Desert Literature: The Early Period

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INTRODUCTION

Although not entirely free, ours is a fairly easy ride when it comes to living on deserts. Today, in order to survive, few people out in the lands of the giant cactus and the Gila monster eat grasshoppers or spend day after day hoeing beans in the punishing 110° heat. Instead, today's residents enjoy a created world of air-conditioned homes, schools, and shopping malls. The point is that few people live in the desert anymore. They live on it. Theirs is a colonial society, imposed on the land, fed from the outside, and infused with the life-giving juice of energy from distant places.

How we live with a landscape has everything to do with how we think and write about it. Tourists flip through the pages of Arizona Highways and feel spiritually uplifted at the candy-colored photographs of mystic sunsets and dancing Indians. This voyeuristic enjoyment of desert scenes is, however, both a luxury and an anomaly. Not much more than a century ago pioneers staggered across the desert toward the rich promise of California. To them the sunset meant the end of one more day of suffering, while the thought of Indians dancing would have made them tremble with visions of captives tied to stakes as fiendish celebrants frolicked.

This grim view, not our present softhearted sentiments, has prevailed through the centuries of European experience with deserts in the American Southwest. Underlying it are concepts about ease and usefulness. Whether Spanish conquistadors or settlers from Ohio and Vermont, pioneers were a practical people. Driven by ne-
cessity, they aimed to improve their lot in life, and if a landscape didn’t offer plentiful grass for stock, good soil and water for crops, or the dazzle of precious metals, it was a place despised, as was the bleak, thorn-infested desert. For that, they called this wasteland the Land that God Forgot and the Devil’s Domain. Only until, as we’ve implied, the amenities of technology made possible a relatively comfortable life on the arid lands did minds change, allowing people freed of hardships to indulge in desert fantasies and the allure of the exotic. Except for wild-eyed effusions about gold mines and clerical enthusiasms for harvesting souls, much early desert writing, then, reflects a long stretch of distaste for deserts. This changed radically in the latter nineteenth century to a favorable, even a celebratory, view. To risk a generalization in two words, the shift was from utilitarianism to romance.

For convenience, we can divide early desert literature into three stages. From the mid sixteenth century to the mid nineteenth century, the Hispanic period of Spanish and Mexican rule marks slow incursions northward from Mexico. These had mixed results. However, following acquisition of the region by the United States in 1848, the huge influx of Anglos made rapid progress in imposing technological civilization on the desert lands. By the closing decades of the same century, the land was fairly well settled, with the establishment of railroads, ranches, mines, and the beginnings of today’s sprawling desert cities. It was then that the fairly comfortable residents and visitors grew misty-eyed, romanticizing a desert wildness just past but now glowing in their minds with the appealing chimera giving birth to our present attitudes toward deserts (see *The Great California Deserts* by W. Storrs Lee).

Writers of all three groups had one subject in common besides the land itself. For centuries stretching far back into prehistory, native peoples occupied the desert lands. In the main, the invaders, both Hispanic and Anglo, considered such tribes obstacles,
to be converted to European ways or bludgeoned into submission. Their fierce resistance added to the garish image of the desert as a dangerous, if exciting, place. Once the tribes had been conquered, however, attitudes did a flipflop, and the romantics made quick, if ironic, use of the Indians, incorporating them, now deemed spiritually superior, into their version of prismatic desert dreams.

Lastly, I must stress a point applying throughout this pamphlet and in my two additional pamphlets of this series on desert literature. Through their books writers lead us into worlds of the imagination. There is nothing wrong with fantasy, of course, enriching as it can be, unless we begin to mistake it for reality. This is exactly what happened, and continues to happen, with desert literature.

**THE CONQUISTADORS**

¡Un otro México! ¡Un otro México! Another Mexico! Another Mexico! Such was the cry of the Spaniards in the New World.

They had good reason for their enthusiasm. In 1519, Hernando Cortez and a small army sailed from the island of Cuba to exploit the lands to the west. Driving inland through the jungles and mountains to the site of present-day Mexico City, they discovered a treasure trove of gold and jewels so fabulous it defied even the wild fantasies of those heady times. Taking Montezuma, the Aztec ruler, prisoner, the Spaniards stove in the doors of an empire, looting it with the abandon of greedy children on a spree.

The Spanish king raised an eyebrow. If government support of such a foray yielded this abundance, why stop there? Surely other expeditions would break into similar, perhaps even greater, riches, causing his treasuries to swell. His courtiers, too, flamed with expectations. Spain had recently driven out the Moors after centuries of occupation. Expansion was in the air. Patriotism, individual initiative, and eagerness to exploit the New World ran at exuberant
high tide, as did the unifying religious fervor making the expulsion of the Moslem Arabs possible. If any thought of theft troubled the invaders’ brows as they variously killed, raped, and enslaved the amazed peoples they encountered, well, the priests were saving these heathens’ souls—if indeed they had souls—saving them from everlasting hellfires, and they should be grateful for that.

So with cries of “Another Mexico!” as their banner and “Gold and Souls” its justification, expedition after expedition set out, led by names familiar to schoolchildren: Coronado, Pizarro, De Soto. They floundered through the swamps of Florida and in Peru ransacked the Inca Empire. Many of them, as did Coronado, headed north from Mexico into what is now our Southwest. The deserts they found were obnoxious places, dry and barren and often infested with fierce Apaches, but the fantasies of the invaders, shown by their search for the mythical Seven Cities of Gold, carried them on. Of course, most of them returned emptyhanded but not necessarily discouraged. If cities of gold weren’t found, surely they must lie farther beyond. Such was the force of the dream. As part of this searching, from Texas to southern California the Spaniards built a chain of forts and missions on their northern frontier. These supported not only further incursions but lent authority to zealous priests by placing swords behind the crosses held high for the conquered Indians to worship.

The results were uncertain. Thousands of miles to the south, Pizarro had reveled with successes in Peru, and although the dreams of Cortez continued to torture with their allure, no similar bonanza materialized in the north. Precious metals lay in the ground, but only enough was discovered to intensify the thirst for more. Onerous problems of transportation over long distances and through hostile territory verged on the insurmountable, and making settlements self-sufficient in that blazing place where the sun wilted the rows of crops was at best a chancy proposition.
Meanwhile, the Apaches kept pegging away with their arrows. Soldiers sweltered in their armor, and colonists, at times so frightened of attack they dared not leave the walls of forts to tend their fields, cursed their lives in this hideous land. Although there were some exceptions to this picture, some pockets of prosperity, for the most part the Spaniards never had a sure grip on the deserts. They remained feared and alien places.

How do you get literature out of that? At the heart of the matter lies a practical issue. Armies are expensive. The Spaniards conquered their portion of the New World largely through government fiat. Would-be explorers applied to the Crown for authorization and financial support to exploit a specific portion of the new lands. Thus commissioned, they assembled armies and plunged off into the hinterlands. Upon their return they wrote reports detailing the results of their efforts.

This could be a dicey, even a dangerous, business, one riddled with politics and intrigue. If the conquistador paraded back with his mules loaded down with gold and bearing the happy news that his accompanying priests had pacified the natives, who now bent their knees both to the Crown and Church, all was well. Chronicling his success, the returned leader could celebrate his exploits and bask in praise. Although jealous rivals might do him in, his rewards were potentially fantastic: a fat cut of the spoils, ready support for his next foray, or a cushy life in a villa, his place in the history books assured.

However, things rarely turned out that way. The problem was expectations. What actually lay out there in the jungles and deserts often failed to match the dream. More often than not, the troops riding off into the unknown with shiny armor and banners flying would come dragging back a year or two later, a sorry, disgruntled lot, their numbers thinned by arrows and disease, and nothing to show for the King's investment. Such is the nature of
extractive industries. The victors are few, losers many. And, unlike their successful brethren, this latter group faced dim prospects, including disgrace, banishment, even years wrapped in chains in a flesh-consuming dungeon infested with rats.

What could the unsuccessful conquistador, sweating over the blank page before him, possibly say? If he had any sense, he tried to put himself in the best light possible. Playing his cards close to the vest, he could try to engineer his own salvation by creating a great fog of detail, demonstrating what a good soldier he was by documenting each waterhole visited, each league trudged in faithful service to the King, and, using this spray and pray method, hope that his thick document would receive little attention in a bureaucracy already choked with similar handwritten tomes. Or, feeding on his imagination, he could say that he had caught a glimpse of golden cities glowing across a distant valley, that the Indians had begged for more priests to bring their people to the True Faith. Or he could blame others in his expedition, his lieutenants and padres who betrayed the King's charge while he remained faithful despite all obstacles—except that such fall guys even then were sharpening their pens, eager for their own swipes at their former leader.

Of such is the nature of our earliest desert writing spawned by Europeans. It should be kept in mind that most of the men involved were soldiers, not writers. Much of their resulting work, although fascinating to historians, is prosaic to the average reader: "Travelled six leagues today toward three distant peaks. Waterhole bad." Now and then we have glimmers, and sometimes outright solar flares, of prose. Juan Nentvig, a Jesuit priest beset by heat and rebellious Indians, was baffled to distraction by a landscape where two-headed eagles soared overhead and monstrous tarantulas leapt out of the bushes to bite off the hooves of horses (ix). In a different vein, Pedro de Castañeda looked back in old age on the
futile search for gold and, in an unusual twist, recognized his youthful dreams as false. His lament over the missed opportunity to appreciate the land on its own terms prefigures our modern sentiment for a beautiful desert now lost (Barclay 55-77).

For all that, in the main we have not so much writing about deserts as writing about the activities of humans passing through the arid lands. What’s lacking not only is true desert literature but true literature, works speaking for all ages spun with the force of an imagination that compels us into the experience of a rich, integrated whole, satisfying both aesthetically and intellectually. This is more than supplied by Cabeza de Vaca’s Relación (1542), “more” because even in our skeptical day, rational to the point of cynicism, an aura of convincing mystery hangs about this great work, forceful in terms of both history and art (see Wild, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca 5-8).

This forcefulness is surprising for a number of reasons, not the least of which are the odds against Cabeza de Vaca. His Relación recounts one of the most dismal failures in the annals of Spanish exploration. Regarding this, we might recall that none other than Christopher Columbus was sent home in chains from his third expedition. That Cabeza de Vaca, second in command of an abject, money-wasting fiasco, was able to turn the tables on Fate in itself is remarkable. That in doing this he could defy the very premises of a rigid, autocratic culture and come out not only with his head but honored for his fine efforts is a testament to the power of writing. Cabeza de Vaca rescued himself with words, and in the process created a work of literature cloaking the desert in a rich myth.

Just about every schoolchild knows the outlines of Cabeza de Vaca’s miseries. In 1527, he set out from Spain to join Pámfilo de Narváez and three hundred soldiers in an invasion of Florida. In their search for gold, they soon set to work ransacking native vil-
lages. Soon after that, however, the expedition began falling apart. Sinking into swamps and failing from hunger, decimated by disease and Indian arrows, the men lost contact with their supply ships and finally foundered on the west coast of the peninsula. Preferring a stab at survival to a slow death, the desperate men built a number of crude boats and began rowing westward. According to the poetic geography of the time, they should have reached the settlements of Mexico in a few days. Instead, Mexico lay over a thousand miles away. One by one the fragile craft drifted apart and disappeared. Weeks later, a handful of Spaniards washed up, cold, ragged, and more dead than alive on the Texas shore.

Here begins the main story of Cabeza de Vaca's eight years of wandering. He's enslaved by Indians, whimsically tortured, and forced to dig for roots until his fingers bleed at the touch of a straw. Finally, having had his fill of that, Cabeza de Vaca persuades three men to join him, and they escape, plunging off into the unknown vastness of what is now the American Southwest. Yet luck is with them, and at last, after a series of astonishing adventures, the four stumble out of the desert into the arms of fellow Spaniards in northern Mexico, their skin blistered and with nothing to show for the King's huge investment.

How do you make a success story, let alone literature, out of that?

Cabeza de Vaca takes the Zen approach. At every opportunity he turns disadvantages to his favor, showing how his report of failure, if carefully considered, will be of even greater value to the King than the mere baubles of a successful expedition. Furthermore, he realizes that he has a good story to tell, that he has just crossed the unknown and that the King is eager to hear what lies out there in that terra incognita. Lastly, beginning humbly, and gambling that the King is weary of the standard fare
of sycophantic fluff constantly dumped on his table for evening reading, Cabeza de Vaca establishes his authority as a reliable reporter of fascinating events. Then he begins to bewitch his readers. All these subtleties work together, supporting the goal of this penniless survivor not only to save himself but, more boldly, to challenge the King and change the policy of his entire empire. It is a desperate risk that Cabeza de Vaca takes, and for that all the brighter for its success.

If rhetoric is the art of effective speaking and writing, Cabeza de Vaca is its master. Structurally, his is a simple story, chronologically told, but one with a glittering surface of revelations. How could a king, eager for knowledge of the new lands and, typical of the Spaniards of the time, disposed to lingering medieval superstitions, not perk up his ears and lean forward at news of an evil, bearded little man walking to and fro in the New World, frightening the bejesus out of the Indians?

Then there appeared at the entrance to the house a burning firebrand. Then he entered and took whomever he wanted and stabbed him three times in the side with a very sharp flint, as wide as a hand and two palms long. He would stick his hands in through the wounds and pull out their guts, and cut a piece of gut about a palm in length, which he would throw onto the embers [. . .] He would pull the arm out of its socket and shortly thereafter reset it. Finally he would place his hands on the wounds which they said suddenly healed. (81)

Add to that tales of hairsbreadth escapes, cannibalism, a tree bursting spontaneously into flames.

Yet no good story is simple. Beneath the enchanting surface Cabeza de Vaca creates a series of subtle parallels, contrasts, and ironies. The more violent their little army becomes, the deeper the
Spaniards sink into a morass of troubles. The four remaining men of the expedition, at the outset dedicated to plunder, are themselves taken slaves by the savages they intended to conquer—only to emerge back in civilization to stand bewildered before their fellow Spaniards out on a slaving expedition. Cabeza de Vaca himself, at first devoted to winning riches through the sword, is next stripped of earthly wealth, eventually achieving fame among the Indians through kindness and devotion to the cross. All this bears its own silent message.

Still, Cabeza de Vaca has one huge problem. Early on, a group of Indians, failing in their own hocus-pocus efforts to heal their sick, forced the Spaniards to try their hands at magical cures. Facing no alternative but death, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions took deep breaths, made the sign of the cross over their patients, threw in a few Hail Marys—and voilà, the sick rose from their beds (The Account 62). Cabeza de Vaca became so good at it that at one point he even raised a man from the dead (80). Whether the miracles resulted from mass hysteria, were skillfully fabricated by Cabeza de Vaca to enrich his tale, or indeed evidence a strange force he had tapped is beside the point here. Foreshadowing a theme of many Anglo writers to come, Cabeza de Vaca had created a desert world so strange that reality often blended into dream, where the imagination led the possibilities. This fabulous creation has an immediate purpose in terms of his story. The new power becomes the very instrument of the party's escape, for, if the King is awed at such events, the Indians had gone gaga at such bright deeds. Now hailing the foreigners as “children of the sun” (95), the natives came flocking out of the hills by the thousands, bearing gifts, and joining the four men in a regal procession to the Spanish settlements.

Now back home in Spain, however, Cabeza de Vaca faces jealous whispers and the scowls of the powerful clergy over his dabblings
in black magic. In the atmosphere of the Inquisition, rife with bilious suspicions, men had been put to the stake for far less than that.

Cabeza de Vaca addresses the issue boldly, once again turning it to his dual ends. Why, Oh, King, these healings were not at all black magic but Divine intervention. And not only to save the skins of four bedraggled Spaniards. Acting as loyal lay forerunners, we did the best we could with God’s strange gifts to us, preaching the basics of Christianity, preparing the ground for the mass conversion of Indians eager for missionaries, eager to become not only members of the True Faith but devoted subjects of His Highness. Through kindness, not violence, His Majesty can conquer the New World. Cabeza de Vaca concludes the case: “[...] one can clearly recognize that all these people, in order to be attracted to becoming Christians and subjects of your Imperial Majesty, need to be treated well; this is a very sure way to accomplish this; indeed, there is no other way” (106).

Implicit in the message is the issue of money, one dear to the heart of a king sometimes eyeing his coffers and wondering if those distant lands weren’t costing him far more than they were worth. But, Hark!, priests are far, far cheaper than armies. Why, what a bargain! Devoted to poverty, the friars not only would be conquering new territory but one of “pearls and much wealth” and “the best and richest things” (116) for a mere pittance. The argument was adamantine.

Thus, Cabeza de Vaca saved his neck and was appointed to a governorship in Paraguay. Despite his success, the long-term results of the Relación were not at all what gentle-minded Cabeza de Vaca expected. His heady version of the new lands fired the imaginations of his fellow Spaniards into a frenzy of exploration, fueling, most immediately, De Soto and Coronado. And such men, along with those who came after them, found it eminently conve-
In contrast to the Spanish approach to exploration, the Americans first struck out into the deserts in bands of freebooters, and the melodrama of bright, individual celebration often colors their writing. A good example is James Ohio Pattie. In the 1820s, nearly three hundred years after Cabeza de Vaca stumbled out of the wilderness of thorns and hallucinations, Pattie became the first English speaker on record to enter the deserts of the Southwest. Chances are good that Pattie, a young Missouri rustic, knew little or nothing about Cabeza de Vaca and the Spanish colonial history of the region.

Americans of two centuries ago no doubt were generally aware of Spain in terms of the long enmity between Protestant England and Catholic Spain, of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and the exciting stories of piracy on the high seas. As to Mexico, which then included the present Southwest, that nation seemed so far away as to be almost completely out of mind. Few people knew anyone who had visited the country; it might as well have been on another planet. William Hickling Prescott’s History of the Conquest of Mexico, a stirring revelation of Cortez’s exploits, didn’t appear
until 1843, and Cabeza de Vaca’s story wasn’t readily available in English until Buckingham Smith’s translation, published in 1851 as *The Narrative*. Such books marked strong signs of Latin American scholarship in the United States, but they came years after James O. Pattie stood bewildered at his first sight of a saguaro, the giant cactus of the Southwest.

The truth is that, although later desert writers would nearly genuflect before the image they created of romantic Hispanics, neither Pattie nor any of the other early Anglos who floundered out across the sandy wastes needed the Spanish chroniclers for inspiration. The nation was moving inexorably westward, and it was all but inevitable that the dynamics of expansion would push the seekers of new lands and new adventures out across the deserts in search of riches and thrills. Pattie just happened to be the first one we know about. Like the early desert travelers after him, he hailed from the ranks of beaver trappers. Their combination of zeal for pelts and lust for adventure was sufficient to itself. Practical men when it came to travel, they didn’t particularly like deserts because they were a pain in the neck to get across without dying. But beyond the deserts glittered the palmy Pacific coast, the dreamland of California, the goal that also would tug Americans across the arid lands for generations to come.

For the first comers specifically, on the other side of those miles of rock and sand lay the prospects of more beaver and the favors of sloe-eyed Spanish señoritas. These were lure enough for robust young men who, once across the barren lands, “caroused in true mountain style” and soon forgot about the deserts behind them. Such is the impression Joe Meek left with his amanuensis, Frances Fuller Victor, about his crossing of the Great Basin Desert with a band of fellow mountain men in 1833 (1: 144). In fact, such men, used to the lurking Indians and irate grizzlies of the Rocky Mountains, sometimes took the desert almost as a matter of
course, as but one more danger in a life full of challenges. In consequence, although he groused about the “inhospitable country” (1: 147), Joe Meek glows with the prospect of pleasures ahead and shrugs off his desert crossing with but a few pages of rather matter-of-fact description (1: 143-47). Indeed, when the frolic on the California coast ends and the time comes to face eastward, this adventurer, who could rear up on tiptoes and recite howling tales of his exploits in the Rockies, devotes but a few casual words to his return trip across the Mojave Desert (1: 152).

Not so James O. Pattie. A callow youth when he started out on his travels, and likely only a minor player in the subsequent events, upon his return to civilization he painted his life and surroundings in bold colors, portraying himself as a swashbuckling hero performing center stage in a sensational drama of brave men combatting villains. The motive of self-aggrandizement aside, there likely was another reason for this hyperbole.

Born in Kentucky, Pattie came from a long line of hunters. Early on, his father, Sylvester, followed the westering urge and moved the family to the Missouri frontier. A wildness for the road gripped Sylvester when his wife died of a fever, and, taking his eldest son, barely twenty years old, along, Sylvester struck out, as did many another American fleeing troubles, into the unknown. In 1824, Sylvester and James reached Santa Fe, and for three years they tried to get rich through trapping and mining, daring moves in areas peopled with aggressive Indians.

Riches, however, remained elusive. Nevertheless, joining up with a few other trappers, the Patties pressed on westward, sometimes through showers of arrows. At last, finding themselves deeper in the wilderness than they expected, they considered the gauntlet they would face on the return trip to Santa Fe. Not liking that prospect, in 1827, from about where Yuma, Arizona, now is, they cast fate to the winds and headed out across the sand dunes for
San Diego. There, Mexican authorities, suspicious of these ragged foreigners, clapped them in jail. Sylvester died, but young Pattie eventually escaped. After further adventures deep in Mexico, in 1830 he stepped off a riverboat in Cincinnati, gaunt and penniless.

We need to pause on that. In Cincinnati, Pattie meets Timothy Flint, a publisher. Flint wants to make money selling books, and here he has a brash young man not only needing money badly but with multiple adventures beneath his belt. Add to that a third element, a public eager to hear fantastic tales of the West, the more fantastic the better. It seems no idle speculation to suggest that the result of the combination largely determined the content and tone of *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie* (1831). The extent of Flint’s collaboration is unknown, but the result is a wild tale still entertaining both for its literary hilarity and for its colorful display of an imagination turned loose. As might be expected from such a narrative, the dates of events in *The Personal Narrative* tend to be a shambles and some parts of the adventures highly suspect in terms of the truth, as is Pattie’s side trip from the Southwest for a couple thousand miles clear across the Rocky Mountains into Montana and back. Most delightful of all is the young man’s rescue in New Mexico of the alluring Jacova, daughter of a Mexican grandee.

She’s been carried off by Comanches, but, as always, Pattie is quick to the stirrups. After participating in an ingenious stratagem, he delivers Jacova to the feet of the governor at Santa Fe. But the lot of the hero is not always an easy one. Lured into her bedchamber, James begins to suspect that the winsome Jacova has more than verbalization of gratitude in mind when, as he prepares to leave, she throws herself between him and the door. What can a sensitive young man do? He doesn’t want to hurt her feelings... Morning finds him rising early from Jacova’s bed, returning discreetly through the dawn before anyone is astir, to join his fellow trappers (46).
In this way, Pattie views his exploits with the operatic eye of the impresario. That is, the full force of the attitude applied to the Jacova incident also comes into play when he turns his pen to his desert crossing. Perhaps more so, since, a man who capitalizes on strangeness, Pattie faces the strangest landscape he’s ever seen, and he makes the most of its horrors. The lack of water, of course, as in nearly all such accounts, is the issue, one that quickly shifts the focus from description of nature to the men’s suffering in it:

We attempted to chew tobacco. It would raise no moisture. We took our bullets in our mouths, and moved them round to create a moisture, to relieve our parched throats. We had travelled but a little farther before our tongues had become so dry and swollen, that we could scarcely speak so as to be understood. In this extremity of nature, we should, perhaps, have sunk voluntarily, had not the relief been still in view on the sides of the snow covered mountains. (145)

And there you have it, part of the earliest first-person account in English of the American desert. The bullets in the mouth, the swollen tongues, the sight of snow-covered mountains ahead, both torturing the sufferers and giving them hope to stumble on, will become standard elements in recorded desert experiences for generations to come. Not, we should remember, because Pattie created a literary vocabulary adopted thereafter by future desert writers but because these experiences were basic to the struggle for survival in such hostile landscapes.

Nature’s hostility, then, becomes the main issue and the thing to watch, for although in Pattie the desert crossing is simply a horror, one more dramatic difficulty to overcome, later writers will begin shading such experiences. They’ll begin to show a magnificence, a beauty, in the desert even in the midst of its trials. And this will evolve into nothing less than readers’ vicarious
thrill of the Sublime. According to Edmund Burke’s definition of the Sublime, an extreme of fear and an extreme of beauty combine into the ultimately ravishing emotional experience. After all, we can’t have real thrills without real dangers, and we need beauty to make them uplifting. Decades later, in the lush mind of Neo-Darwinian aestheticist John C. Van Dyke, the Sublime will become the Great Goddess of Nature, never so resplendently seen as on the desert, a great siren who lures in men dazzled by her temptations, only to crush them in her maws. It was just the thing, with its sexual overtones, to speed the blood in the veins of the bored late Victorians, as it does, with some modifications, in us today.

Yet that is getting considerably ahead of James O. Pattie, a man devoted to wild tales of his own heroism and with hardly a thought for the potential of desert aesthetics evolving from his account. Important as he is in this latter respect, a few things need to be kept in mind about his contribution. He may have been first by happenstance, but his desert passage is brief, less than six pages, and impressive as it is, it marks but one gripping event in a book consisting of a string of florid anecdotes having nothing to do with the deserts. His manner throughout is so histrionic that the desert section becomes but one more blazing scene before us, as if we were opera-goers moved by what they’re seeing but also safely detached from it.

Laurels for writing the book that would become the desert classic of horrors would go to William L. Manly, yet another yeoman suffering a similar experience, but his rendition of it would be far more extensive and far more convincing, presenting the bare facts of the matter, plainly sufficient to themselves in his Death Valley in ’49. Manly’s book wasn’t published until 1894, years after the events described, but it remains chief in revealing a perfectly justifiable attitude of deserta horribilis toward the cactus sweeps. Yet
even at that we can see subtleties creeping in, foreshadowings of gentler things to come, as the nation begins coming to terms with this, one of its most extreme landscapes.

Much had changed in the United States during the twenty-two years separating the trek of James O. Pattie across the Colorado Desert and that of William L. Manly across the adjacent Mojave Desert to the north. Certainly, neither the circumstances surrounding writers nor their varying personalities can entirely explain the shapes of literary works. Ultimately, each succeeds or fails according to its individual alchemy. However, circumstance and personalities also play their large parts. By Manly’s time the deserts under consideration had passed from Mexican to American control as a result of the Mexican-American War, a conflict that would soon generate the rapid settlement by Anglos of a vast desert wilderness. Yet Anglos knew little of desert areas. Manly’s nearly disastrous trip across Death Valley marked the first trickle in a flood of adventurers pressing behind him. For by 1849 the news of California gold had electrified the nation, and the great rush for riches was on. After those illusion-seekers would come railroads, telegraph lines, villages amid orange groves, and other settled ways of coastal California.

Unlike trapper Pattie, a brash young man eager to celebrate himself and turn a few bright dollars in the process, in later years William L. Manly was a farmer in San Jose, California. It was during this period that he looked back through the eyes of an aging man on the desert adventure of his youth. He was not alone in the process. Across the West during the late nineteenth century, the graying pioneers now living in middle-class comfort were beginning to wax nostalgic and patriotic about their former roles in first settling the country. They were gathering into pioneer societies, holding annual picnics, and, like Manly, writing down their reminiscences. Heroism was what they were celebrating, but it
would be a heroism tempered by middle-class modesty. Manly's job was to sound factual, to create a "you-are-there" experience for a trek that had by then become famous, for he wrote knowing full well that many living pioneers with similar experiences would be sure to point accusing fingers at self-glorifying exaggerations. In contrast to the tall tales in Pattie's *Personal Narrative*, there are no Jacovas in Manly's desert book.

The result is a journalistic dignity not found in Pattie, the story of an honest young man turned into an iconographic adventurer for the nation as a whole. Manly tells of his birth in Vermont (1), the hard work of a farm family, and its move to Ohio (6), and after that the further westering to Michigan (12). Then he recounts his own setting out to make his way in the world, the guidance of his parents ringing in his ears: "Weigh well everything you do; shun bad company; be honest and deal fair" (23). In this sense, Manly's desert tale is a morality play, for it will be such qualities, not the colorful recklessness of Pattie, that bring him through when the desert tests him.

As is not the case with Pattie, it will test Manly morally as well as physically. Catching the gold fever, he joins a band of pioneer families with oxen and wagons. Yet in their eagerness to reach the field of dreams they take a shortcut from the main trail, ending up lost in Death Valley's maze of canyons. They're utterly confused, thirsty, starving, and surrounded by Indians. Facing death, the little band camps by a meager spring and decides upon a plan. Manly and another youth, the two strongest in the group, will strike southwestward on foot for the coast and bring back help. Paralleling the admonition of Manly's parents, the group's leader expresses faith in Manly, knowing "well enough" that he'll have the moral fiber to return regardless of the dangers. He will not betray the others' trust (152). Thus, in a curious reversal, the great enemy, the desert, assumes a larger role, trying one's body cer-
tainly but also burnishing one's soul. It will be a theme coming into full bloom with other desert writers.

Manly and his companion, John Rogers, succeed. They reach the coast and return with supplies, then valorously lead their friends to safety. Thereafter, Manly recounts his later career in the gold fields, but the desert episode, as the book's title suggests, is his work's central feature. It also is the book's most memorable, not only because of the situation, as two young men, in order to save themselves and the people depending on them, engage in a long life-and-death struggle with nature, but because of Manly's detailed delivery. His is a day-by-day account, its specifics enticing readers along with suspense as the parched men take hope, rushing toward a stream, only to find it too salty to drink (156). Or early one morning they find an ephemeral fringe of ice around a little seep. What a prize! They break off pieces and greedily suck them, the chance blessing that gives them life for yet another day of struggles (160).

Here they are at their worst point, having once again failed to find water:

[. . .] our mouths became so dry that we had to put a bullet or a small smooth stone in and chew it and turn it around with the tongue to induce a flow of saliva. If we saw a spear of green grass on the north side of a rock, it was quickly pulled and eaten to obtain the little moisture it contained. (157-58)

This sounds very much like Pattie, for, as observed, the pebble in the mouth and such last resorts became a common palliative of unfortunates lost in the desert, a common reaction to shared circumstances. However, as the aestheticians say, life is one thing, art quite another. Literature depends not so much on the hard facts of the matter as on what the writer does with them when,
taking up his pen, he weaves them into a story. In Manly we have early linkings of physicality with portraits of psychological depth, while Pattie's conflicts are more thoroughly physical.

Pattie shows that physical stress is related to mental turmoil. His desert crossing is shot through with worries. The travelers have only a vague idea of where their goal, San Diego, lies. They know generally that hard times are ahead of them out there in the dunes, but how far they will have to go, what their preparations should be, and the reliability of their two Indian guides, none too friendly to begin with, are all in doubt. So, the unknown starts working, causing huge fears and placing the men at the mercy of their imaginations. Worse, neither of the two Indians speaks Spanish, and the little band of Anglos can do nothing but give their lives over to the strangers and "follow them in silence" while their doubts grow (144). They have considered making signs about taking water along, but the Indians were so glum the Americans hesitated to ask. Worse still, used to desert travel, now the two Indians stride off, leaving the trappers to flounder as best they can over the sands.

Finally, the inevitable happens. Sun and thirst take their toll, and the trappers string out along the route in various stages of exhaustion. Only young Pattie, stepping once again into his hero's shoes, saves the day. He races ahead, finds a stream, and joyously returns to the others, bearing water to them in his powderhorn (149).

Such are Pattie's worries. Whether he's furrowing his brow about not offending the salacious Jacova or in anguish that he and his companions will fall victim to the sands, his fears are immediate, directly linked to the physical issues at hand. Once the storms blow over, his brow brightens as he eagerly faces the next adventure. Little of character, besides his annoying penchant for heroism, has been revealed.
Manly takes very similar circumstances and begins showing the complexities behind them. Although he doesn't hesitate to blow his own horn, he's far more subtle than Pattie. As seen, he was chosen for the rescue mission because of his reliability. His friends have faith in him not because he has shown spectacular bursts of derring-do but because he's acted responsibly during the trip. In turn, he praises the bravery of the pioneers, but he also catches the strange looks, the flickers of cannibalism the travelers begin giving one another. Manly may suffer, but his suffering is all the more profound when he considers the poor, staggering, faithful oxen. On the trek to the coast with Rogers, the two are driven by fears that they'll not make it back to their friends in time to save them. Having reached the waiting party with supplies, he next cajoles the weak on the trip out, humorously begging them not to die on this rocky desert, where graves are hard to dig. If not a full-blown inner portrait, this is at least a beginning of correspondences between the physical and the psychological. It was seen in Cabeza de Vaca, and it will become a feature ever more important in desert writing until the desert itself becomes a vehicle for entering that place beyond psychology, the spiritual realm.

Other differences make Pattie and Manly telling contrasts. Despite the difficulties of the rescue mission, Manly and Rogers are not freebooters who have gotten themselves in a tight spot. The two are attached to something larger. They see themselves as typical, good-hearted Americans not only most immediately on a mission of mercy but engaged in the national drama of civilizing the continent. And yet another element shows the deepening dimensions of arid-land encounters. The desert begins taking on a richer character. Even as the two men stumble, uncertain of survival, Manly is fascinated at his first sight of the weirdly branching Joshua tree (168). Rogers curses but Manly is awed when, topping yet another ridge, they behold not the lush coastal valleys
they hoped to see but range upon range of bare mountains spreading out endlessly in all directions. Yes, it is a worthless landscape, Manly comments to himself, but, transcending his own bedraggled circumstances, he recognizes that there is a grandness to it all (155). More than utilitarianism was beginning to beat in the heart of the nation’s desert wanderers.

**THE ROMANTICS**

Some years later, in 1901, desert writer Mary Austin published a short story, “The Pot of Gold,” in *Munsey’s*, one of the popular magazines of the day. In Austin’s tale, the scales fall from the eyes of an anthropologist. Now seeing the true light, he rejects the ways of Anglo civilization to live a new, idyllic life with an Indian woman out in the desert. There, day after day passes before him with “the color of a lotus eating dream” (493). Pattie and Manly would have guffawed at such nonsense. However romantics coming after them sitting on the porches of desert resorts might gawk amazed at sunsets or wrap the remnants of desert peoples in gauzy colors, the two men knew firsthand about the desert’s demonic reality. Even those few Indians living out there had a hard lot of it, sometimes meeting their end through thirst or hunger. Yet Austin became far more popular than Pattie or Manly, and it was her view of the desert, not theirs, that prevailed. Austin had turned the desert into a stage for theatrics, and others were quick to follow her lead.

Yet she was but the culmination of two trends nurturing one another. Coming first, the West was a land of possibilities, of hope and exaggeration, and as we’ve seen in discussing Pattie, Easterners had always craved news of the region, the more colorful the news the better the sales. Taking their cue from the market, writers answered the need with imaginations turned loose. What was generally true of the West was particularly true of the
desert, the nation’s most exotic landscape, one quickly becoming a major inspiration for fantasies. Secondly, also earlier touched on, the taming of the desert by the military and the arrival of railroads and other technologies reduced much of the desert’s harshness and in its stead offered an amenable living fostering flights into rosy unreality. Not all of this happened overnight, but the direction was set: the desert was evolving into a dramatic Technicolor movie running up and down the scales of emotions, for if beauty is enthralling, the possibility of danger, real or imagined, also makes the heart beat faster. In novels and travel books tumbling off the presses, desert peaks became vertiginous in their soarings, and dry waterholes, occasionally the demise of the thirsty, became horrifying places, ringed with harvests of human bones. If the land was extreme, so then were the men who survived it. Their rifles dropped Indians from the saddle at prodigious distances, and, switching to quite a different awe, out there in the wilderness travelers found mystic shrines where spiritual natives faithfully tended eternal flames. Such a grand flavor can be seen alone in the title of Samuel Woodworth Cozzens’ erumpent tour of Arizona and New Mexico, The Marvelous Country (1876). The title promises much, and Cozzens outdid himself in delivering on it, spinning a series of exploits in the above vein that strike us now as simply laughable.

There were those who, winking, managed something of a balance, employing a jocular tone that both entertained and approached a semblance of accuracy. When professional world traveler J. Ross Browne entered the Arizona desert in 1864, wisely clinging to the shirttails of a military escort, he found the strange countryside rather a fun place. Tucson was a typical but amusing hellhole, a “Sodom and Gomorrah” (131) with “buffoons, dressed in theatrical costumes, strutting about in the midst of violent lunacy” (133). And, yes, there were very real dangers; there would have to be to
truly grip his readers. Browne recites, as did just about every other writer who passed through that territory, the fate of the two Oatman sisters, carried off from the slaughtered parents of a pioneer family to serve the pleasures of Indians (96). And he pays particular attention to another violent scene when he comes upon an Indian crucified by an enemy tribe. The Indians had learned, Browne quips, this new form of exquisite torture from the missionaries (104). Such details had the late Victorians salivating. Yet Browne had it both ways. In the main, he concludes, Arizona is a delightful place, with a climate rivaling that of Italy; plus, there's gold and silver just about everywhere, and once we get those pesky Indians settled down.

Other writers, however, dispensed with the falderal. When Horace Greeley, stalwart editor of the New York Tribune, crossed the desert by stagecoach in 1859, his goal was not to entertain but to describe exactly what he saw for readers thinking about settling in the West. And what he, a weekend farmer enamored of trees and green fields, saw appalled him. The desert was an ash heap, treeless, unfit for man. Crossing Nevada, he shuddered that here "famine sits enthroned" (231).

Despite the nasty words of Greeley and the cautions of other realists, the public's fascination for the desert kept growing. Dangerous and hot it might be, still, it was a pretty intriguing place to get to know, at least through books; yet, whatever the services of railroads and the convenience of the telegraph, who would be so addled as to want to live out there? A gap existed, then, between the literary romance of the desert, exciting to imagine, and the desert as a place for families to settle and be happy in. That great abyss would be bridged by an offshoot from a growing fascination for a quite different, although adjacent, land, for a place of magnolias and palms and orange groves, coastal southern California.
Most of those who made it to the gold fields in California's Sierra arrived with the intent of returning after a few months to Indiana or Connecticut, their pockets heavy with gold. At first enthusiastically ditching and grubbing, they next found themselves rudely disabused of their dreams. A few people got rich; thousands failed. But when they looked around, on the state's southern shore they found the unexpected riches of a new dream: a winsome climate, a fertile land, a wondrous place of palm trees and exotic fruits. Here was a breezy, balmy seacoast shining brightly all year round with hardly a hint of winter. What a great place to raise the kids! Why return to the slush and snow waiting back East?

This indeed might be the elusive Promised Land that footloose Americans had been searching for ever since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock. Rumors of this wonderful discovery spread, and it was getting easier to get to. In 1869, the transcontinental railroad started bringing in the hopeful by the trainload, and following them was Charles Nordhoff.

Perhaps the most respected journalist of the day, German-born, socially conscious, peripatetic Nordhoff was fascinated by America's evolving democracy, and in southern California he envisioned the Great American Dream at last come true. The problems of immigrants choking the slums, of the nation's financial ups and downs robbing people of their savings, of the chronic respiratory ills then plaguing the population—all these could be solved, and more, by the healthful, fertile, silken promise waiting on the West coast. Striking a memorable contrast with the pale, hacking children of the East coast's tenements, Nordhoff held out this prospect in his buoyant California for Health, Pleasure, and Residence (1872):

As I drove out from Los Angeles into the country on a January morning with a friend, we met a farmer coming into town with a market-wagon of produce.
Imagine that, in January! Yet Nordhoff offered far more than frothings. A practical man, he assuaged the doubts of would-be settlers with advice on soil conditions, climate variations, and the price of land. And the thousands who arrived in southern California clutching Nordhoff’s guidebook found that he had led them well. Tuberculars stopped their hacking, fields yielded abundantly with a minimum of sweat, while farmers’ families frolicked through lemon groves and skipped through seashore breakers in an eternal summer. As Theodore Strong Van Dyke, another Californiaphile, put it: “Life comes so easily and so naturally; time flies so swiftly, yet so softly! You feel the thread of life fly faster from the spindle, yet you hear no whizz” (233). For thousands of transplanted Americans, the dream had come true, for California was, indeed, a splendid place.

With a good deal of justification, then, the newcomers developed intense regional pride based on their salubrious changes in fortune. However, in turn, the dream fulfilled began generating a whole new complex of dreams. For one thing, coming from all parts of the country, shorn from their roots, living in novel circumstances, where their pasts counted for little and the future was all, they did not have a firmly shared culture. Well, then, they would invent one. And this involved not only reinventing themselves but reinventing history, even the landscape. In a process Franklin Walker wryly calls “Cultural Hydroponics” (118), Californians lounging in their land of ease began inhaling bright bits and
pieces of various religions, philosophies, fads, and winsomely illogical notions. Ignoring their own ghettos of poor Mexicans and Indians employed as maids and farm laborers, they looked into California’s past and saw a colorful Hispanic heritage, one they celebrated with noble conquistadors in shining armor and plumed helmets proudly riding high-stepping horses in holiday parades. The result of such happy thinking was a colorful and appealing mishmash. Crowed George Wharton James, one of the state’s most popular writers, “In religion I am a Methodist, with leanings towards Roman Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, Christian Science, Theosophy, Buddhism, Confucianism, Universalism, Free Thought [...]]” (Bourdon 315).

By the 1880s, all this eclecticism reached a near feverish pitch. Newcomers were pouring in, business was booming, land prices soaring. Now and then, economic downturns sobered folks up, but it wasn’t long before they were once again reaching for the champagne of progress. New towns sprang up, and the orange groves continued to spread out in ever greater green waves of prosperity. If the land was good, then boosterism dictated that all of California must be good. The high tide of the state’s enthusiasm for itself began spilling over the mountains eastward out into its deserts.

The surge received a tremendous boost when in 1881, only about a hundred miles east of Los Angeles, two prospectors discovered huge deposits of silver in the Calico Mountains of the Mojave Desert. Then came discoveries of gold, and more silver, until millions upon millions of dollars were fluming into the pockets of city investors. If there was gold, there must be other riches. Soon in this land of overheated imaginations, schemes for huge irrigation projects, for great plantations of eucalyptus groves, plans for building entire cities out in the cactus barrens had investors reaching for their checkbooks. Such was the Zeitgeist. Most of the projects
failed, but still, hope far outstripped reality. Showing the influence of wealth (even illusions of wealth) on shaping perception, the Devil’s Domain was being transformed into a dreamland, a place where as the wallet fattened one could wander on horseback through the great, endless outdoors, discovering not only visual joys but spiritual renewal in nature.

Artists started painting the once-despised Calico Mountains in beautiful colors.

Historians still debate whether a culture changes through the accumulated influence of all its people or whether a Great Man of force and brilliance appears to lead everyone off in a new direction. Likely, given the complexities of such things, a critical conjunction of the two would seem necessary. That is, the right leader appearing at the right time. Certainly, an example of this hypothesis would be Charles F. Lummis, a young New Englander who on 1 February 1885 walked into Los Angeles.

The emphasis should be on the word “walked.” The son of a minister, as a young man Lummis had self-published his first collection of poems, rich with indescribable feelings and moons over lakes. It was a handmade edition of birch bark. Later, at Harvard, he became a demon at poker and, beginning a dalliance with women that eventually took him through three wives and uncounted lovers, he dropped out. Restless in Ohio as the editor of the Scioto Gazette, he had a bright idea. He’d walk to Los Angeles.

This, however, would be no idle lark, the stroll of a directionless young man. Foreshadowing things to come, calculating Lummis turned the trip into a publicity stunt. He would supply reports of his progress to his hometown newspaper. Well and good, but small beer never was enough for Lummis. He cut a twofold deal with Colonel Harrison Gray Otis, editor of the Los Angeles Times. Not only would Lummis mail weekly installments of his adventures on the road for Times readers to follow; if Lummis made it all the
way, Otis would crown him city editor of his newspaper. It was nip and tuck all along the route. Angelenos held their breath as Lummis talked his way out of an encounter with thugs. They marveled when the lone but plucky youth broke his arm, then set it himself by tying the injured limb to the branch of a tree and jumping off a rock. They felt a sharp pang when Lummis was forced to shoot his faithful dog. After 143 days of such cliffhangers, on the first night of February the adventurer tramped victoriously into Los Angeles, the distinguished Colonel Otis beaming at his side. The next morning, there was Lummis sitting brightly at the city editor's desk.

Thereafter Lummis turned his whole life into a pretty good show. Excelling the cultural vision bubbling in his new homeland, he strutted about in the outfit of a Spanish nobleman, complete with sash and broad-brimmed hat, strumming his guitar and glowing when people called him Don Carlos, the name he preferred. In such an act lay the first great flowering of cultural hydroponics.

But two things here. First of all, the showmanship did not remain an act. Lummis was one of those rare individuals who becomes the role he's playing. If you were with Don Carlos, you ate chiles and collected Spanish songs, wore huaraches, and celebrated all things Spanish and Southwestern—at least according to the notions of a transplanted romantic New Englander. Yet there was more here than a glib man living out his fantasies. Lummis got things done. As editor of The Land of Sunshine, a magazine of regional boast, he promoted the careers of Southwestern writers who later became nationally famous. He ran the Los Angeles public library and founded the Southwest Museum, to this day one of the area's great research institutions. He launched campaign after campaign to save California's old and neglected missions, and he fought fiercely for the rights of dispossessed Indians. Most of all, he wrote books, book after book celebrating not only the glories of
southern California but the entire Southwest as a land of physical and spiritual salvation.

Paralleling California's own series of cultural roller-coaster rides, hyperactive Lummis, who drank and smoked too much as he plunged from one cause to the next, had a series of breakdowns, periods of physical paralysis and mental turmoil. Curing himself, Lummis withdrew into nature and lived among rural people, such as the Pueblo Indians and Hispanics of New Mexico, who seemed to get along just fine without much modern technology. The result was twofold: Lummis came bouncing back to dive, full of vigor, into new whirls of activities; and in his books he hailed the "natural" life of the Southwest as the remedy for what he deemed an overly civilized Anglo society woefully cut off from the life-giving earth.

This is exactly what Californians, enjoying the ease and prosperity of the very modern ways Lummis condemned, wanted to hear, in fact had been saying for some years, although not so poignantly as did Don Carlos. In this way, Lummis reflected, next embodied, and then perfected the new hydroponics. Yet it also was what the whole nation wanted to hear. Uprooted from quiet farmlife and floundering in the new, booming urbanized economy following the Civil War, many Americans were stumbling through the jimjams of social change. The old religions and traditional ways seemed to hold few solutions for their new problems, and people began turning, often desperately, to colonic irrigation, food fads, and séances—to whatever promised to assuage their cultural jitters (see No Place of Grace by T. J. Jackson Lears).

A return to nature became one of the Big Answers, a secular religion with so many enthusiastic converts that one of its chief proponents, John Burroughs, groused that factory workers escaping from New York City on weekends to tramp through his orchards upriver on the Hudson were ruining his solitude. Lummis, how-
ever, was offering much more than green hills and frothing brooks tumbling out of placid mountainsides. He offered nature with a bonus—exoticism. Out in the Southwest those suffering from ennui could find not only stunning sunsets, clean air, and strange landscapes to shock them back to their spiritual selves. Out there, they could find Indians dancing on mesa tops, Hispanic farmers timing the planting of crops according to signs from the moon—people actually living according to nature’s rhythms.

And how beautiful they all were, he told his readers in The Land of Poco Tiempo (1893). The women wore necklaces of “[c]lothesty corals, silver beads alternating with silver crosses, and long strings of priceless turquoise [. . .]” (260). And how exciting life was, he enthused in yet another book, appropriately titled Some Strange Corners of Our Country: The Wonderland of the Southwest (1892). Lummis took his readers underground into a kiva to behold secret religious rites. There, shamans turn into bears and various other animals (86). Then, “Suddenly a blinding flash of forked lightning shoots across the room from side to side, and another and another, while the room trembles to the roar of the thunder [. . .]” (83). Sitting yet one more Sunday in a stuffy church and listening to yet another version of the same, old, boring sermon hardly could hold up a candle to that.

Most people, it is true, did not pull up stakes and rush out West to hoe corn and watch shamans turn into bears. In such matters, most of us prefer to dream, are satisfied with the dazzlement of vicarious experiences. For all that, largely due to the promotional efforts of Charles F. Lummis, with George Wharton James, A. J. Burdick, and many other writers following, the Southwest took on a glow in the nation’s psyche, one that continues to enchant us with books and travel posters. Lummis had incorporated the desert into his charming panorama, stating early on in his tramp across the Mojave that he was walking through the “most beauti-
ful place on earth” (A Tramp 26). Be that as it may, in his books the desert remained a geographically vague portion of his rosy portrait of the Southwest. And Lummis, for all his influence, was writing books more compelling as propaganda than as literature considered in terms of a fine art. Yet he had set the course of desert writing, or, perhaps to put it more accurately, the course of desert writing had found its flowering through him. Almost inevitably, given the forceful spirit of the times, the dual features Lummis had not clearly addressed would soon become central in the works of two very different writers, one a feminist and social reformer, the other an aloof, hidebound art critic.

John C. Van Dyke and Mary Austin have become such icons in the genre of desert writing that it is sometimes difficult to penetrate the hagiolatry that has grown up around the authors and their famous books. As is often true of saints, once they’re canonized their values change; they and their works take on fictional colors. Thereafter, their followers, buoyed on enthusiasms, see more the aura than the facts.

Because of this, a few general observations are in order. Yes, their books—Van Dyke’s The Desert (1901) and Austin’s The Land of Little Rain (1903)—stand as landmarks, pivotal in their field. Not only did they become the first two works to concentrate on the desert as a lovely and healing place, they did so with a literary grace, an aesthetic manipulation both of their subject and, hence, their readers, which has not been matched in the many decades since the books lifted the American public by the ears. Yet, even as the writers praise their subject, both books project highly distorted versions of reality, loading them with such promise, beauty, and sometimes appealing inaccuracies that a cynic could make the case that The Desert and The Land of Little Rain are unintended put-downs of the actual, everyday, ho-hum desert. Furthermore, although the two books sway with a compelling emotionalism
finely wrought, their messages are very different, all but polar in their differences, and in this regard, in an irony often missed, they are two rival icons produced by two warring saints.

Part of the reason the irony is missed, as we've said, is because the force of the books often distracts from a cooler analysis. Part, also, falls to the account of readers. They are so overwhelmed by what the authors are saying, or what they, projecting their own desires, think they are saying, that the readers themselves become culpable, turning the works into what they want them to be. Of late, Austin has become the heroine of feminists, so much so that her many books often are viewed in the political light that her devotees themselves bring to their subject. These politically preoccupied readers miss Austin's gaffes and some of her admirable complexities—as well as smoothing over some of her blatantly selfish and downright embarrassing behavior.

If anything, the case is even worse when it comes to John C. Van Dyke. Almost unanimously through the hundred years since his desert book's appearance, critics and general audiences alike have lauded the little volume. These readers see The Desert as a natural history guidebook and as a reflection of a sensitive, Politically Correct male far ahead of his times in liberal social thinking. They find both worthy of following as sterling examples of man and literature. Furthermore, he is praised as an early, if lonely, voice for preserving what would soon become the badly assaulted arid expanses (Powell 316-20). Such is Van Dyke's aura. The truth, however, is almost exactly the opposite. Although it remains perhaps our greatest aesthetic tour de force, the book that presents the arid lands as a series of stunning canvases in the mode of English painter J. M. W. Turner comes riddled with factual errors that schoolchildren in today's Southwest would instantly recognize. And these, crafty, elitist Van Dyke, likely chuckling up his sleeve, wrote into his text, despising the very audience which now adores
him. As to conservation, he dedicates his famous book, using the ruse of initials only, to Andrew Carnegie, probably the foremost nature-wrecking man in America of that day. Adding to the fun, Van Dyke, a sickly professor, faked the rugged horseback trip on which he based his desert book. Such, at times, is the nature of literature. For all that, there you have them, our two finest desert books.

If unusual people do unusual things, in our case writing monumental books about a landscape, it is tempting to explore the writers themselves. Each left behind an autobiography, and so the temptation grows to consider their works in the light of the lives which produced them. When we follow the autobiographer's ascendance in Austin's Earth Horizon (1932), we see a dramatic bit of Americana. Born in the Midwest, even as a child Mary Hunter had otherworldly moments, once seeing God under a walnut tree. Thereafter, hers is the tale of a middle-class, rebellious woman making her way to fame. Failing at homesteading in California, she suffered through a bad marriage resulting in a retarded child and a divorce. She dabbled with the avant-garde writing community at seaside Carmel, got a boost when editor Charles F. Lummis began publishing her short stories, then, so launched, wrote a series of feminist novels and plays, interspersed with books about mysticism, poetry, and folklore.

Visionary Austin not only matched the changes swirling in the air at the turn of the nineteenth century, she had an intuitive knack for turning them to her advantage. A bold woman, on trips back East she decked herself in outlandish skeins of Navajo jewelry and paraded about with Indians gussied up in preposterous costumes. Her show gave the literary power brokers, New York City's critics, the romance, false as it was, they hungered for; soon she was their darling.

There is no record that contemporaries Austin and Van Dyke ever met, and it is just as well they did not. John C. Van Dyke
harrumphed that the female reformers of his day would do better to get back into their kitchens. His father was a banker, member of the U.S. Congress, and a justice of New Jersey’s supreme court. Born, then, into the nation’s unofficial aristocracy, young John first had private tutors before attending Columbia Law School. Yet art interested him more than law. Holding two concurrent and prestigious positions, as librarian of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary and as the first professor of art history at Rutgers University, he became a taste-setter of his day. He lauded the new Impressionism sweeping the country from Europe and turned out dozens of books, on art criticism, travel, and nature. Through these he told the new, burgeoning middle class, eager to learn about “culture,” what it should properly think about such subjects.

His Autobiography (1993) passes on further, and more intriguing, details. On trips to Europe’s art museums, he lounged on the Champs Élysées, a handsome, fastidious dresser, at his ease in a world of servants and tinkling crystal. He strolled the decks of the world’s most sumptuous private yacht with Lillie Langtry, and he served as the art advisor to Andrew Carnegie, one of the planet’s richest men. Yet Van Dyke was not simply a splendid “indoorsman,” as Lawrence Clark Powell calls him, that is, a refined gentleman and worthy scholar; he blended that admirable quality with another. As Powell further notes, Van Dyke also was a savvy outdoorsman (319). A lamb in the drawing room but a lion in the field, as a youth two-fisted Van Dyke rode hard with cowboys in Montana and pounded across the Great Plains hunting buffalo with the Sioux Indians on thrilling, teeth-rattling romps. Later in life, drawing on such skills honed on the frontier, he was able to strap on his pistol, saddle up, and ride off alone into the unknown desert, emerging many months later with the manuscript of the desert’s most famous book.
Whether we're talking about the strenuous Van Dyke or the rebellious Austin, the writers' lives seem to provide informative matrices for the books growing out of them. Yet the approach comes with any number of pitfalls. An author may be very different from his books. He may not even be aware of the complexities flowing from his pen, for his literary work rises above daily concerns, which are only tenuously connected to art. The writer of detective stories need not be a sleuth. Furthermore, bewitched by a personality, we may read the books according to our fascinations. More troublesome still is the reliability of a writer's own information. An autobiography is but one version of a life, its details often selected and colored to create a euphonic picture of its writer/subject. Lastly, some critics set personality aside, arguing that a book should be its own whole, its aesthetic integrity our focus, not the fallible and ultimately unknowable mortal behind it. This certainly holds true of Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*. We need know nothing of its author to appreciate the book and grasp both its loveliness and its message. The book stands on its own.

On the other hand, one intrigue of literature is that not all books are best read on their own. Few would disagree that in order to understand a work we need to understand its words, not only in the dictionary sense but in the particular shadings an author gives them. Keeping this in mind, it's clear that in writing *The Desert* wily Van Dyke was combining two books, one for public consumption, the other for the cognoscenti, yet each valid in its own way. Furthermore, in doing this he projected a very strong message concerning what he thought life, art, and the desert itself were all about.

The far more accessible level of *The Desert*, the one applauded by the public for a hundred years, is a lush and convincing trumpet solo praising the wonders of a newly discovered land. It's as if Lummis, that Barker tooting a horn about the desert's attractions,
suddenly had huge surges of sensitivity and IQ and had become the maestro of his material. For surely we have a master hand at work in *The Desert*.

Disarming us, Van Dyke arranges the structure of his book in a traditional way, logically dividing it into chapters on desert geology, plants, animals, birds, and such. In this mode he passes on the information about features which readers back East were eager to have elaborated, the factual wonders of a far-off land. Fulfilling the needs of his audience, the writer offers instruction about the agents of wind and rain giving shape to this strange place (30-34), and he discusses the habits of animals unfamiliar to most readers, for instance the fleet antelope, its bulging eyes so keen the creature almost seems able to see around corners (164-65). Thus, in passing on such knowledge Van Dyke gains authority. He is the docent providing the nation’s first popular guidebook to the arid lands. Such is his renown on this score that, decades after the book’s publication, one desert historian summed up Van Dyke’s reputation by declaring him the “famed naturalist” (Lee 136).

Compelling as the revelations from the new region were to people keen for information in those far less traveled times, what truly dazed them was Van Dyke’s treatment of his material. He was passing on more than the scientific truth of his stomping ground; he swept readers away with its levitating beauty. Here, out in the desert, those following Van Dyke on his travels from one high-voltage page to the next beheld not just cacti blossoming into variegated colors right out of the “fiery waste” (177) and huge condors soaring back and forth on wingspans far larger than anyone had ever seen shadowing over the ground in Massachusetts (181), but nature in her full force, outdoing herself, whirling up great, epical storms until “All the air shone like gold dust and the sun turned red as blood” (16). What nature lover could read such scenes and not ripple with a ravishing frisson?
That, however, was only the beginning, Van Dyke’s softening up of his audience for his real message. When halting his horse and turning in the saddle, shouting to his listeners to follow him “far beyond the wire fence of civilization to those places [...] where the trail is unbroken” (xx), he was inviting them on no mere tour but responding to one of the nation’s great cultural needs. An earnest Pied Piper, he was leading them away from their mundane lives, away from factories and drudgery, out into a spiritual realm where the glories of nature would have the senses vibrating.

It was just what kept the late Victorians buying his book, as we do a hundred years later.

If only that were the whole of Van Dyke’s story! Then we could rest, pleasurably exhausted in our afterglow from reading The Desert. But the Pied Piper, we should not forget, for all the sweetness of his playing, led the dazzled children into a mountain not out of love but out of revenge.

A close reading of a skillfully wrought book often shows that writing is a process of seduction. Choosing words to construct a web both strong and flexible, the writer lures readers into his artistic world. When in Van Dyke’s introductory material, for instance, he throws up his hands and says all he can do is give his “impression” of the desert (xxi), we see quite clearly from the context what he means. The facts of nature are interesting, he admits, but ultimately you can’t “pin Nature to a board,” and most of all the lover of the desert hopes to capture his passion, his “impression” of his beloved landscape (xx-xxi).

Despite the validity of the statement and its appropriateness in preparing us for the poetic delivery ahead, more is going on here than meets the eye. Here, biographical information is useful, for if we know something of Van Dyke’s life, even a little about his private art collection, we see that he also was using “impression” in a more complex way. A devotee of the school, he will be describing
the desert as an Impressionist would paint it, catching fleeting glimpses of the land in terms of whirls of colored light, as we’ve seen in his treatment of the swirling, golden storm mentioned above (Wild, “How a London Madman”). Thus, although knowing this little trick is not at all necessary to grasp the book, the application of biographical knowledge certainly enlarges our reading.

Yet as earlier implied, a close reading can be dangerous. Readers swept away by Van Dyke’s passion might, in their cooler moments, pause to wonder over some of his “facts.” In Van Dyke’s *The Desert*, coyotes are lazy (158), rattlesnakes hardly dangerous (169), and, come to think of it, that condor, a monster impressively rivaling the pterodactyl in size, has an impossibly large wingspan of fifteen feet (181). In fact, the book is riddled with errors of the most unforgivable kind. More bewildering still, if we pursue the initials of the book’s dedicatee, we see that Van Dyke formally inscribes *The Desert* not to some nature lover of the day, such as John Muir or John Burroughs, but to steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, whose machines chewed up Minnesota’s Mesabi Range, leaving today’s scars as our legacy (Ingham and Wild). And if we dig a little deeper, we’ll soon see that Van Dyke never swung his leg over an Indian pony and rode off into the unknown. Rather, a professor so chronically ill that at times he couldn’t even mount the lecture platform, he saw the desert while whizzing across its spaces in plush Pullman cars. What on earth is going on?

Reading *The Desert* along with Van Dyke’s other books, we’ll see that Van Dyke was consistent in his fabricating. Whether crowing about his exploits with a six-shooter in Montana or dashing after buffalo with Sioux Indians, Van Dyke was a romantic fabulist, a man who delighted in hoodwinking a public the elitist deemed too blockheaded to appreciate his artistic sensibilities. On the first level, then, at least in part he wrote *The Desert* to show the public’s gullibility, its foolishness in swallowing the information in a
badly flawed book. On the second level, Van Dyke, a bleak man at heart, believed mankind doomed; only art could give us temporary succor, the ephemeral pleasure before nature crushed us in her maws. In this spirit, he offered *The Desert* to a small and sophisticated coterie of art connoisseurs who cared not a whit about such lowbrow concerns as factual accuracy, only for the thrill of Van Dyke’s passionate prose. Such is the provenance of what remains our most powerful desert book (*Wild and Carmony*).

Whatever Van Dyke’s shenanigans, he brought the impulses of Lummis to fruition. With the combined power and grace of his prose, a twin talent Lummis possessed only in part, Van Dyke gave the desert cachet as literature. In cultural terms he established the desert as a distinct entity, a psychic boon for the nation, and he provided the colorful romantic vocabulary which we still use, a century later, to talk about the region.

If life is one thing and art quite another, it seems that both Van Dyke and Austin are indulging in similar imagined realities. Both declare themselves desert lovers, both celebrate the desert as a beautiful and healing land, and in counterbalance both make a public display of rending their garments over a burgeoning technological society gnawing its way across the arid loveliness. Beyond this, however, they are worlds apart, showing how even romantics can be at feisty loggerheads.

The pivot showing their radical differences is people. In Van Dyke’s *The Desert* there are none. It’s as if on his grand tour of the desert he met not a single cowboy, snaggletoothed sourdough, Indian, or storeowner. This for a good reason. A cynic when it came to human beings, for his aesthetic masterpiece Van Dyke idealizes his landscape, ridding it of those perverse, meanspirited invaders who could be only blots on nature’s lovely scenes before him. Art may not save us from the great Nothingness that follows life, but by Gosh he’s not going to have any flies in the ointment of
his balm, the beauty serving him as a temporary relief, his distraction from ultimate despair. Austin, on the other hand, for all her spite and ambitious trampling on her fellowman during the course of her life, comes across as angelic, gently bringing people center stage in her desert paean. These are, furthermore, particular types of people, addled prospectors, beaten-down Indians, Mexicans, and others on the bottom rungs of industrialized society. Like her, they are victims, and from her experience of that condition she is able to understand, as do other Wordsworthian romantics, that in the downtrodden and ignored lies society’s great reservoir of genuine goodness. Paralleling the area’s victims is the desert itself, also variously ignored and abused but, in the new light she throws upon it, seen as the land of all good things. Thus her message, echoing Lummis, is clear. If we would only abandon our technology and live our lives weeding endless rows of corn under a blazing sun, as did the anthropologist in “The Pot of Gold,” we’d all be supremely happy—an escape into fantasy as quickly appealing to readers in her day as it is in ours.

At her worst, such notions based on willful ignorance degenerate into pure silliness. Austin, for instance, celebrates Seyavi, a blind and ancient Paiute crawling about in rags who, despite her wretchedness, remains full of the joy of “primitive women” (175). No, things can get worse. The final chapter of The Land of Little Rain lauds a Mexican town in the mountains. Its inhabitants, although poor and hungry, are rich with culture. They spend much of their time strumming guitars and dancing, despite their empty bellies (265-81). This is so patently unrealistic and insulting, the worst kind of self-serving romantic colonialism, that even good writing can’t overcome it for the thoughtful reader.

Genius, however, invites forgiveness. When Austin is good, she is superb. Unlike Van Dyke, Wagnerian in taking on large and loud prospects, Austin prefers to concentrate on those things immedi-
ately at hand that form her intimate world. Also unlike Van Dyke, she not only gains our respect by knowing her plants and animals well, she can describe them in ways that are both accurate and fetching. Crouched by a spring at evening to watch small desert creatures timidly come out of the brush to drink, she notes elf owls swooping above, “speckled fluffs of greediness” hungry to rend the flesh of mice—thus a lesson on the desert’s combined beauty and violence (38).

When she’s at her best, Austin applies her delicate talents convincingly. Drawing on her miserable years of marriage in California’s arid Owens Valley, she writes a meditation on a neighbor’s field, a ragged, abandoned place with a little stream and trees creeping back in, nature reclaiming her own. Here there is not a hint of her personal trials, only the sense of a person full of curiosity, respectfully stepping through nature and recording its lovely changes. This chapter in The Land of Little Rain is, to use a phrase that was once applied to John Burroughs, the harvest of a quiet eye (125-39).

That is, at her best, Austin takes a quotidian subject and, skirting the dangers of cliché, shows us how the everyday can be the rich center of our deepest selves. Yet not satisfied to remain in a comfortable stasis of sepia, she’s willing to take further risks. She recounts the tale of an old prospector who gets caught in a blizzard up in the mountains. Desperate for shelter, long after dark he crawls into a clump of trees bent over by the snow where, apparently, some sheep also have taken refuge. However, when he wakes in the morning he sees that he’s been sleeping with wild sheep who now stand up god-like around him, “nodding their great horns beneath the cedar roof, looking out on the wonder of the snow” (76).

In terms of natural history, this is a highly unlikely, although not impossible, event; the possibility, combined with the writing
here, lifts us beyond doubts, leaving us at story’s end, along with
the prospector, awed believers in nature’s transcendental powers.

**EPILOGUE**

With the poles of their styles successfully applied to a similar
general message, that the desert can heal and elevate, Van Dyke
and Austin might be seen as both the flowering and the fruition of
desert literature. In a seeming instant, the genre was born and
came to full growth around the turn of the nineteenth century.
Their combined work is so powerful that it may well be, to shift
the metaphor, that the writers who follow them, striving to imitate
their accomplishment, have become but the stick that continues
soaring long after the rocket’s lovely burst.

In this sense, the romanticized desert, although still enormously
appealing, has become a luxury wearing thin for those of a more
perceptive bent. What readers could persuade themselves to be-
lieve, even falsely, in the day of Van Dyke and Austin, today, in
our age of high technology, with hardly a truly wild patch of
desert left to be seen, has become a willful delusion, an escape into
a fantasy given the lie by reality. Still, over the years some writ-
ers, such as Joseph Wood Krutch and Edward Abbey, have been
willing to take on this burden and, acknowledging the new circum-
stances, deal with the changes impinging on a genre given contin-
uing new birth from that uneasy place where reality and the
imagination often not only are at odds but at times inform one an-
other.
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