Thrushes by Ted Haughes

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,

More coiled steel than living - a poised

Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs

Triggered to stirrings beyond sense - with a start, a bounce,

a stab

Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states,

No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab

And a ravening second.

Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained

Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats

Gives their days this bullet and automatic

Purpose? Mozart's brain had it, and the shark's mouth

That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own

Side and devouring of itself: efficiency which

Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it

Or obstruction deflect.

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,

Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,

Carving at a tiny ivory ornament

For years: his act worships itself - while for him,

Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and

above what

Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils

**** and hosannah, under what wilderness

Of black silent waters weep.

Analysis of the poem

The thrush is described as a 'terrifying,' bird that is almost robotic and has fierce eyes. It is ready to take its prey, and rhythmically drags an innocent worm from the ground. It does not procrastinate nor is it taken over by tiredness or boredom. It simply and efficiently does what it needs to. The speaker then questions why the thrush is so efficient, whether their skulls, brains, training, or motivation to feed their loud, hungry and demanding young gives them the efficient purpose. Their work is compared to Mozart's ability and that of a shrk, that smells blood, even its own, and then devours itself. There is no doubt or obstruction. The thrush simply does what it does.

The poem then says it is different with mankind, because heroes, everyday office pencil-pushers and intricate craftsmen have all worked and shown that the 'act worships itself.' Even though the man prays, there is a distraction that is noisy and obvious, of demons drowning out concentration and silence.

“Thrushes” paints a picture of birds as efficient, instinctive killing machines. The poet is observing some thrushes on his lawn; the observations lead him to contrast them to human beings, such as himself, whose best acts seem produced by the suppression of such energies as the birds display, and at enormous cost.

The poet looks at the thrushes hunting for food, such as worms, slugs, and beetles, in his yard. Normally, thrushes are associated with domesticity or song, certainly with nature tamed. Instead, Hughes sees them, no less than the hawk in his poem “Hawk Roosting” (also in Lupercal), as ruthless killers. Each bird is doing its natural thing in its pride of life as it drags “out some writhing thing,” which it devours in “a ravening second.”

He wonders what motivates this single-minded ruthless purpose. Is it, he asks, the way they are programmed to some point of evolutionary perfection? Have they been taught by equally skillful elders, or is there some survival of the species instinct, driven by “a nestful of brats”? Perhaps it is genius: an almost indefinable term, but one which reminds him of the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who seemed to have superhuman ability to produce perfect music apparently without trying.

His questioning thoughts turn on the phrase “automatic/ Purpose” toward the shark. The shark’s automatic purpose is to attack the smell of blood, even if it is its own blood pouring from its side. The shark then devours itself. It is “too streamlined for any doubt.” In other words, such efficiency is questionable. The same movement is seen in “Hawk Roosting,” where the hawk’s megalomania is reminiscent of human megalomaniacs such as Adolf Hitler and makes readers withdraw any admiration from the bird.

Here however, Hughes pushes the poem in a different direction, by explicitly contrasting animal with human (presumably, Mozart's genius is somehow seen as inhuman). "With a man it is otherwise," he starkly begins the third and final stanza. Humans are capable of "Heroisms on horseback," in the traditional notion of bravery, where any notion of violence is suppressed. Yet such heroic acts are beyond humanity's usual mode of being, which is bound by daily routine. Such heroisms are, like the carver's patiently working "at a tiny ivory ornament/ For years," in a sense outside of people. Such acts achieve worth or value almost impersonally. They are rare, unlike the animals' daily acts of perfect killing.

In conclusion, the poet sees the typical nature of humankind as a continually frustrated search for personal integration within a civilized context, signaled by such widely divergent markers as art, heroism, and "desk-diary" routine. The search is never-ending as "the distracting devils" of "Orgy and hosannah"—unrestrained lust and unrestrained joy—assail humans from their unconscious as if from hell-fire and "black silent waters" from above, perhaps from the accusations of conscience. This is each person's confusion and yet also his or her nature. Ultimately, the poet leads readers from an apparent admiration of the simplicities of the bird to a cry that is both anguished and celebratory of the complexity of being human.

This poem seeks to flesh out human nature in all of its contained contradictions. using the image of the thrush all other living creatures apart from humans are defined by its single-mindedness of pursuit- yet while its ruthless survivalist focus is empahsized the thrush is a creature that lives without living- its identity is intertwined with its actions- the thrush is but a flurry of movement.

you would think humanity is treated with indictive acrimonity in this poem. the truth could not be further.mankind for all its futile tendencies, his frivolous meaningless pursuits, has the joy of experience- from despair to delight, for which sin and guilt (religion) and the delirium of transitory pleasure wars constantly and through which the struggle makes one human.human actions in all their glory and guilt rarefy humanity. and the highest ennoblement comes with the self-realization of mortality. if death and vitality are at odds then it is the cosmic paradox of life that to live fully one must have a strong sense of one's mortality.

Forms and Devices

The poem consists of three eight-line unrhymed stanzas. In each stanza, six of the lines are roughly pentameter (five stresses per line), one line is lengthened by one or two extra feet, and the last line is shortened. In stanza 1, line 4 is lengthened to ensure a climax, with "with a start, a bounce, a stab," "bounce and stab" being repeated in line 7 as the typical movement of thrushes.

There are three main images in the poem which are : Thrushes, mozart and shark. The only common point of these three beings are acting instinctively.

Themes and Meanings

Insofar as the poem is about nature, it must be termed Romantic, but certainly not in the Wordsworthian sense of a creation that inspires through beauty or pathos and witnesses to some divine purpose. Rather, it is the “Nature red in tooth and claw” that the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson noted—a post-Darwinian nature of the survival of the fittest. In some of Hughes’s poems in Lupercal, various humans are described as survivors through their animal-like energies or instincts. Here, however, Hughes seems more concerned to divide humanity from nature. As in a previous poem, “The Water-Lily,” humans live in two worlds: the suppressed instinctual world, which becomes for them “distracting devils,” and the disciplined, civilized world, symbolized by the “desk-diary at a broad desk.” In this Hughes echoes psychoanalyist Sigmund Freud’s dictum that the price of civilization is the suppression of sex drives, as well as Carl Jung’s awareness of the shadow side of humanity, which, if denied, becomes diabolical. More specifically, the man at the desk observing the thrushes becomes the poet himself, whose act of creating a poem is a disciplined act that “worships itself,” yet at a psychological cost for him.

The poem echoes not only Tennyson but also D. H. Lawrence, who was similarly fascinated by the instinctive life force in animals, as well as Gerard Manley Hopkins, who celebrated the “thisness,” the specificity, of each created thing.

In the poem Thrushes by Ten Hughes, the birds was treated as an ineffective animal and thrushes are associated with the domesticity of the song. In the poem, it was clearly mentioned that the songs sung by a bird adores the beauty of the nature and birds forms an essential element in the midst of the nature so that every human being should feel and experience them with the full of their hearts.