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## Horses

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# Horses

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DAVID BLYTHE

When we say the word “horses” we make a sound that simulates our previously more guttural Anglo-Saxon, a noise so re-expressed in our other word for roughness in the throat (which is “hoarse”), that I wonder whether the folk-lore of equus is not partly told even in the vocal vibrations English speakers make when these creatures are named; or whether the word alone can excite us with the energy required to say it, as if the deep tone of “horses” were somehow imperative, or exclamatory, in signifying their beauty, strength, tenderness, purity, and velocity.

With them, and by means of these qualities, we mythologize our kinship of artistry, physicality, and emotion, as seems partly told in their name. We wish to be horsemen and horsewomen, which is more than to be riders, and something apart from our biped, muscular-footed experience; for this quadruped is the darling of ultra-human possibility. We who were forked and had two feet, shall now have four (finding our anatomies correlative with theirs); we frail, indecisive, and clumsy, discover power, extension, lift, and grace; we landlubbers find the only means nature has given for getting clean off the ground, and becoming on horseback airborne — and at that altitude feeling what a low thing this pedestrian was, to be horseless, to be down there, mountless with the foot people.

The Dolphin of *Henry V* has an adoring passage expressing this sensation of wind and force on horseback, since he is not simply off the mean earth, but is also in flight when he says, “When I bestride...I soar/ I am a hawk” (3.7). For horses so much infuse human fancy that *horsemanship* means giving up earthbound ways and sharing the qualities of our mounts, and this in moral-spiritual senses too, since the basis of horsemanship lies in a kind of silent mutual understanding — not omitting horses from being mutual with us. Does not Xenophon in the oldest extant relic of horse-craft make it plain, in respect to such kindness, that horses “must not only love man, but even long for them,” and so fulfill that two-way sympathy sublimated by the Centaur, the horse/human icon of what each creature lacks (for the Centaur doubles the emblem of physique and desire).

## II

It is a mystery how such wishes come collectively into us, though many begin by riding sticks in pretense. My own first reins were strings, and in Western fashion I

ted my steed to rails. I recall liking to rear and plunge in make-believe in my little endeavor to be “demi-natured” with the slender wooden beast. Thus is the Centaur imaginary in child’s play, for we who were children of the hobby-horse were stick-riders acting out any image we knew: the chariot of the sun unreinable in the hands of Phaeton (he could not master them; the team ran wildly off track and nearly set the earth on fire); or we could mock the horses of the broken seals in *Revelation* — the white horse (with a bow-man), the sword-ridden red horse, the black (with balances), or the skeletal pale one the reaper bestrides. And when we add Pegasus, our horse with wings — the flying horse whose hoof struck the well-spring of poetry — our horse emblems range from life to death, from inspiration to apocalypse, with several kinds between, including the horse of idolatry (which is French), the horse of utility (which is Roman), the horse of power (which is English), and the perfected unbacked creature, not wild like Mustangs, or ponies of Chincoteague, but trained stallions (like that one of Adonis), who run snorting at human mastery.

When I ride I remember motion practiced on my hobby effigy; I compare real forces now to the facsimile at that time: “I spurr’d hard to come up,” says Shakespeare, “and under me I had a right good horse,” (*under me* images essential riding sensation, as again, we “feel our fiery horses/ like proud seas under us”). The forces are conceived and allocated under us, and the motion is next likened to that of longships in the sea-lanes of Poseidon, or to Poseidon formatting again his big-bellied horse of sticks, that Greek and fir-plank monster inside Troy gates. Of this Attic idea of horse and sea, Ruskin says, “Neptune over the waters, and the flow and force of life, is always among the Greeks typified by the horse, which was to them as a crested sea-wave, animated and bridled,” (where boys ride under-water dolphins, too, and Proteus shapes himself in seahorse guise).

### III

I have suggested so far how horses animate our fancies by giving astonishing muscular reach to a man’s or woman’s sense of physical capability, give relief indeed to the drag of our own personal gravity — much like a ship relieves sailors the dismal fixation of land-lock, a note Ishmael strikes early in *Moby Dick* when December’s in the soul, and he feels like stepping into the streets and methodically knocking people’s hats off; for then he knows it is time to put to sea again, and a nautical fancy carries him involuntarily to the water’s edge. So some of us find on horseback the relieving next plateau of thrilling sensation; not plodding in the muddy foot-path, not to clump in scuffy shoes to the asphalt lots with no grace; but thinking with the Dolphin instead,

“montez le cheval,” ascending with the genus Centauri, part horseflesh, part yourself. Real experience and imagination thus combine, as when Claudius recollects such a rider as one entire thing — like the Aztecs who thought the Spaniards and their horses one solitary flesh:

Two months since  
Here was a gentleman of Normandy:  
I have seen myself, and serv'd against, the French,  
And they can well on horseback, but this gallant  
Had witchcraft in't, he grew unto his seat,  
And to such wondrous doing brought his horse,  
As had he been incorps'd and demi-natur'd  
With the brave beast. So far he topp'd [my] thought,  
That I in forgery of shapes and tricks  
Come short of what he did. (*Hamlet* 4.7)

Note the terms particular to Centauri, that “this gallant had witchcraft” and “grew unto his seat,/ And to such wondrous doing brought his horse/ As had he been incorps'd and demi-natur'd/ With the Brave beast.” Imagine this collected idea of a rider, and with such an implication of balance, all the while himself unmoving but in tight rhythm and in invisible deference to horsepower. This may be a kind of manage seen nowadays in the Spanish Riding School only, though through Claudius, Shakespeare commends French equestrianism: “The French can well on horseback.” As with ballet, the very terms of dressage are theirs; and yet in this case the French succeed too well, for the horse-idolatrous Dolphin of *Henry V* could not that way prevail in the field of Agincourt (gorgeous chevalier that he was).

Before turning to the following brief Gallic viewpoint of the dressy steed, I may suggest how common enough it is to dote on a certain horse we must have. We have fallen in that equus love, and once mare, gelding, or stallion is ours, we embellish and glorify, change bloodlines, find beauty and speed and sweet disposition, where yesterday was a dusty nag passing with unkind treatment through the stockyards of Indiana. And without papers, but with invention, horse-love becomes a will — and somehow, after the first brushing, the palfrey suddenly bears all the honors we have spirit enough to throw on, for horse-trading and horse-getting, not less than horse mythology, run on admiration. The beauty of our new pony wakens our beauty-making

power, where with fine terms we cover imperfection and secret habits; such rich phraseology, such pedigree, such nobility, such names, and such a personal, local, box-stall mythology. For just as Jonathan and David had a love passing the love of woman, so this horselover (very drunk now in a stallion), looks past human gender and onto his glistening steed sets the poetry of his soul. In such conceit is the Dolphin of France:

I will not change  
my horse with any that treads but on four pasterns.  
Ca, ha! he bounds from the earth, as if his entrails were  
hairs; le cheval volant, the Pegasus, chez les narines de  
feu! When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk; he  
trots the air; the earth sings when he touches it; the  
basest horn of his hoof is more musical than the pipe of  
Hermes.

And of the heat of the ginger. It is a beast for  
Perseus. He is pure air and fire; and the dull elements  
of earth and water never appear in him, but only in  
patient stillness while his rider mounts him. He is indeed a horse,  
and all other jades you may call beasts.

Nay, the man hath no wit that cannot, from the  
rising of the lark to the lodging of the lamb, vary  
deserv'd praise on my palfrey. It is a theme as fluent as  
the sea; turn the sands into eloquent tongues, and my  
horse is argument for them all. 'Tis a subject for a  
sovereign to reason on, and for a sovereign's sovereign to  
ride on; and for the world, familiar to us and unknown, to lay  
apart their particular functions and wonder at him.

I once writ a sonnet in his praise and began thus: "Wonder of nature"  
— (*Henry V* 3.7)

Modern counterparts to the Dolphin's state of mind live now in the sale-rooms at Lexington and Saratoga Springs, where the sleekest yearlings are exaggerated for no battle glory, but for glories of money-value; and where these prized and pampered beasts carry the colors (or the silken coats of arms) of their owners, they never carry the owners themselves. For where the French chevalier is a true, if ostentatious, man-of-

war, he is like Alexander in loving and riding his own Bucephalus: though the Dolphin has bejeweled his stallion, and cased him in trappings, he is yet an *equestrian*. But in our modern counterpart the exaggeration shows another kind of unmeasured expense, or rather the conspicuous no limit of dollar-cost, when pedigree is pursued and merely collected, like eggs of Fabergé.

#### IV

Such chosen thoroughbreds have descended from the Arabian, whose breeding has been so pure (and prepotent) over centuries as to have made a virtual new species. Mixed with the colder-blooded mares of England, the desert power begot the thoroughbred by blending heavier plodders with the quick-footed steeds of Persia and North Africa. The contrast between breeds of nations can be imaged with the armor of crusaders against the silent slashing velocity of the desert riders, or between the two-handed swords of Northern weather and the scimitar of Southern. The English side of the question is portrayed between Prince Hal and Hotspur who, when he says “That roan shall be my throne,” gives more than rhyme words, for he suggests the weight and mass in the deep-seat of the saddle itself, as being furniture heavy enough for the throne-like image. And when Hotspur hears the transformation of nemesis — Hal, that renewal is from footpad rogue to a rider now glittering in armor:

I saw young Harry...gallantly arm'd,  
Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,  
And vaulted with such ease into his seat  
As if an angel dropp'd down from the clouds  
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,  
And witch the world with noble horsemanship. (*Henry IV Part One 4.1*)

How unnerving a vision to Hotspur, who yet answers in matching terms:

I am on fire...  
Come let me taste my horse,  
Who is to bear me like a thunderbolt  
Against the bosom of the Prince of Wales.  
Harry to Harry shall, hot horse to horse,  
Meet and ne'er part till one drop down a corse. (*Henry IV Part One 4.1*)

In this clash of English horse-soldiers, we sense the eminent collision of juggernauts,

mass against mass — Harry weightedly armed, yet vaulting into his seat; Hotspur not less heavily enthroned, borne in his saddle like a Jupiter.

V

There are several divisions, or counter-points, of horse culture that we have been setting for the purpose of contrast and definition — as in French versus English, or as Arabian opposing the big-bone breeds of Europe, but in Scott's tableau of opponents east and west (*The Talisman*), his novel of steel-encased crusaders advancing against desert riders merely robed in their folds of wool, the images show on one side density and mass, and the other, lightness and speed. Here is medieval panoply worn or carried by a northern man of war: a coat of mail, plated gauntlets, steel breastplate, triangular shield, and barred helmet of steel; lower limbs in flexible chain mail, feet in plated shoes, with a poniard and a double-edged broadsword with a handle like a cross — and a long steel-headed lance (whose end rested in the stirrup). These accoutrements for rider only, yet those of his horse were not less unwieldy: heavy saddle plated with steel, and a steel axe, called a mace-of-arms hung to the saddlebow; the reins secured by chain-work and the front stall of the bridle, a steel plate, with apertures for eyes and nostrils and a sharp spike projecting like a unicorn.

This knight watches now a mounted Saracen flying over the sands as if borne on the wings of an eagle, managing his steed by his limbs and by the inflection of his body. Presently he canters, circles around the ponderous Gothic steed who is fetlock deep in sand, and though these riders make a truce, the first similarity Scott finds is their international horse-love: both men possessed “the confidence and the affection of the horse which was the constant companion of his travels and warfare. With the Saracen, this familiar intimacy was a part of his early habits; for, in the tents of the Eastern military tribes, the horse of the soldier ranks next to, and almost equal in importance with, his wife and family; and, with the European warrior, circumstances...rendered his war-horse scarcely less than his brother-in-arms.”

These horses are vastly more dissimilar than even Scott's picture can show us, for here we reach the greatest distinction that could be drawn: it was implicit in the metal and the weight of our Anglo-Saxon against the heathen's mastery of manage (told by “inflection of his body”). If one symbolic term were set between their practice, it would be *iron*, since where iron is a burden, not only is the horse impeded, but that intimate tactility between horseflesh and the body of a rider has ended. And where riders managed skin to skin, (over some previous unknown time) — spurs, hard bits, and stiff saddles put barriers between rider and ridden, although the elegant manufac-

ture of saddles adds other kinds of enhancements and gives riding many other possibilities. For “classical” riding, then, consider again Elgin marbles, or any early effigy, stamped in coin or cut in bas-relief — such as show boy-soldiers and Amazons, either barebacked or with the least amount of tack, indicating that fabled *sympatico* sometimes called witchcraft.

I am only suggesting such a delicacy of contact as already told in Scott’s inflection of the body, but I will say more, because for many years I have been riding with only a bridle. Leaving my saddle in the barn, I spend most of my time bareback which has given me the merest glimpse of what balance is, and has taught me, what I also have read to be true, that something — but who can name the term — some kind of message system exists between us, conducting through impulses in the skin and through the sensitive nervous make-up of horses. I have heard this called telepathy; it is at any rate an invisible transmission, a marriage of force and reason, and one not possible with saddles, although saddles vary so widely that a distinction should be made between the cowboys of Colorado in their weighty Western seats, and the elegant hunters of Maryland in their English.

Yet I have wondered how without a saddle my horse could sense what I wanted, when to turn, whether to quicken — and not only understand my disposition minute to minute, but anticipate a certain thought. And although I tended at first not to saddle up because it was easier not to, and because saddling makes riding more formal and more committed to posture, over many years I found how liberating bareback was, how natural, and how we may feel how our horses sense us as much as we them. It gives a hint, or only the shadow of a hint, of what ancient Greek or Persian riding must have been, with that necessary, life-long skill, and those generations of bodily mastery. So that Pegasus (the flying horse whom you could not saddle) would seem a local, natural dream — and the Centaur configuration may have been striding daily in the streets — so intimate beast and rider must have been (though we can only fantasize such levels of equipoise and synchronicity).

Yet some insight into this concept is suggested by the kind of control shown by Mark Antony, whose attitude is another remove from the decorated horse of France, or the heavy-weights of England; and this passage will show not just a Roman standard of equine utility, but also expresses a plain and non-indulgent relationship:

It is a creature that I teach to fight,  
To wind, to stop, to run directly on,  
His corporal motion govern’d by my spirit

He must be taught, and train'd, and bid go forth.

*(Julius Caesar 4.1)*

This is another Centaur type where the rider is “demi-natured” with the beast: the cavalryman’s horse can turn sharply (changing speed and direction) though what Antony calls “To wind” is nowadays called “to cut,” as is said of Western or Canadian cutting ponies.

But this soldier’s horse is also taught both to stop suddenly (by breaking with his front hooves), and to fall into full speed instantly, which is “to run directly on.” These feats are the two extremes of equine responsiveness — the instant halt and the instant impulsion, both which the horse is taught to sense, so that Antony’s idea of governing “corporal motion” with “spirit” is literal and technical, and consists of subtle commands which are not visible, and are all but indescribable — including the shifting of weight, leg pressure, and the touch of the bridle.

It is especially to be noted, however, that Antony’s horse does nothing for show, and therefore no gaits are mentioned, and no postures. It is a war-horse of high utility he means: the quickness to move, to cut, and to stop; and the purity of this Romanesque use of the horse compares starkly with the gorgeous ostentation of the Dolphin. For the French rider showcases Gallic superiority in breeding, training, and as I suggested, idolatry of horseflesh — while to Antony the beast is a duteous servant whose only value is good performance, and whose only reward is provender. In Roman military logistics, this horse is an unpampered, but superbly trained four-footed legionaire, not often thought of till needed.

## VI

I have suggested that sympathy between horse and rider depends essentially on human kindness, and on that instinct for co-operation that horses possess — much as if they found fulfillment through our thought of them (just as we are realized via their physique). In an earlier time, a prominent seat of power in human consciousness was expressible through such horse impulsion, but whose place in modern life has been supplanted by the very idea of mechanical energy. To that extent, the physical/spiritual icon of the horses has become the more a dream, though the great globe itself has been everywhere previously chartered by horses.

Are there plough-teams in furrows we remember, or pack-horses of the Orient, or the cavalries of history from Caesar to Attila? Or is it an English horseman-king clopping in the streets of Lud’s Town, or Napoleon on a pale stallion, still so many frozen miles out of Moscow? Or is it rather the horse of the psyche who energizes our myths

of private force and airborne invention? I have been speaking of the aesthetic of these creatures, and how they seem to extend us their living art, as we them our art-love; and I only have last to ask what our poetic hearts had been like, lacking horses.