voices and viewpoints of the contemporary west

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ESSAY

Robert Schnelle

Soul-struck Soldier: Stepping Westward with Cabeza de Vaca

"We need to witness our own limits transgressed." —Thoreau, *Walden*

Obdurate, thick-witted Panfilio de Narvaez, brandishing sword and cross as he swaggered up the Florida tide line, celebrated Good Friday of 1528 by claiming a new country for God and King Carlos V of Spain. His goal—to plunder gem-encrusted cities—and his expedition's fate—to chase beyond endurance a deadly mirage—were poised that morning on the fulcrum of possibility. Cortez, a few years earlier, had humbled an empire. Narvaez and his men would do the same, but while their hope launched an unrelieved calamity instead, it also resulted in one of the strangest and, finally, most heartening second acts in the history of European expansion.

Pounded by storms, burdened with armor and useless artillery pieces, the conquistadors under Narvaez hacked their way through mangrove jungles on a northwesterly course in search of booty. Every horizon they examined for smoke from some El Dorado's foundries as they hacked their way northwestward through mangrove jungles; every human trace they found sharpened their anticipation. Despite the single-mindedness of the Spaniards, they fared poorly in skirmishes with Apalachee Indians, and their confidence ebbed when they realized they could not feed themselves in a land teeming with game. After losing contact with his supply ships, Narvaez watched his expedition unravel. Apathy followed panic as desertions and drownings took their toll; starvation reduced at least one group of men to cannibalism. Eventually, all but four of the original 400 hidalgos, friars, and foot soldiers perished in the North American wilds.

Among the survivors of the Narvaez

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"Pounded by storms, burdened with armor and useless artillery pieces, the conquistadors under Narvaez hacked their way through mangrove jungles on a northwesterly course in search of booty."

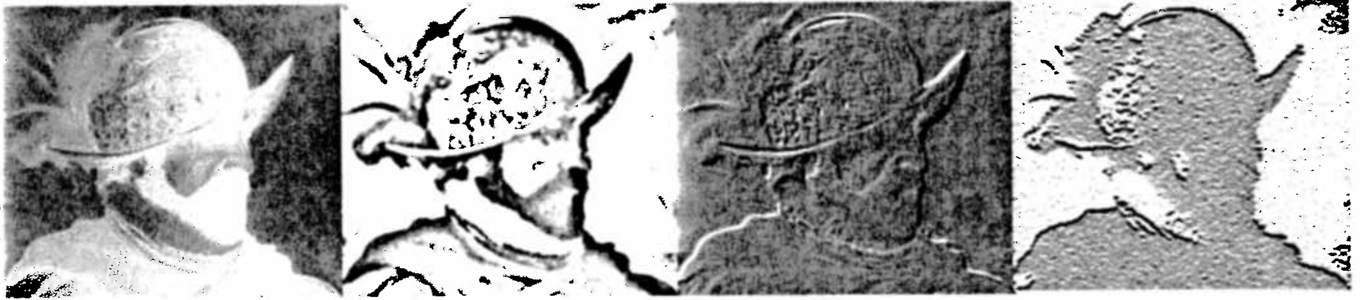
expedition who walked 6,000 miles to Mexico City was Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. The *Relacion*, a terse, gripping account of the eight-year journey, at first proceeds in the fashion of other New World epics. Daring exploits, grim austerities, and the presumption of favor in high places are common features of Bernal Diaz's *Conquest of New Spain* and subsequent literature all the way forward to the *Journals* of Lewis and Clark. Accordingly, the author of the *Relacion* appears to be a cocksure soldier of fortune when we first meet him. Here is de Vaca defending his reputation, impugned by Narvaez when the former (and second-in-command) challenged an order:

> [Our fate] was clear from our entering so ill equipped into the country, but I declared that I would rather venture into the danger where he [Narvaez] and the others were venturing, and go through it, than to take charge of the ships and let people say that I was staying behind out of fear.... [M]y honor would be in question, and I would rather sacrifice my life than put my honor in such a pass. (Bishop 42)

But unlike most chroniclers of the genre, Cabeza de Vaca eventually softens his tone, mutating on the page into a man of peace. Seeking conquest, the hero surrenders nothing less than a worldview. The man who emerges eight years (and little more than a hundred pages) after the expedition vanished is one whose insights startle the modern reader, not only because they express an anachronistic, liberal-democratic creed but because the author shows us the distance he must travel in body and soul to earn them. In the end, de Vaca becomes a faith healer, a voice for Indian rights, and a social-egalitarian visionary—a New World utopian ahead of his time.

Early on, de Vaca reports no feelings of remorse while helping to plunder native villages. He refers to the Indians as "pathetic savages" and "brutes." In a matter-of-fact style, he makes clear that condescension tinged the expedition's dealings with everyone who might have eased the troubles they soon encountered. Ill and outnumbered, Narvaez would address Indian warriors with breathtaking arrogance: "With the aid of God and my own sword I shall seize you and your wives and children; your property I shall take and destroy, and every possible harm shall I work you as my subjects" (Bishop 37). Reacting to this speech, we learn, its audience melted into the bush, answering Narvaez with a volley of arrows.

De Vaca tells us that he did question his leader's tactics from time to time, but with fame and fortune at stake, it is clear that he wore the same moral blinders as his peers. Like dogs devouring a deer, the Spaniards thought to consume the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country they found. Unhappily for them, the Appalachee Indians were successful predators themselves. In liquid badlands, de Vaca and company bogged down deeper than de Soto more famously did some years later. What saved the expedition for history was the unlikely fact that de Vaca would return to civilization after years of penitential wandering, and in frank detail, tell of his own mind's conversion. The *Relacion* is a curious, laconic tale, careless of proofs but charged with the subversive authority one associates with saints or the self-deluded. Largely ignored by contemporaries, it has fueled equal measures of admiration and scorn from later interpreters. What, the modern reader wonders, do I make of the man who finally emerges from the wilderness, an alleged humanitarian? One writer calls him both "a sorry figure… the most unbelievable hero of the Age of Discovery" and "a legend… far outshining Panfilio de Narvaez under whose banner he began the long passage" (Speck 137). As a resident of the far West and a walker in wild country, I am myself deeply drawn to de Vaca's legend. To read the *Relacion* is to be seduced by a powerfully American literary document, one which foreshadows the likes of Melville in blending narrative travel and a spiritual quest (Pilkington 75-6). But because the narrator addresses us in an official capacity—the *Relacion* was produced at the charge of a king to explain his lost investment—a blurring of categories ensues. Today's readers may find themselves hedging between resistance and assent.

Cabeza de Vaca: "Head of a Cow," the name translates. Alvar Nuñez inherited this homely honorific from an ancestor who, two hundred years earlier, cairned a mountain pass with a cow skull, thus enabling Christian Spain to defeat their Moorish enemy and tip the balance of power in medieval Iberia. De Vaca's own grandfather conquered the Canary Islands in a way that would set the standard for transatlantic ruthlessness. Considering his background, we have no reason to suppose a kind regard for dark-skinned people by the latest de Vaca. Indeed, had the Narvaez expedition followed the pattern of Cortez in Mexico—where mass executions, enslavement, and the founding of fiefdoms followed military success—Cabeza de Vaca would probably have ended his days as a viceroy, iron-fisted lord to a harem of Indian women and dozens of unacknowledged heirs.

Instead, the conquistadors met disaster. Hearing rumors of an inland citadel, Narvaez ignored de Vaca's advice and separated his soldiers from their

ships. His plan was to take the town by force (or at least its presumed tons of gold) and then to reconnoiter at Tampico, Mexico, which the commander insisted lay fewer than a hundred miles to the west. What followed was alligators, insects, disease, hostile Indians, and starvation, but the burnished city was only a rumor. With one of every three men malarial or already dead, the little army had no choice but to go limping back to the coast. Nor were the supply ships there to meet them—they had long since sailed for Cuba.

Desperate, the conquistadors forged their weapons into tools and nails, using them to fasten planks together into sea scows, patching their clothes into sails, and twisting horsehair for stays and halyards. "Without any among us having the least knowledge of the art of navigation," says de Vaca, the Spaniards launched five awkward craft into the surf and set out for territories which lay—who could say for sure?—a dozen or a thousand leagues away (Cabeza de Vaca 47). Once at sea they soon exhausted their water supplies. Protected by a scant six inches of free-board, they sailed, rowed, and drifted, at last growing crazed with thirst. Men gulped salt water. Attempts to land brought Indian attacks. The days began to merge. Narvaez had abandoned all pretense of command by the time the castaways reached present-day Mobile Bay, Alabama. Here, de Vaca argued for closing ranks, but anarchy presided; the boats became separated and four of them disappeared from history.

It was now November, 1528, nine months since Narvaez had set out from Cuba. When de Vaca beached his vessel on "Bad Luck Island" (presently Galveston Island in Texas), he rolled into the surf with eighty other men "as naked as [we] were born." The autumn winds were chilling, he writes; "our every bone could be counted, and we looked like death itself" (Cabeza de Vaca 57).

From here the narrative of *Relacion* darkens. After an initial rescue by Weeper Indians, the Spaniards dispersed among various coastal tribes. These people, though accustomed to periodic famine, were worse off than usual when the Europeans arrived. De Vaca and a few others earned their keep as camp drudges, gathering fuel, tending cook fires, and entertaining their hosts with displays of courtly dancing. Others were put to death when they proved incompetent foragers. Yet another half dozen camped on a neighboring island where they killed and ate one another in succession. "The last being left alone," de Vaca learned, "there was nobody to eat him when he died" (Cabeza de Vaca 60).

Moving inland with those they now regarded as captors, the fifteen remaining Spaniards were scattered by famine and inter-tribal war. Still determined to reach Mexico, however, de Vaca gained a

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measure of independence for himself as a sort of trader/diplomat. He learned the rudiments of several languages and spent the next two years peddling cosmetic ochre northward to present-day Oklahoma and southwest as far as Matagorda Bay. This was bare-bones country, where exposure and lack of food were dependable: "Like a snake, I shed my skin twice a year." Whites and Indians alike ate "spiders and the eggs of ants, worms, lizards, salamanders, snakes and vipers, earth and wood, the dung of deer, and other things that I omit to mention" (Cabeza de Vaca 79).

Yet it was as a healer that de Vaca came into his own among the Indians of Texas and the Southwest. To all who beheld his pale apparition, naked and bearded to the chest, he came to signify enchantment. Whether he wielded a power for the good they could not have known, but somehow it happened that the native people began bringing him their invalids. De Vaca would genuflect, make the sign of the cross, and, praying over his patients with the urgency of one who sees his own life at risk, would blow in their ears. Again and again, according to his report, the fevered and the comatose recovered. He putatively raised one man from the dead and cured another of quadriplegia (a feat repeated by William Clark among the Nez Perce). And so, here we find the first of several interpretive problems posed by the *Relacion*. Were his cures simply frauds, cases of psychosomatic coincidence? Or were they medical miracles augmented by faith? De Vaca's works were separately and consistently acknowledged by the other Spanish survivors, and no one was more modest about his powers than de Vaca himself; as presented in his account, certain events happened to occur.

While the years passed, de Vaca's reputation preceded him in the Rio Grande country. Likewise, the content of the *Relacion* begins to undergo a topical and chronological shift. In its second half, the narrative loses its forward thrust, descriptions of plants and animal life occur more frequently, and various groups of Native Americans are now referred to as "our friends" (Cabeza de Vaca 112). We sense the cracking open of a culturally determined mind. When several Spaniards die in an epidemic, Cabeza de Vaca writes, "It was strange to see these [Karankawas], wild and untaught, howling over our misfortunes. It caused in me as in others an increase of feeling and a livelier sense of calamity" (58). Other passages suggest similarly empathic revelations, the core of any healer's art.

At the same time, de Vaca gained great powers of endurance: "While traveling," he writes, "we went without

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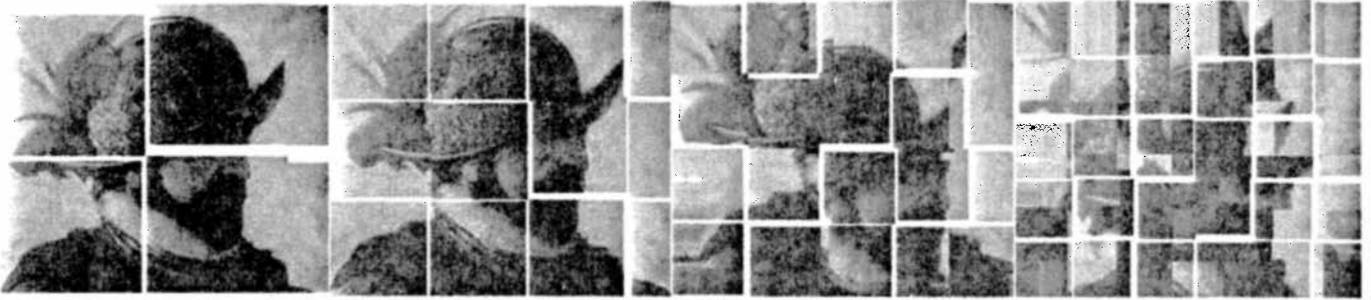
"Yet, despite his eventual disgrace, de Vaca left behind a story that moves the blood, one that deserves a reading. The ground its hero covered appears most plainly at the moment he re-enters civilization."

food all day until night, and we ate so little as to astonish [the Indians]. We never felt exhaustion, neither were we in fact at all weary, so inured were we to hardship" (Cabeza de Vaca120). Deprivation fed his new, more generous regard.

Moving through present-day New Mexico and Arizona and across the Sierra Madre to the Gulf of California, Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions from the defunct expedition, one an African named Estebanico, were the first non-indigines to meet with bison herds. De Vaca made the first notes on the opossum, the white-fronted goose, and the fleet pronghorn antelope. Estebanico took a detour among the Pueblo Indians (who so impressed him that they became known as rulers of the Seven Cities of Cibola sought by Coronado). Together, the four were the first foreigners we know about to have crossed the continent on foot. If de Vaca emerged from the bush a changed man—an evolved human being, let us say—perhaps his growth was fostered by some ineffable spirit of place. Scholars have often depicted the North American West as "a country of daydreams and fantasies" (Worster 232), and Wallace Stegner described it as "such a wilderness as Christ and the prophets went out into" (Stegner 569). Either way, it was the place where Alvar Ñuñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish knight, shared food and adversity with people radically unlike himself. Early on, his account finds nothing but obstacles in a hell realm peopled by savages. Several years later he is conversing in native tongues and taking field notes, recording, for instance, the Karankawa's practice of mourning dead children at dawn, noon, and sunset for a year's duration. De Vaca admires the Indians' physical excellence and their deep geographical knowledge. Again and again, he writes of their open-handedness: "For this [our medicine] the Indians treated us kindly; they deprived themselves of food that they might give to us, and they presented us with skins and trifles" (Cabeza de Vaca 115).

Nearing the goal of his journey, knowing Mexico lay ahead and foreseeing the end of his days as a naturalized man, de Vaca paused to reflect on the people he had lived with so many seasons: ..."[H]ow curious and diversified are the contrivances and ingenuity of the human family!" (Cabeza de Vaca119). He was referring to desert horticulture at the time, but one can easily imagine a succession of Native American faces, fierce and benevolent, curious and indifferent, flashing in rapid succession before his mind's eye. Had he learned to see himself in others? May we claim him for our multicultural myth?

Here we meet the second problem of Cabeza de Vaca's tale, his "miracle" of a pluralistic vision. He had wandered in foreign countries, endured isolation and slavery, and learned to heal the sick, but



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de Vaca returned to his own world with an idea that pre-Enlightenment Europe was not ready for. To his contemporaries he would become a crank and a laughing stock, forever petitioning Carlos V on behalf of "los Indios" and a proto-Quaker colony he hoped to found in Venezuela. Back in the New World, he would argue, Spain should outlaw slavery and promote justice. The colonies should practice small-scale agriculture rather than mineral extraction and the founding of vast plantations. In de Vaca's plan, New World society must blend the best of local knowledge with European tools. When, at last, the King had appointed him governor of Paraguay, the other colonists sent him home in chains for obstructing the slave trade. Had he succeeded, de Vaca would be honored in historical memory, as his contemporary, the reformer Bartolome de las Casas, is honored. Instead he is a footnote.

Yet, despite his eventual disgrace, de Vaca left behind a story that moves the blood. The ground its hero covered appears most plainly at the moment he re-enters civilization. Encountering a force of slavers in northern Mexico, de Vaca describes the moment's human dynamic:

> Our countrymen became jealous at this [de Vaca's rapport with his Indian companions] and caused their interpreter to tell the Indians that we were of them, and for a long time we had been lost; that they were the lords of the land who must be obeyed and served, while we were persons of mean condition and small force. The Indians cared little or nothing for what was told them; and conversing among themselves said the Christians lied: that we had come whence the sun rises, and they whence it goes down; we healed the sick while they killed the sound; that we had come naked and barefoot, while they had arrived in clothing and on horses with lances; that we were not covetous of anything, but all that was given to us we directly turned to give, remaining with nothing; and that the others had only the purpose to rob whomsoever they found, bestowing nothing on anyone." (Cabeza de Vaca 128)

As with any good story, the words conjure an atmosphere of identification. They dispel the mystery of historical time.

Unfortunately, however much we approve of de Vaca's attitude, today's readers come by our universalism unconsciously. We can't hope to recreate the experiences of an explorer who fed off the country, grew intimate with plants and languages now extinct, and made friends with people who had no preconceptions

about men with white skin. For despite his grounding in the Counter Reformation, de Vaca put enough distance between himself and cultural prejudice to see humanity as one. The *Relacion's* improbabilities are like sacred groves, which signify without inviting entry.

Cabeza de Vaca died shortly after his release from a pauper's prison. To the end of his life he had worked to reform colonial policy, but even if he failed in this, writes historian William T. Pilkington, "[His] conquest lay in the realm of the spirit" (65). The man who first set sail from Europe was no less bloody minded than Pizarro, no more prone to epiphanies than the slave traders who followed in his wake. But with the passing years his feet discovered the contours of an unfolding land, and de Vaca became a mystic, self-sufficient and supple, confident of his medicine. Whether tantalizing fable or sustaining proof of grace, de Vaca's chronicle approves the life renewed, the change of heart in the middle of the journey.

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