Creepy: Pondering the question of insects and origins

by Martin E. Marty in the June 27, 2006 issue

Ogden Nash taught us most of what we need to know about centipedes when he wrote about the one that was happy until a toad asked, “Which leg goes after which when you run?” Whereupon the centipede pitched into a ditch, paralyzed by confusion. Recently, thanks to J. L. Cloudsley-Thompson’s review of *Secret Weapons*, by Thomas Eisner, Maria Eisner and Melody Siegler (*Times Literary Supplement*, April 28), more light has been shed on the “defenses of insects, spiders, scorpions, and other many-legged creatures.” The first impulse of this new expert on insects is to speculate about the origins of their diversity, given the options of evolution, intelligent design and creation.

We should care about these creatures, there being so many of them. “More species of beetle are known to science than of all other animals (including insects other than beetles) put together.” There are 3,700 known species of cockroaches alone, and they will outlive us all.

This statistic ought to, but evidently does not, disturb literalists who recall that Noah’s family had to catch and bring on the ark “of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female” (Gen. 6:8). The Noahs also had to be rather deft to avoid the hazardous secretions of these creatures. Some produce “repugnatorial secretions,” often containing “proteinaceous and cyanogenetic compounds that generate hydrogen cyanide.” Some scolopendromorphs, which have poison glands in their legs, can harm your skin merely by walking over it. *Rhysida nuda* in Africa, when disturbed, can voluntarily detach its legs to distract predators. “Other species swing their anal legs from side to side and stridulate when irritated”—something we will see political candidates doing during campaigns this fall. Female fireflies, through aggressive mimicry, attract males, have sex and then devour their menfolk. In 1898 French soldiers in Algeria ate legs of frogs which had been feeding on blister beetles, with visible consequences: “The unfortunate legionnaires ended up with ‘érections douloureuses et prolongeés.’” Daddy-long-legs

spiders, we learn, have “leg autotomy,” which can be used for defensive purposes in their just wars.

Leaving Noah and kin behind, we move to intelligent design and evolution. As I read Cloudsley-Thompson I have to think of the ingenuity of the presumably intelligent Designer in setting up the animal struggles, in which “ploys are met with counterploys.” Think, for the most dramatic instance, of darkling beetles that, when threatened, stand on their heads and spray repellent quinones on attacking grasshopper mice. “These small rodents have acquired the remarkable skill of holding the beetles upright and forcing their rear ends into the desert sand, where the secretion is discharged ineffectually.” That’s not the end of the story. “The beetles are then devoured—apart from the tips of their abdomens (which contain the repugnatorial glands) and the legs and wings, which contain few nutrients.”

From pondering the question of insects and origins, I am drawn to observe the relation of insects to destiny and the eschaton. What we are seeing in the insect world is an almost perfect description—observe it on the desert sands of Iraq—of creature fighting creature, ploy being met with counterploy, devouring met with counterdevouring until nutrients and life are gone. Should we think: this is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends . . . ? The cockroaches, however, will survive.