

THE **FATE**
OF THE **ANIMALS**

Three Paintings Trilogy: Volume 2

THE **FATE** OF THE **ANIMALS**

On Horses, the Apocalypse, and Painting as Prophecy



MORGAN MEIS

S L / . N T
B O O K S

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On Horses, the Apocalypse, and Painting as Prophecy
Three Paintings Trilogy: Volume 2

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Preface

IN 2011, I WENT TO SEE A SHOW AT THE Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The show was called *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*. I don't remember that much about the show. I do remember a painting by Franz Marc called *The World Cow*, which was painted in 1913.

Maybe it's because I was having some experiences with animals at the time, but the painting had an impact. I think it was the eyes, mostly. The eyes of that cow. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a living cow? It is an uncanny experience, I can tell you. Cows are supposed to be so dumb. Perhaps they are. It doesn't matter anyway. This is not a question of intelligence as such. What happened to me, looking into the eyes of a cow out in a field somewhere in upstate New York, what happened to me was that something stared back. The thing that stared back stared with the calm intensity of a rebuke. Not that there was anger in the cow. There was not. The cow just looked at me. The rebuke was something I created, that I was feeling. My own intelligence felt puny and irrelevant in the face of

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the mute and unblinking stare of the cow. Eventually I looked away.

Then, some weeks or months later, I came across the cow in Franz Marc's picture. The cow is red. She sits huge in the center of the painting, with its blend of landscape and abstraction that was Marc's style at the time, just before the outbreak of World War I. Dang if I didn't recognize those eyes, or, to be more precise, that eye. The core of the picture is the left eye of the red cow, swirling there in its infinite and patient gazing.

I'd never really been interested in Marc until I saw that painting. A year or so later, the timing here is surely imprecise, I came across a book of Marc's letters to his wife Maria, written during his time spent as a soldier in the Great War. The letters were so intense I could barely read them. This guy, I thought. He was alive. He'd been beautifully alive. And here he was, still alive in these letters, still so alive on some of the powerful canvases he painted in the years just before the outbreak of World War I.

Some time after this I went to see one of Marc's paintings in Basel, Switzerland. The painting is called *The Fate of the Animals* (1913). I drove to Basel with my dear friend Abbas Raza, who was living in his mountain redoubt in Brixen, Italy. We passed through a vicious snowstorm on the way. I'll never forget that short trip, or the feeling of standing before that giant painting in the museum. This book is the result of those experiences and the thoughts that finally worked their way out from them. It is the second book of what I call

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my *Three Paintings Trilogy* and continues some themes and ideas from the first book, *The Drunken Silenus*. This book can, however, be read independently. I dedicate it to my aforementioned friend, S. Abbas Raza, and to the friend I never had the chance to meet, Franz Marc.

1. The discovery of a book of letters written by a soldier and artist to his wife during World War I, and the recognition that this book of letters drives us into a consideration of The Great War, which was a kind of Apocalypse.

I BOUGHT A BOOK A FEW YEARS AGO. I don't remember why, certainly not for the cover or book design, which is why I often buy books. Sometimes a book just looks interesting, and then I want it because the look calls out to me. Often, the books that force me to buy them were designed in the late 1960s or early 70s. Other times, a book is so badly designed that this, in itself, intrigues. That was the case with this book.

The book I bought is an English translation of letters written by the painter Franz Marc to his wife Maria. It is a thin, hardcover volume published by Peter Lang as part of the American University Studies series. The edition of the book that I've got has about six different fonts on the front cover. Some words are in italics and some words are not. The sizes of the fonts

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vary considerably as well. It's as if a small child got into the final layout for the book just before it went to press and started changing things according to a game she was playing in her own head.

The letters published in the book were originally written between September 1914 and March 1916. The letters ceased abruptly on March 4, 1916. This was the day Franz Marc was hit in the head by a shell fragment at the Battle of Verdun. Marc survived the initial impact but didn't live for much longer. He was thirty-six years old.

After Marc's death, Maria Marc made a selection of his letters available to the publishing house Paul Cassirer in Berlin. This was in 1920. The volume was entitled *Briefe, Aufzeichnungen, Aphorismen (Letters, Notes, and Aphorisms)*. This is the route by which personal letters, handwritten by a German soldier who died in the Battle of Verdun, made their way into general English-language publication. The preface to the original R. Piper edition of Marc's letters opened with the following sentence: "Franz Marc's *Letters from the War* belong to the treasures of twentieth-century German literature." I didn't know that when I first bought the book. I didn't know that it was a treasure. Or maybe I did. Maybe I did somehow know that this was a treasure. I knew and didn't know that I was holding a treasure.

Marc's very first letter, written almost two years before he was to die at the Battle of Verdun, is dated "September 1 (1914), Autumn!" The first sentence reads, "Today I stood guard for the first time, with eighteen

Letters written by a soldier

men; it was very moving, a wonderful autumn night full of stars.” The last letter, written on the day of his death and during the Battle of Verdun, begins, “Dearest, Imagine, today I received a little letter from the people where I was quartered in Maxstadt (Lothringia), which contained your birthday letter.” Near the end of his final letter, Marc wrote, “Don’t worry, I will come through, and I’m also fine as far as my health goes.” Several hours later he was dead.

The Battle of Verdun (though there were many extraordinarily surprising and terrible battles of World War I) is unique. People still study the battle in detail. They track the various troop movements and the intricate military details. They know the names of all the generals and lower-level military people involved. This requires a certain kind of patience, a certain kind of mindset. The word “clinical” is appropriate here, in both its positive and negative connotations. The clinical mindset is one I do not, myself, possess. I am to “clinical” as “professional wrestler” is to “brain surgeon.”

In fact, I suspect that the people who are obsessed with the details of the Battle of Verdun are trying to control something with their supposedly dispassionate attitude to the whole affair. Something about the battle is intolerable to them, to something within them. Some feeling, some root despair or fear is being touched on by the facts of the battle, its reality, its actual happening in the world. To study the battle is to encroach upon that fear and surround it, as it were, with the various analytical tools at one’s disposal.

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Or is there also desire? Is it a mix of fear and desire? The person who studies the Battle of Verdun in a clinical manner has no idea what to do with this potent mix of fear and desire, and therefore these persons become studiers, even though probably what they really want, deep down, is to be in the battle, to be in the actual battle and to kill in the battle and to die in the battle, though, in some other sense, this is the last thing they want. They want and do not want. They take some pleasure in the distanced ability to study the battle and to participate in it that way, and this distance is also, at the same time, a kind of torture.

I don't have the desire to understand and to encroach upon the battle in that way. But I often find myself thinking about the Battle of Verdun. My pulse quickens when the battle comes up in conversation, or on the radio, or in books. I remember, many years ago, watching a television documentary about World War I and about the Battle of Verdun in particular. The narrator uttered the following line: "It was one of the most brutal, most sinister battles in military history." As I recall, the narrator spoke with a British accent. He placed special emphasis on the words "brutal" and "sinister." I don't think I'd ever heard a battle referred to as "sinister" in a documentary before. Brutal, yes. But war is always brutal. So, it is surprising when the narrator of this particular documentary does not stop at the word "brutal." His voice continues on, rising in pitch and volume. When he utters the word "sinister,"

he is practically spitting. It's not the typical language and diction of a television documentary.

There is a scene in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*. Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) is walking through the trenches. The camera follows his movement in a tracking shot—or perhaps we should call it a double tracking shot. We see men lined up in the trenches as Dax walks along. We are seeing the scene from his perspective. Soldiers move out of the colonel's way as he passes through. Then the camera cuts to a backward-moving tracking shot. We are seeing the same scene from the perspective of the soldiers who are watching Dax. Shells begin to explode to the left and right of the trench. We see Dax check his watch. He stops at an observation post. The exploding of shells intensifies. Dax unholsters his pistol and puts a whistle to his mouth. He jumps out of the trench and blows the whistle. The camera pulls back. Hundreds of men leap from the trenches and advance along blasted ground as the shells continue to fall. Colonel Dax continues to wave the men forward, through tangles of barbed wire, muddy pits, the wreckage of destroyed houses, and pulverized bodies.

There it is in a roughly five-minute scene: the true horror of trench warfare. But there's more than horror. What is it that adds an element of disquiet to the horror? It's the watch. It's the exact keeping of time. Such timing was a crucial element of World War I trench warfare. The shelling had to be timed to the second so that the shells would, in theory at least, fall just ahead of the

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advancing soldiers, clearing a path through the enemy but leaving the soldiers on one's own side unharmed. In practice, of course, there were many instances where the timing failed to work out, with disastrous results. Mistakes aside, it was, nevertheless, a war of timing. Precise timing.

Learning this fact is akin to the feeling one might have at arriving in Hell and finding out that the lakes of fire and brimstone are crisscrossed by trams running on an extremely tight schedule.

It is said that the commander of German forces at the time of the Battle of Verdun, a man named Erich Georg Anton von Falkenhayn, went into the Battle of Verdun with the precise (there's the word "precise" again) intention of creating a battle of attrition. That's to say, he wasn't looking either to win or to lose the battle. He was, instead, looking to create a scenario that would produce massive numbers of casualties. He was looking to make the French army bleed. Presumably, he understood that his own army would do some bleeding too. That is in the nature of battle. Falkenhayn hoped, surely, that because of his superior tactics, he would cause much more bleeding than he would suffer.

But this very fact, the intentional bleeding that was to be the purpose of the Battle of Verdun, makes it a unique battle, even in terms of World War I, a war which presented us with one surprisingly brutal and devastating and sinister battle after another. Here at Verdun, a matter that was only implicit in previous World War I battles, a matter that you could call

hidden, had suddenly become explicit. With the Battle of Verdun, the war became, self-consciously, a killing machine. If previous battles during World War I had been de facto killing machines, the Battle of Verdun was different in that it was actually designed that way. One can only guess at these things, but it is certainly possible to imagine that, from Falkenhayn's perspective, the killing machine he'd designed at Verdun would have done its job quite effectively if it had lured in and then ground up the entire population of France. In real-world terms, of course, this wasn't going to happen. No battle can kill everyone. But what about that idea, the idea of a single battle that could kill everyone, every single person alive anywhere? Was Falkenhayn, somewhere in his rigorous Prussian brain, exploring, despite himself, the idea of a battle that would kill everyone, that would be, really and truly, the most perfect and thorough battle ever devised, one in which, at the end, everyone is dead? Anyway, whatever Falkenhayn was trying to do, he killed plenty of people.

The Battle of Verdun was designed, as we've pointed out, at least in principle, to do just that. It was designed to kill as many people as possible. Falkenhayn, in his memoirs written after the war, likened the battle to a pump. He thought of the Battle of Verdun as a pump that would bleed the French white. This is a strangely mechanical metaphor, a pump that sucks blood out of bodies. But that, purportedly, is what Falkenhayn imagined.

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It is estimated that the Battle of Verdun caused 375,000 casualties on the French side and 335,000 casualties on the German side for a total of more than 700,000 casualties during just shy of three hundred days of fighting. So, just as Falkenhayn intended, there were more casualties on the French side than on the German side. But one has to believe that Falkenhayn was not imagining a scenario in which his own side, the German side, would suffer more than 300,000 casualties. The bleeding pump, one has to assume, slipped out of his control. Instead of pumping dry the French army, Falkenhayn's strategy ended up bleeding both armies, bleeding them both to the point of exhaustion. This happened with little to justify in terms of ground gained or strategic goals achieved.

Falkenhayn did indeed create a pump for the bleeding of armies. But it was a pump so big that it bled three quarters of a million human beings. It just pumped and bled.

One of the victims of Falkenhayn's bleeding pump was the aforementioned Franz Marc. Marc was German and was, therefore, not one of the intended victims of Falkenhayn's strategy. Marc was also a painter. He was a founding member of the well-known artist group *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider). *Der Blaue Reiter* included as members or affiliates, at one time or another, such famous artists as Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke, and Paul Klee. August Macke was also killed during the fighting of World War I. He was killed almost two years earlier than Franz Marc, on September 26, 1914.

Letters written by a soldier

The death of Macke was quite a blow to Franz Marc. On October 23, 1914, Marc wrote to Maria from a town called Hagéville, which is in the Meurthe-et-Moselle department in northeastern France. “The death of August is so terrible for me,” Marc wrote, “how can I overcome it inwardly and take a position toward it—the latter quite literally; the naked fact will not enter my head.”