Masculinity, Feminism, and Motorcycles: Memorial Reflections

Elizabeth A. Flynn

The cycle swings into each curve effortlessly, banking so that our weight is always down through the machine no matter what its angle is with the ground. The way is full of flowers and surprise views, tight turns one after another so that the whole world rolls and pirouettes and rises and falls away.

—Robert Pirsig

Most of the sight lines along the mile-long strength of Route 5 that I walk are good, but there is one place, a short steep hill, where a pedestrian heading north can see very little of what might be coming his way. I was three-quarters of the way up this hill when the van came over the crest. It wasn’t on the road; it was on the shoulder. My shoulder. I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this. It was time enough to think, My God, I’m going to be hit by a school bus, and to start to turn to my left. Then there is a break in my memory. On the other side of it, I’m on the ground, looking at the back of the van, which is now pulled off the road and tilted to one side. This image is clear and sharp, more like a snapshot than like a memory. There is dust around the van’s tail-lights. The license plate and the back window are dirty. I register these things with no thought of myself or of my condition. I’m simply not thinking.

—Stephen King

Bob Connors and I were graduate students together at Ohio State University in the 1970s. I finished coursework before he started his and then spent two years in Europe, so we didn’t meet up until the mid-1970s. But we were both involved in the composition program when I returned, so our paths crossed from time to time. My most distinct memory of an association with him during this period was our being paired up in a workshop focusing on pedagogical issues in which we wrote an on-the-spot collaborative piece. I realized then that he was both an assertive and a skilled writer. I also had a sense when we were at Ohio State that he had clear priorities: he was a scholar first.

I was not surprised, then, that as soon as he obtained a tenure-track position he started publishing immediately and within a few years had
established himself within rhetoric and composition as a historian of classical rhetoric, composition studies, and technical communication. I took note of his being the person who coined the term "composition studies," of his providing one of the first maps of the field of technical communication, of his winning the Richard Braddock Award (1982). His was definitely a rising star. We chatted from time to time at the annual CCCC convention, met again at one of the New Hampshire conferences in the 1990s, had overlapping terms on the CCCC Executive Committee in the early 1990s, and served on the same Executive Committee subcommittee. It was after one of these subcommittee meetings that we shared stories about our daughters. Mine was a toddler and his was a baby. I distinctly recall his mentioning that he had given himself permission to take time off from his scholarship to help with Aillinn. I remember thinking that he certainly could afford it and deserved it. He nevertheless was able to publish Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy in 1997. I also remember seeing him in his black leather motorcycle jacket after the 1996 CCCC session, "Beyond Zen: The Rhetoric of Writers Who Ride"—a session he shared with David Schwalm and Toby Fulwiler.

Bob was no one to contend with in writing so I am fortunate not to have gotten into a wrangle with him in print. I guess I learned that lesson in graduate school. My personal contacts with him were entirely pleasant, so I am probably better situated than some to reflect on his gendered writing and life. Many of us who got PhDs at Ohio State in the late 1970s and obtained academic jobs were women who were then feminists or became feminists when the field of rhetoric and composition turned its attention to feminist concerns in the late 1980s. The English department at the University of New Hampshire where Bob obtained his second academic position (his first job was at Louisiana State University) hired a number of strong feminist women in the wake of controversy over Annette Kolodny's discrimination charges in the mid-1970s. These women (from what I understand) represent a strong force within the department. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Bob began to turn his attention to gender issues earlier than most others in rhetoric and composition and that he demonstrated sympathy for feminism. But his relationship to feminism was no doubt more complicated than that—hence his turn to men's studies. His considerable achievements and his tragic death remind us of the limitations of dichotomous conceptions of gender and of monolithic rejections of men and male modes of behavior. While obviously an expression of male freedom and independence, motorcycle
riding, after all, has its pleasures and its aesthetic dimension, as Robert Pirsig's description makes clear. It also has its vulnerabilities. A motorcycle is smaller than other vehicles on the road, and the motorcyclist does not have the protection provided by other vehicles; in this sense, motorcycle riding more closely resembles bike riding or walking than driving. Stephen King's description of his near-fatal accident while walking on a highway in Maine makes clear the vulnerabilities of walkers in the face of powerful machines such as vans. Although motorcycle riders are frequently the victims in accidents—hence the controversy over the need for helmet laws—they are rarely the perpetrators in accidents. They are more like English teachers in an academy dominated by hard scientists than like patriarchs that dominate others. Bob Connors' death reminds us that in the midst of our work on women's special needs and problems, we need to attend to those of men as well.

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**Struggling with Manhood:**
**Remembering Robert Connors**

Patrick McGann

Bob, Jim Catano, and I are standing together at the 1998 CCCC convention in Chicago, a little uncertain about how to continue discussing the politics of masculinity, men’s studies, and composition. I notice each of us has a beard. Bob and I have just participated in a roundtable with Gesa Kirsch and Eileen Schell focusing on the relationship between women’s and men’s studies in composition studies; Jim was in the audience. Although Bob is disappointed that only about seventy people were present, I am ecstatic, never before having presented to a group that size. I am the newcomer, the only person on the roundtable without substantial publications and therefore perhaps a bit giddy. Bob and Jim seem frustrated by the profession’s disinclination to embrace the issue of masculinity. When I suggest the need for an edited anthology, they both say, “Who’s going to do all that work? Not me,” and they laugh.

Jim leaves and Bob turns to me. He seems bear-like—both lovable and intimidating. I saw him present at the CCCC convention ten years