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Mary Austin's Disfigurement of the Southwest in *The Land of Little Rain*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

WILLIAM J. SCHEICK University of Texas at Austin Mary Austin's Disfigurement of the Southwest in *The Land of Little Rain* Although *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) was created to earn money,¹ Austin also had higher motives. Earlier in her life, she had moved to the desert of southern California, where (her friend tells us) she had "felt the rigors and bleakness of the desert denied her a vocabulary and her mysticism."² In time, Austin tried to appreciate better the strange beauty of this desert. *The Land of Little Rain* records her attempt to express this revised perception, especially of the "strange," which for her implies "a criticism of the familiar." The familiar "lack[s] any criterion of authority other than that it is ours," Austin observed.³ Her first book challenges "the familiar" not only in its setting but also in its search for the transcendent there. The

sheer minimalism of the austere desert terrain presumably might facilitate the detection of the transcendent; in turn, her book further suggests, this detection presumably might facilitate a revision in her readers' perception of reality. Conveying the "strange" in this instance apparently did not require inordinate attention to style. Austin noted that "nothing was further from [her] mind when writing" *The Land of Little Rain* than "the question of style"; she had not considered style to be "a writer's problem."⁴ If we take her at her word, her first book may be read as a relatively unguarded account of her experiences. Austin's sections on the desert, even more than her few entries on the mountains, reveal not only the search but also the frustration of her desire for a transcendental encounter. The fact of human mortality is the principal cause of this frustration. This actuality contravenes Austin's attempt to detect the eternal in her temporal encounters. Symptomatic signs of Austin's unfulfilled desire surface in her art, especially in her tendency to transform descriptions of nature into autobiographic and anthropomorphic associations. ³⁸ *Western American Literature* This manner of association amounts to a rhetorical disfigurement and refigurement of Austin's experience with nature. In short, Austin appropriates metaphorically (through disfigurement) what is resistant to her metaphysically. This stylistic manner in effect replicates and reenacts the physical disfigurement of the landscape that Austin explicitly denounces in her book. In *The Land of Little Rain* Austin particularly appreciates the minimalism of the desert. For her, the desert surpasses all other terrains. It intimates some eternal force at the core of the material world. "None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections," she explains in her introductory sketch, "the rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the luminous radiance of the spring, have the lotus charm" and "trick the sense of time."⁵ This sentiment is reprised in the final sketch of *The Land of Little Rain*. There Austin reports that in the desert one may detect "a sense of presence and intention," an intimation of "eternal meaning" (246, 262). For Austin, the desert reflects a transcendent timelessness that she would like to believe redeems temporal experience from its tragic transience and materiality.⁶ However, if nature conveys hints of the eternal, it also resists Austin's quest to close with the transcendent. Everywhere in nature she senses "purposes not revealed" (184)—something infinite that is intimated and at the same time resistant to human apprehension. The desert in particular always at once allows for "communion" with the "clear heavens" and, contrarily, takes a "toll"; it does so by suggesting in various dire ways that every viewer is "of no account" within the context of divine "imperturbable . . . purposes" (21, 186). The sempiternal "nature" she detects in this landscape is seemingly near to her spatially; but at the same time it remains apparently remote metaphysically. The spiritual fulfillment she seeks in the desert is rebuffed. As a "land that supports no man" and "sets the limit" (3) beyond what any human law might decree, the desert may metonymically reflect the eternal in nature, but it also especially seems antagonistically Other to Austin. She...

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Mary Austin's Disfigurement of the Southwest in *The Land of Little Rain*

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