A Horse Is a Horse, of Course

Verlyn Klinkenborg

February 22, 2018 issue

Reviewed:

Farewell to the Horse: A Cultural History
by Ulrich Raulff, translated from the German by Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp
Liveright, 449 pp., $35.00

In 1937, a car carrying Rebecca West got stuck in a snowdrift on a Croatian hilltop. "Peasants ran out of a cottage near by," she wrote, "shouting with laughter because machinery had made a fool of itself, and dug out the automobile with incredible rapidity. They were doubtless anxious to get back and tell a horse about it." West's prose shimmers with imagination, and she has a way of being highly illuminating when she's merely incidental, as she is here. You can almost feel the car blushing and hear the horse and peasants snickering together in the dim light of winter. And in this passage, just in passing, West reveals a historical divide. You could look out, it seemed, from that snowy hilltop in two very different directions: into the watershed of the past, full of horses and peasants, and into the watershed of the immediate future, apparently full of machinery. It was a vista you could find almost anywhere in 1937.

Yet when war began again, two years later, it was again a war of horses, like the one that ended in 1918. We think of World War II as a war of men and machines—of blitzkrieg and aerial bombardment. But it was also, especially on the Eastern Front, a war of horses pulling armaments and ineffectual vehicles through mud and snow, just as World War I had been. In that war, the German army—to cite only one of the warring nations—used 1.8 million horses. Nearly one and a quarter million of them died.*

By the end of World War II, Germany had put 2.7 million horses into service, with a death toll of 1.8 million. According to one historian, German infantry divisions during World War II "possessed more than twice as many horses as an equivalent division in the First World War." Why so many more horses? Because there were so many more machines, and the machines were so much heavier. And because the German army soon began to experience what Richard Overy calls "demodernisation." In Russia, by December 1941, he writes in *Why the Allies Won*, "the Panzer armies were using horses again." Machinery was making a fool of itself and of everyone else, and there was no joking this time. It was another tragedy for horses,

like every war before it.

"A horse's mind does not adapt to modern thinking," says Ann Hyland in *Equus*, her study of horses in the Roman world. It belongs, instead, to the eternal present. It isn't just the massive size of the animals that makes them look so exposed in war photos. It's also their unblinking awareness of the moment, the seemingly limitless gaze of their large, dark eyes. They don't amplify the fear of the humans around them. They reflect it, which somehow makes it worse. Their fear is "refracted outwards, towards the viewer, the witness, the enemy," writes Ulrich Raulff in his strange and fascinating new book, *Farewell to the Horse*. What changes over time, as its role in history changes, isn't the horse. It's our perception of it. By the end of World War I, the horse at war was no longer an embodiment of "terrifying power," as it was in the days of mounted cavalry. It was a drudge, a laborer in a dire landscape. The terror it experienced was simply gratuitous, a change for the worse in working conditions.

Raulff's subject is the dissolution of what he calls "the Centaurian pact"—the economic and cultural bond uniting humans and horses—between 1815 and 1945. In little more than a century, the energy provided by horses was replaced almost entirely by the energy of machines. The change was profound and complex, and it was accompanied by a kind of amnesia as the silent partner in the pact was put out to pasture or carted away to be rendered or simply buried where it fell. We cannot recall—we can barely imagine—all the ways in which horses were once used before they became, as they are now in the developed world, largely recreational. Nor can we imagine what it was like to live surrounded by them, as one would have been in Manhattan in 1900, when there were 130,000 working horses in the city. The horse's role in human history, Raulff writes, "is like a lost continent...still waiting to be discovered."

What the horse requires, Raulff suggests, is an "*histoire totale*." What he offers instead is a sweeping cultural history, more kaleidoscopic than *totale*, as bibliographical as it is historical. He writes, as he says, "never...from the stable, but always from the ivory tower of the library." And he candidly admits that "this...is not the horse's book." It's the work of a historian who has "never seen a horse die," the kind of book in which the horse becomes a "living metaphor," "the re-semanticized being par excellence."

Farewell to the Horse is a whirlwind that seems capable of drawing into its vortex almost anyone who ever thought of a horse. Jacques Lacan and Alan Turing and Lucian Freud, Goethe and his writing stool, Myron Cohen and his one-way street joke, Nietzsche and his mad embrace of a beaten cart-horse—these and a vast crowd of occasional and oblique equestrians make it clear that what Raulff is

tracing are the endless impressions the horse has left on the minds of humans. The horse may be "the privileged object of human research and cognition," but it has always risked disappearing "behind all discourse." In Raulff's book, the horse risks being buried beneath an avalanche of analogy.

As suggestive as it is, there's also a curious imprecision in Raulff's use of the centaur. The image of that mythical creature —half-horse, half-human, with a distinct character of its own, sometimes wise, sometimes choleric—must have seemed irresistible to someone writing about the relationship between humans and horses. But it isn't as revealing as he hopes because it's essentially synoptic, an emblem of argument. When it comes to centaurs, it's worth heeding the voice of Chrysantas in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. The centaur, Chrysantas points out, has only two ears and two eyes, unlike a mounted human who, if she's observant, also sees and hears with the eyes and ears of the horse she's riding. "Centaurs," he notes, "must have had difficulty in making use of many of the good things invented for man; and how could they have enjoyed many of the comforts natural to the horse?" Better to be a "centaur that can be taken apart and put together again," in other words, a human seated on a horse's back.

The chimera that Raulff is really describing when he talks about the centaurian pact is actually another beast altogether, a creature we have no name for: half horse, half machine. Beginning in the 1840s, there was a "huge boom in the exploitation of horses," largely driven by the advent of new agricultural inventions like horse-drawn reapers, which, as Raulff notes, "could only save manpower by increasing the use of animal labour instead." As the machines grew in size and capacity, so too grew the size of the horse teams drawing them until, by the early twentieth century, it was possible to see forty-horse teams pulling combine harvesters in the wheat fields of the Palouse, in Washington State. These are hardly centaurian monstrosities, if only because the machines and horse teams utterly dwarf the humans who drive them. Though many people rode in the nineteenth century—one human on one horse—it was a time in which it seemed as though horses would be shackled to machines forever.

This was especially true in cities, which were jammed with horse-drawn vehicles of every kind, producing the distinctive (and now forgotten) roar of horseshoes and hard wheels on paved and cobbled streets, a roar accented by the cracking of whips, a sound that Schopenhauer called a "sudden, sharp thwack which slices through one's brain and shatters one's thoughts." Raulff alludes in passing to "the short summer of urban horse-drawn mass transport," but the nostalgic note in that phrase seems a little discordant. It was certainly no summer for the horse teams pulling omnibuses and

trams or for the cities that relied on them. If the nineteenth-century city was a biocenosis—an ecological community—dominated by two species, it was also a place where "the life of one species means the death of the other." City horses could work for only a few years before they were exhausted, and their very presence was a threat to the humans who lived among them. "In 1867," Raulff writes, "horse-powered transportation on the streets of New York caused an average of four fatalities per week, with another forty pedestrians injured."

To us, now, there is always something archaic about the horse. The picture that comes to mind is the individual rider—the cowboy, the hunter, the jockey at the track—an image that goes straight back to antiquity. We forget that the horse, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was actually "an outstanding agent of modernization." If we look back nostalgically from the speed of our own lives to an era of gigs and curricles and stagecoaches, we forget how swift they seemed on the open road to their passengers, like Samuel Johnson, who expressed to Boswell "his love of driving fast in a post-chaise." It was a need for speed as well as power that led to the equestrian boom of the nineteenth century, a boom that ended quickly in cities as motorized vehicles took over from horses in the early twentieth century, solving one environmental problem—two and a half million pounds of horse manure per day in New York in 1900—and causing another.

The change came more slowly in the country, though it was no less sweeping. In the United States, the number of horses on farms and ranches peaked between 1910 and 1920 at about 19 million. By 1940 there were half as many, and by 1954 the number had dropped to just under three million, fewer than there were in 1850. In the agricultural world, horses replaced the labor of humans, and machines replaced the labor of horses. What no one foresaw was how quickly the disappearance of farmers themselves would follow the disappearance of working horses.

There are many reasons why Raulff doesn't write from the stable in *Farewell to the Horse*, but I suspect that the main reason is simply this: the horse is a given. Its nature is essentially unchanged from the horses Xenophon wrote about. Raulff relies on our apparent familiarity with the horse, as evidenced by the long line of humans who troop through his book, each having his equestrian say. He assures us that "the horse, for all its sublimations and projections, remains a snorting, nodding, hoof-scraping, warmly fragrant reality." But the reality of the animal's character is almost entirely missing from his book.

So too is the vast literature that deals with the training and riding and management of horses, a literature that includes some

remarkable nineteenth-century works. Riding, for Raulff, is "a neuro-navigation between interrelated natures," which doesn't sound like the kind of thing that nearly persuaded Sir Philip Sidney to have wished himself a horse. Nor does it capture how different those two natures really are and how tenuous the ground on which they meet. After all, there's an entire subgenre of satiric poetry about equestrian disasters befalling unskilled riders. It can be summed up in a quotation from William Cowper: "Thus equipp'd Academicus climbs up his horse,/ And out they both sally for better or worse."

In my experience, cultural notions of the horse, no matter how crude or refined, tend to vanish in the presence of the animal you're about to train or ride. So too do any cultural notions of yourself—any image of who you'll be when you're in the saddle. There is simply the silent gulf between species, which has to be crossed somehow by both creatures in a way that uses the best of their very different natures. As William Cavendish wrote in 1658, "there should always be a man and a beast, and not two beasts." When things went wrong between a horse and its rider—a sudden bolt or a fit of bucking—Ray Hunt, the great Western horse trainer, would often ask, "What happened before what happened happened?" This was his way of pointing out that the awareness of humans usually lags behind the awareness of horses. Being a good rider means more than having a good seat and good hands. It means having a good mind, being as alert and attentive as the horse is, as present in the world. For most of us, this is a stretch. We have to live up to the horses we work with.

This is the tragedy of the machine horse of the nineteenth century. There was no use for a horse's awareness, its instincts, its mind. All that was wanted was its muscle, its horsepower. That's the point of putting blinders on a carriage horse—to narrow its range of attention. It was as though, having the horse at hand, humans really wanted for their machine work—their trams and omnibuses—a lesser creature, a fast ox of sorts. And in a sense, that's what the drudgery of the work routinely created: an animal that was as close to being a machine as any organism could become. Instead of living up to the horse, we had to bring the horse's mind down to our own level of inattention, which can be truly stupendous. Jeremy Bentham framed the problem brilliantly in 1789 when he wrote, "The question is not, can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But, can they suffer?"

But even this—generous as it is and, as Raulff says, "still valid to this day"—isn't quite enough. You don't have to be Gulliver, returned from the Houyhnhnms, to admire horses for their minds as well as their bodies. They are "docile and omnipotent," Emily Dickinson wrote, but only when we meet them in kinship, with the best of ourselves.

Verlyn Klinkenborg

Verlyn Klinkenborg teaches at Yale. His books include *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, *The Rural Life*, and *Timothy: or, Notes of an Abject Reptile*.
(October 2024)

*

It is estimated that all the parties in World War I deployed a total of sixteen million horses, half of which died before the war was over. ↩