

Mr. Claro -- Modern Nonfiction

Reading Selection by Lewis Thomas

The Tucson Zoo

LEWIS THOMAS (1913-1993) grew up a doctor's son on Long Island, attended Princeton University, and took his M.D. at Harvard. For most of his life, he practiced research in laboratories, more scientist than clinician, and served as administrator for medical schools and great hospitals.

For many years his publications were confined to medical journals and labored under titles like "The Physiological Disturbances Produced by Endotoxins" and "Reversible Collapse of Rabbit Ears after Intravenous Pain and Prevention of Recovery by Cortisone." Then, in 1975, he received not only a distinguished achievement award from Modern Medicine but also a National Book Award in Arts and Letters; the National Book Award is not awarded for papers on the collapse of rabbit ears.

Lewis Thomas's career as a prose stylist began with a series of columns written for the New England Journal of Medicine; he also wrote a column for Discovery, a science magazine for a general audience. He assembled five collections of essays: The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher (1974); The Medusa and the Snail (1979), from which we take "The Tucson Zoo"; Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony (1984), Et Cetera, Et Cetera: Notes of a Word-Watcher (1990), and The Fragile Species (1992). In 1983 he published an autobiography called The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine Watcher.

Reading the autobiography, Thomas's admirers were amused and unsurprised to discover a literary past. While he was intern and resident during the Depression in the 1930s, Thomas picked up pocket money by selling poems to the Atlantic Monthly, Harper's Bazaar, and the old Saturday Evening Post. "Millennium" appeared in the Atlantic long before the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima:

*It will be soft, the sound that we will hear
When we have reached the end of time and light.
A quiet, final noise within the air
Before we are returned into the night.*

*A sound for each to recognize and fear
In one enormous moment, as he grieves -A sound of rustling, dry and very near,*

A sudden fluttering of all the leaves.

*It will be heard in all the open air
Above the fading rumble of the guns,
And we shall stand uneasily and stare,
The finally forsaken, lonely ones.*

*From all the distant secret places then
A little breeze will shift across the sky,
When all the earth at last is free of men
And settles with a vast and easy sigh.*

Readers of The Youngest Science learn how Thomas's enthusiasm for modern medicine and his scientific optimism took energy from recollecting his father's medical practice, at a time when doctors had little to offer patients except morphine and sympathy. His columns and essays usually reported on medical and biological science in a writerly style, a human voice. Still, Thomas's gentle and personable prose served the mind of a scientist; at times it almost turns on itself, or uses one side of itself to correct the other.

Science gets most of its information by the process of reductionism, exploring the details, then the details of the details, until all the smallest bits of the structure, or the smallest parts of the mechanism, are laid out for counting and scrutiny. Only when this is done can the investigation be extended to encompass the whole organism or the entire system. So we say.

Sometimes it seems that we take a loss, working this way. Much of today's public anxiety about science is the apprehension that we may forever be overlooking the whole by an endless, obsessive preoccupation with the parts. I had a brief, personal experience of this misgiving one afternoon in Tucson, where I had time on my hands and visited the zoo, just outside the city. The designers there have cut a deep pathway between two small artificial ponds, walled by clear glass, so when you stand in the center of the path you can look into the depths of each pool, and at the same time you can regard the surface. In one pool, on the right side of the path, is a family of otters; on the other side, a family of beavers. Within just a few feet from your face, on either side, beavers and otters are at play, underwater and on the surface, swimming toward your face and then away, more filled with life than any creatures I have ever seen before, in all my days. Except for the glass, you could reach across and touch them.

I was transfixed. As I now recall it, there was only one sensation in my head: pure elation mixed with amazement at such perfection. Swept off my feet, I floated from one side to the other, swiveling my brain, staring astounded at the beavers, then at the otters. I could hear shouts across my corpus callosum, from one hemisphere to the other. I remember thinking, with what was left in charge of my consciousness, that I wanted no part of the science of beavers and otters; I wanted never to know how they performed their marvels; I wished for no news about the physiology of their breathing, the

coordination of their muscles, their vision, their endocrine systems, their digestive tracts. I hoped never to have to think of them as collections of cells. All I asked for was the full hairy complexity, then in front of my eyes, of whole, intact beavers and otters in motion.

It lasted, I regret to say, for only a few minutes, and then I was back in the late twentieth century, reductionist as ever, wondering about the details by force of habit, but not, this time, the details of otters and beavers. Instead, me. Something worth remembering had happened in my mind, I was certain of that; I would have put it somewhere in the brain stem; maybe this was my limbic system at work. I became a behavioral scientist, an experimental psychologist, an ethologist, and in the instant I lost all the wonder and the sense of being overwhelmed. I was flattened.

But I came away from the zoo with something, a piece of news about myself: I am coded, somehow, for otters and beavers. I exhibit instinctive behavior in their presence, when they are displayed close at hand behind glass, simultaneously below water and at the surface. I have receptors for this display. Beavers and otters possess a "releaser" for me, in the terminology of ethology, and the releasing was my experience. What was released? Behavior. What behavior? Standing, swiveling flabbergasted, feeling exultation and a rush of friendship. I could not, as the result of the transaction, tell you anything more about beavers and otters than you already know. I learned nothing new about them. Only about me, and I suspect also about you, maybe about human beings at large: We are endowed with genes which code out our reaction to beavers and otters, maybe our reaction to each other as well. We are stamped with stereotyped, unalterable patterns of response, ready to be released. And the behavior released in us, by such confrontations, is, essentially, a surprised affection. It is compulsory behavior and we can avoid it only by straining with the full power of our conscious minds, making up conscious excuses all the way. Left to ourselves, mechanistic and autonomic, we hanker for friends.

Everyone says, stay away from ants. They have no lessons for us; they are crazy little instruments, inhuman, incapable of controlling themselves, lacking manners, lacking souls. When they are massed together, all touching, exchanging bits of information held in their jaws like memoranda, they become a single animal. Look out for that. It is a debasement, a loss of individuality, a violation of human nature, an unnatural act.

Sometimes people argue this point of view seriously and with deep thought. Be individuals, solitary and selfish, is the message. Altruism, a jargon word for what used to be called love, is worse than weakness, it is sin, a violation of nature. Be separate. Do not be a social animal. But this is a hard argument to make convincingly when you have to depend on language to make it. You have to print up leaflets or publish books and get them bought and sent around, you have to turn up on television and catch the attention of millions of other human beings all at once, and then you have to say to all of them, all at once, all collected and paying attention: Be solitary; do not depend on each other. You can't do this and keep a straight face.

Maybe altruism is our most primitive attribute, out of reach, beyond our control. Or perhaps it is immediately at hand, waiting to be released, disguised now, in our mind of civilization, as affection or friendship or attachment. I don't see why it should be unreasonable for all human beings to have strands of DNA coiled up in chromosomes, coding out instincts for usefulness and helpfulness. Usefulness may turn out to be the hardest test of fitness for survival, more important than aggression, more effective, in the long run, than grabbiness. If this is the sort of information biological science holds for the future, applying to us as well as to ants, then I am all for science.

One thing I'd like to know most of all: When those ants have made the Hill, and are all there, touching and exchanging, and the whole mass begins to behave like a single huge creature, and thinks, what on earth is that thought? And while you're at it, I'd like to know a second thing: When it happens, does any single ant know about it? Does his hair stand on end?

AFTE RWORD

"Instead, me." Lewis Thomas makes a transition from observing the behavior of beavers and otters to observing the behavior of Lewis Thomas. He does it, elegantly, by means of a two-word sentence which follows a sentence of forty-two words and precedes a sentence of thirty-one words providing rhythmic variation, simple sandwiched by complex. Of course the two-word sentence is incomplete; many teachers, for good reason, ask their students to avoid incomplete sentences until they approach the skillful control of a Lewis Thomas.

Really, the essayist has all along reported not on beavers or otters but on Lewis Thomas, for it was his "mechanistic and autonomic" reaction to the animals that he revealed, not the animals themselves. Thus the essay discovers, at the moment of this transition, that its subject is not what it thought its subject was: The essay's shape is the plot of its thought.

Perhaps "Instead, me" should be scrolled onto the essayist's coat of arms. Beginning with Montaigne, the essayist's subject has been me. The assumption is implicit:

If we understand one human being (possibly the one we stand closest to) we learn about all other human beings, for each man and woman potentially contains every man and woman. Lewis Thomas admires Montaigne and has written about the great inventor of the essay, who once said, "Each man bears the

form of man's entire estate."

BOOKS AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK

Et Cetera, Et Cetera: Notes of a Word- Watcher. New York: Penguin. Essays.

The Fragile Species. New York: Macmillan. Essays.

Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. New York: Bantam. Essays.

The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher. New York: Penguin. Essays.

The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine Watcher. New York: Bantam. Nonfiction.