

Historicizing the Horse (VI). *The Dun Horse (Pawnee) (a Hegelian approach)*

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Abstract: The series of studies dedicated to analyzing the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures continues with *The Dun Horse*, a story told by the Pawnee. The action of the story happens at a time when the horse is already historicized and integrated into the life of the tribe and it focuses on the events experienced by an old woman and her grandson, whose poverty caused them to have a marginal position, socially speaking. It is the accidental discovery of a dun horse that shifts their social position: as the horse turns out to be a reservoir of Pawnee knowledge, on both the social and the historical level, it helps them ideologically and hierarchically navigate from the margin of the tribe's historical system to its very center. The dun horse has foreknowledge of historical events and functions as the force that propels humans from the margin to the center of the historical system. It can initiate historical action, in the Hegelian sense, by placing itself in the service of the young boy, but can also launch reaction. Its support is conditioned by unquestionable acceptance of myth. Through the dun horse, obedience to myth entails historical progress. In the case of the young boy, the horse intervenes in the course of history as a result of a historical action undertaken by him and, in its turn, sets up a series of actions which help the boy depart from the margin and reposition himself at the very center of the Pawnee historical system.

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Historicization of the horse by Native American tribes was one of the most complex processes of cultural transformation and adaptation experienced by these societies. The investigation into the various approaches Native American tribes took to historicizing the horse continues with an analysis of a story told by the Pawnees, *The Dun Horse*, included in George Bird Grinnell's compilation of stories (*The Dun Horse* in George Bird Grinnell, *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales*, pp. 87-98), a book that remains an enduring legacy of the power of storytelling across cultures and ages. Unlike the previous stories examined in this series of analyses (*Thunder's Gift of Horses*, *Water Spirit's Gift of Horses*, *How Morning Star Made the First Horse* and *The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog* – all Blackfoot, *The Tale of the Wind Horse* – Choctaw, *Ghost Stallion* – Yinnuwok, an untitled story told by the Diné and *The Swift Blue One*, collected from the Tejas by Bessie M. Reid in 1936), *The Dun Horse* focuses on a representation of the horse as a repository of tribal knowledge. The action of the

story happens at a time when the horse is already historicized and integrated into the life of the tribe and it focuses on the events experienced by an old woman and her grandson, whose poverty caused them to have a marginal position, socially speaking. It is the accidental discovery of a dun horse that shifts their social position: as the horse turns out to be a reservoir of Pawnee knowledge, on both the social and the historical level, it helps them ideologically and hierarchically navigate from the margin of the tribe's historical system to its very center. If one looks at this movement through Hegel's theory of history (synthesized through the concepts of action and reaction and margin vs. center), the horse can be viewed as a mechanism that initiates historical action and reaction (Hegel, 2004) that impact the life of the entire tribe, manifested through the change of identity it generates for the old woman and her grandson. As they internalize and act upon the knowledge imparted by the horse, they reposition historically and relocate from a micro, peripheral position to a macro, central one.

The story opens with the temporal contextualization of the events and a description of the marginal position of the two characters. As it was common for Native American traditional narratives, the action of *The Dun Horse* is placed in a time that stands at the intersection of myth and history; it starts in the *illo tempore* and, as events unfold, precise historical elements are incorporated. In most stories, the Native American mind conceptualized ancestral time in a vague, loose manner and this one makes no exception. Events happen "many years ago", but focus on a recurrent historical moment – "and always" – in the life of the Pawnees: seasonal migrations. Although these migrations preceded the acquisition of the horse, the transformations it brought about would lead to the emergence of the famous horse cultures of North America.

Many years ago, there lived in the Pawnee tribe an old woman and her grandson, a boy about sixteen years old. These people had no relations and were very poor. They were so poor that they were despised by the rest of the tribe. They had nothing of their own; and always, after the village started to move the camp from one place to another, these two would stay behind the rest, to look over the old camp, and pick up anything that the other Indians had thrown away, as worn out or useless.

Thus, it becomes evident from the onset of the story that the horse is historically incorporated and culturally internalized. The idea of horsemanship is indirectly suggested, along with the allusion to a direct connection between horse ownership and the social rank of a Pawnee. As the storyteller implies, one of the factors that marginalized the two characters was nonownership of a horse. In his comprehensive study on the horse in Blackfoot culture, John C. Ewers argues that "contemporary observers of the Plains Indians in buffalo days noted that these people reckoned their wealth in horses. Some tribes appeared to be rich in horses. Others were obviously poor. Within each tribe there were individuals who were relatively wealthy in horses. Others were desperately poor. The individual's status as an owner of horses conditioned his use of these animals and helped to determine both the nature and degree of participation in many aspects of the life of the people of his tribe." (Ewers 1969: 20)

As the story continues, we are told that the old woman and her grandson accidentally cross paths with “a miserable old worn-out dun horse, which they supposed had been abandoned by some Indians. He was thin and exhausted, was blind of one eye, had a bad sore back, and one of his forelegs was very much swollen. In fact, he was so worthless that none of the Pawnees had been willing to take the trouble to try to drive him along with them.” The two characters’ decision to take the poor animal marks the inception of the Hegelian journey that would take them away from the peripheral position and allow them to transition to the centre of their society. Prior to meeting the dun horse, the two manifested historically only through reaction(s) to the action(s) undertaken by the rest of the tribe. They had no historical will of their own and only turned to passive responses; in fact, as the story suggests, they only resorted to action when they found the abandoned horse and decided to “take this old horse, for we can make him carry our pack.’ So, the old woman put her pack on the horse, and drove him along, but he limped and could only go very slowly.” Departure from the margin begins as a slow process which gains unexpected momentum when the boy learns that a spotted bison calf was seen by the young men who had been sent to find the buffalo herd. The chief of the tribe announces that whoever kills the spotted calf would get his very beautiful daughter as wife because it was considered that “a spotted robe is *ti-war’-uks-ti*.” (big medicine, in the sense of spiritual power) Against all expectations, the young boy decides to compete against the other braves and enters a race that could only be won by the owner of the fastest horse. However, before the race begins, his action is mocked at by the other participants and he inevitably regresses to reaction and repositions himself in a marginal position. Thus, his first attempt at taking action in a historical sense seems to be annihilated by the lack of an appropriate instrument for engaging history and making it happen – a horse that is fit for a historical endeavor. From this perspective, one gets insight into how the Pawnee collective mind represented the horse not only as an agent manifesting at the level of macro history, with the ability to change, adjust or improve the historical trajectory of the entire tribe, but also at the level of micro history, with the ability to solve, settle or regulate routine or small-scale events.

Then all the warriors and the young men picked out their best and fastest horses and made ready to start. Among those who prepared for the charge was the poor boy on the old dun horse. But when they saw him, all the rich young braves on their fast horses pointed at him, and said, "Oh, see; there is the horse that is going to catch the spotted calf;" and they laughed at him, so that the poor boy was ashamed, and rode off to one side of the crowd, where he could not hear their jokes and laughter.

Once the boy is pushed back to a marginal position, the dun horse reveals its true identity and appears to be one that transcends history and has mythical connections. As the animal begins to speak, the *illo tempore* makes its way into the spatial and temporal dimensions of the story and allows for a shift of perspective and myth becomes the forger of historical action. The horse knows what is needed to change the course of history and it teaches the boy how to act. Therefore, the didactic function of myth is transferred onto the horse and it can now impart knowledge and instruct. The emergence of the dun horse as a

manifestation of myth first scares the boy – a result of its *unheimlich*-ness / uncanniness – but as soon as it begins to give instructions, the boy immediately acts on them (he acts, in fact, based on mythical knowledge).

He said, ‘Take me down to the creek, and plaster me all over with mud. Cover my head and neck and body and legs’ When the boy heard the horse speak, he was afraid; but he did as he was told. Then the horse said, ‘Now mount, but do not ride back to the warriors, who laugh at you because you have such a poor horse. Stay right here, until the word is given to charge.’ So, the boy stayed there.”

At this point, the dun horse appears to be the *de facto* centre of Pawnee society, as it holds and imparts knowledge that is superior in strength and value to that of the rest of the tribe. With and through the dun horse, the realm of myth invades the realm of history and is about to change it. As the mythical and the factual collide and mingle, they alter the initial representations of margin and centre. While imparting knowledge, the dun horse, now transformed into a mythical element, acts as the initiator of a Hegelian movement from the margin to the centre of the historical system. With help from the horse, the young boy no longer stands at the receiving end of historical action; marginality aims at centrality and he becomes an actant. When the historical horse changes into the mythical one, the boy’s relationship with history changes from a passive to an active one and he experiences historical initiative for the first time in his life.

At this point in the story, the didactic function of myth in Native American cultures emerges as the storyteller describes the riding technique(s) of the Pawnee, viewed as a component of collective knowledge that had to be reasserted and reminded of to the audience with each retelling of the story:

And presently all the fine horses were drawn up in line and pranced about and were so eager to go that their riders could hardly hold them in; and at last, the old crier gave the word, ‘*Loo-ah*’—Go! Then the Pawnees all leaned forward on their horses and yelled, and away they went.

The supernaturality of the dun horse becomes evident as it appears to move differently compared to the rest of the horses: “suddenly, away off to the right, was seen the old dun horse. He did not seem to run. He seemed to sail along like a bird. He passed all the fastest horses, and in a moment, he was among the buffalo.” Thus, at both the ideological and the physical level, the dun horse seems to always move from a marginal position to a central one. It uses knowledge as historical initiative and its initiatives propel the boy towards social recognition and power. In fact, the horse reassigns historical relevance and power within the Pawnee community; with and through the dun horse, myth intrudes on history and changes its course. When the hunt for the buffalo begins, the boy leaves the village from a marginal position; after the hunt, he returns in a central position and the Hegelian paradigm is enacted: “On the way to camp, one of the rich young chiefs of the tribe rode up by the boy and offered him twelve good horses for the spotted robe, so that he could marry the Head Chief’s beautiful daughter; but the boy laughed at him and would not sell the robe.”

The historical layer of the story resurfaces when it narrates a second event that would help the boy advance to a more central position within his village: the Sioux, old enemies of the Pawnee, mainly because of direct competition over territories on the Northern Great Plains, prepare an attack. While it is historically accurate to think of a skirmish or a fight between the two tribes, the event is wrapped in myth through the dun horse's prior knowledge of how the action would unfold. Thus, we understand not only that myth precedes history, and mythical knowledge precedes historical fact, but also that myth intrinsically holds the power to shape and shift the course of history. The dun horse possesses objective historical knowledge, but it imparts this knowledge only when it shifts to the mythical level and acts out through it. As the dun horse navigates between mythicity and historicity, it helps the boy navigate through Pawnee history, constantly enhancing his Hegelian shift from social poverty and periphery to social centrality. But, as is often the case with Native American myths, the use of such knowledge is conditioned.

That night the horse spoke again to the boy and said, '*Wa-ti-hes Chah'-ra-rat wa-ta.*' Tomorrow the Sioux are coming—a large war party. They will attack the village, and you will have a great battle. Now, when the Sioux are drawn up in line of battle, and are all ready to fight, you jump on to me, and ride as hard as you can, right into the middle of the Sioux, and up to their Head Chief, their greatest warrior, and count coup on him, and kill him, and then ride back. Do this four times, and count coup on four of the bravest Sioux, and kill them, but don't go again. If you go the fifth time, maybe you will be killed, or else you will lose me. *La-ku'-ta-chix*—remember.' So, the boy promised.

The didactic dimension of Native American myths is embedded within the story and it reminds the audience of the importance of strict obedience to the knowledge imparted. Since myth precedes history, it holds an unquestionable central position in the Pawnee society. Historical events are forged within myth and history happens as events flow out of a preexisting body of mythical knowledge. Furthermore, as the story implies, myth not only generates history, but it also holds the power to adjust or change it. As long as the boy listens to the instructions given by the dun horse, history unfolds as planned, while trespassing the boundaries of mythical knowledge would inevitably result in an adjustment of history and a reshaping of historical factuality. Moreover, blatant disregard for the knowledge shared by the horse results in the animal's physical death and the symbolic death of myth.

But the Sioux and the Pawnees kept on fighting, and the boy stood around and watched the battle. And at last, he said to himself, "I have been four times and have killed four Sioux, and I am all right, I am not hurt anywhere; why may I not go again?" So, he jumped on the dun horse, and charged again. But when he got among the Sioux, one Sioux warrior drew an arrow and shot. The arrow struck the dun horse behind the forelegs and pierced him through. And the horse fell down dead.

The death of the dun horse suggests the failure of the didactic function of stories and the collapse of myth. The boy acknowledges his mistake and he "felt very badly that he had lost his horse; and, after the fight was over, he went out from the village to where it had taken place, to mourn for his horse." It is

also a stark reminder of the importance of myth in Pawnee culture: indifference toward mythical knowledge entails historical decline. In Hegelian terms, it could be argued that the boy, whose decision to ignore the horse's advice cuts off the action that has been generating his centrality, is bound to slip back to the margin. His decision interrupts the momentum gained by the movement that was taking him from margin to center and ensured historical progress and is likely to reposition him on a different trajectory. His action enframes reaction, which manifests through the loss of mythical support and is bent on historical regress. The power of myth transcends that of history – it can generate both action and reaction, it can push toward the center, but also away from the center. However, the boy in this story is given a second chance which can be viewed as a reinstatement of myth and its pervading power. The horse returns to life and the first thing it does is to inform the boy that “you have seen how it has been this day; and from this you may know how it will be after this. But *Ti-ra'-wa* has been good and has let me come back to you. After this, do what I tell you; not any more, not any less.” With the dun horse's return, the initial course of action is restored. This reassertion of the power of myth leads to historical progress for the whole tribe: the first action the horse takes is to bring new and better horses to the Pawnee community (“each morning he found a different colored horse, a bay, a roan, a gray, a blue, a spotted horse, and all of them finer than any horses that the Pawnees had ever had in their tribe before.”) and better horses equated with historical progress. As the didactic dimension of myth is reasserted, the horse is re-historicized and the boy resumes his Hegelian trajectory toward the center of Pawnee history:

Now the boy was rich, and he married the beautiful daughter of the Head Chief, and when he became older, he was made Head Chief himself. He had many children by his beautiful wife, and one day when his oldest boy died, he wrapped him in the spotted calf robe and buried him in it. He always took good care of his old grandmother and kept her in his own lodge until she died. The dun horse was never ridden except at feasts, and when they were going to have a doctors' dance, but he was always led about with the Chief, wherever he went. The horse lived in the village for many years, until he became very old. And at last, he died.

To conclude, *The Dun Horse* showcases a different perspective on the process of historicizing the horse in Native American cultures, one which spins around the idea of a proto-horse, a mythical animal that has the power to control history. It has foreknowledge of historical events and functions as the force that propels humans from the margin to the center of the historical system. It can initiate historical action, in the Hegelian sense, by placing itself in the service of the young boy, but can also launch reaction. Its support is conditioned by unquestionable acceptance of myth. Through the dun horse, obedience to myth entails historical progress. In the case of the young boy, the horse intervenes in the course of history as a result of a historical action undertaken by him and, in its turn, sets up a series of actions which help the boy depart from the margin and reposition himself at the very center of the Pawnee historical system.

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