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# "Spiders and Webs in American Literature"

Vincent Dussol

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Where there were no spiders I saw spiders  
Patti Smith, Witt

- 1 A spider thread runs through American literature, poetry in particular. It has not escaped critics' attention. Hyatt H. Waggoner contended that "it might well be argued that Emily Dickinson is more central in American poetry even than Whitman" and that her "centrality could be discovered inductively from a study of her several spider poems<sup>1</sup> which would place them side by side with the spider poems of Taylor, Whitman and Frost" (Waggoner 630-631). In *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*, John Elder calls the spider and its web "a characteristic subject of American poetry" (Elder 150).
- 2 This article first proposes to ask how that may have become the case and examines different instances in which textual evidence suggests that authors were conscious that their choice of the spider for a subject meant that they would be following in a predecessor's footsteps. As it will become plain to the reader, the source material of this research is not confined to poetry. Indeed the germ of the second point this essay makes – the notion that, aside from veiled references to previous texts, there may be a recurring feature in American authors' treatment of spiders (the naturalist's eye or touch) – comes from a critic's observation about a passage from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. This study next turns to the *other* American spider heritage, namely that of Native American myths, which anthropologists contributed to making available to non-Native Americans. It seems certain that the revival of Native American literature in the second half of the twentieth century partly accounts for what could be called "spider syncretism" as it is found in radical American women's movements. Of course the main question that should finally be addressed is why spiders have proved such a fascinating topic for American writers and culture. Not unexpectedly, the explanations offered in the last part of the article are embryonic and tentative. It nevertheless seems worth hazarding them, given the peculiar resonance of the spider in America even outside the

field of literature and the choice was made here to end by piling up more heterogeneous evidence of this resonance, – admittedly rather higgledy-piggledy – for future use. This essay is a stub.

## A lineage of textual spiders

- 3 How does the tradition of a subject start within the corpus of a nation's literature? In the case of the spider and its web in America, it is safe to assume that the first two founding exponents of what was to become a tradition partly drew their inspiration from biblical spiders. Edward Taylor (1642-1729), the author of the poem "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly" was a Puritan minister and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), who treated the subject in an essay and referred to spiders in one of his most famous sermons, was a Congregationalist preacher and a theologian.<sup>2</sup> The spider is not a major symbol in the Bible, but what few mentions of it that are found in the holy book of Christianity, are unambiguously negative. Unsurprisingly, Edward Taylor's "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly" is true to biblical meaning on this point. It reads like an allegory coming with its interpretation and the practical conclusion to be drawn from the lesson. The spider is hell's creature; the web he weaves is used "To tangle Adams race/ In's stratagems" (Taylor 340). Consequently, one should pray to the Lord for safe guidance away from those traps. The same observation can be made about Edwards. His fire-and-brimstone sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," refers to "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire" and his youthful essay "Of Insects" ends on a praise of God who provided for the regular destruction of spiders by drowning: "almost all manner of aerial insects, and also spiders which live upon them and are made up of them, are at the end of the year swept and wafted into the sea and buried in the ocean [...]. Hence [...] we may behold and admire at the wisdom of the Creator."<sup>3</sup> This, to Edwards, providential solution to the problem is probably echoed in "The Spider" by Richard Eberhardt (1904-2005). The last stanza is about "moving eyesight off" from the familiar surroundings of the barn to the shore which, the speaker says, is "no place for spiders." Unlike Edwards's, Eberhardt's spiders are not doomed to be drowned. The spider and the ocean stand for two different ways to transcendence: "Do I feed deeper on a spider,/ A close-hauled view upon windless meaning,/ Or deeper a day or dance or doom bestride/ On ocean's long reach, on parables of God?" (Eberhardt 232)
- 4 To revert to chronological succession, Susan Howe strongly suggests that Dickinson, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, must have been exposed to Jonathan Edwards's thinking either directly or indirectly: his *Complete Works* were reprinted in Dickinson's lifetime and at least one close friend of the Dickinson family knew his writing well. So it makes sense that Howe should have entitled the section of her book devoted to Jonathan Edwards's prefiguration of Dickinson, "Conversant with Spiders" (Howe 1985, 47-52).
- 5 The tradition was clearly claimed and debts acknowledged when in the 20<sup>th</sup> century New England-born Robert Lowell quarried two poems from Jonathan Edwards's spider material.<sup>4</sup> To turn to less obvious examples of "spider legacy," Frost's well-known 1922 poem "Design" (Norton 1892) may have inspired both Jorie Graham and Philip Roth. "Design" features a "fat and white spider" that sitting "[o]n a white heal-all" has, thanks to its camouflage color, caught a moth. The speaker proceeds from there to hypothesize

the existence of a "design of darkness" in a universe where a heal-all becomes a scene of death and the possibility of healing seems denied. When in her 1980 poem "The Geese" (1995), Jorie Graham includes spiders in her tableau of a natural world that will not cohere and writes that "things will not remain connected/ will not heal" (Norton 2820), it is tempting, given the context, to ascribe the reference to not-healing to a wish to make up for that general disconnect(ion), by hailing a predecessor in the chain of American spider poems. The camouflaged spider lurking in a white flower is also part of the catalog of subjects Merry Levov is said by the narrator of *American Pastoral* to have been interested in in her bucolic youth:

She used to [...] examine with the pocket magnifying glass he'd given her every chameleonlike crab spider that she brought home to hold briefly captive in a moistened mason jar, feeding it on dead houseflies until she released it back onto the goldenrod or the Queen Anne's lace ("Watch what happens now, Dad") where it resumed adjusting its color to ambush its prey.  
(Roth 420)

- 6 In addition, it should be noted that the association of "lace" with a spider is found in Dickinson's poem 1423 in which the web is compared to "mechlin."<sup>5</sup> More examples of such transmissions of the "spider baton" will be discussed in the rest of the article. One may simply conclude for the time being that spiders have become a part of American authors' co-textual environment, part of the national house of words. Once a tradition has been identified, it goes on under its own steam, so to say: the ball is simply kept rolling.<sup>6</sup>

## Naturalists' Spiders

- 7 When it comes to spiders in American literature, it seems that authors – in their own names or vicariously through their speakers or characters – will double as naturalists, regardless of their principal calling or of the aim being pursued (moral, religious, metaphysical or aesthetic). Even in the most unexpected of ways, it finally looks as though the real spider was never lost sight of.
- 8 In Edward Taylor's poem for instance, the didactic use of the spider emblem does not spoil the graphic quality in the rendering of the scene depicted in the opening stanzas – despite the strong flavor of pathetic fallacy present in them. The speaker mocks the spider's lack of audacity when facing a wasp as opposed to its expeditious cruelty with a fly. But in both cases, the scene has been carefully observed:

I saw a pettish wasp  
Fall foule therein.<sup>7</sup>  
Whom yet thy Whorle pins did not clasp  
Lest he should fling  
His sting.  
But as affraid, remote  
Didst stand hereat  
And with thy little fingers stroke  
And gently tap  
His back.  
Thus gently him didst treat  
Lest he should pet,  
And in a froppish, waspish heate  
Should greatly fret  
Thy net.

Whereas the silly Fly,  
 Caught by its leg  
 Thou by the throate tookst hastily  
 And 'hinde the head  
 Bite Dead.  
 (Taylor 340)

- 9 Provided one disregards its conclusion, it is equally obvious, on reading Jonathan Edwards's "Of Insects," that it did not originate in the speaker's abhorrence of spiders: the essay does not primarily regard them as symbols of evil. Instead, it is informed by a sense of wonderment. Edwards's speaker was puzzled by the ability of spiders to defy the laws of gravity and float in space and he conducted a series of experiments aimed at solving the mystery to his satisfaction, which he did, finding more reason therein to celebrate the Creator's providence. The Calvinist theologian to-be also had this awed and marveling naturalist in him.



- 10 Robert Lowell's two poems inspired by Jonathan Edwards's spider material rightly recall that the Calvinist theologian's repeated use of spiders as vehicles of metaphors in his rhetoric of doom was rooted in observation. Either ventriloquizing Edwards's voice - "I saw the spiders marching through the air" (Lowell 59) or addressing him - "lying on your back,/ you saw the spiders fly,// basking at their ease,/ swimming from tree to tree -" (Lowell 354) - Lowell does not pass over that bottom stratum: the naturalist's eye.
- 11 The insisting presence of the naturalist's eye in American literature when spiders are the subject, and the continuity of the "chain of spiders," are once again illustrated by the different accounts of the same event(s) in Clayton Eshleman's work and a passage from David Antin's *What it means to be avant-garde*.<sup>9</sup> In the latter book, Antin revisits - through a long drawn-out metaphor - the poet/spider analogy: "but being a poet and working with language is a lot like being a spider and working with silk because the language comes out of your mouth much the way thread comes out of a spider so that it looks like you've

made it but only in a way" (Antin 164). Unlike Eshleman's, whose "spider poems" and essay are intensely personal, Antin's piece clearly has a generalizing intent. However, as he is discussing the "structural limitations" that confine the speakers of a particular language and the spiders of a particular type within certain bounds, Antin's speaker displays factual knowledge of those arachnids:

so the epeira has a sticky thread that the  
labyrinth spider hasn't got and the epeira family can lay  
out a stark geometric web in a single plane perpendicular to  
the ground confident that a flying insect will stick  
while the labyrinth spider has to lay out a three  
dimensional maze to entangle insects in its web  
(Antin 164)

- 12 In all likelihood, the first example given by Antin was prompted to him by Eshleman's own encounter with an epeira<sup>10</sup>: "A Japanese Epeira, under whose green, red, and yellow abdomen I spider-sat, daily, for a month" (Eshleman 1986, 219) with "her web attached to the persimmon tree in the Okumura backyard" (Eshleman 2001, 117). Eshleman's own delving into spider symbolism is extremely far-reaching,<sup>11</sup> but the reader is duly informed that the starting point of the research lies in live observations of the creature. What made Eshleman's first observational moment a landmark in retrospect was the vision, occurring shortly afterwards, of a huge spider similar to the one he had sat under: "I immediately felt that I had been given a totemic gift and that it would direct my relation to poetry" (Eshleman 2001, 118), he writes. From this point on, the red spider is caught in a multi-layering of references – muse, "Great Mother," at once Arachne and Ariadne, or Minotaur – but wasn't the poet redirected to the latter two by actual goings-on in the persimmon tree?

The orbed web with a female spider at center is a compelling metaphor for the labyrinth. The male spider, with semen-loaded paps, must make his way to the center without signaling via the wrong vibrations that he is prey, inseminate the much larger female, and then skedaddle before she seizes and devours him. [...] As a hybrid, the Minotaur consists of a grotesque synthesis prefigured by mating spiders (Eshleman 2001, 120).

- 13 The naturalist's view and knowledge of the material world come to counterbalance the interpretive flights and the two are conjoined in the character of the shaman: "Making his way between biology and classical myth here may be the ur-poet, the shaman, who at the center of his or her initiation undergoes symbolic torture, dismemberment, and rebirth" (Eshleman 2001, 121). Clayton Eshleman's mention of the shaman invites an integration of the different American "spider cultures," a point to which I will return. More generally, it brings out a common ambivalence in the American literary approach to the animal: the hesitation between forms of Romanticism and a less sentimental outlook derived from contact with native cultures and the encyclopedic Jeffersonian thirst for facts. Eshleman recounts how his coming upon the Japanese spider proved transformational in his life as a poet and he equates it to a passing through to "the other side of nature." "Other," he writes a few pages on, "is a *heartless* word; these days we sometimes set 'significant' before it to *romanticize*<sup>12</sup> its neutrality (Eshleman 2001, 122)." Eshleman entitled the essay and the collection of essays it comes from *Companion Spider*. He also points out: "[t]he conversion of the other into a companion, sounded by Blake's 'Everything that lives is Holy,' is one of the grand human themes, in daily life as well as in art" (Eshleman 2001, 127). But inasmuch as "companion" suggests sharing,<sup>13</sup> it urges recognition of the animal's status as an equal, therefore recognition of its essential

otherness: the hierarchy between human and non-human is leveled but respect presupposes the acknowledgement of irremediable distance. This may account for the conspicuous physical presence of spiders and the frequent inclusion of the observer in the material which has been discussed so far.<sup>14</sup>

14 Commenting on Annie Dillard's spider scene in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, critic Alain Suberchicot interprets her treatment of the subject as part of an attempt to "take up the challenge of the transient in an effort to sever all links with those typically American ancient determinisms." "Any spider topples into the symbolic," he goes on, but not Dillard's despite Jonathan Edwards's heavy legacy bearing on her of spiders doomed by divine will to a providential yearly drowning into the ocean: Dillard's spiders remain "beyond the pale of Calvinistic teleology." "Annie Dillard's achievement as a writer," Suberchicot concludes, "lies in having restored its integrity to the representation of nature: her representation of nature retains a wholeness both in the present and in the transient" (228-229).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, some of Dillard's observations owe something to Edwards: the specimen which she found "especially interesting" intrigued her "because the light just happened to be such that I couldn't see the web at all" so that "[t]he spider I watched was a matter of mystery" (51). But she equally clearly let herself become immersed in her observation and managed to clear the scene of theological overtones. The liberating gesture is unmistakable. Alongside the clear break with the theological, it is also the continuity in the naturalist's scrutiny that I would choose to emphasize.

15 The naturalist's instinct may be what lurks or informs Laura Riding Jackson's Steinian writing in "Elegy in a Spider's Web" with more imitative than descriptive representation of a spinning spider. She very gradually spins out a cat's cradle of words which she knots together, never venturing too far out without first retracing her steps, wishing to secure ties. The poem starts in mid-air, as it were, with a stuttering question:

What to say when the spider  
Say when the spider what  
The spider does what  
Does does dies does it not.  
(Nelson 488)

16 The question will be left hanging in the air, blocked by verbal running on the spot, or the constant circling back. A web is slowly evolved: words cross and re-cross paths. One thing and its opposite are constantly woven together:

Or if I say  
Or if I do not say  
Who cannot cease to know  
Who know the genii  
Who say the I  
Who they [...].  
(Nelson 490)

17 The speaker is half-human, half-spider: "What to say when I/ When I or the spider/No I and I [...]." As thin as gossamer is the visual one-letter separation between life and death, "does" and "dies." As its title suggests, the poem draws on the ancient association of spiders with death, demonstrating the impossibility to extricate oneself from the lethal trap of life. But it is as if the symbol had been de-symbolized with the poet mimicking a spider.

18 Even Rod Smith's most non-referential, non-naturalistic *The Spider Poems* (2000), occasionally show spider mimicking.<sup>16</sup> In the weaving of letters, for instance, as when the

"spider" is seen to enter the text in the wake of other words out of which it is literally made: "like a filter, like a soup, like a spider// suddenly in your face." Or when, imitating what the spider seems to be doing and which is what has made it such a powerful symbol for writers celebrating immanence,<sup>17</sup> Smith chooses to literally start from nothing: "Nothing believes Korea./ Nothing turns into it."<sup>18</sup> The function of the *word* spider is actually to web the poems together. It is a lexical wild card. "Saying why/is like saying spider. Fill your why with walks with spiders". "Spider" is more what it does than what it refers to. Being so many things and people in succession, it links them and so is "spider" in very indirect ways.<sup>19</sup> So the *bios* keeps returning in American writers' "scenes with spiders."

## The *other* tradition and spider syncretism

- 19 Even if most authors who wrote about spiders were not aware of it until the second half of the twentieth century at best when anthropologists' and folklorists' work became more widely available, the Euro-American yarn of spiders had coexisted with another strong, equally homespun symbolizing fiber. From the dawn of time in many Native American traditions, the spider as Grandmother Spider has quite simply stood as the one who spun the world out of inexistence. In Simon Ortiz's *Woven Stone*, a trilogy of works under the sign of continuance that read as a re-gathering, indeed as a contemporary re-telling of "the epic Acoma narrative of our development" (5), the poet brings on this character in the context of his children's births. This is the poet, addressing his newborn child:

To Insure Survival  
 You come forth  
 the color of a stone cliff  
 at dawn,  
 changing colors,  
 blue to red  
 to all the colors of the earth.  
 Grandmother Spider speaks  
 laughter and growing  
 and weaving things  
 and threading them  
 together to make life  
 to wear;  
 all these, all these.  
 (63)

- 20 Ortiz portrays her as a generally positive figure: she is a helper and a creator of beauty. Another of his poems entitled "Toward Spider Springs" features a family that is "trying to find/ the right road," "a place to start all over" (63). In yet another, with myth a given of daily existence, an elderly Navajo woman weaving and the demiurgic animal may become one in the observer's eye:

Quickly, Grandmother,  
 the Spider spins,  
 quick flips and turns,  
 the colors.  
 O the colors, Grandmother,  
 I saw in the two-days-ago rainbow.  
 O grandmother Spider, the sun is shining  
 through your loom.



(63)

21 Ortiz's references to Spider Grandmother actually belong to different Native American cultures. His creative weaving together of stories related to her nevertheless makes a great deal of sense as Spider Grandmother herself is associated with linguistic creation at different levels. In some versions of the Hopi creation myth, she gives human beings a language; in the Navajo creation myth, she gives the people ritual language and so participates in the power of language as "[r]itual language does not describe how things are; it determines how they will be" (Witherspoon<sup>20</sup> quoted by Carol Patterson-Rudolph 98). Spider Grandmother is occasionally shown by Ortiz as a figure of authority. In "And there is always one more story," she finds herself rescuing Coyote from the top of a pinnacle, making her help conditional on strict compliance with a rule. When Coyote, whom she has taken in her basket, cannot help breaching it, Kahmaasuu Dya-ow mercilessly sends him crashing down (177-180).

22 Carol Patterson-Rudolph's *On the Trail of Spider Woman* takes a more scientific approach to the subject, laying much stress on the different Native-American cultures' specificities. The few generalizations the author ventures to offer bring out one significant difference from the White-American treatment of the spider:

To indigenous people there is no reason to depict her in a realistic spider form. Instead, she is described in symbols that reflect her attributes. She is a metaphor for something very small and invisible yet very powerful. She represents creativity, spirit, old age and wisdom. [...] Although people frequently wonder what she looks like, her appearance remains a function of her role in individual myths. This tiny elusive figure is more powerful than any of the larger, more prominent deities" (Patterson-Rudolph 1).<sup>21</sup>

23 It is no wonder that such a rich female figure both powerful and deeply life-giving in its associations with the natural world should have appealed to alternative movements as the lore about it spread thanks to anthropologists. Clayton Eshleman's brand of radical ethnopoetics, can definitely be said to have harnessed spider symbolism to the cause of female power. The previously-quoted prose poem "Placements II" (Eshleman 1986, 219-223) is a typical instance of how the shortcuts – paratactic thinking – tolerable in poetry authorize him to synthesize a wealth of anthropological material. Probably drawing on – among other sources – Chris Knight's *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, he argues that the reversal – more of a usurpation actually – by men of ancient female rituals amounts to a tearing apart of "the Sister web" and can be considered to have been the rule rather than the exception. For example, he hypothesizes that the gradual shift of focus from Arachne to Ariadne was part of the hijacking at work in the superimposition of a male-enhancing myth over a female-enhancing one. While the former stands for "the natural mind of the earth always spinning," the latter is just

the mistress of the labyrinth that the [male] initiate is to traverse [...]. When patriarchal consciousness overwhelmed matriarchal centering, Ariadne became a 'maiden to be rescued,' who, 'falling in love' with the hero Theseus, gave him the 'clew' or thread that would enable him to get in and out and, while in, to slaughter the sleeping Minotaur. The labyrinth, without its central being, was thus emptied of animality, (Eshleman 1986, 222)

24 The evidence summoned by Eshleman is not specifically American; it actually cuts across space and time – ranging from his Middle and Upper Paleolithic "new wilderness" (Eshleman 2003, 17) to ancient Greece or Arnhem Land mythology – but as Adrienne Rich's foreword to *Companion Spider* testifies, the appeal of his work was strong with

American feminists: "I would unhesitatingly urge these essays upon women poets," she writes (Eshleman 2001, ix-x).

- 25 More directly committed to the women's cause and also coming to the fore following the radical 1960s<sup>22</sup> and 1970s, the lesbian movement appropriated spider web imagery, a gesture still occasionally discussed on several sites of the World Wide Web:

Does anyone know the origin of spider web imagery in seventies lesbian-feminism? When I came out, everyone was always going on about "we are the weavers, we are the web." Was it about reclaiming something people are afraid of? Was it some Wiccan thing? Was it because female spiders are bigger than males? Was it an association to spinning, and spinsters? Was it based on a misperception that male spiders don't spin webs? DO male spiders spin webs? [...]

I always thought it was very cool how women would bring rope and yarn to political demonstrations, and "weave webs" by tangling everyone up together...but what's the symbolism about? Where did it start? I have a letter from a friend written in 1981, which says, "Remember—wimmin's webs are always connected but when they become electricity is where it all happens, when the threads of the webs become the wavelengths is when the magic begins!"<sup>23</sup>

- 26 This series of questions posted in April 2010 initiated a passionate forum. Clearly, awareness of the significance of spiders for Native Americans had done much for the popularity of the symbols related to it. One of the first comments showed it: "When I was on the Navajo res in the early 80's, I heard a lot about Spider Woman and the Sacred Web. In Canyon de Chelly, I saw webs people had woven into bushes, and we were told not to photograph them, as they were sacred."<sup>24</sup> Of course classical mythological references to Ariadne, Theseus, Athena or Arachne quickly popped up but the bulk of responses pointed to a broadly militant bundle of meanings. One participant called spider and web "grass-roots self-empowerment imagery."<sup>25</sup> Several others confirmed that its rallying power had been strongest in the 1970s and early 1980s when sexuality and status were high on women's agenda in close connection with environmentalism, pacifism, paganism and lexical issues.<sup>26</sup> Spiders and webs were about a dream of dominant females challenging the ruling male sexuality. A quote from *Sisterhood is Powerful* which came up several times during the forum sums it all up: "If you feel really hostile bring up the sex life of spiders. They have sex. She bites off his head" (Morgan 452). Spiders and webs – via weaving – were about demanding belated recognition of crafts essential to survival but often marginalized owing to their association with women. Invoking spiders alongside toads and bats was meant by neo pagan witches as the vengeful return of the formerly demonized. Women's general insubordination translated into "the unifying theme of women interweaving threads to create a whole, and throwing up webs to tangle the war machine in the women's peace camps and demos." Spiders as female power symbol provided ammunition for countering the disparaging connotations of the word "spinster" and so reclaimed dignity for single women.

- 27 The specificity of American feminists' and lesbians' tapping of spider and web imagery lay in its syncretism. Judy Grahn's 1982 *Queen of Wands*<sup>27</sup> exemplifies this. In the eponymous poem saturated with neo-whitmanian images of linking, "The Queen of Wands" speaker primarily identifies herself as a web-maker, a web-ster in the service of universal democracy. And whether she is tree, sun or spider appears immaterial here:

and here I am only a spider  
webbing their minds  
[...]  
and I am who remembers

the connections woven  
 [...]
   
 And I am the Queen of Wands
   
 who burns, who glows, who webs
   
 the message strands
   
 (50)

- 28 However "Spider" is fleshed out into a character in other poems. "Spider Webster's declaration: He is singing the end of the world again" is an indictment of male aggressiveness in form of a tally of the damage it has caused the world over from the dawn of time up to the present. And the Indian is foremost on Spider's mind: "There was a tribe/ and now there is another,/ there was a nation here once/ and now there is another (56)." Addressing a Grecian Helen with much of Penelope in her in another poem, Spider works at awakening a political consciousness in the one she portrays as the perfect universal benevolent Mother, weaving her "web of thought and caring and connection (67)." In different senses of the word, Spider stands as the organizer, the organizing principle. In a section of her essay "Writing from a House of Women" entitled "The Ideal Place of Wholeness Appears in All Our Work," Grahn brings together the "creatix, the primary god (Spider Grandmother)" of an American Pueblo Indian culture and Lesbian poets, arguing that the latter are "mending the rips and tears" in "the tapestries the old women storytellers once made of the substance of a wholistic life, its spider meanings (281)."
- 29 Contributions to the forum previously referred to included multilayered responses like "Thank you, my spinning spiders! Blessed be the web that unites us all!"<sup>28</sup> This is where the most primal insights meet the twenty-first century.

## Why spiders may have fascinated Americans

- 30 The above "finds" leave unanswered the question of why the "spider tradition" caught on so well in non-Native American America. It is now time it was addressed.
- 31 The beginning of an answer may have been captured by A. R. Ammons in his poem most interestingly entitled "Identity":
- the possible settings  
 of a web are infinite:  
 how does  
 the spider keep  
 identity  
 while creating the web  
 in a particular place?
- 32 One could argue that these words make an apt description of some of the main issues that the settlers of the new continent and the founding fathers of the new nation had to tackle. What fascinates in the spider is its ability to adjust when
- you can go all  
 around the fringing attachments  
 and find  
 disorder ripe,  
 entropy rich, high levels of random,  
 numerous occasions of accident;  
 (Ammons 27-29)

33 "Ammons," Elder writes, "gives the image of the spider and its web a triple importance: as a model of natural order amid flux, of human meaning in a physical world, and of the reflexive voice in 'nature poetry'" (147-150). It is the second point which was especially critical for the new inhabitants of an unsettled territory: the theme of fragility inherent in the spider's web,<sup>29</sup> at the mercy of "every Broom and Bridget" (Dickinson 557), found additional meaning in the context of American culture, anxious to establish itself and preserve its identity. Moreover, this nation's inherent fragmentation might partly account for the appeal exerted upon its writers by spiders and webs, any web being susceptible to tearing or unraveling but also of mending and integrating.<sup>30</sup> It takes but little effort to see the skeletal map of the United States included in Michel Butor's *Mobile* which only shows the contours of each state with its name in abbreviated form, license plate style, as a continent-wide web with Florida, Maine, the southernmost tip of Texas and Washington State's Olympic Peninsula as cobweb-anchors and the Californian Coast possibly flapping in the breeze. Thus "spider writers" of all kinds may reflect the United States haunted by the fear of becoming the Untied States.<sup>31</sup>

34 Furthermore, it can be argued that the nation, throughout its history, has worked on reconciling a vision with hard realities of all kind. In that respect, a spider's web may be seen as epitomizing the perfect compromise between flexibility and rigidity, freedom and determinism:

if the web were perfectly pre-set,  
the spider could  
never find  
a perfect place to set it in; and  
if the web were  
perfectly adaptable,  
if freedom and possibility were without limit,  
the web would  
lose its special identity.  
(Ammons 27-29)

35 The undertaking demanded a lot of courage. And it is the impression the reader derives when reading about Whitman's spider, which "explore[s] the vacant vast surrounding"<sup>32</sup> with its filaments: it "is engaged in what William James would later speak of as a 'faith venture'" (Waggoner 630). What if the golden eagle was the glorious, assertive side of the national coin and the spider its hidden but more real hidden side?<sup>33</sup> Pursuing this line of thinking about America as an insecure nation with the spider as its unacknowledged symbol, the strikingly visual nature of American authors' treatment of spiders could be related to the settler's keen sense of observation of the natural world – a survival skill honed by the perils of a newly discovered place.

36 American webs and spiders may equally be perceived as evil or be seen as threats. Whereas the ceaseless launching forth of filaments was shown by Whitman in a positive light, other forms of webbing have been viewed very negatively. For example Frank Norris, who may have been familiar with Victor Hugo's parallel in *Toilers of the Sea* equating octopus with spider, wrote his epic novel against the railroad, emphasizing containment rather than connections<sup>34</sup>:

the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean,  
red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast  
power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the  
valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of

steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus (Norris 617).

- 37 Unsurprisingly, concern about webs of power appears in the work of Thomas Pynchon who has repeatedly explored the theme of paranoia, that "key notion in American fiction" (Pétillon 196). The main plot line in his *Against the Day* (2006) is also about the conflict pitting workers against capitalists with global ambitions. It takes a good web to defeat an evil one, as the "good" hero's name – Webb Traverse – confirms. As *Pynchonwiki* points out, "the character is introduced mere paragraphs after the description of spider webs," an invitation to web-gazing: "Berry vines crept in the crevices, and spiders adorned the sashwork with webs that when the early daylight was right could cause you to stand there just stupefied" (Pynchon 2006, 76). "In law," the annotator continues, "to 'traverse' means to deny, and a 'traverse' to a pleading is a denial of its allegations. This appellation fits Webb Traverse, whose anarchism is a denial of industrial capitalism."<sup>35</sup>
- 38 A vaguely similar pattern can be observed in Robert Frost's poem "Design" (Norton 1892). The pitiless white spider embodies the fear of an evil design governing the universe, enveloping it like an evil web while the web of the sonnet form tightened up by a rhyming system based on a mere five sounds, may stand for the good counterforce, what Frost saw as the goal of poetry: "a momentary stay against confusion."<sup>36</sup>
- 39 In Jorie Graham's poem "The Geese" (Norton 2820), briefly mentioned in this article's first section, the spiders are at first a source of metaphysical anxiety. They are part of a criss-crossing of patterns. As she is hanging out the wash, the speaker sees a flight of migratory geese, "tapering with goals." They elicit a mixed reaction in her, made of admiration (at the beauty of the sight), envy (of such absence of doubts as to the goals to be pursued) and fear of the passing of time. The spiders she sees closer at hand are weaving their webs between the clotheslines. But instead of concluding from the sight that all filaments and spheres seem to connect in some way, Graham's speaker appears to yield to a kind of despair. The spiders' frantic webbing can only remind human beings of their own fear of senselessness: "As if, at any time, things could fall further apart/ and nothing could help them/ recover their meaning." On second thought, though, the speaker doubts that a "chainlink over the visible world" should be wished-for as it might leave us out. The final realization concluding the poem is that it is the rift that human beings carry within themselves, the yawning gap created by the inscrutable body – "The real is crossing you."<sup>37</sup> – which leaves room for connection with the natural world as it also stops our mind from thinking things through, making for heightened awareness that the whole lies at the heart of the hole. The human being is chained to its body and so a part of the animal world. Due to the mind's forever lagging behind the body "the everyday – equated to an "astonishing delay" –, takes place" (Norton 2820). Graham's spiders stand for the *threat*, not the dream, of a closed unified field. The really unified field is paradoxically achieved through impossible completion. Eshleman pointed out that cobwebs are "both centripetal and centrifugal" (Eshleman 2001, 121).<sup>38</sup>
- 40 In her masterly synthesis on Arachne's metamorphoses in western literature, Sylvie Ballestra-Puech warns against searching for an elusive worldwide core meaning of spider-related symbolism (13). Ultimately, she contends, the basic data about the real spider – that it spins a web to catch its preys – may be all that the fruitless attempt ends up with. Despite all the brilliant pages she devotes to American authors' works, she is examining them within the Western framework as a whole and does not try to tease distinctively

American features out of the astonishing amount of American material on spiders.<sup>39</sup> This article purports to partially fill that gap.

- 41 Surely much spider material produced in the United States was not homegrown. In the wake of Poe, exponents of the Gothic have gone on tapping the spider vein: a gruesome tableau in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* includes "crude tattoos etched" on the skulls of victims of barbaric rituals showing "spiders, swords, targets" (76). But, as we have seen, there has been much original symbolizing around spiders and webs. More than anyone else, Clayton Eshleman has thoroughly explored and expanded spider symbolism by reconnecting it to Old World mythology and rereading the Arachne-Ariadne-Minotaur-Theseus cluster through the issue of fast-disappearing wild species of animals. The labyrinth may soon be empty of all significant others. In doing so, he has contributed to the meeting of Native-American and feminist currents. But the negotiations between competing mythologies are complicated.

Here [...] one must move cautiously  
between the thrust of narrative and  
the associations the story sends out like feelers to test the air  
for prey or rock face and if they do attach, a perpetual  
give and take begins, for the older story wants to go on  
and resists letting the new pull it apart as the new  
revises the identity of the old. It is in the moment when  
both have equal strength that Ariadne's face  
is said to appear in this webbing –  
(Eshleman 1986, 225)

- 42 Much remains to be done. Many connections are unexplored. Like Grandmother Spider which ascends rocky pinnacles, Spider-Man has been climbing glass walls of skyscrapers.<sup>40</sup> There must be more to Spider-man than a mere teenage-formatted response to Batman. *Spiral Orb*, a recently launched online poetry magazine advertises itself thus: "A spiral orb is the type of web that spiders from the family of Araneidae weave [...]."<sup>41</sup> The naturalist's taste for precise characterization is still there. "The spiders can or/ can't leave alone Springsteen's America."<sup>42</sup>

*All my thanks go to Jean-Paul Auxéméry for providing me with much Clayton Eshleman material and granting me permission to reproduce Eshleman's inscription to him. Auxéméry's own poem "saturation..." inscribed to Eshleman, ends « l'araignée tisse cependant le réseau/ où nous lisons le pur désir de voir » (Auxéméry 30), nicely isolating the gist of much American "spider writing."*

for Auxeméry,  
with gratitude for his  
response + work on my behalf,  
& for Codex.  
Jim Eshleman  
Feb. 2002.



E S S A

Y S

Clayton Eshleman

*Foreword by Adrienne Rich*

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<http://www.spiralorb.net/submit>

Accessed on 2011/04/23

## NOTES

1. Poems 605, 1138, 1167, 1275, 1423. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 297, 511, 519-520, 557, 607.
2. It is worth noting from the outset that the American interest in spiders manifested itself across generic boundaries.
3. <http://www.apuritansmind.com/jonathanedwards/JonathanEdwards-Scientific-Insects.htm> .
4. "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" and "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts." Robert Lowell, *The Collected Poems*, 59 and 334.
5. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 607. This may be the right place to acknowledge my debt to one of the anonymous peer-reviewers of this article who suggested I refer to Susan Howe's *The Midnight* with "its precise archeology and typology of lace." Indeed, the excerpts "Bed Hangings II" section of it anthologized in *American Hybrid* include a poem entitled "The Age of Resplendent Lace" with a line that goes "Cobweb gossamer ephemera" (215).
6. The relatively recent tradition of inauguration poems in the USA offers striking examples of this passing of the baton where the baton can be a single word: for example "gift" or "bramble."
7. In the web.
8. <http://www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2006/09/12/jonathan-edwards-loves-spiders/> . All our thanks to Fred Sanders for granting us permission to reproduce his cartoon.
9. Renewed thanks to my anonymous peer-reviewer for directing me to this work.
10. Biographical information about David Antin (born in 1932) and Clayton Eshleman (born in 1935) supports this guess. Their paths often crossed in the 1960s. See Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, 142.
11. See "Placements II" in particular in *The Name Encanyoned River*, 219-223.
12. The italics in this sentence are mine.
13. "The etymologist," Emerson wrote, "finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry" ("The Poet," *Selected Essays*, 271). Eshleman must have been conscious of the etymology of "companion" in his choice of a title: "from L. L. *companionem* (nom. *companiono*), lit. "bread fellow, messmate," from L. *com-* "with" (see *com-*) + *panis* "bread" (<http://www.etymonline.com/>).

14. See also "Cross-Legged, the Spider and the Web," Charles Olson's only "spider poem": it stages a gazer who may be urging himself to "with this body worship her" and to "stare to blindness/ better than the sun" and to "look until/ you know look look keep looking until/ you do know you do know" (513).

15. My translation of the different quotes from A. Suberchicot.

16.

Full text of Smith's poems at <http://www.dcpoetry.com/anthology/251>.

17. See « Modernité d'Arachné : L'écriture de l'immanence » in Sylvie Ballestra-Puech, 279-404. In that it combines zoological accuracy, totemic references and Beat willingness to postpone knowledge and *not* to be in a hurry to know, Clayton Eshleman's formulation of spider-inspired commitment to immanence, can be said to be distinctly American: "I believe that I make my poems out of my body in a way that is symbolically sympathetic with spider spinnerets issuing thread, and that I live and hunt in my poetry. (...) Since my conformational figure [- the spider -] is lethal as well as constructive, it supports negation as well as affirmation, releasing me from the kind of idealism that permeates so much poetry. I relate to spider, web, and prey as a complex in which building, killing, attraction, and the apotropaic constitute a creative maze in which the way out, or resolution, can never be seen until one is right there. Without an overview, there are bound to be lots of dead ends, wrong turns, etcetera, which I accept as part of the creative process as I understand it" (Eshleman 2001, 310).

18. These are the poem's opening lines. They enact the perceptual fact of the invisibility of a spider's "starting point." Emily Dickinson performs a similar "trick" by describing the spider as plying "from Nought to Nought/In unsubstantial Trade" and referring to its "unperceived Hands" (Poem 605, 297). Since the observer is striving in vain to see the actual "knot" being tied, not only does it make sense to substitute the homophonic "Nought" in the description of the scene but the substitution also materializes the perceptual fact of the invisibility of "hard" reality in this instance.

19. More such enactment of environmental nostalgia is found in Smith's *The Spider Poems* with the line "I miss the urth." The prefix "ur" means "original." So it is likely that the shrinking of the two vowels of "earth" into the single "u" is meant to mimic the speaker's longing for the planet as-it-used-to-be.

20. Gary Witherspoon, "Language and Reality in Navajo World View," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 10 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983) 575.

21. One can see how the naturalist's look is mostly irrelevant where closeness to nature is still a given. But the stress laid on the spider's and Spider Woman's small size and invisibility gives an insight into the workings of theogony. It would seem that a deity's power - or rather the election of a material image of divinity - is in direct correlation to its invisibility. And we are talking about major power with Spider Woman: "she is really Mother Earth," reports American folklorist and anthropologist Harold Courlander (Patterson-Rudolph 42). The privileged link between deity and invisibility is probably what Hamilton A. Tyler, another anthropologist, had in mind when he wrote: "Spider Grandmother is by her nature small and disappearing, *like the old ones*. Sometimes she is a voice only [...]" (Patterson-Rudolph 42)

22. Now recognized as a "poet whose work rests at the absolute center of American poetry over the past 50 years" (from Ron Silliman's blurb on the back cover of her collected poems) Joanne Kyger entitled her first collection *The Tapestry and the Web* (1965). In turn Penelope and Ariadne, her speaker wonders: "and what am I? / a flower/ a deer/ a spider waiting/ for the breeze to/ speed my weaving// the reverie of/ memory past/ what I know" (*About Now*, 54-55). To briefly revert to our "lineage of textual spiders," it is worth noting that Clayton Eshleman and Joanne Kyger were both living in Japan at the time and were on friendly terms. Eshleman had his founding spider vision on his way back from visiting Kyger (CE 2001, 55-57). Still on the subject of women poets during the radical 1960s, here is the quote - from an untitled poem by Barbara

Moraff – chosen by Daniel Kane to illustrate the rather experimental writing in *Four Lady Poets*, the anthology edited by Amiri Baraka for Totem Press in 1962:

The wild wind whoops birds shoots bulls of milk whoops  
birds who claw silence beat darkness out of empty eggshells  
the wild wind whoops the birdfeathers choke Aeolus weaving  
spiders millions of them crawling around secausus piglegs.

(Kane 254)

23. <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/spider-webs> .

24. All unidentified quotes in this paragraph also come from <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/spider-webs> .

25. It may not be accidental that Eleni Sikelianos should have fitted in some spider presence in the portrait she draws (in *The California Poem*) of her formidable grandmother: "& the spiderwebs are fresh & dewy" (15).

26. It is worth noting that the gendering of spiders in female authors' work varies. Emily Dickinson consistently gendered spiders male. On the other hand, radical feminists and lesbians just as consistently seem to have been gendering them female: a sign that women's empowerment makes linguistic wars less necessary but not completely so since the dispassionate choice to refer to a spider would be a neutral pronoun.

27. We have used the excerpts included in *The Judith Grahn Reader*, Aunt Lute Books, 2009.

28. See note 33.

29. Standing as the *Ur*-spider story in the western tradition, Ovid's version of the myth of Arachne has consistently been invoked by writers as the rightful defense of human pride, as the fitting celebration of human art, of the superior beauty of immanence over transcendence. Human beings are makers: they create beauty but it is part of the human condition that their beautiful creations are under constant threat of destruction. That dimension in the symbol is what English Romantic Robert Southey's "To A Spider" brings out: "And is not thy weak work like human schemes/And care on earth employ'd?/ Such are young hopes and Love's delightful dreams/ So easily destroy'd!" Still, the poem's speaker continues, "Thy bowels thou dost spin,/I spin my brains" (*The poetical works of Robert Southey collected by himself*, vol. 4, 180-181).

30. As a master weaver and sewer, the spider has logically been associated with mending. To confine ourselves to the Native-American domain, "Spider Woman also plays an important role in the Navajo Healing Chants. She signals a complete recovery from disassociated behavior and a healing of the soul" (Patterson-Rudolph 99).

31. In Jonathan Edwards's view of creation as a grand providential scheme, flying insects were "little collections" of "the nauseousness of our air" and spiders [...] "collections of these collections, their food being flying insects" (<http://www.apuritansmind.com/jonathanedwards/JonathanEdwards-Scientific-Insects.htm>).

It is as though Edwards had inferred from the centripetal pattern of a web a kind of set theory in which ever-vaster and bigger structures could be simultaneously integrated and condensed: an effective remedy to allay fears of fragmentation as well as a pre-vision of the U.S.A or of the World Wide Web, a "collection of collections" if ever there was one.

32. "A Noiseless Patient Spider" (*Leaves of Grass*, 347-348). Before it became, in the "Whispers of Heavenly Death" section, the melancholy poem of an older man uncertain about how long his soul's anchor was going to hold to this life, the poem had been a kind of addendum to his "Passage to India," the piece celebrating the technological webbing of the earth as a starting point for the endless progress of the soul: "The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires" (Whitman 321). The ceaseless launching forth of filaments was then unambiguously shown as a blessing.

33. "With great power there must also come great responsibility." The line is included in a text box in the final panel of the first Spider-Man story.

34. I borrow the phrase from a student's essay published online at <http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/SMargolin/cppgraham.html>.
35. <http://pynchonwiki.com/> .
36. Full text of Frost's essay "The Figure the Poem Makes" at <http://www.mrbauld.com/frostfig.html> .
37. What Graham means here by "the real" seems very close to its definition in Lacanian theory as "the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language." <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/real.html> .
38. Applying the model to the field of narrative, Gillian Conoley's sun-like cobweb of options in *The Plot Genie* suggests exactly that (*American Hybrid* 87).
39. A brief word in praise of the "Shorter Sixth Edition" of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* is in order here as this article partly owes its existence to it. "Shorter" matters here as without the foreshortened view afforded by the one-volume format, the puzzling attention paid to spiders by successive American writers of note might not have become so conspicuous to this reader.
40. Coming after this vertical crawler, virtual crawlers have arrived: "Spider" now refers to "a program that automatically fetches Web pages [...]. It is called a spider because it crawls over the Web." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_crawler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_crawler) .
41. <http://www.spiralorb.net/submit> .
42. <http://www.dcpoetry.com/anthology/251>.

## ABSTRACTS

From Jonathan Edwards to Jorie Graham, spiders are strikingly present in American literature. The purpose of this article is first to show how that theme may have become something of a national tradition as very different writers, all of them careful observers of aranae, answered one another through the years.

It is very likely that the attention paid to spiders by American authors was increased by those Native American myths in which spiders are a central figure. More than occasionally, on the female side of the American counter-culture, especially among its feminist and lesbian exponents, simple activists and creative writers have harnessed the symbolic power invested in the spider by Native Americans.

There may be deeper reasons accounting for American authors' fascination with spiders. The country's phobia of disunion is one; a nation of settlers' acute consciousness of the precariousness of its occupation of the territory is another. In demonstrating outstanding skills for adjustment to unknown places, spiders epitomize a form of identity permanence.

The predominantly positive character of spider symbols in American literature will occasionally be inverted. Following the national logic of checks and balances, any web covering the whole of the United States will tend to come under suspicion.

This study ends with an inventory of cultural productions linked with spiders and webs and whose Americanness is yet to be clearly determined.

De Jonathan Edwards à Jorie Graham, l'araignée apparaît dans un nombre frappant de textes littéraires américains. On a d'abord voulu tenter de montrer comment a pu se construire cette

tradition thématique et faire la preuve que différents écrivains, réunis par un souci de l'observation, se sont répondus à travers elle.

L'attention prêtée à l'araignée s'est certainement trouvée renforcée par les récits mythologiques des peuples premiers américains qui font de l'araignée une figure centrale. Ainsi témoignages et textes de création liés au versant féminin de la contre-culture américaine et aux courants féministes et lesbiens qui en sont issus, attestent de cette conjonction : l'araignée est convoquée en tant que figure de résistance.

Mais il pourrait y avoir des raisons plus profondes à cette fascination particulière des écrivains américains pour l'araignée. L'angoisse de la désunion en est une ; la conscience aiguë qu'un peuple de colons garde de la précarité de son occupation du territoire en est une autre. D'où ce regard si intéressé vers celle qui sait s'installer en s'adaptant sans cesse à des mondes nouveaux sans perdre son identité.

Le caractère largement positif des symboles liés à l'araignée s'inverse à l'occasion et les toiles prenant les Etats-Unis dans leurs rets peuvent être l'objet de soupçons, s'inscrivant dans la logique des « freins et contrepoids ».

L'étude s'achève sur l'inventaire de 'manifestations' de l'araignée et de sa toile dont les liens avec la culture américaine restent à déterminer plus précisément.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Bestiary, Eshleman, lesbian movement, Native Americans, spiders, thread, web

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