Making the Moth of It

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2018)

El Coloso, Francisco de Goya, 1808-1812

The moth, the butterfly's nearest relative, does not enjoy a good reputation. The very word *moth* conjures up annoying little holes in socks and curtains. Moths are to fabric what rust is to iron or mould to bread, and they used to take a terrible toll of fur coats in the days when middle-class people still had fur coats. I remember that my mother used to send her mink for cold-storage in the summer, a service that is no more required these days than that of the ice-man. But one has still to take all kinds of precautions against

themmoths, I mean, not fur coats.

My wife puts lavender in our drawers, which is said to discourage the little beasts. We used to put in musk as well, until our supply ran out. Then my wife discovered that in Turkey naphthalene (of which my grandmother used to smell) was still permitted to be sold, and bought an entire bottle of it in little balls. Unaccustomed as she was to the use of naphthalene, she put the little balls, many of them, everywhere, until the whole house smelt of my grandmother. It took ages to go away, that smell, which in slight doses is pleasing, or at least intriguing, but in large is throat-catching. Naphthalene was prohibited from use in Europe because it is carcinogenic, but to judge by our survival its action is delayed.

The Bible does not have a good word for moths. They are made to stand for the vanity of earthly pride, especially that of youth or material possession. Psalm XXXIX, for example (in the version of that most exquisite of all English texts, the *Book of Common Prayer*) says:

> Thou makest his beauty to consume away, like as it were a moth
>
> fretting a garment: every man therefore is but vanity.

Or, as Matthew VI, 19, has it:

> Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth

and

rust do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.

Besides their propensity to corrupt, in the Biblical sense, moths can be mildly unpleasant, especially where they are numerous. When I illuminate my bedside lamp in France, for example, the they come in large numbers likewell, like moths to the flame. They flutter about inside the lampshade making an astonishing racket for creatures so small; whatever it is that they desire of the light, they seem never quite satisfied with it, rather like consumers in modern consumer society, and flutter about some more.

Things are hardly any better when I put out the light, at least for a time. Then the moths start flying around at random and personally I find the sensation of a moth flying into my face in the dark disproportionately disagreeable, considering that it can do no harm. I try to brush the moth away, but always too late: I flick the moth away after it has bolted, so to speak. Somehow, moths also manage to insinuate themselves *into* the bed, which is even more unpleasant, and many is the squirming struggle I have had under the sheets to rid the bed of them.

Moths, then, do not share in the popularity of butterflies, quite the reverse; and for every enthusiast for the former, there are a hundred, or perhaps even a thousand, for the latter. There are, of course, specialists in moths, as there are in everything else (one defence of Mankind is the diligence with which, collectively, it has studied the universe into which it was born); but for every book about

moths, there are untold numbers about butterflies.

Nevertheless, many moths have a beauty of their own, if more restrained than the more obvious, one might even say sometimes gaudy, beauty of butterflies. They are understated rather than overstated in their design and coloration (I use the word design without implying any designer). Recently I have started to take photographs of them.

Let me admit at once to a complete absence of technical competence as a photographer: I do not know my apertures from my exposures. (I speak only of photography, of course; I am well aware of the relationship between other types of apertures and exposures.) I think I have an eye for composition, however, and modern cameras are very forgiving of technical ignorance. Where the night-photograph of moths is concerned, ignorance is often bliss, for it can result in the most startling and beautiful pictures that mere technical competence would probably not have obtained, because the effect was unforeseen, probably unforeseeable, unlooked for and certainly not desired in advance. Thus every photograph becomes an experiment, an experiment that mostly fails but occasionally succeeds triumphantly. And now that we can simply wipe off from the camera’s memory the failures, without having to go to the trouble and expense of developing on paper each photograph that we take, we can simply try and try again until we hit upon that is splendid.

Needless to say, I feel slightly guilty about this. I once reviewed book of the photographs of the explorer, Wilfred Thesiger, who travelled far and wide in the Abyssinia here he was born, in Iraq, and above all in the Arabian Peninsula. There he shared the physical discomfort of the Bedu, the

inhabitants of the desert, just before advent of oil had so thoroughly destroyed their ancient (and noble) way of life. He published his great book, *Arabian Sands*, in 1959; by the time his book of photos was published he was a very old man.

My review praised his photographs highly, but not, I think, *too* highly. If photographs can be masterpieces, his were masterpieces; and the very difficulties under which they were taken (I surmised) contributed to the intensity of the vision of which they were evidence. With what infinite care and discretion must they have been taken, where sand and grit and sun were the enemy of the photographer, and where the results could not be known until development very much later, after every possible hazard known to photographic film had been encountered and endured! I wrote that the photographs suggested to me an almost religious ecstasy, certainly a mystical one, on the part of Thesiger, and I was gratified to learn by an intermediary that he was much moved by my review. I had understood! For a reviewer, there is no greater compliment than that the author says that he has understood, just as for the writer there is no more irritating review than the one in which the reviewer has plainly taken no pains to understand, or has refrained from understanding because of *parti pris*. The only review worse for a writer is the critical one which is correct or justified in its criticisms.

To take splendid photographs without the difficulties that Thesiger faced is almost sacrilegious, then, but I would not be telling the truth if I said that some of my photos are, by chance, or seem to me, quite good. The camera encouraged me to look more closely at the beauty of moths than I might otherwise have done, though whether the camera in my hand caused me to see beauty, or seeing the beauty caused me to take up the camera, I can no longer say with certainty. Be

that as it may, moths have become beautiful for me where before they had been only a nuisance.

One night I took a picture of a small moth that landed on my bathroom mirror. It was white, with black eyes and a fringe of yellow-gold on the front edge of its wings. The photograph turned out to be of ethereal beauty. The moth was transformed into pure silver and gold (apart from its large dark eyes which, together with its inquiring antennae, imparted to it an air of alertness and intelligence surprising in a mere insect). Since I have not seen all the photographs of moths ever taken I am not entitled to say that there has never been a photograph of a moth like it, but I have never seen such a one.

By similar happy chance, I also took a photo by moonlight of a spider on its web, and it too resulted in an ethereal picture, silver etched on black. It was as eerie as a story by Poe, without the verbiage.

I was pleased with my luck, of course, but at once began to worry, in the manner typical of neurotic intellectuals, over the status of these photographs. Though undoubtedly beautiful, was there any artistic merit in them, given that, when I took them, I had no idea, or no preconception, of how they would come out? On showing them to others, could I brazen it out and preen myself as a photographer? The only slight merit that I could truly claim, and it was very slight, was that I recognised in these humble creatures something worth photographing which others might have overlooked.

Does artistic merit appertain only to those works in which an artist’s conscious design has been carried to triumphant conclusion? Many artists in all fields claim that their best work is carried out in a state of semi-automatism, if not total automatism. Does merit, then, inhere in the intention or in what is produced, or in some combination of the two?

Our reaction to works of art is often complex. We often stand transfixed before what we have been told ought to transfix us: few of us have the independence of mind or the confidence in our own powers of discrimination to judge of works entirely independently of props such as the opinions of others, or of what everyone knows. *El Coloso*, the painting in the Prado once attributed to Goya, was downgraded by art historians as being by an unregarded follower of his, the painting was removed from its pride of place in the gallery with the famous Black Paintings of Goya (for the moment safe in their attribution), and promptly ceased to attract crowds of admirers who used to experience feelings of sublimity while standing in front of it. Now the public was told that not only was *El Coloso* not by Goya, but that it was *obviously* not by Goya; any fool could see it, though any fool, including art historians and authors of books about Goya, had failed for more than a century and a half to see it. This painting, which not long before would have attracted so many visitors that you would be lucky to catch a glimpse of it between the thighs of the tall, and the heads of the short, people in front of you, is now passed by the hurrying crowds on their way to gawp at the *Perro semihundido* and other Black Paintings as if it were no more worthy of notice than plaster ducks on a suburban living-room wall.

Only a couple of days ago, I read in a newspaper that twenty-one paintings (out of about fifty) supposedly by Modigliani at

an exhibition in Genoa had been impounded by the Italian police as fakes. If the alleged fakes turn out to be true fakes, or perhaps I should say turn out to be truly fakes, the sum total of the world's sublime feelings will have been reduced slightly, in so far as never again will any such feelings be experienced in front of these twenty-one paintings: though physically, of course, they, the paintings, will have remained exactly what they always were.

Thirty years ago, there was a rumour that one night in 1909, in a state of despair, Modigliani had thrown sculptures into a canal in his home town of Livorno. The canal was dragged, three sculpted heads were found, and were immediately proclaimed masterpieces, including by the curator of the town's modern art museum. A few days later, three students and a local artist admitted that they had faked the heads, and provided irrefutable proof that they had done so. The whole country fell about laughing, but for myself I could not but feel some sympathy for the humiliated curator, who lost her job over her misjudgment. A moment of folly can vitiate a lifetime of service.

If aesthetic merit were the sole source of the sublimity of our feelings, a fake Modigliani that 99.9 per cent of people were incapable of recognising as such would be as good (and valuable) as a real one. Perhaps I will pass off my photos after all as masterpieces that came out exactly as I had intended.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *The Proper Procedure* from New English Review Press.

Help support *New English Review*.

More by Theodore Dalrymple here.

Theodore Dalymple is also a regular contributor to our blog, *The Iconoclast*. Please click here.