Spider Man

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2014)

This year has been very bad for butterflies, at least at my house in France. Normally they dance around the lavender in clouds, but this year there have been very few. Why this should be I do not know: one is inclined these days to ascribe every change in nature, especially undesirable or unwanted, to global warming.

It is curious how people's attitude to the existence of a supposedly empirical phenomenon depends so completely on their political outlook. It is as if policy determined facts and not facts policy. If people are against big government they tend to deny that there is any such phenomenon; if they are for big government they tend to regard it as established fact and equate those who deny its existence with Holocaust deniers.

I have not followed the debate very closely: frankly, it bores me even though the fate of the world is at stake. The fate of the world is too large a thing to engage my interest for very long: give me a convoluted crime any day, I can read about *that* forever. But in so far as the debate impinges on my consciousness at all, it seems to boil down to a few questions:

> Is global warming taking place?
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> If it is taking place, is it caused by Man's activity?
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> If it is taking place, is it necessarily a wholly bad thing?
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> If it is a bad thing on balance, and is caused by Man's activity, what should be done about it?
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> If it is taking place, but is not the result of Man's activity what should we do about it?
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> Are the proposed cures worse than the disease?

My problem is that, not knowing anything about climate except that sometimes it is too hot for me and sometimes too cold, sometimes too windy and sometimes too still, but rarely just right, I am at the mercy of the last expert I hear. When someone says that the concept of global warming is suspect from the outset because there is no way of measuring the temperature of the earth as a whole, and anyway such measurements as have been made do not demonstrate, even in

their own terms, any tendency to global warming, what am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to think when I see pictures, incontrovertible, of glaciers and ice caps melting? In practice what I do is to think of something else entirely, the lazy man's way out of any dilemma.

But while it has been a very bad year for butterflies, it has been a very good one for spiders – and flies (perhaps these two facts are dialectically related, though while I can see how flies might bring forth spiders, I cannot see how spiders bring forth flies). When I arrived back at my house after an absence of a few months, I thought I had stumbled upon the French National Spider Reserve, so many were there inside and outside the house.

I don't actually like spiders very much, though I recognise their role in keeping flies down. If I am honest I am a tiny bit afraid of them, though of course I do not girlishly run away from them or utter screams when I see one (this year, that is just as well, I would be hoarse by now). I *can* pick them up with my hands when called upon to do so, but I would really rather not.

This is somewhat odd, because I love beetles and other insects. What is it about spiders that so commonly inspires fear? In Australia, where they have so many dangerous species, fear is to a degree rational; but my faint fear of them is not allayed, as it ought to be, by knowledge the fact that in Europe spiders are very rarely dangerous. That spiders have eight legs whereas insects have only six surely cannot account for my frisson of fear. Why should two legs extra make any difference? (On the other hand, I find the *Myriapoda*, the many-legged creatures such as centipedes and millipedes, utterly repellent. I keep finding *Scutigera coleoptrata*, the Mediterranean house centipede which has fifteen pairs of legs, in my French bathtub, and am inhibited from washing it angrily down the plughole only by a vague respect for life in general and disgust at enjoyment of its suffering, if 'suffering' is the word for its struggles against the tide of water that to it would be a Tsunami; so instead of washing it away I shovel it on to a piece of paper and defenestrate it, a much more human method of disposal. How its legs make me shudder as their contract in co-ordinated waves! And yet again, I am disgusted by worms, both segmented and unsegmented, which have no legs at all. It seems that creatures, to please me, must have the right number of legs, between two and six. This, of course, is a necessary condition, though not a sufficient one. Hyenas, hornets, cockroaches and many people do not please me.)

There is something peculiarly unpleasant about the sensation of an unseen thread of a spider's web brushing into one's face, and this year I experienced it many times as I walked in my house and garden, far more than ever before. (I don't much care for the sensation of cold used

teabags on the skin, either.) I know that the thread which the spider spins, or rather excretes, is a marvellous thing, the strongest fibre known to Man, the strongest fibre in the universe: I tested such a fibre that had been spun between the two branches of a bush and was amazed by how hard I could pull one of the branches toward me without breaking the fibre. Even more unpleasant than bumping with one's face into a spider's web is the removal of spiders' webs from the brush one has used to clean the corners of the room, the casements, the bookshelves and so forth. It is difficult to do so: the web sticks unpleasantly to one's fingers as if one were a prey, and won't leave the brush either.

I am not alone in my disgust at spiders' webs. Horror films often use spiders' webs as a metonym for a sinister place. What I cannot quite disentangle in my mind (no pun intended) is why the sensation of the web should be so disagreeable, to the point of being horrible and even frightening. Is it the tactile sensation itself or the arachnoid association of that sensation that revolts us? I suppose an experiment could be done to elucidate the matter, if anyone thought it worth elucidating: a person could be made to come into contact alternately with a spider's web and something made to feel like a spider's web without knowing which was which. If his disgust was equal, but greater when he knew when he was in contact with a real spider's web, it would be the anti-spider culture in which he had been raised rather than the sensation itself that caused his disgust. On the other hand, it might be that our tendency to disgust of spiders' webs is inborn, as the chimpanzee's fear of snakes is said to be.

A long time ago, in my intellectual youth, I read a book called *Purity and Danger*, by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, about the way in which we humans divide into the clean and the unclean. This is a question related to that of the reasons that some animals attract and others repel. Unfortunately I did not understand the book at the time, which may not have been entirely my fault since, in a preface to a subsequent edition, the author wrote, 'the book would have been better received if it had been clearer;' but I took from it an impression that has lasted ever since, namely that our classification into the pure and the impure, the clean and the unclean, the attractive and unattractive, partakes of much more than merely rational considerations. I know, for example, that my dislike of cockroaches has little to do with their capacity to spread disease. (One senses a certain reluctance in publications devoted to pests to admit that the role of cockroaches in spreading disease is a relatively minor one at worst, that no specific epidemic outbreak has ever been proved to have been caused by them, and that the fear that they might spread disease is of the 'it stands to reason' variety because they have been found to carry pathogenic germs on their bodies. But this 'it stands to reason' kind of argument in medicine is often false, and what stands to reason is often not in fact the case; but still we feel that creatures so uniformly reviled, that crunch horribly

under the shoe when stepped upon, *ought, if there were any justice in the world*, to be important carriers of disease.) In the case of cockroaches, it is perhaps the fear of being overrun by them that haunts us; and their resistance to being exterminated by us is an insult to our giant intelligence. They are regarded as primitive even by insect standards, and yet they outwit us: three quarters of all American homes have them. It is not the meek who will inherit the earth but the cockroaches.

What repels us can also fascinate us. I am repelled by snakes but also drawn to them: I don't think I could ever pass one by without approaching it, even if I knew it to be highly dangerous. Indeed, the danger would only encourage me to approach nearer, as a kind of test of character (mine, not the snake's). This reminds me of an essay, titled *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, by Simon Leys, the wonderful Belgian sinologist and literary essayist who lived most of his adult life in Australia and who has just died (he was my hero). 'Every time I see one of those threatening labels on a packet of cigarettes,' he wrote, 'I feel seriously tempted to start smoking again.'

In fact, I have idled away several hours this summer watching outdoor spiders. For example, near one blackberry bush where I gather blackberries (another way of putting off work, under the pretext that I am thereby living the natural life), a very large yellow, black and white striped spider has been eating a handsome dragonfly caught in its – actually *her* – web. I watched this Argiope spider vibrating ecstatically and sucking the juices from this large creature. By the next day the prey was gone from her web, whether entirely eaten or otherwise disposed of I cannot say. Certainly, the spider looked fatter the next day.

Perhaps more sinister, if Nature can ever be sinister, was the disappearance from the web of her husband, a comparatively small arachnid of, if I may so put it, more spidery physique. It is well known that female Argiope spiders eat their husbands, and perhaps this accounted for some of my spider's increased size the following day.

Near the verandah table on which I write is a bush in which a funnel web spider has spun its web (the funnel web spiders are out in astonishing force this year). These spiders spin a web with a funnel into which they retreat either for safety or to eat their prey, which they drag into it so that they can consume it in private.

Can spiders learn? It seems to me that they can, but perhaps I am deceiving myself. At first when I approached the web the spider would dart immediately into the depths of its funnel, like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. But gradually, over the succeeding days, it became less timid, and now does not do so unless I actually touch the web. It has learned that

if I was not exactly a spider’s best friend, neither was I its worst enemy.

To return to the male-eating Argiope. In his preface to Richard Dawkins’ famous first book, the great evolutionary biologist, Robert Trivers, wrote that study of the social ants, wasps and bees had conclusively demonstrated that there was no genetic basis for inequality of the sexes. I wonder when the first wife-killer will argue in his defence that, in killing his wife, and having studied the behaviour of Argiope spiders, he was only acting pre-emptively, to prevent his own death; or a husband-killing wife, having also studied the behaviour of Argiope spiders, she was only acting true to biological form, and was therefore not responsible for her behaviour.

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is