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M. Oldfield Howey. *The Horse in Magic and Myth.* Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002. xii + 238 pp. $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-486-42117-9.

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Renaissance: Or, Maybe What Goes Around Ought to Come Around

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In his preface to the 1923 edition of this book, M. Oldfield Howey tells readers that the original impetus to collect the materials included in *The Horse in Magic and Myth* was the surge of interest in "spiritual matters" that followed World War I. Yet his collection of myths and folk tales related to "one of the most widely diffused … sacred and magical symbols," the horse, remains informative and suggestive for twenty-first century readers whose interests in the horse and in myth are likely more secular.[1] Because he admittedly "touches little more than the fringe of the subject," Howey has and will continue to provoke "further inquiries and new discoveries" (p. v). His slim volume leaves open all of British and European, Near and Far Eastern literature and lore since 1923 and the whole rich spread of the traditions, native and colonial, of the Americas to other collectors and explorers.

I found his insights and the materials he offers perhaps even more stimulating while reading this new Dover edition than I found them nearly twenty years ago when I first read Howey as part of my preparations to teach the first of the several animal studies literature courses I devised before retiring from full-time teaching at Holyoke Community College (Holyoke, Massachusetts). "The Horse in Literature and Art" didn't require my "Intro to Lit" freshmen to read Howey, but our discussion of works like Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, D. H. Lawrence's novella *St. Mawr*, and even Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* benefited from insights I had gained reading both Howey's *The Horse in Myth and Magic* and his *England's Horses and Ponies* (a discussion of breed history). Like Sewell, Lawrence, and Shaffer (and unlike my urban and suburban students), Howey knows horses and can help the horse-deprived touch the physical as well as the symbolic and mythic (and perhaps even the spiritual) power of the horse. (Actually, I didn't rely on Howey for that; instead, I required a field trip to touch living, breathing horses to help my students feel that power!)

Coming back to Howey now is for me a rediscovery of a moment when I made a decision that seemed merely practical (how to jazz up a required literature course for myself as well as my students) but turned out to be life-changing for me (and actually for at least one student who has gone on to dedicate her life to working for the welfare of animals).[2] Once I had seen how focusing on animals in literature could energize teaching and learning, I never turned back. A whole new approach grew to dominate my scholarship and imagination, bringing together two passions of my life, animals and teaching, that had, before that, seemed wholly separate. While other readers will not share that thrill, Howey cannot help but kindle in contemporary readers the awe that horses have sparked since time immemorial in the imaginations of humans fortunate enough to have shared their worlds either in the wild or in the domestic sphere.

Early in Howey's collection it becomes clear that the association he makes between horses and spiritual forces beyond human control is an ancient association made by humans in many cultures all around the planet. In the tales he retells that force burns brighter than any efforts humans have made to domesticate or use the horse to augment their own status and prestige. One reason for that is that Howey has both an empathic appreciation of the horse's mind and an aesthetic appreciation of the horse's physical power and beauty. And both are deeply embedded in the magical/mythic attributions all cultures touched by the horse have recognized in the species. In such cultures "the horse was esteemed as the medium of expression most favoured by the deities." In fact, many north Europeans and Britons kept "certain horses … in their sacred groves, untouched and free from any sort of mortal labour." Their spiritual and political leaders (often one and the same) would go to "observe their neighings and whinnyings," which they believed presaged things to

come (pp. 156-57).

In cultures from the ancient Assyrian and Babylonian through the Greeks and Romans, where the horse was used rather than being venerated in the wild, it was not used as a beast of burden but rather as a warrior who was understood to participate decisively with its rider or driver in battle–as a full partner, not a vehicle, as horses have often been perceived in modern times. Perhaps now that technology has released the horse from that role, a process that was well underway even in 1923 when Howey wrote, human attitudes toward the horse as well as other nonhuman beings will return to that early veneration and respect.

Similar beliefs are at work in the *Iliad*'s account of Achilles' horses, Xanthus and Balius. The latter responds to Achilles' rebuke for having left Patroclus's body on the battlefield with words as well as tears, the goddess Juno having enabled "the noble Xanthus … to speak what was in his heart and unburden himself of his sad foreknowledge that Fate had also … decreed his loved master's death." It was–and remains–significant to my understanding of the horse's role in literature that Howey comments at this point:

"The reader should note that Xanthus was not a mere mouthpiece used by Juno. The goddess enabled him to speak, that he might give vent to the crowding, bitter thoughts of his *own* heart. This story should be compared to the biblical narrative of Balaam's ass, where the same thought is expressed. The long pent-up emotions and ideas confined in the animal's mind by its inability of giving them voice [at least in utterances that other than psychic humans could understand], suddenly released by the angel's power, and pouring forth in indignation at the injustice of its master and his blindness to the spiritual world around them, is the point emphasized." (pp. 159-60)

This combination of spiritual prophecy (which often takes the form of satire in more modern works) and revelation of man's inhumanity to those over whom he claims dominion is at the core of narratives drawn, so to speak, straight from the horse's mouth, from the Old Testament and the *Iliad* to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* through Swift's Houyhnhnms, Sewell's *Black Beauty*, to Hughes's *Sweet William* and Smiley's *Horse Heaven*.

On a related note, Howey observes that "Indian myth generally seems to speak of the horse as a fully developed self-conscious creature with powers (e.g. of speech) which it certainly does not now normally possess, existing long anterior to the creation of man" (p. 213). It is typical of Howey's open-mindedness that he qualifies the horse's voice as a power it "does not … normally possess," leaving room for the possibility that the horse (and perhaps all other beings) continues to speak although most humans have grown progressively more deaf to their voice(s). Indeed that possibility lends even more significance to horses in literature like Balaam's ass and Black Beauty, whose voices we can hear because their human creators retained the imaginative power both to hear and to recreate their voices for readers less aware. They serve as our hearing ears, our guides.

I have long felt that Howey's observation that "[i]n British symbology the dark horse indicates uncertainty, an unknown quantity, an individual who is surrounded by mystery," explains Sewell's choice of color for her narrating equine. It is a shorthand way of reminding her readers that there is more to a horse than fashionable or utilitarian portage–more to any nonhuman individual. Her welfare message is obvious and, unfortunately, still necessary. Her deeper message about human perception of the species with whom s/he shares the planet is less so and, consequently, a direct challenge to the anthropocentric culture story that developed between those early days of allowing sacred horses their freedom in return for their wisdom and our own time and place in which domestic animals of all breeds, humans and non, share the same captivity.

Howey does not mention Sewell or Black Beauty. He does refer to Swift's Houyhnhnms who, I think, bring readers much the same wisdom. Certainly a number of Howey's varied sources also speak to the wisdom to be gained from the horse. I would like to think that more readers–especially those associated with NILAS–will respond to the message today than could in 1923. Come to think of it, perhaps Howey's original impetus still pertains: something in the human make-up, call it soul or imagination or mind, longs to encounter the nonhuman "Other," perhaps especially the equine Other. And, because that is so, the forces of myth and magic Howey returns us to have the power to affect the evolution of the human/animal bond in particularly positive ways, making this new edition of *The Horse in Magic and Myth* well worth any reader's time, horse lover or not.

Notes

[1]. One caution: the contemporary reader (or at least this one) needs to keep in mind that Howey himself was deeply involved in the spiritual renaissance he mentions. He believed in metempsychosis (the transmigration of souls), for instance. While at the root of prohibitions against the taking of life, even those of insects and plants, in many non-Western traditions as well as in

the beliefs of the Pythagoreans and Greek Skeptics, the tradition retains a solidly anthropocentric core. The human soul is the focus and Howey believes the "lower animals" yearn to be reborn as humans with human souls. For him nonhuman bodies are prisons from which their captive souls wish release (particularly relevant is his discussion of animal suicide on p. 219). Such notions strike me as being at odds with the evident love of and firsthand as well as scholarly knowledge about horses that informs the majority of Howey's observations but may simply reflect the distance between 1923 Britain and 2003 United States.

[2]. Those who attended the NILAS conference in Ohio this past summer may remember Heidi O'Brien, who now works at NAHEE (National Association for Humane and Environmental Education) and spoke as part of the Humane Education panel. Heidi was not in that class, but in a subsequent animals in literature class, and claims the experience was responsible for her choice to become a professional animal advocate.

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