The Algerian desert in the American imagination

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The general assumption, even among specialists, is that North Africa in general and Algeria in particular have hardly impinged upon the consciousness of America in the twentieth century. It is one of those sweeping generalizations that need to be qualified.

Two important points need to be made in relation to that issue:

- the first is that Algeria did not figure in American letters to the same extent that it did in French literary writings. There has never been in America that intimate relationship with and knowledge of Algeria that came from colonization. So, compared to the flood of French literature set in Algeria, the American literary response actually amounts to very little.
- the second point is that Algeria featured in works which enjoyed, for some of them, great popular success both in Britain and in the United States. Very few of these works have survived the test of time but the influence of that sub-literature was considerable in the sense that it represented the living popular literature of the day. More importantly, there has been a spate of Hollywood films based on some of those stories with North Africa providing an exotic backdrop. So, thanks to impressions largely derived from novels of military adventures and desert romances, popularized by Hollywood in the 1920s and 30s, the desert became an essential motif in the American imaginative geography.

The stories of P.C. Wren, which contributed to the myth of the Foreign Legion, are quite representative of that popular literature of military adventures and romance which flourished between the two World Wars and which took hold of the American imagination.

Long before P.C. Wren wrote *Beau Geste* in 1924, the French were writing tales exalting the exploration and military conquest of the desert. The French officers and their squadrons of camel-riding meharists patrolling the Saharan hinterland had become part of a popular mythology which sublimated not only the desert but also the colonial adventure and the romantic excitement it inspired. Wren continued that tradition of soldiers' tales set in colonial Algeria. The basic ingredients of his stories were invariably the same: desert warfare, Arab fanaticism, hand to hand combats, brave deeds, and the wonders of Africa. The rehashed plots with their coincidences and chance-meetings stretch the credulity of the reader to its limit, but the rendering of life in the Legion, the descriptions of isolated military outposts in the Sahara, of desert action, were all drawn from Major Wren's own experience with the Foreign Legion in North Africa and have about them a definite ring of truth.

Films like *Beau Geste* and *Beau Sabreur*, both featuring Gary Cooper, and lesser variants on the same theme instilled in the public mind the idea of a most exciting body of social rebels, of sun-baked, tough young men, high on romance and machismo, gallant defenders in outlandish lands of civilization against fanatical natives even though the reality was actually less romantic. In fact, the Foreign Legion was a corps of mercenaries, many of whom were criminals who enlisted to escape imprisonment. Unlike the Meharist Corps, it never enjoyed any particular link with the desert. It was based at Sidi-Bel-Abbes in western Algeria and from there its units could be sent anywhere in the French colonial empire where there was particularly nasty fighting to be done. Thus especially after the First World War, many battalions were sent into the Sahara to reinforce exposed positions or, as was more often the case, to carry out punitive operations against native tribes. When recalled to their headquarter, they usually left behing a trail of smouldering hatred and fear. But it was not this unsavoury image but the romantic myth which Wren had created and which

Hollywood had reinforced that fastened on the collective imagination both in Britain and America.

The 1920s and early 1930s also saw the vogue of the desert romance and the emergence of a highly fantasized image of the Arab male generally portrayed as violent, often cruel and absorbed in the pursuit of sexual gratification. This fantasizing about the Arab male was reflected in Edith Hull's novel *The Sheik*, first published in Britain in 1919 and its sequel, *The Sons of the Sheik*, published in 1925. Both novels are set in the region of Biskra, in southern Algeria. The success of *The Sheik* was amplified when Rudolph Valentino, then a rising star in Hollywood, was cast as the Sheik in the film version of the novel in 1921. The film was a great popular success and was greatly instrumental in projecting the image of the Arab male as a dark, piratical lover surrounded by mystery and the spell of the desert. Quite characteristically, amidst the prevailing post-war disillusionment, people sought escape from the drab social reality and Hollywood obligingly offered exotic melodramas which turned the desert into an extravagant place of hedonistic pleasures. Rudolph Valentino who featured in both films was the first American actor to become a sex symbol. The image of the predatory Arab lord and the desert, his hunting terrain, entered so deeply into the American popular imagination that we find outcrops of it everywhere in the inter-war period and even after. The theme of the white captive fallen into the hands of a dark, predatory Moor crops up again in Paul Bowles' first novel *The Sheltering Sky* which begins and ends in Oran. The novel published in 1949 integrates many elements from the first two trips he made to North Africa in the early 1930s. In *Without Stopping*, his own autobiography, Paul Bowles recalls that on arriving at Oran for the first time in 1931, he climbed a tramcar and rode out to a place called Eckmuhl-Noiseux because he remembered the name from the Baedeker, a guide book he had used when he was working at Dutton's bookshop on Fifth Avenue. The incident was made use of in *The Sheltering Sky*. On a second visit to Algeria , the following year, Bowles headed for the desert city of Ghardia where he settled for a while in a cheap hotel used by bus and truck drivers. Bowles talked to them and listened to the tales they traded from one end to the other of the Sahara. He

visited Touggourt where he had some difficulties with the French administration, an incident echoed again in *TSS*.

The 'stepping over the edge' into an alien environment that defies adequate, rational description and leads to desintegration of the self is the theme of *The Sheltering Sky*. The novel follows the journey by three New Yorkers, Port and Kit Moresby and their friend Tunner who, shortly after the Second World War, take a trip to North Africa. They land at Oran and from there they travel south into the Sahara. The novel relates the series of incidents that lead to the death of Port Moresby and to the unhinging of his wife Kit and her disappearance in the native Casbah of Oran.

Relations between the couple are already seriously strained before they arrive in North Africa and the trip which had been Port's idea is actually an attempt to escape from the desert of their own lives. The journey becomes a metaphor for the emotional crossing of borders between civilization and nature, between rationality and madness. The book appears to bear the spiritual imprint of recent history in the Western World. That impact is perceivable on the surface of the novel but still more significantly in the nihilistic atmosphere that envelops the novel. In a way, the novel is another version of the romantic escape to the mysterious Orient but the journey turns out to be a terrifying descent into hell. Images of physical sickness, of imprisonment, violation and personal annihilation mark the journey of the American couple as they drift into the Saharan hinterland. Following the death of her husband after an attack of typhoid and still under shock, Kit wanders away in the desert where she is picked up by a caravan heading for Soudan, as present-day Mali was called then. During the trip she is raped by the leader of the caravan. Later, she is sequestrated by a younger man, Belquassim who takes her to his village and makes her his mistress. Drugs are forced on her by the other wives of Belquassim and she becomes extremely confused and torn between the desire to escape from captivity and her unconscious wish for bondage. She is eventually traced by the French authorities who put her on a plane to Oran. At the Airport, Kit is met by a lady from the American consulate who take her to a hotel in the European centre of the city. Left alone in the car for a moment, Kit disappears again in the warren of the native quarter, where, as her

American escort had just told her, the chances of disappearing are far greater than in the desert.

The dominant motif in the story is that of the dislocating influence of the desert on the American couple. The physical landscape is invariably hostile, mesmeric, incorporating a lore of real or imagined terrors which bring out to daylight the flawed personality of Kit and lend a dramatic significance to the death-drive of Port Moresby.

Port's illness and eventual death give Kit her freedom , and as it turns out, what she unconsciously desires, that is enslavement. The terrifying transformation of the young American woman from innocent traveller into consenting prey contrasts the world of reason to that of insanity; the dead metropolis of the New World to the perilous, potent desert. Bowles' desert is not the luminous place of physical and spiritual rebirth that it had been in *Les Nourritures Terrestres* of André Gide or in the *Garden of Allah* of Robert Hichens. It is exotic in the nihilistic sense that is, chaotic, incomprehensible, the seat of hostile destructive forces.

In a similar way, Scott Fitzgerald's correspondences between emotion and environment accompany the theme of the self-destructiveness of a doomed generation of American expatriates. In *One Trip Abroad,* Nicole and Kelly Nelson, a young American couple, cross to North Africa to escape from the strain of their breaking marriage. The short story is based on a trip that Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald took to southern Algeria in February 1930. The journey from the oasis of Bou Saada to the sanatoriums and nursing homes of Switzerland charters the falling apart of the couple and their spiritual break-up, a theme that Fitzgerald was going to develop in *Tender is the Night.* The first paragraph of the story launches the first omen: on their way to the little oasis village of Bou Saada, their bus drives through a swarm of locusts.

" In the afternoon the air became black with locusts, and some of the women shrieked, sinking to the floor of the motorbus and covering their hair with travelling rugs. The locusts were coming north, eating everything in their path, which was not so much in that part of the world; they were flying silently and in straight lines, flakes of black snow." (1)

The Saharan episode is a very brief interlude in the story but it gives significance to the increasing tense relationship of the young American

couple. The same sense of impending disaster haunts Zelda's own reminiscences of that incursion in the desert. In the photographs they took during that trip, she looks distracted and unsmiling. Throughout the trip that took them from Algiers to Bou Saada, Biskra, Batna, Timgad and Constantine, Zelda remained tense and impatient to get back to Paris and to her ballet practice instructor. Biskra remained in her memory as a suffocating place of loneliness and anguish.

"The world crumbled to pieces in Biskra; the street crept through the town like streams of hot lava. Arabs sold nougat and cakes of poisonous pink under the flare of open gas jets. Since the *Garden of Allah* and *The Sheik* the town has been filled with frustrated women. In the steep cobbled alleys we flinched at the brightness of mutton carcases swung from the butchers' booths".(2)

The passage is a sharp depiction of local atmosphere. But still more, it reflects Zelda's sense of anxiety in her confrontation with a world she perceived as alien, crude and essentially disturbing. The glamorized desert of the "hot romances" and Hollywood films of the 1920s was gone, changed, changed utterly into a valley of ashes overcast by dark shadows of calamitous plagues.

In the winter of 1947-48 while working on *The Sheltering Sky*, Paul Bowles travelled to the Saharan oasis of Taghit, in South Western Algeria. The outcome of that excursion, however, came some fifteen years later when its memory provided the framework of *The Time of Friendship,* the title piece of the collection of short stories he published in 1967.

About that winter excursion to the oasis of Taghit, Paul Bowles wrote in his autobiography:

"The tiny hotel atop the rocks was run in conjunction with the military fort nearby. There was a solitary ols servant who did everything; fortunately he had only one other other guest besides me, an elderly Swiss lady who taught school in Zurich and spent her winters in the Sahara. She and I got on perfectly and took long walks together in the valley to the south." (3)

The Time of Friendship is told from the point of view of Fraulein Windling, an elderly Swiss schoolmistress. For years, she has divided her

time between Bern and an oasis in the the Algerian Sahara which she has come to consider more of a home than her native land.

The story develops the theme of the desert and its restorative power contrasted with the mechanical, debilating life in modern societies.

" Her first sight of the desert and its people had been a transfiguring experience; indeed, it seemed to her now that before coming here she had never been in touch with life at all. (4)

Destructive forces, however, are already at work, threatening the old order of existence. Fraulein Windling regrets the intrusion of the modern world in the oasis, the increasing impact of western ways and culture, and more importantly the war which has just started in the North and which is tranforming the old society she knew. Although her sympathies are with the Algerians in their fight to free their land, she resents that the "virus of discontent from the off North" should have spread to her oasis. As the troubles are speading south, she is ordered by the French army to leave the village.

Out of the hundreds of books that have been written on that theme, few have actually rendered with such poignancy, the sense of being torn up from one's roots, the sense of banishment and exile from the lost paradise.

Paul Bowles who has been living in Tangier for almost fifty years, is the only American writer to have rooted his life in North Africa and to have transformed his first hand knowledge and experience of the terrain into an impressive body of literature. And he has done this through both a rare intimacy with peoples and places, and an extraordinary empathy which informs all his north african stories. Jeffrey Miller has put the matter nicely in his foreword to *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles*: "What is backgroung and usually incidental in almost all the other literature and cinema touching on North Africa, is foreground in Bowles's fictions: he has entered into and discovered the wellsprings of a culture alien to American and English literature".(5)

And indeed, no other American writer has made such a remarkable body of fiction out of North Africa. Paradoxically, Bowles's identification with North Africa and therefore his apparent foreignness to the mainstream of American literature may well account for the limited number of studies and theses that ought to have been devoted to one of the great American

storyteller of his generation. Great American writers have traditionally achieved greatness and fame by writing about "the American Experience". But Paul Bowles who has lived most of his life in Morocco hardly ever writes about the United States. Hence the neglect he has been suffering from in his own native country. For the American Academics, Bowles still remains the odd man out.

It is for the Maghreban americanists to fill in that gap. And Bowles presents them with a unique opportunity to bring in their own contribution to the field of American Studies with tremendous possibilities for a triangular network of cooperation between Algerian, Moroccan and American Universities.

But what, you may ask, is the place that the Algerian desert hold today in the American imagination? And my unequivocal answer would be none at all.

There are probably more Americans in the Sahara now than there had ever been in the 1920s and 1930s. The main difference is that they are American expatriates working for the majority of them on oil and gas sites. Unlike the visitors, artists and writers in the earlier part of the century, these expatriates have, as a general rule, have made their journey to the desert for the sake of work; they tend to live a self-contained, and self-sufficient life in their own little compounds, a situation which hardly favour identification or the development of those strong bonds which Gide, Camus, and of course Paul Bowles developed with the Algerian Sahara.

Notes:

(1) *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald,* ed. by Matthew J Bruccoli, (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 577.
(2) F.Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Fitzgerald, "Show mr. and Mrs. F to Number --," in *The Crack-up,* (NY: New Directions, Edmund Wilson Ed., 1945), p. 52.
(3) Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping,* (NY: Ecco Press, 1985), p.282.
(4) Paul Bowles, "The Time of Friendship" in *Collected Stories 1939-1976,* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), p.338
(5) *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles,* ed. by Jeffrey Miller,(NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. XV.