A Text of a Different Colour: What *Horse* Can Tell Us About Reading

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It was in the winter of 2005, or thereabouts—I was in the first year of my PhD program, and Ted Chamberlin had been writing a book about horses.

"Horses?" I asked, echoing what must have been by that point a familiar response. "Horses," Ted replied, and continued with a description of the landscape in Montana at that time of year and of the characters he had met during his recent visit. At the time, I'm sure I nodded politely. I hadn't quite gotten around to asking him to be my supervisor, and as usual, I assumed that I was missing something. The early years of grad school are different for everybody; for me, they mostly involved trying to figure out what was going on—what I should read, what I should think about it, and the kind of language—or *discourse*—that I should use while saying so. And during my many visits to Ted's office, I could always count on him to confuse any conclusions that I came to. Although he was always encouraging, and infinitely patient, I would leave feeling somehow slightly *less* sure about things, and generally with twice as many questions as when I went in.

Neil ten Kortenaar writes that:

> Theory provides the critic with certain compensations, especially a sense of mastery (I know better) and virtue (I am on the side of the right thinkers). Theory also exacts a toll: it can easily make a reader feel "I must be stupid because I do not understand" or, just as likely, "I had better watch what I say lest I prove I do not belong among the right thinkers, after all." (5)

These are notions that plagued me during my first years at the University of Toronto, and I'd be lying if I said that they don't trouble me still. But as Kortenaar points out, they are concerns that don't really seem to bother Ted Chamberlin.

Ted was appointed University Professor in 2004, just after the publication of the

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much-acclaimed *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* His next book-length project, then, may have raised a few eyebrows. People referred to *Horse* with a smile, often commenting that it was something quite 'different' for a senior literary scholar to do. After all, it was quite plainly a book about horses. Just look at the title: *Horse*. So literal! Now I'd only known Ted a couple of years, but he had talked often enough about tricksters and riddlers and the wily ways of poets that I was suspicious. What was he up to?

If you read *Horse*, in fact, you'll find that although it is undeniably about horses, it's about many other things too. In many ways, *Horse* is a Trojan horse. With its mild-mannered appearance, it was no doubt able to make its way into the homes of all kinds of unassuming readers—some who own or work with horses, and others who simply may have pictures of them on the wall. These readers will learn about the early history of the species, about the evolution of the saddle, bridle, and bit, and about the ways in which different civilizations have cared for, made use of, and imagined horses. But readers will also learn things like the names of the different nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Canada—the *Kainai* (or Blood), the *Apatohsipiikani* (Piegan), and the *Siksika* (Blackfoot) (*Horse* 22). They will learn about the Dawes Act, which in 1887 reorganized Indian lands in the United States into individually-owned allotments (9). And they will learn about the ways in which human societies have long been fixated upon ideas of the primitive and the civilized, of wanderers and settlers, and of the wild and the tame. In other words, *Horse* carries within it a history that is underrepresented (if, indeed, it's represented at all) in many of our schools and newspapers, and it brings this information to a much wider group of readers than the audience of your typical academic book.

This is not to say, however, that *Horse* is only aimed at so-called 'popular' readers and has nothing to say to an academic audience. Anyone familiar with Ted's work knows that this rigid separation between what he refers to as the "yard" and the "tower" is one that he does not really uphold (*If This Is Your Land* 28). So this is not just about the people in the tower amusedly watching the wooden horse roll into the yard to teach the 'common' people a lesson; those soldiers that tumble forth are going to be coming through our door as well. This paper, then, is about the lessons that *Horse* contains for the academy—and in particular, for students and scholars of literature.

In Chapter 2, "Bringing Horses Home," Ted writes about the Chauvet cave in France, which in 1994 was discovered to have some of the oldest known cave-paintings of horses and other animals on its walls (39). Today, horses are the subject of countless drawings and photographs, books and movies, and Ted points out the ways that they've been a part of human traditions of representation, or text-making, for tens of thousands of years. He takes this opportunity to expand our understanding of reading, somewhat, as he observes that "the reading practices that developed in medieval and modern Europe were…flourishing 30,000 years ago in the highly sophisticated reading traditions of hunting societies around the world and in the

paintings, sculptures, and other representations they made of animals" (43). He argues that regardless of whether or not people use letters to record their thoughts and desires, they're involved in the same process of sign-making—of using an image to invoke something that isn't there. As Ted says, "This is the essence of magic, of memory, and of all forms of art" (42).

In 2002, Ted published an essay called "Hunting, Tracking and Reading," in which he explains in greater detail the ways that the academy—despite its politically-correct protestations—continues to sustain the idea that the development of alphabetic writing systems represented a major cognitive leap for humanity, and that those societies who don't, or didn't, make use of this particular form of writing are somehow at a different phase in evolution. Ted's work has been instrumental in collapsing this much-beloved distinction between oral and written traditions. As he says, "[a]ll societies, agricultural and hunter gatherer, have both" ("Hunting" 70). Part of his task, then, has been to acknowledge those forms of reading and writing that we might not always recognize as being a part of traditions of literacy and scholarship.

In *Horse*, Ted imagines the visit that a Dunne-za or Beaver Indian man named Bobby Attachie might have made to the Kainai elder Joe Healy in 1933. Bobby is looking to trade a prize mare, and Joe is offering him four horses in exchange. Ted writes that:

> Bobby went over, looked at each [horse] carefully from about six feet away, watching the eyes and ears, the signs of splints and side bones, bog spavins, capped hocks and curbs, and then picked up the feet, checking for cracks in the walls and contraction of the heels, tapping the soles to see that they would take a shoe, watching breathing at the flanks for heaves, felt at the top of the heads for poll-evil, looked at the angles of the hoof and the pastern, ran his hand up each leg to confirm that the small problems he had seen from a distance—three of them had splints on the front cannon bone, one had a capped hock—were indeed small, and covered their eyes for a couple of minutes to check for moonblindness. (267)

"Watching horses is a lot like reading," Ted says, "you need to learn how to do it" (*Horse* 45). Bobby Attachie's horse-literacy would have been gained through many years of training and diligent study, but people like him are very seldom referred to as 'scholars.' If he had a degree in veterinary medicine, then perhaps. But the academy seems to have its own case of moonblindness; our ability to recognize scholarship that is entirely independent of the institutions we know remains quite limited.

So why is this? What is it about the ability to read horses, or the sky, a set of tracks, or the sea-ice, that is so different from what 'we' do—that is so unscholarly? I wonder if part of it might have something to do with the *usefulness* of knowledge like Bobby Attachie's. Somehow, it doesn't fit with the idea of a scholar—one who cloisters him or herself from the world, in pursuit of higher things. In the humanities—and particularly in literary studies—we're constantly plagued by doubts about our usefulness; especially these days, when budgets are making it clear just how useless we are considered to be. But this uselessness—this obscurity—is also a matter of some pride. It's

the sense that the things we devote our lives to are extra-ordinary, or so self-evidently interesting that they need never be tempered by any kind of practical applicability… except when it's grant-writing season.

Increasingly, though, the academy is coming to terms with the existence of other systems of knowledge, just as various government bodies are now beginning to see the necessity of incorporating what's often referred to as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (or TEK) into their policies. Up in Nunavut, it's known as *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (IQ), and it's part of the mandate of the territorial government to draw upon it via consultation with elders. I know that Ted is cautious about the use of the term 'traditional,' here, with its implication that this knowledge is somehow not contemporary, or that it is so very different from other, more familiar kinds of knowing. But I have learned from him that those knowledge traditions (however you label them) are not only relevant for scientists and policy makers in determining things like polar-bear quotas; they belong in literary studies, too. Horses are not much a part of the geographical or intellectual landscape of Nunavut; all Inuktitut words for 'horse' are metaphors, like *qimmirjuaq*, 'big dog.' But during my doctoral research, I began to look for metaphorical horses in Inuit elders' oral histories, and in the songs and stories, both old and new. By this, I mean that I began to look for literary and critical texts, and for scholarship, that appeared in a form that the academy didn't recognize. Texts of a different colour.

Ted points out that the apparent opposition between the useful and the useless is at the heart of any discussion about horses, as in any discussion about art. "Most of us have two images of a horse," he says (*Horse* 243). One of them is the working horse, the domesticated horse—the one that has allowed humans to travel great distances, to wage war, and to plough fields. The useful horse. The other is the wild horse, the one which has never known a saddle or bit. This is the symbolic horse—the mustang. Ted tells us how in the 1920s, the Indian Reorganization Act tried to encourage the Navajo to sell off or destroy what a government report referred to as "worthless horses" (*Horse* 9). As he writes, "they did not understand that horses were both useful and useless"—that aside from being beasts of burden, they "signified not just prestige but a kind of sovereignty" (10).

Ted suggests that like horses, literary texts, or our discussions of them, have been caught up in the apparent contrast between the idea of art as a tool, and of art for art's sake. The criticism in the field of Aboriginal literatures, for example, has mirrored the debates in literary theory as scholars oscillate between attention to form and attention to context. Early readings of the classic stories, or "myths," for example, emphasized their ethnographic content—the ways in which they embodied rules of behaviour, or guidelines for survival. In response, a discipline known as ethnopoetics arose to celebrate the form, or artistry, of these oral traditions, and often removed them entirely from their historical and political contexts. In other words, they became useless, in the wonderful way of art. Recent Indigenous literary theory, meanwhile, emphasizes the political function of Aboriginal texts—the ways in which they embody resistance

or assist in current struggles for sovereignty. Each phase tends to recoil from the priorities of the others; when we think about a text's usefulness, we tend to forget about its beauty. And vice versa—in thinking about the beauty of a text, we tend to channel Oscar Wilde: "all art is quite useless."

But Ted shows us that this rigid division between aesthetics and politics is often unnecessary. The usefulness of horses is bound up in their form—as the horses on the cave walls did their work by evoking the spirit of the animals, the presence of the game. "This is how horses help us," Ted writes, "They embody the in-between…" (250). While readers must take into account a literary text's usefulness—the way in which it functions as a historical document, or a political tool—they should also keep in mind the way in which literature is "useless"—the way that it is "simply" a thing of complex beauty, or of intricate form (209). In other words, Ted teaches us that reading, like riding, can be what he might call a ceremony of delight, rather than simply a means to an end.

This paper is not really about horses, unless by "about," I mean "around," or "in the vicinity of." But I think it would be bad manners if I didn't tell at least one horse story.

My aunt and uncle own a small ranch just outside of Edmonton. When I was growing up, my aunt Kelly always used to tell me that the moment you get on a horse's back, it knows exactly what kind of a rider you are. This put a healthy respect into me, and also a little fear. I knew that the second I got up there—even though it couldn't really see me—that horse was reading my mind. Or that I was inadvertently speaking to it, only it was in a language I didn't know very well—a language of nudges and kicks and the subtle shifting of weight, or the degree to which I was clinging to the horn. *Horse* teaches us to think about reading in the same way: to have a healthy respect for the text as a living creature—one with its own language. One that we are attempting to make use of, even if it is simply for the sake of its artistry—its uselessness.

In his final chapter, Ted writes about a farm belonging to a friend of his, Reg Greer. Ted writes:

> Electricity only arrived [at the farm] in 1952, and that was good, because it meant safe lights in the barn. Tractors came around the same time; but Reg had grown up working the fields with horses, and he could not imagine being without them. He treated his tractors like working stock, acknowledging their personalities and wary of their power; but tractors were designed to do what they were told. He loved how horses were determined to surprise him. (*Horse* 241)

What I've learned from Ted is that we want texts to be horses, not tractors—that we should do our best to retain that element of surprise, or uncertainty, or wonder, that may have brought many of us to this field in the first place. This is the gift that Ted leaves for us at the gates, as he heads off, back home again.

My thanks to him, and to you for listening.

Works Cited

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