

Contrasts: A Defence of Desert Writings

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The Taklamakan.
The Empty Quarter.
The Kalahari.
The Mojave.
The Gobi.
(and, of course,)
The Sahara.

All are evocative names. Yet Edward Abbey, desert lover and self-proclaimed protector of all that is arid, complained in his 1968 *Desert Solitaire* that the desert was a place which had 'scarcely been approached in poetry or fiction'. If Abbey was right, that 'the desert waits ... untouched by the human mind' (Abbey 1968: 302-303), such an oversight obviously needs to be redressed. Unless, of course, it truly is as bland a subject as the literati, according to Abbey, seem to think.

Proof to the contrary is provided by the endless streams of travel writings that these harsh, dry landscapes never cease to pour forth. Among many recent examples one can name Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle's *Sahara: The Life of the Great Desert* (2002) and Fergus Fleming's *The Sword and the Cross* (2003). This list will grow much longer if we add past desert travellers such as Charles M. Doughty, Richard F. Burton, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Laurens van der Post, T.E. Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger. If we allow fictions¹ to be added to the list, one may likewise point to the writings of Gustave Flaubert, Andre Gide, Paul Bowles, Bruce Chatwin, Thea Astley, Randolph Stow, Patrick White, or, as most people will promptly answer when asked to name a "desert story", Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992). It is even possible to find

¹ In this paper 'fiction' will refer to works of a purportedly 'fictional' nature whereas 'travel' and 'explorative' writings will refer to works claiming to be based on 'actual' experiences of the landscapes described. That some works bridge these distinctions, as eg. Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987) does it, will for the purposes of this paper be ignored.

Norwegians and Swedes writing of the hot, gritty wastelands, making comparisons to cold Scandinavia in the realization that driving between 'drifts of sand' outside of Tan-Tan in the Sahara is like driving between 'heaps of snow in Stockholm at winter' (Lindqvist 1990: 9)². So, we may ask, exactly what was Abbey griping about? Westerners apparently have been, and still are, 'approaching' the desert in all sorts of imaginable ways. Western nations, certainly, have 'approached' the desert more than once in recent years. They did so under Rommel and Montgomery, and they have done so under Schwarzkopf and Franks. Deserts, one may rightfully claim, have had a powerful grip on Westerners for centuries past, be it on their imagination, security agendas or oil policies.

Yet Abbey's complaint is not entirely off the mark. We do not find prose praising the desert as Thoreau praised the woods or Hemingway the sea, nor do we find an Ode to Sand by Wordsworth, Keats or Shelley. Yet in a way we do. The texts are out there, floundering on the desert dunes for lack of attention. Critical opinion just never bothered to spend a lot of energy on the subject. At least not till recently.

Since Abbey put forth his complaint, critical investigations of specific deserts and national desert traditions³ have flourished, much thanks to the growing interest for the emergent field of literary geography. Plentiful as these may have become, one will still be hard pressed to dig up more than a handful of critical accounts bridging literary genres, national traditions and geographically diverse deserts. Belden C. Lane's *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (1998) and William L. Fox' *The Void, The Grid & The Sign* (2000) come close, but the former is too preoccupied with the monastic tradition and the latter with the specific American vision to offer truly wide-ranging accounts encompassing the host of Western desert writings. And in the texts originating from the tip of van der Post's South Africa to the top of Axel Jensen's Norway, from Abbey's Arches National Monument in southeast Utah to Stow's desert of Central Australia, one is

² For a Norwegian example of the genre, see Axel Jensen's *Ikaros* (1957).

³ For investigations of the American and Australian traditions see eg. Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert* (1986), Peter Wild, *Opal Desert: Explorations of Fantasy and Reality in the American Southwest* (1999), William L. Fox, *The Void, The Grid & The Sign* (2000), Craig Leland Childs, *The Secret Knowledge of Water: Discovering the Essence of the American Desert* (2001), Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (1998) and Lesley Head, *Second Nature: The History and Implications of Australia as Aboriginal Landscape* (2000).

indeed able to find similarities that need not necessarily be described within a more specific framework but that of 'the West'.

Whereas this paper lays no claim to offer one such definite account, it will argue that Western desert writings are to some extent all centred on what Sven Lindqvist calls the 'contrast between surface and depths [that is] the fundamental experience of the desert' (Lindqvist 1990: 57). A contrast that is so rich in imagery that one cannot but wonder why critical opinion never bothered to give more than the occasional cheer for Lawrence and Exupéry and forgot all the rest.

Tales of Dare

Used as a narrative ploy in a work of fiction, we most often meet the desert in narratives in which the setting is either partially or completely replaced by elements of a fictional world. That is, in fictions that would normally be classified as belonging to the genres of science fiction, fantasy or magic realism. Exceptions such as Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) or Thea Astley's *Drylands* (1999) do, of course, exist, but it is in texts like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1946), Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963), Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and J. G. Ballard's *Vermillion Sands* (1971) that we most often meet the desert as a protagonist in its own right. Here, the desert is either employed to provide the atmosphere for a futuristic or fantastic setting, or, alternatively, acts as a gateway to other worlds. Occasionally, the desert also makes an appearance in adventure writing, but as Richard Phillips has said of the desert of the Australian interior, so it goes for the relationship between the desert and adventure writing in general. Since there is nothing but sand and heat for the intrepid hero (rarely the heroine) to explore, it is, as Phillips says, 'unsuitable as the setting for conventionally epic exploration history' (Phillips 1997: 75). It may act as yet another piece of troublesome landscape that the hero must traverse before he reaches the treasure trove at the end of the road, but it is not often in the desert itself that the quest is completed. Adventurous souls like Alan Quartermain may make a perilous journey across the desert (Haggard 1885: chap. 5-6), but it is not here that he finds the gemstones of King Solomon that he covets.

Most Western desert tales, however, are couched in the framework of travel and explorative writings. That Westerners' literary engagement with

the desert mainly comes in the form of exploration and travel is no great surprise when we consider that these hot sandy wastes are to be found on all of the continents with the exception of Antarctica and Europe. Practically all such deserts are located in countries once colonised or at least under heavy influence of (European) colonial powers. Consequently, as a large amount of Western desert writings can be classified as being the products of non-indigenous writers, aspects of the colonial/postcolonial debate can hardly be ignored. Writings such as Charles M. Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888), Charles F. Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* (1893), T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) and Wilfred Thesiger's *Arabian Sands* (1959) can easily be placed within the theoretical framework provided by postcolonial theory and have indeed been so many times in the past. The writers' donning of 'native clothes' (Lawrence 1935: 51) in order to perform a 'journey in disguise' as well as the urge to see country 'not yet seen by a European' (Thesiger 1959: 8 and 7) is typical of the genre as is the language in which it is put, the constant desire to 'penetrate' and 'conquer' the 'virgin lands'. As investigations into this particular aspect have been explored thoroughly elsewhere we will not dwell upon it here, but only note that, as Barry Lopez expresses it, '[d]ifficulty in evaluating, or even discerning, a particular landscape is related to the distance a culture has traveled from its own ancestral landscape' (Lopez 1986: 12). That European travellers and explorers projected their desires and pre-conceived notions on a landscape utterly alien to them to a large degree explains why they had a hard time coping with the desert landscapes that they were at the same time also enthralled by. One would, however, presume that this 'difficulty' should diminish with time as the foreign invaders settle down and begin to make the desert landscape their own. For the cowboys of the American West and the bushrangers of Central Australia it may have become so, but for the average citizens of these preponderantly urbanised societies, it is still a landscape that has not been assimilated in the national psyches. In a reading in which Abbey's own *Desert Solitaire* is compared to desert writings ranging from a variety of different national traditions, genres, and geographic and fictional locations, we will attempt to explain why that is.

Mind under Matter

Whether they are defined as travel writings, fictions, sociological accounts or ecological polemics, it is a rare piece of desert writing that does not express a

belief in the 'origin' of the desert. One may find the desert invoked as a romanticised dream of a pure and forgotten past, or, inversely, as a cruel and malignant entity bound to destroy all that invades it, hence as a space that must be either traversed or 'greened' in order to conquer it. No matter what the form or purpose of the texts in question, though, the desert and its peoples are almost always seen as primeval, untainted and pure. The Arabian scholar Ibn Khaldûn spoke of the desert's ability to keep its inhabitants 'closer to the first natural state and more remote from evil habits' (Khaldûn 1381: 94) already in the fourteenth century, but we find his claim mirrored in Lawrence's description of the 'abstraction of desert landscape [that] cleansed me' (Lawrence 1935: 506), in Bowles' claim that 'the sun is a great purifier' (Bowles 1949: 136), in Thesiger who speaks of 'a cleanness which was infinitely remote from the world of men' (Thesiger 1959: 32) and in Chatwin's thesis that 'man was born in the desert [and] by returning to the desert he rediscovers himself' (Chatwin 1987: 65). Whether this 'purity' is benign or not is, however, an entirely different story. Exupéry may express admiration, passion even, for a place that 'does not open itself to transient lovers' (Exupéry 1939: 48), but for the explorers vanquishing of dehydration or the assaults of the desert dwellers, the 'purity' of the desert - its ability to thwart all plans of invasion - will seem a rather doubtful trait.

Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* takes the middle road. His introductory lament, stating that:

This is not a travel guide but an elegy.

A memorial.

You're holding a tombstone in your hands (Abbey 1968: xii).

may fool one into believing that the tone of *Desert Solitaire* will be akin to the romanticising one encounters in Thesiger and Exupéry. Reading on, however, Abbey's claim that:

The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself ... I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself (Abbey 1968: 7)

hints what it is that sets him apart from the glorified myths of his predecessors.

'I'm a humanist; I'd rather kill a *man* than a snake' (Abbey 1968: 20), Abbey wryly observes as he ponders which of the two species he would prefer to exterminate if he was given the chance. According to Lynn White Jr., 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 9), and if one finds Abbey's remark provocative (which it is certainly meant to be), it is probably in this Christian conception of the world that the root of one's annoyance should be found. As White argues, we may be rationally aware that the earth revolves around its own axis and that, consequently, the sun does not *rise* in the east, yet few of us think otherwise when we watch a rosy dawn. For as Umberto Eco says it:

if our knowledge is by now Copernican, our perception is still Ptolemaic: we not only see the sun rise in the east and travel through the arc of the day, but we behave as if the sun turns and we remain immobile. And we say, "the sun rises", "the sun is high in the sky", "it sinks", "it sets". Even your astronomy professors speak Ptolemaically (Eco 1999: 23).

For White, this means that,

[d]espite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are *not*, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 12).

No one is going to tell *us*, talking creatures with enormous brains who drink our morning coffee as we watch the *sunrise*, that a slithering snake can be more important than a bipedal man. As Christopher Manes has said it, the possibility that 'intellect or self-consciousness' could be deemed inferior to 'photosynthesis, poisoned fangs or sporogenesis' (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 24) lies as far from our conception of our place in the universe as the belief that the life of a snake could possibly be more valuable than the life of a man. The insignificance of man is, however, exactly what Abbey attempts to convince us of in *Desert Solitaire*.

Away with all 'personification of the natural' and all forms of interpretation. Welcome 'surfaces – [for] what else is there?', Abbey asks. Though a philosopher by trade, Abbey seems determined not to linger over the age-old conflict between body and mind longer than absolutely necessary. He is reputedly perfectly content with there being nothing but surfaces in the world, that the 'surface is also the essence' (Abbey 1968: 32), and that, as a consequence, we can do away with all forms of

interpretation and wranglings about inner and outer, simulacra and real. Notions of 'solipsism, like other absurdities of the professional philosopher is a product of too much time wasted in library stacks' (Abbey 1968: 121), Abbey says, and to refute such a creature, 'all that you have to do is take him out and throw a rock at his head' (Abbey 1968: 122). Instead of theorising too much, Abbey commends us to make a leap of faith and simply accept the world as it is without trying to wrench any 'meaning' from it.

This advice of Abbey's is one that we find elsewhere in desert writings (though by no means in all), for as Lane says, 'one initially enters the desert in order to be stripped of self' (Lane 1998: 6). The opposite lesson, taught by many but especially by Lawrence, is therefore far removed from the sentiment of *Desert Solitaire*. For instead of praising it for producing a creed of mind-over-matter in which bodily wants and desires can be conquered or quelled by a strong mind⁴, Abbey cherishes the desert for its ability to merge the two into one. Rather than elevating the mind to some superior position far removed from the body, Abbey argues that in the desert where 'the sun reigns' in 'arid intensity of pure heat ... all things recede to distances out of reach ... annihilating all thought' (Abbey 1968: 165).

In Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of a 'nomadology', we find much the same advice expressed. Instead of abiding by the strict dichotomies and goal-oriented structures of the 'arborescent culture' in which we live, Deleuze and Guattari urge us to think in the patterns of a 'rhizome', realising that 'the distinction to be made is not at all between exterior and interior', but rather that 'everything is connected' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 36 and 115). Accordingly, the lesson of the desert (or to be more precise, of the desert peoples, the nomads), is therefore the realisation that 'a path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 350). For unlike the 'striated', 'sedentary' space of the cities that we (Westerners) live in, the desert dwellers are aware that there is 'no line separating earth and sky ... no intermediate distance, no perspective or contour' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 382). It is, as Lane and Fox point out, in the desert which

⁴ According to Lawrence, the body is 'coarse ... rubbish', sex an 'unhygienic pleasure', the optimal Beduin army is envisioned as 'a thing intangible ... like a gas', Lawrence and his bodyguard 'see our bodies' with 'hostility' and Lawrence himself on several occasions experiences that he is 'dividing into parts', 'detaching' from his body and 'hovering above' his 'flesh' (Lawrence 1935: 12, 338, 182, 460, 12 and 443).

has 'no middle ground' (Fox 2000: 51) that we are confronted 'with a vast *horizontal* edge, a horizon of emptiness into which we find ourselves absorbed and lost' and 'little distance is made between the self and the environment' (Lane 1998: 38 and 40).

It is this form of spatial conception and living that Abbey advocates as an escape from the mind-boggling 'absurdities' of Western philosophers, an experience described by Maurice Blanchot as being one that 'tends towards the inexplicable in order to explain ... an experience which is one not of knowing but of being' (Holland 1995: 309). Instead of attempting to prove (or disprove as it is so common these days) the existence of the world in which he seeks to immerse himself, Abbey similarly chooses to face the void unquestioningly, ignoring all questions of ontology in his decision to simply *be*. The desert offers Abbey 'a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world' (Abbey 1968: 7), the epiphany of which is the realisation that,

out there is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours, a world which surrounds and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship. The shock of the real (Abbey 1968: 45).

Unlike Lawrence who 'reverenced my wits and despised my body' (Lawrence 1935: 527), Abbey therefore believes 'that man is a dream, thought an illusion, and only rock is real' (Abbey 1968: 244).

The belief that 'the "real" us ... is concentrated in some disputed recess of the body, a precious cocoon, separate from the world of matter' in a place called 'the mind', is a belief that Neil Evernden rightly diagnoses the Western world as having suffered from ever since Descartes (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 98). Consequently, the 'hyperbolic doubts' of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* should, Abbey agrees with its author, 'be rejected as ludicrous' (Cahn 1977: 377). But so should the concept of the 'evil genius' and its counterpart, the benign God, that had Descartes going in the first place. For as Abbey puts it, '[u]nder the desert sun, in that dogmatic clarity, the fables of theology and the myths of classical philosophy dissolve like mist' (Abbey 1968: 45). In the beautiful but trying terrain of the desert, when your 'thirst becomes so intense' that you 'cannot seem to drink any liquid fast enough to quench it' (Abbey 1968: 161) and the heat is 'thick and heavy on [your] brains' (Abbey 1968: 107), one cannot deny that body and world most certainly exist. Abbey, at least, cannot, and there is no one else around to object.

Kenosis, Silence and Solitude

It is the paradox of the desert that although it is a place of desertion and loneliness, it is also a place where one can rarely survive for long without companions. Consequently, one must often let go of one's immediate individual needs in order to serve the long-term welfare of the group/tribe. Abbey, however, claims that 'man can never find or need better companionship than that of himself' (Abbey 1968: 121), and it is a rare instance in *Desert Solitaire* when Abbey is not praising the many qualities solitude has over companionship. For this reason alone, if not for any other, it would be wrong to insist that Abbey does not operate with the concept of 'the individual'. One only has to remember that Abbey does not, like Descartes and countless other Western thinkers, see 'the individual' as an intangible kernel shut off from the rest of the 'world' or 'reality'. For Abbey, the path to 'the individual' does not go through the pineal gland as Descartes would have it, but *is* the pineal gland, the brain in which it resides, the skull which vaults the brain, and the skin that keeps in blood, bone and gristle yet exudes sweat; sweat that evaporates and mix with air, some day to condense again and perhaps fall upon the very same head as rain. For Abbey, '[t]here is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context' (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 103), and individual and context are constantly interacting.

Though Abbey fiercely denies all thinking of a religious nature and, as Lane puts it, 'would have scoffed at the very idea' that there is anything holy about the desert, Abbey's desert paradoxically seems akin to the desert of the desert fathers on many points. According to Saint Jerome, the desert was the place in which those 'who desire to live a remoter life, stripped of all its trappings, withdraw themselves' (Waddell 1936: 58). For Jerome as well as for later mystics, the desert was therefore the place in which *kenosis*, the 'emptying of the ego that opens one [to God]' (Lane 1996: 15 and 13), could take place. For Abbey, too, the desert is a silent, solitary, contemplative place in which one often loses one's sense of self yet gains something in return. Although the contents of this return certainly differs from that of Saint Jerome and his fellow desert fathers, the process of solitude, silence and lack of urban comfort through which it is gained is similar to the experiences of the desert fathers in many respects.

Having spent the 'The First Morning' (chapter one) and subsequent hours of daylight together with the superintendent and the chief ranger of Arches National Monument (the geographical desert in which most of

Desert Solitaire is set), darkness falls on Abbey's camp. It is only then, freed from all companionship, that Abbey becomes aware of 'the immense silence in which I am lost'. This 'silence', Abbey assures us, is not so much a 'silence as a great stillness'. A few sounds can be heard, 'the creak of some bird in a juniper tree, an eddy of wind ... - slight noises which break the sensation of absolute silence', yet this only serves to 'exaggerate my sense of the surrounding, overwhelming peace' (Abbey 1968: 13). This is the stillness of the wild, the opposite of what Abbey later terms the 'confusion and clamor' (Abbey 1968: 200) of urban life that he is trying to get away from. Having dispensed with the noise of urbanity, Abbey next decides to rid himself of 'the small device stripped to my hand' in order to attain a 'suspension of time, a continuous present' (Abbey 1968: 13). Thus freed from the restraints of civilisation, solitary, silent and timeless, Abbey begins to perceive his surroundings in a different light, metaphorically and literally speaking.

As he finishes his supper, the remaining daylight disappears and Abbey experiences one of the telltale characteristics of the desert night. Stars, 'bold and close' canopies the desert world of 'arches and cliffs and pinnacles and balanced rocks of sandstone' (Abbey 1968: 13). To keep him company, Abbey decides to light a 'little squaw fire' that, though man-made, is comparatively 'natural' enough to avoid yoking him back to the man-made world he has just escaped. As the fire dies out, however, Abbey shortly relapses into modernity as he fiddles with the thought of using a flashlight and tries to start up the generator of his housetrailer in order to light the light bulbs inside. The idea of the flashlight is quickly discarded, for 'like many other mechanical gadgets [it] tends to separate a man from the world around him'. Instead, Abbey ventures into the darkness with limited vision, but remaining 'part of the environment' (Abbey 1968: 15). As he returns to his housetrailer after his stroll, he does, however, start the generator in order to write a letter. In contrast to his recent experience of a flashlight-less walk, the bright lights of the light bulbs and the 'clatter of the generator' make him feel 'shut off from the natural world and sealed up, encapsulated, in a box of artificial light and tyrannical noise' (Abbey 1968: 15). At the end of the chapter, it is therefore with great pleasure that he relinquishes housetrailer, generator and every other man-made appliance. As a result of this abandon, 'the night flows back, the mighty stillness embraces and includes me' once again. Freed from the constraints of modernity, he can 'see the stars again and the world of starlight' (Abbey 1968: 16). He is, we are tempted to say, One.

That he is One with his surroundings is not equivalent to saying that he is One with God, for as Abbey himself proclaims, 'Why confuse the issue by dragging in a superfluous entity?' Those who claim that they find God in the desert should realise that there is nothing there but 'heat waves' (Abbey 1968: 230), nothing 'but me and the desert' (Abbey 1968: 231). Abbey's desert experience is therefore strictly speaking not *kenosis* in the full import of the word. Having emptied his ego, what possesses him is not the Holy Spirit, but Nature.

Immersion and Meaning

'To really experience the desert you have to march right into its white bowl' (Reisner 1986: 4) Marc Reisner claims in *Cadillac Desert*, for as Fox expresses it, 'keeping hold of the desert means staying in it' (Fox 2000: 30). Of all Western desert travellers who have advocated the slowness of travel as a way in which to immerse oneself in the landscape, no one, however, surpasses Thesiger:

I had no desire to travel faster. In this way there was time to notice things - a grasshopper under a bush, a dead swallow on the ground, the tracks of a hare, a bird's nest, the shape and colour of ripples on the sand, the bloom of tiny seedlings pushing through the soil. There was time to collect a plant or to look at a rock. The very slowness of our march diminished its monotony. I thought how terribly boring it would be to rush about this country in a car (Thesiger 1959: 60).

Thesiger thus realised that 'for me the fascination of this journey lay not in seeing the country but in seeing it under these conditions' (Thesiger 1959: 310).

Abbey likewise claims that 'wilderness and motors are incompatible and that the former can best be experienced, understood, and enjoyed when the machines are left behind' (Abbey 1968: 59). For Abbey, the difference between a trip in the wilderness with or without technology is, in the words of Don Scheese, 'the difference between perception and blindness, immersion and non-participation' (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: 312). Flashlights, motorised transport and power generators act as a bar to our access to the natural world, but that is not all. It is also destroying it. The result of our technologically near-total mastery of nature - explosive demographics and careless (ab)use of natural resources - are fast diminishing the sorry remains of what wilderness we have left.

Most people, Abbey realises, are compelled to 'tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the wild and prehuman to human dimensions' (Abbey 1968: 240) and they do this by building parking lots, diners, tarmac scenic views and road signs. This is understandable, for, as Fox says, 'the need to control our ancestral fright of the dark and the empty' (Fox 2000: 211) is completely natural. We need the 'pretense of ruling the void with rationality' (Fox 2000: 123). Without the structuring of human presence, many people feel 'dread ... in the presence of primeval desert' (Abbey 1968: 240) and even cynical, pragmatic Abbey is sometimes forced to 'push a stone over the edge of the cliff' simply to convince himself 'of the reality of change' (Abbey 1968: 243) that the ancient and silent desert in which 'nothing has happened for a thousand years' (Abbey 1968: 44) seems to belie.

Yet we need that space, the desert, 'the dark and the empty', Fox, Reisner and Abbey claim. We need it for ecological reasons since it acts as an 'indicator region for the rest of the planet' leading us 'into reconsidering how we see the rest of the world' (Fox 2000: 117), and we need it for personal reasons, leading us to reconsider how we see our own private world. We need it because our 'imagination need places of habitation', places in which, as Fox says, we can 'contemplate space in both positive and negative manifestations as part of our understanding of the universe, which is, after all, more void than not' (Fox 2000: 28). In all its desolation, quietude, indifference and emptiness, the desert acts as a counter to our lofty ideas of what it is that makes us human. Philosophical theories of surface, essence, self and world, theological notions of spirit and God, or, indeed, the simple, steadfast belief in our own importance; all are challenged and therefore set in a new perspective by the desert, reminding us 'of our place' (Fox 2000: 206) in the greater picture.

In one of Abbey's many digressions from the main narrative of Arches National Monument, we are told of how he once went for a trip to Havasu Creek. During the five weeks he stayed there he 'lived alone' (Abbey 1968: 248), 'wandered naked as Adam', and on a moonlit night 'slipped by degrees into lunacy' and 'lost to a certain extent the power to distinguish between what was and what was not myself' (Abbey 1968: 251). At other points, back in the desert, he has similar experiences of 'sinking into the landscape' (Abbey 1968: 271), of having a feeling that all 'human melted with the sky and faded out beyond the mountains' (Abbey 1968: 121). That Abbey is capable of performing a merging with landscape both while catching 'a few rainbow trout' (Abbey 1968: 249) on the shores of Havasu

Creek and as he is 'surrounded by a rolling wasteland of stone and dune' (Abbey 1968: 271) in Arches National Monument, could lead one to suspect that any form of landscape will make him lapse into this ecstatic mode of ego-abandonment. As long as the prerequisites of being solitary in a location of unsullied nature are fulfilled, this is to some extent true. Yet the desert has a quality that no other place can compete with. Or rather, it has not.

Near the end of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey asks the same question we asked in the beginning. What is it that makes the desert special? What does it mean? What does it say?

The restless sea, the towering mountains, the silent desert – what do they have in common? And what are the essential differences? Grandeur, colour, spaciousness, the power of the ancient and elemental, that which lies beyond the ability of man to wholly grasp or utilize, these qualities all three share. In each there is the sense of something ultimate, with mountains exemplifying the brute force of natural processes, the sea concealing the richness, complexity and fecundity of life beneath a surface of huge monotony, and the desert – what does the desert say?

The desert says nothing (Abbey 1968: 300).

The ocean is there to be crossed, the mountain peak to be climbed, but the desert is simply there, 'passive, acted upon but never acting' (Abbey 1968: 300). It is 'clean, pure, totally useless' (Abbey 1968: 35). As we have said it before, so Abbey reiterates. In the desert, there is nothing to do but *be*.

Now one might rightfully claim that, for some, 'the desert was there to be crossed' (Blackmore 1995: 104), as Charles Blackmore so bluntly puts it in *Crossing the Desert of Death*. True as that may be for travellers and explorers, it is not true for Abbey, and he does have a significant point when claiming that once you reach a mountain peak, 'there is nothing to do but come down again' (Abbey 1968: 301-302). Likewise, though theoretically possible, no one stays sea-borne forever whereas many people have, and do, stay/ed in the desert for a lifetime.

Whatever the merits or faults of Abbey's theory, it is clear that, for him, the qualities of the desert lie exactly in its *non*-qualities, in its *non*-voice. 'What does it mean? It means nothing. It is as it is and has no need for meaning' (Abbey 1968: 244). Waiting 'on the shore of time' (Abbey 1968: 170) in the desert, one may try to wrestle 'signals from the sun' or a response from a tree' (Abbey 1968: 44), but you will receive no answer from that 'lovely, sweet, remote, primeval world' (Abbey 1968: 207).

Instead of constantly trying to infuse meaning into everything, man should 'learn to perceive in water, leaves and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and the marvelous' (Abbey 1968: 221) and leave it at that. For Abbey, there is no place quite like the desert to teach us this.

Moderate Extremism

If Abbey is right, that we need to 'immerse ourselves' in order to gain anything valuable from the desert, *Desert Solitaire* renders its own existence invalid. What need do we have for a book that tells us that 'too much time wasted in library stacks' will only result in 'absurdities'? Is it not itself, then, absurd?

As so much else of Abbey's colourful discourse, claims like these should, however, be taken with a pinch of rhetoric salt. Just as it is doubtful whether Abbey would actually rather kill a man than a snake if presented with the choice, his complaints about Western philosophers' incessant discussions of 'meaning' are hardly meant to be taken quite as harshly as they are expressed. If so, he should at least lob a few pebbles at himself now and then, as he himself is certainly very much concerned with the 'meaning' of it all, from the meaning of life to the manner in which we should depart from it.

What redeems Abbey somewhat is the clear realisation that, for all his rabid outbursts, he really wants a '[m]oderate extremism' and the 'best of two worlds' (Abbey 1968: 331). This is most clearly seen in the fact that as *Desert Solitaire* nears its ending, so does Abbey's stay in the desert. Having enjoyed the solitude and purity of the place for half a year, he leaves stars, snakes and housetrailer behind in order to employ several motorised vehicles of varying levels of modernity and machinery, only to emerge in metropolitan New York. Abbey thus steps into every single trap that he avowedly wants to avoid, but he does so happily and with eyes wide open. He personifies the wild, quotes Balzac and Baudelaire, and plunges back into bustling urbanity when he gets tired of all that sun, dust and solitude. As long as we get his main points, Abbey does not seem to mind his share of scorn. A bit of credibility is a petty sacrifice for vividness and force of argument. For Abbey knows that, when dealing with the desert, the argument can easily swing either way.

Conclusion

On one hand, the desert is often seen as the centre of all origins and as the ultimate place to go to in a quest for pre-modernity, Oneness and a way of

life in which one does not need to ponder about the difficulties presented by signifier and signified, source and representation. For many a Western desert writer, the desert has therefore acted as the unlikely gateway to the garden; the garden of Rousseau's simplistic conception of 'a small community with a "crystalline" structure' that is 'completely self-present' (Derrida 1967: 137).

On the other hand, it makes little sense to talk, or rather, *write*, of an experience that promises to merge the dichotomies of post-Babel in an experience of immersive *being* when such a message is conveyed through the medium of the book. For such a project, however well-meant it may be, can never quite avoid a tinge of the ironic. Not only will the large majority of these desert books (if not all) have been written, printed, distributed and read in the urban societies that they so desire us to abandon. The subject matter and the way in which it is presented to us also cannot but remind us that 'you cannot get the desert into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his net' (Abbey 1968: x). For apart from the paradoxical desire to *describe* a feeling that can only be experienced *in situ*, the unique place in which this experience can be gained – the desert itself – can easily be construed as a metaphor of the exact opposite argument. In its emptiness that is void of all meaning, in its vast horizon that forces one to ponder on the distinction between inner and outer, and in its flickering mirages – the simulacra of all simulacra – the desert is a treat for all who wish to embark on lengthy arguments about the 'contrast between surface and depths'. Solipsists, deconstructionists, postmodernists and their like may be deemed absurd by Abbey, but they will be able to find as much validation for their claims in the desert as Abbey finds for his.

The desert may therefore not be an entirely 'blank slate', yet it is 'empty enough ... that we're prone to transform it in our imaginations into a literal void that happily receives our mythic inventions' (Fox 2000: 38). It is therefore 'the ultimate example of ... unscripted space' (Haynes 1998: 53) and a place that beckons to be filled with whatever *meaning* we desire to give it, yet it is also a place that forces both reader and writer into considering the *form* in which this meaning is conveyed. Abbey may be highly concerned about getting people off the roads, away from their cars and comfy housetrailers and out into the blistering, all-encompassing experience that the desert has to offer. But the fact remains that as long as he, and others, advocate their message through the medium of the written word, a second void, one very similar to the void these writers wish us to bridge, becomes apparent.

That, if nothing else, should be proof that the desert, and the texts in which it is presented to us, are indeed worthy of whatever amount of time we are willing to invest in them. For the 'contrast between surface and depths' is not only 'the fundamental experience of the desert'. It is also that of Western thought.

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Contrasts: A Defence of Desert Writings