers, while Jack Ahearn, who falls in the same spot, finds that “his lightweight leathers [are] torn to shreds” (231). Also following a heroic tradition, Bosozoku riders often wear gear which intentionally invokes cultural memories of Kamikaze pilots. According to Sato, the characteristics most associated with these Japanese riders are “ultra-masculinity, bravado, defiance and an emphasis on violence” (69), much like the values advocated in *The Futurist Manifesto*. But of course, it is a cliché to point out that contours of ultra-masculinity often emerge from a profound sexual ambiguity.

Like gender, injury is a category of embodiment that is often rendered ambiguous by speed. Most obviously, a rider’s body seems superhuman and powerful in a race but also extremely vulnerable to injury. How does the rider reconcile the contradictions inherent in the training and caring for his or her athlete’s body (along with the bike) and then engaging in a sport that poses such a high level of risk to that body? As Canadian extreme sport rider Guy Perrett once told me in an interview, having just listed his many serious riding injuries, “If my body was bike, I would have sold it a long, long time ago.” In her autobiography, Duff describes the strength required to heave the bike through the race in her first Grand Prix win: “Because of the machine’s bulk, it became necessary to allow extra time negotiating various sections. It took more physical effort to virtually throw the bike from side to side and considerable muscle to lift and drop down on the other side through esses and over jumps” (181). This athletic effort is exhausting. Duff describes changing gears during a race, “I calculated that I made a gear change, on the average, once every three seconds for two hours and a few minutes” (179), making over 2400 gear changes a race, a number that is even more impressive to anyone who has ever squeezed the highly muscular clutch of a 1960s high performance motorcycle. So why would an athlete risk his or her body, if strength and endurance are requisite for victory? How do athletes reconcile—or drive themselves through—the contradiction? The answer is simply put by countless riders: they are addicted to speed. Over and over again in rider accounts, the attraction to speed is described as being like an addiction to a drug that suspends the rider beyond embodiment. Speed generates contradiction in the context of embodiment.

The compression of speed with thrills, strength, and risk but also with drugs, addiction, and physical craving occurs for the riders today as it did over one hundred years ago for De Quincey. Duff describes racing as a “need” and a “compulsion” (12). In a reference to the beginning of her career,

she writes that “At this stage of my racing career I was still unable to answer that indeterminate ‘why’ I needed to race motorcycles, but I was sure that this intangible urgency to go fast was real” (14). Perhaps it is unsurprising that speed in the form of drugs and speed in the form of acceleration may, like motorcycles themselves, be linked to military history. In *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan’s Next Generation*, Karl Taro Greenfeld describes the injection of “Philopan . . . pharmaceutical amphetamine, the kind of speed Japanese soldiers used to shoot during World War II and that Japanese factory workers and taxi drivers still [prefer] over smokable speed” (17).

Indeed, there is a long historical association between the altered mental states produced by both drugs and velocity. De Quincey was a notorious opium addict who described his addiction as acceleration: “these dreadful symptoms were moving forward for ever, by a pace steadily, solemnly, and equably increasing” (90). In a more modern context, Ward writes that “Speed is a form of ecstatic experience that is comparable to other forms of ecstasy, such as sexual or religious experience, or the use of psychotropic drugs” (par. 12).

The film *Faster*, a documentary about Grand Prix motorcycle racers, begins with a voice-over that states “We all are just junkies, speed junkies”; and Wayne Rainey says of racing at one point “It was just something that I was addicted to.” But, of course, with addiction comes risk. Between 1990 and 1992, Wayne Rainey won three consecutive 500cc Grand Prix titles; in 1993, he was leading the Grand Prix series when he crashed at the Italian Grand Prix and broke his spine. His career (and his addiction) did not end, however; today he races high performance go-carts at alarming speeds. So what does it mean to be “addicted” in the context of speed?

Compare the observations of motorcycle racers to those of the Boso-zoku, or “Speed Tribes.” As Karl Taro Greenfeld notes, the Boso-zoku often act as couriers for the Yakuza, carrying “methamphetamine, the drug of choice for Japan’s half-million speed addicts” (22). Greenfeld also describes the Boso youth both shooting up and smoking methamphetamine; Ikuya Sato also describes the use of amphetamines in *Kamikaze Biker*. With unintentional irony, the Boso youth repeatedly comment to Sato “we get high on speed” (13), referring to the rush of acceleration, not chemicals, but in this phrase the close association between the two becomes clear. Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell bluntly states that

Speed is a drug, and not in just the old-time hepcat high of Dexedrine or bennies, those ingested, on-the-road amphetamines; or even in the newer, hi-tech crystal meth to be found, probably, in some corner of a schoolyard near you. The

experience of speed itself releases into the electrochemical soup of our heads a cascade of naturally occurring drugs, not the least of which are epinephrine and nonepinephrine, the hormones that course through the brain in the bone-melting, stomach-clenching high of sexual attraction. ("Fast Forward" 37)

But if the attraction of speed is sexual, is it also gendered? It doesn't really seem to be. If anything, racers seem to imagine themselves to be unified with the machine, not another person. Furthermore, in Duff's work, it seems at times that when unification of machine and body is imagined, the body is transcended, leaving physical imperatives such as fear, desire, and even gender behind. Duff writes that "Grand Prix racing is a state of self-expression that joins into a single act of aesthetic union between rider and machine" (299). Perhaps the motorcycle racer is the perfect example of the millennial athlete, a kind of cyborg in whom technology and the body merge, ultimately transcending both, as Donna Haraway has argued in "A Cyborg Manifesto": "the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender" (181). I would argue, though, that not all cyborgs are beyond gender: nothing is more gendered than the fetus embodied through the ultrasound, for example. Rather, I would suggest, the machine-made body is not the one that inhabits a "world without gender": rather, it is a body moving at very high speeds that moves beyond gender. Granted, it often reaches those speeds through the use of machines and thus encourages the temptation to imagine every cyborg as beyond gender—yet robot imagery is full of gender stereotypes, from the highly masculine Terminator to the ultra-feminine Rosie, the robot maid from *The Jetsons*. In contrast to these oddly essentialist cyborg or robot figures, motorcycle racers imagine and describe the race as though they have been altered or left behind entirely at high speeds. One Boso-zoku describes his subjectivity at speed as unconscious: "My body moves instinctively. It moves without any thought. I forget myself" (24). The Boso-zoku also "frequently use *moetekuru* [burning like fire]" to describe high speed driving, recalling De Quincey's description of speed as "incarnated in the fiery eyeballs of an animal" or Marinetti's "racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath"—all images of bodies dissolving into flames.

In practical terms, of course, riders remain in the flesh, all too often reminded of their bodies when crashing. In 1960, Duff experiences a crash and immediately is returned by the physicality of the experience to the body and to desire—specifically, desire to return home:

When I came into contact with the road surface the protective leather covering my leg ripped open and I dragged this exposed member momentarily along the abrasive tarmac. The ensuing donation of precious skin to the emery smooth surface became my final performance in Europe for 1960, and even before I stopped rolling I knew I wanted to go home. I was homesick and needed the comfort and reassurance of loved ones. (69)

Not only does injury return subjectivity to the body, the body longs to be returned or resituated at “home.” This reaction might be related to Heidegger’s notion of the *unheimlich*, or the “uncanny,” which also translates as “unhomelike” (233): this is a state of anxiety of being, a crisis of being. As Heidegger puts it, “in anxiety one feels ‘uncanny’. . . . But here ‘uncanniness’ also means ‘not-being-at-home’” (233). One might argue that gender is a way of “being-at-home” and speed is *unheimlich*, accelerating subjectivity away from history and toward the unknown. Heidegger regards the “uncanny” and “not-being-at-home” as existentially ideal, as preferable to the “tranquilized self-assurance” of “‘Being-at-home,’ with all its obviousness” (233). One imagines that the motorcycle racer is anywhere but “at home” and that there is nothing “tranquilized” about the race. It is the crash, the lapse into flesh (and gender) that returns the racer to the longing for the “average everydayness” of being-at-home. And these phrases of Heidegger’s also seem to recall Duff’s fear of the mundane, of the time-clock, of the day ending in “tired depression” (98). But speed is not entirely virtuous or benign, certainly not in its potential to damage or destroy bodies.

Perhaps speed is even inherently violent, adversarial, or, as Paul Virilio writes, “The violence of speed has become both the location and the law, the world’s destiny and its destination” (151). Hence another ambiguity around speed: as much as we love speed and may be culturally addicted to it, we also often feel cultural hostility toward speed and the deployment of speed as a tool of violence. However, it may well be that speed is not the problem—it is simply a physical force. Any cultural values associated with speed—associations between speed and masculinity, speed and violence—may ultimately be arbitrary. That is, maleness, war, and thus harm to bodies are associated post hoc with what is actually a neutral, physical force. “Speed Kills,” we are told, but in itself speed does not kill: the brutal and thoughtless deployment of speed by people kills, whether in a street race or a smart bomb. Likewise, speed is not male or female; it is indeterminate. When speed is deployed as an indeterminate force, it may deconstruct gender, it may disembodify the subject who is propelled by it; when speed is determined, or overdetermined, it does kill. But what is speed when it is recuperated in indeterminate discursive contexts, when it forms an uncanny context of subjective realization; what is speed, reconsidered

as a neutral phenomenon, without sex or nation to defend? What kind of force is it then? Perhaps speed itself, like the subjectivities that may inhabit it, paradoxically becomes indeterminate, or slows down, as it accelerates.

Virginia Woolf wrote an article in 1932 about De Quincey's autobiographical writing, which includes "The English Mail-Coach." She argues that somehow the story of a life needs to record the way in which speed and slowness are enfolded in the same moment of lived experience:

To tell the whole story of a life the autobiographer must devise some means by which the two levels of existence can be recorded—the rapid passage of events and actions; the slow opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion. It is the fascination of De Quincey's pages that the two levels are beautifully, if unequally combined. (n. pag.)

Further, Woolf argues that in the midst of De Quincey's leisurely description of events, speed is born impetuously from the middle of the narrative, and at its peak of acceleration, speed is simultaneously stillness: "suddenly the smooth narrative parts asunder, arch opens beyond arch, the vision of something for ever flying, forever escaping, is revealed, and time stands still" (n. pag.). For Woolf, speed seems to emerge from a middle; her reading intriguingly anticipates philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in their 1983 essay *On the Line*:

The middle is not at all an average—far from it—but a place where things take on speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one to the other and reciprocally, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement carrying away the one *and* the other, a stream without beginning or end, gnawing away at its two banks and picking up speed in the middle. (58)

Their point is that lines are rules, restrictions, and prisons, and the middle, often seen as mediocrity, is really the locus of change. Woolf, Deleuze, and Guattari all seem to say that life and the autobiographies it produces create speed and change from the very centre of being.

Michelle Duff writes of change and speed at the end of her autobiography, the story of being a man from the perspective of being a woman, which means that it is written from somewhere in the middle, the place where speed and change are born and gender is suspended: "Riding a motorcycle fast, with mastery of man (or woman) over machine and singularity of purpose, the joining of two species, one human, one mechanical, working together, enters a realm of art no one experiences doing anything else" (355). Though I cannot agree with Duff that the reunification of speed and subjectivity can only be achieved on a motorcycle, this much seems clear: when gender is removed from the narrative, speed begins to be emptied of violence to become, in Duff's words, "a realm of art."

Of course, this claim is touched with utopian fantasy. In life, bikes fail, racers crash, racing narratives end badly. On a personal level, Duff's journey traces a line laid down on a cultural circuit marked by thousands of repetitions by thousands of riders who understand that success often demands conformity. Follow the right line, the fastest line, and follow it on better rubber. But then again, to be really fast, to be faster than everyone else, the rider must risk deviation from the line: deviating from the path of the other riders is ultimately the only way to win—and to be the fastest motorcycle racer in the world is to achieve a form of utopia.

There is an apocryphal story about legendary English motorcycle racer "Mike the Bike" Hailwood: while racing in the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy one year, he suddenly began to clock better times than anyone else. When asked the secret for this increased speed, he simply said that at a certain point, he cocked his head away from a roadside pole so that he didn't have to come out of his corner lean. That slight movement was all it took. And, as Duff discovers when training for the Isle of Man TT races in 1960, sometimes leaving the line is both inevitable and dangerous:

For fast approaches to slow corners, like Brandish, it is of primary importance to establish easily recognizable braking points. I had chosen a bright yellow bush that stood out in contrast to the lush green of shrubs and grass bank at the right side of the road. . . . All through practice, this yellow bush served me well, until this final practice period. I had not accounted for the large influx of spectators on the Saturday of this last practice period. A great many seemed to have a magnetic attraction to my yellow bush and chose to sit on or near it in great numbers obscuring it totally from my view. I sailed on in complete confidence that my yellow bush still lay between me and the corner until the sight of the rather slow left turn at Brandish threatened with a rapidity that left me breathless. On this lap I had learned just how fast it was possible to get around Brandish corner. (51)

In this instance the rider is almost passive—the crowd obscures the self-selected landmark—and, indeed, we are all subject to the imperatives of the crowd. However, "complete confidence" and acceleration also emerge unexpectedly from a loss of bearings, the loss of the relation between landscape and comprehension. The result: the fastest time around the corner ever, the racer's utopia. So, speed demands conformity, that is, following the fastest line; however, the acceleration beyond speed, toward higher speed, toward speed as yet unimagined, demands that we pull away from our leanings, that we cock our heads to the side for just one, small second, after which the right line might be changed forever. And if people like Duff never risked crashing, none of us would ever get anywhere quickly enough.

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