
The Literary Animal and the Grotesque Survival in Ted Hughes's "Thrushes"

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Abstract

In his opus, Ted Hughes has annexed new and fresh territories of signification to the very notion of the literary animal. Building on the earlier modernist example of the Lawrencian legacy that dwells upon the question of animalism, Hughes seems to have stepped further into the terrain of the sheer struggle when, in his hands, the grotesquerie of survival and violence energizes the topos of the literary animal in his postmodern bestiary. In Hughes's elemental poetic process this grotesquerie and violence stages the literary animal as a vital poetic device or motif that is finally restored to the primitive power of poetry. In his "Thrushes", he thus defamiliarizes these tiny creatures' acts of being to bring upfront into focus this power that has long been deadened and overshadowed by discursiveness and the ersatz, civilized acts of living.

Keywords : animalism, grotesque survival, anti-anthropomorphic, Darwinian poetics.

One is inclined to beginning this reading with a question; to what extent does Ted Hughes's concept of survival differ from that held and cherished by the Romantics? And here one may have William Wordsworth in mind. Wordsworthian creatures, whether they be human or animals, are in a state of oneness and universal harmony with one another and thus with

their natural context and habitat. His are rendered as solitaries, and this is how they are spared the *presences* of violence and the brutalities as instigated by the revolutionary and warring state of the human condition. His leech-gatherers, for instance, are spared the hauntings of the grotesquerie of terror as represented by the French Commune. The Wordsworthian bard is yet to be thoroughly mindful of Thomas Hobbes' presentiments concerning the "the war ... of everyman against everyman," as man's life turns into a "continual fear, and danger of violent death," into a life which is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1998, 84). This is how human condition is rendered a traumatic event being continually repressed, soothed, and normalized in the discursiveness of the civilized—legalized and philosophized—acts of being.

This Hobbesian undercurrent and its latent leviathan wells up in Hughes's postmodern bestiary and its creations that do not seem to be typically Wordsworthian, nor do they resemble any of his pre-modern and modern predecessors in the tradition. His are rather driven by the energy of the apocalyptic terror in a post-holocaust nuclear age and context. Hence, Hughes is shown here straddling between the death of the romantic and the death of the naturalist, and while partaking of both, he seems to be heading out into the post-apocalyptic horror of futurity.

This reading has for its point of departure Hughes's poem "Thrushes". This very poem belongs to his book *Lupercal* (1960) which comes second in the poet's poetic opus. In *Lupercal*, Hughes shockingly presents his phenomenal view of the natural world through the violent, grotesque imagery and behaviour of a set of creatures that are rendered purely predatory. This "obsession with animal savagery" in Hughes might be related, in part, to the "principle of der Wille—the will—which ... [Schopenhauer] sees as generating not only the phenomenon of hunter and

hunted but all other phenomena of existence” (Eddins 1999, 95). The grotesque and down-to-earth depiction of animalism in *Lupercal* builds up into a terrifying post-Lawrencian anti-anthropomorphic world.

Hughes’s creatures, moreover, turn out to be finally redolent of the Darwinian scheme and poetics of being. John Holmes posits that “Darwinism and its poetics have permeated poetry about animals more thoroughly than they have the wider poetic tradition at large” (1999, 158). Hughes’s attempt here is not created *ex nihilo*; here one may speak of the Lawrencian literary animals as one modern exemplary influence. On the other hand, Hughes’s beasts of prey—it is tempting to ponder the Anglo-Saxon motif and its later medieval bestiary as forming influences—might be traced further back to the poet John Clare. Hughes admires Clare’s poem “Badger” to the extent that one may venture to say that his “View of a Pig” is nothing else but a postmodernist offshoot of Clare’s poem. In this very poem, the badger-hunting and badger-baiting is a sheer and dire Darwinian struggle:

He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men,
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd agen;
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles, groans, and dies.

(Clare 1920, L. 37–40: 186)

With what seems to be full detachment here, the poet shows the natural rubrics and creed being enacted. From observing animal behaviour in the fields near Helpston Clare understood the concept of survival of the fittest, though he would not have been aware of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Nevertheless, his detachment is nothing else but a determinist involvement of sorts, as the poet is “no longer a lover of Nature; he had become Nature itself. He felt as a wild animal felt” (Porter 1914, quoted in

Storey 1973, 368). Hughes's version of the story is depicted in the slaughterhouse in the aftermath, as it were, of Clare's badger giving in:

The pig lay on a barrow dead.
 It weighed, they said, as much as three men.
 Its eyes closed, pink white eyelashes.
 Its trotters stuck straight out.

.....

Too dead now to pity.
 To remember its life, din, stronghold
 Of earthly pleasure as it had been,
 Seemed a false effort, and off the point. (1960, L. 1-4, 17-20: 38)

The same deterministic tone might be detected in Hughes's rendition as in Clare's, when the niceties of being are diminished and reduced to the mere logic of survival.

In the context of the suggested Darwinian poetics, the kinship of Hughes's "Thrushes" to other poems within the Romantic lore might be traced back to Emily Dickinson's view of the "Bird". Hers sounds to be next in kin to Hughes's "Thrushes":

A Bird came down the Walk —
 He did not know I saw—
 He bit an Angleworm in halves
 And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
 From a convenient Grass—
 And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
 To let a Beetle pass—

He glanced with rapid eyes
 That hurried all around—

Wordsworthian thistles whose song preaches, and that are being taught by nature. Conversely, the only lesson, if any, for these post-Romantic thrushes to learn from nature is that of survival. That said, Hughes's dark-deadly-eyed birds seem to crystallize and foreground the Darwinian intimations latent in the bead-eyed Bird in Dickinson's poem, with the latter's transcendental echoes being muted.

Therefore, the opening lines of the poem, in a highly performative poetic language, which is neither romantic nor utterly naturalistic, carry the sense of immediacy of the bird's purely physical and purely mechanic act of killing. As such, they carry, too, the sense of poetry's persistence not by traditionally following or imitating the thrush's song, but just by being. Also implied here is the poet's desire to create his own satire of survival by means of parodying the Romantic direct word—the songbird or the bird's song. It follows then that the sole song that the thrush needs to perform, and thus to secure his existence or subsistence, is the murderous song. This is where the element of dark-humour and grotesquerie in the poem come from. The grotesque nuances are established by the description of the bird's sheer physicality rendered in a quasi-gothic fashion; the "Dark deadly eye" and the "delicate legs" which are "Triggered to stirrings beyond sense," and the murderous mechanism of "a start, a bounce, and a stab." Yet the grotesque delineation of Hughes's bird and his "endorsement of the dark elementals" is deemed, to consult Dennis Walter, to be excessive and far from being humorous (1987, 27). Nevertheless, the element of dark-humour is betrayed in the poem when the bird's turf and the human turf meet and are set in a sharp contrast with each other; "With a man it is otherwise" (L. 17; 50). When the bird kills just to be true to his animal self and genes and the practicalities of just being, man, on the other hand, idealizes and philosophizes, say, his war and kill, and creates his code of knighthood

where “his act worships itself” (L. 20: 50). As such, he renders his act mock-heroic rather than heroic. He needs to energize himself with angelic-devilish poetic of “Orgy and hosanna” (L. 23: 50) to derive his power of good and evil to fight and to murder. Hughes himself has this comment on this very mock-heroism of man; “the heroic struggle,” he states, “is not to become a hero but to remain a living creature simply” (Fass 1980, 167). These words are tellingly expressive of the ironic bird/man rendition in the poem.

The Darwinian poetic and paradigm is everywhere to be found in “Thrushes”, but one needs to situate the poem within this aesthetic or tradition by means of definition. John Holmes comes to define what he calls the Darwinian poem as follows: “Any modern poem that raises an animal’s evolutionary history, its ecology, even its behaviour, is almost by definition a Darwinian poem” (2009, 158). In accordance with Holmes’s designation, Hughes’s poem might be considered deeply anchored in this tradition as it dwells upon the sheer mechanism and behaviour of its literary animal. Moreover, Holmes goes on characterizing the poetic facet of this tradition:

Darwinian poetry undermines the ecstasies of the Romantics. The typical Darwinian songbird is undistinguished. In place of skylarks and nightingales, both of which are genuinely remarkable in their songs and behaviour, we are shown thrushes and wood warblers. (2009, 165)

This is more than merely situating Hughes’s poem within tradition; this is, rather, the genuine genealogy of Hughes’s “Thrushes”.

Hughes’s “Wordsworthian moment” (Peitte 2009, 127) begins when he becomes aware of the *presences* of nature in a desolate place on the Yorkshire moors. But no sooner he does so than he comes to identify his natural poetic space in terms at odds with his native Romantics and their ethos. He does not moralize about nature but tries to see it for what it is. His

“is not benevolent nature, or nature as a source of moral uplift, romantic joy, or idealist inspiration” (Underhill 1992, 279). “His nature,” to put it in M. L. Rosenthal’s words, “is Nazi, not Wordsworthian” (1967, 228). The stark-naked parade of power in “thrushes” and its militant character emits this sense of poeticized Nazism. In that view, the opening lines of the poem are preceded by like verses in its twin-poem “Hawk Roosting” which bears the stamps of the selfsame will-to-power poetics:

There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads—

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right. (L. 15–20: 24)

The militant, and even combative, imagery and the single-mindedness as well as the single-purpose and functioning of “Hawk Roosting” is put into much more concrete tropes in “Thrushes”:

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. (L. 9–16: 50)

The hawk’s self-consciousness of its superiority translates now into a blind thrusting of the thrushes; this is comparable, too, to the ferociousness of the shark, the epitome of beastdom, which might end up devouring itself in this carnival of grotesque survival.

This grotesque survival is to be conceived in tropes derived now from the anthropomorphic leviathan that, in its post-Hobbesian fashion, implicates the shark's self-devouring ferocity. This is to be understood, intricately, in terms of the apocalyptic view of the human condition. Hugh Underhill remarks that the "language of the machine—even of the war-machine" (1992, 280) dominates the first part of the poem, the very language that describes the thrush's life-force as being "More coiled steel than living" (L. 2) that is instantly "Triggered". The second part goes on intensifying its warfare lexicon even further, as the animal's "bullet and automatic / purpose" attacks and "Strikes too streamlined" (L. 11–12, 15: 50). These are the trappings of the Darwinian hero or the life-crime hero who, in the Cold War age, verges on being "like nuclear bombers, their coil of DNA a trigger mechanism, ready to release 'dark deadly' energy into environment" (Piette 2009, 123). The transformation of imagery betrays another implicit transformation of power and energy in Hughes's typical Darwinian poem. In his panoramic reading of *Lupercal*, Keith Sagar sees its poems as "strategies for evoking, confronting and negotiating with the Powers," whereby the poet "forces himself and us to confront Nature at its most ugly, savage and, apparently, pointless" (2000, 115). On the face of it, the allusion to Mozart does not fit into this conception of nature and *powers*. He is the only relic of the human world in the poem. Yet, Mozart's mental power is presented as being para-human or super-manly. His pre-programmed-brained nature is depicted in anti-anthropomorphic terms. Furthermore, this use by Hughes of the Mozart allusion has been ill received by some. Brian Cox thinks that the very comparison between the thrushes' concentration on killing and the creativity of Mozart's mentality is superficial (1999, 30). This criticism, however, fails to see the Darwinian and quasi-Nazi poetics that brings

Mozart forth into play; the very poetics that idolizes the acting super-brains, and has these brains weaponized.

After all, Mozart may play the poet's cameo role in the poem; the creative mind wants to translate its quasi-animal mental energy—in a fashion that may remind of the Blakean pseudo-mystical animalism—into an ingenious and vital “stab”: it wants to be rather than to mean. Yet this is not to say that the final product in poems in the semblance of “Thrushes” is utterly and crudely Darwinist. Hughes's poem—and his conception of the poetic process at that—internalizes the thrush's song which happens to be a grotesque rite and exigency of survival.

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الكائن الادبي وخرائبية البقاء في قصيدة "طيور الدّج" لتيد هيوز

الباحث : م. د. عامر رسول مهدي

المستخلص:

عمد تيد هيوز في جل نتاجه الشعري الى تدشين فضاءات بكر فيما يتعلق بفكرة تمثيل الحيوان بوصفه كائنا ادبيا. فبعد أن نهل من تجربة الموروث اللورنسي الحدائي بهذا الخصوص نراه وقد اخذ ينحى منحى آخر ومغايراً لمجرد عرض الحيوان بوصفه ممثلاً لصراع البقاء. يبيث هيوز طاقة جديدة في غرائبية هذا الصراع وعنفه عبر تثويره موضوعاً الكائن الادبي في أطروحته الشعرية ما بعد الحدائية عن الحيوان. فهنا نراه يوظف الطاقة الحيوانية بوصفها رافداً اصيلاً في العملية الشعرية. في قصيدته (طيور الدّج) يلجأ الشاعر الى رصد فعل البقاء لدى تلك الكائنات وتقديمها بوصفها ممثلة لتلك الطاقة الشعرية البدائية التي لطالما غيبتها استطرادات المدبرية وأنماطها الزائفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الحيوانية، غرائبية البقاء، اللانساني، الشعرية الداروينية.

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