

LUCIUS R. O'BRIEN

A Victorian in North America

In the historiography of Canadian art, Lucius R. O'Brien (1832-99) has been noted more for his role in the promotion of cultural life than for his painting.¹ However, the first retrospective exhibition of his work held in 1990,² almost a century after his death, attempted to counteract this view and place O'Brien in the forefront of art practice in nineteenth-century Canada. With the hindsight of one hundred years, he now emerges in the exhibition catalogue as "the pre-eminent Canadian artist of his day."³ He is seen as "a key link in the development of a theme that is Canada's major contribution to the history of painting: the idea that self is necessarily located in its relationship to place."⁴

It is important to recognize, however, especially as related to O'Brien, that although self is unquestionably related to place, the idea of place is not a constant. It was not so much the land which shaped ideology; rather it was ideology that guided the perception of the landscape. O'Brien attempted to locate Canadian identity in the indigenous landscape, but one circumscribed by a larger context under the political and cultural protection of Empire. Despite the rawness of Canadian geography, O'Brien produced poetic, reserved scenes of nature that attest to his own upper-class Victorian background and his consequent firm belief in the rightness of Canada's position within the British dominion. O'Brien's intention was not only to show the Canadian landscape, but also to establish the vision of Canada as an integral part of the British Empire in the minds of his countrymen, and to promote the value of Canada to the mother country.

There would thus seem to be a discrepancy between O'Brien's preoccupation with developing a truly Canadian expression in art, based on new world geography, and the resulting domesticated, poetic landscapes. This contradiction was as much a result of O'Brien himself, who by "birth, breeding and education"⁵ was predisposed to a refined interpretation of nationalism, as it was a consequence of the larger context of nineteenth-century colonial Canadian mentality.

Although O'Brien envisioned Canada's future as a protected one within the Empire, he did not look directly and solely to English stylistic sources since the search for a national identity was grounded in the physical aspect of the new land. In the early years of the century it had been acceptable to refer to old world conventions in order to convey the idea of culture; but as national awareness grew, so did concern for a more indigenous style to fit the subject. A logical place to find the appropriate vision to convey the freshness and uniqueness of Canadian landscape was in the United States.

As a self-taught artist in search of a national voice, O'Brien culled pertinent aspects of style from American landscape painting; these he filtered through the Victorian sentiment which was a reflection of his own genteel upbringing and social class. England supplied the cultural foundation for O'Brien's world view, and America, although not unaffected by these same influences, provided a model of North-American form. The Hudson River and luminist paintings provided the stylistic models, and the American vision of the land as a metaphor for new world strength and purity suited his own patriotic concerns. American art was a major formative influence on O'Brien's work in the decade of the eighteen-seventies. It is a source barely mentioned in Dennis Reid's exhibition catalogue, yet one crucial to understanding not only O'Brien's style, but the larger question of Canadian nationalism and its relationship to America.

American life was grounded in an all-inclusive mythology of Nature, a celebration of the land which involved religious, moral and social ideals.⁶ Since it was believed that unspoiled nature conveyed God's grace and visible presence to man, it followed that the American citizen, as the new Adam, inhabited a land of truth, beauty and limitless possibility. Thus the depiction of new world landscape became associated with nationalistic sentiment, providing models for and parallels to the Canadian search for identity. As a colonial country, however, Canada could not relate entirely to the exhilarating restlessness, the spirit of self-confident exploration guided by God not King, that was reflected in the portrayal of that landscape. In Canada the natural world was understood as a threatening force, hostile to human values and inferior to civilization. This outlook was a direct result of Canada's colonial status and its consequent dependence on the parent civilization. The United States, having broken with the protective power, affirmed a different experience of the wilderness. Americans placed their faith not in the security of the parent culture, but in the symbol of Nature - "that state in which Truth, Beauty and Harmony reign"⁷ - which to them represented a new order for human existence.

O'Brien's paintings of the middle seventies reveal his familiarity with the work of the Hudson River School, whose members all belonged to the most important art organization in the United States, the National Academy of Design, an exclusive institution largely disdainful of innovative styles. Despite the social upheaval which followed the American Civil War, the conservative (and by then less influential) Hudson River artists continued to paint idyllic landscapes. For them, America was still an Eden and nationalistic pride and confidence were expressed through a pantheistic view of nature. O'Brien had little interest in philosophical sentiments such as pantheism, but he was attracted to the device of associating views of the indigenous landscape with nationalism. For example, paintings like O'Brien's *Lords of the Forest* ⁸ (1874) clearly refer to such Hudson River works as Worthington Whittredge's *The Old Hunting Grounds* ⁹ (1864) and

Asher B. Durand's *In the Woods*¹⁰ (1855) in which the native force of the landscape is already altered by the British picturesque. In O'Brien's work, however, both the form and the content are further diluted and the idyllic interpretation of nature, energized by the divine spirit, is emptied of strong emotion and tamed to fit known patterns. Despite the compositional reliance on such American paintings, O'Brien's light-filled, benevolent forest refers more to the old-world Claudian tradition of the picturesque than to native scenery. It is an image bathed in Victorian sentiment, at once grand and nostalgic. The heroic Indian, however, localizes the scene and puts it firmly on North-American soil. He is a symbol of the purity of the new land, and roots it in history. Although the Indian is the indigenous Canadian content, the ideals he represents are derived from European myths of the noble savage. He is a hybrid figure, serving the dual functions of nascent nationalism and Victorian nostalgia. The Indian is the sole element in the painting that links it to Canada; if he were removed, the landscape, although meant to suggest wilderness and the ancient forest, could well be a Fragonardian one, awaiting a picnicking couple. O'Brien gentrifies the subject, giving the effect of a curtain raised on a tableau of the noble savage. Just as in the works of the early eighties, when O'Brien would portray Québec as a shining prize of Empire, this picture derives much of its value from its connection with the larger power; even the title suggests an aristocracy of the land. O'Brien's upper-class outlook strongly perceived Canada as being meaningful only as a part of the homogenous whole of the British Empire and it is this circumscribed understanding of nationalism that is responsible for such a majestic vision of inherent order. It had been said that O'Brien's work "is for the eye seeking rest and beauty,"¹¹ and certainly the message carried by this painting is one of reassurance.

Although the didactic message in *Lords of the Forest* is particularly pronounced, perhaps due to the fact that O'Brien had recently been elected head of the Ontario Society of Artists and was acutely aware of his new responsibilities, this painting nevertheless illustrates the eclectic approach which characterizes O'Brien's work throughout the seventies. American painting provided the stylistic inspiration, and O'Brien's mild, poetic response to nature and his continuing reference to European culture resulted in this his own, and uniquely Canadian, vision. Although one is also struck by their visual similarity to American luminist paintings, what luminist paintings convey and what O'Brien's pictures of the late eighteen-seventies communicate is very different. O'Brien again seems to have borrowed formal elements – specific compositional devices, atmospheric effects, evocative details – but he did not adopt, or attempt to transcribe, the luminist philosophy.

Luminist paintings expressed a different kind of sensibility from that of the Hudson River group. In contrast to the optimism and nationalism inherent in the

confident salon style which reflected America's expansionist energy, luminist works, though still immersed in the idyllic, at least alluded to the changing times. Given the harsh reality of post-Civil War conditions and the advent of Darwinian science, which altered the relationship of man and nature, luminism's moody, introspective character may be seen to mirror the uncertainties of the age. Luminist paintings, however, like their Hudson River counterparts, remained on the whole pastoral and nostalgic. There is no clear reference to post-war problems, to urban industrial life, to slum conditions, racism or political division. Luminism continued to portray a pure, untroubled world. This may have been a result of a kind of zealous avoidance, or perhaps it was an awareness of a disappearing world that occasioned the feelings of nostalgia evident in the small, intimate canvases.

The same motives which led O'Brien to borrow from the Hudson River artists led him to look to the luminists for inspiration. The luminist pictures were attractive, conventional, picturesque in a newly evocative way, and provided an appropriate vehicle for O'Brien's poetic and genteel sensibility. They were perfectly suited to his temperament and readily fulfilled the needs of a poetic-picturesque interpretation of new-world scenery.

The majority of luminist paintings combine a geometrically simplified composition with the portrayal of ethereal atmosphere and light. This juxtaposition of sparse, carefully measured composition – which signifies the eternal and immutable – with the ephemeral, transient states suggested by atmospheric effects, is partly responsible for the meditative, calm character of luminism. This serene beauty, and tranquil, still atmosphere is retained in O'Brien's works. However, in his hands their moody undertones and surreal, impersonal surfaces are lost. The feeling that luminist works are highly personal despite their smooth, impersonal surface is paradoxical. The tangible presence of the artist is erased, yet the perception remains that deeply-felt concerns about the nature of existence are being expressed. These internal tensions, particularly strong in John Frederick Kensett's (1816-1872) paintings of the eighteen-fifties and sixties, create a highly expressive and transcendental mood.

In contrast, O'Brien's technique remains painterly and his interpretation of the subject matter relies on the tradition of the topographical picturesque. His work of 1877 reveals a marked preference for landscape compositions that feature a semi-circular shoreline. This latter device is particularly evident in *The Whirlpool at the Chats*¹² and practically all the compositions of that year are structured around a similarly curved waterline. A semi-circular coastline was also an enduring motif of the American luminists. Fitz Hugh Lane (1804-1865), Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904) and Sanford R. Gifford (1823-1880) used it recurrently and Kensett, especially, imbued this design with particular meaning. O'Brien's *Moonlight, Shanty Bay*¹³ (c.1877), although employing the same design, immediately suggests the picturesque both by means of the rotted tree trunk

which frames the view and by its description of a particular, and arch-romantic, time and condition. It suggests the specific rather than echoing the luminist concerns with the universal. The luminist interest in showing the opposition of masses and voids is apparent, but even in O'Brien's paintings in which this contrast is particularly emphasized, it speaks more of the picturesque than of the transcendental.

American experience around mid-century transformed the conventional British picturesque style and gave rise to the poetic quietism of luminism. In Canada, the situation was different: the pervasive influence of the British picturesque persisted in its conventional form. The reason for this difference can be found in the disparate American and Canadian responses to nature. Many formal elements, that is, the look of O'Brien's early landscapes can indeed be traced to contemporary American painting, but his work embodies, in essence, the colonial British-Canadian experience of the land. The Canadian perception was that the wilderness represented a life inferior to European patterns of civilization, and it was hoped that eventually this wild and natural world might be replaced by the British model. Seeking the protection of a lawful, civilized society, Canadians "[opened] the floodgates to terror when they did have to meet the wild and natural."¹⁴ Reliance upon convention, like the need to domesticate, was a reflex against the reality of the wilderness and an expression of colonial mentality. According to Northrop Frye, "the colonial position of Canada is therefore a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination, and it produces a disease for which I think the best name is prudery... the instinct to seek a conventional or commonplace expression of an idea."¹⁵

The Whirlpool at the Chats and *Moonlight, Shanty Bay* demonstrate that particular colonial response to nature which focuses on its domesticated, protective qualities and, as noted above, O'Brien repeated the design of these two paintings throughout the eighteen-seventies and into the eighties. A sheltered bay on one side of the canvas is contrasted with an open view across water on the other. Although this formal arrangement was derived from American luminist landscapes, it developed in ways that expressed the opposite of luminist concerns. The massive cliffs of *Black Cape*, *Bay Chaleur* occupy more than half the space of the canvas and effectively block any panoramic view on that side of the painting. Their solidity is contrasted with the airy space on the right side of the canvas. The compositional division is paralleled by the division of activities taking place in the picture. The picturesque, detailed side of the canvas, populated with labourers gathering kelp, is countered by the still, "luminist" side which shows only a solitary boat coming in to shore. The painter's interest it seems, and that of the viewer, is focused on the encircling land formations and on the genre scene in the foreground. The potentially oppressive shadow of the cliffs is moderated by the view into the distance and the overall mood is one of domestic well-being.

A Kensett painting – *Beach at Newport*¹⁶ (c.1850-60), for example – even when it shows local activity, remains contemplative and emphasizes the space and light that are its principal subject. Voids are still offset by masses, but their purpose is to heighten the effect of the light-filled atmosphere, thus producing a mood of meditative silence. *Black Cape, Bay Chaleur*, on the other hand, underplays the effect of release into space and concentrates instead on solidity of form and on the comforting depiction of everyday life. It represents a picturesque landscape scene, and despite a certain stillness of atmosphere, it retains the dramatic aspects antithetical to luminist paintings.

In 1880 O'Brien was appointed first president of the Royal Canadian Academy and was required, as were all potential academicians, to submit a diploma work which would contribute to the creation of a national collection. The fact that the newly formed Academy was an institution which represented the emergent Canadian self-awareness and budding nationalism made the choice of subject and theme all the more important. The resulting painting, *Sunrise on the Saguenay*¹⁷ (1880) shows the synthesis which marks O'Brien's achievement. The prevalent British picturesque tradition is modified through reference to contemporary American painting, thus approaching the reality of the Canadian landscape and conveying a specific nationalistic message. Just as O'Brien had borrowed stylistic elements from the American Hudson River School, so again he looked to America for the fresher style of the luminists. The luminists' wistful undertones, however, are eliminated and luminist light is appropriated to serve as the bearer of O'Brien's message – a message of the hope and optimism of a new land, yet one confident in the protection of the Empire at large.

In *Sunrise on the Saguenay* the dead tree and brush in the foreground, painted in dark tones and so prominently displayed, fulfill a particular function. They serve to locate the scene geographically and to introduce the picturesque convention into the luminist stylistic framework. With this foreground removed, the work could be described as being transcendental and international. Although the familiar forms of the Saguenay cliffs refer to a specific place, the tranquil atmosphere, unified colour and immediate experience of the glassy surface of the water produce a contemplative scene that has more to do with nature and the meditative sublime than with the topography of nationalism. Examined without its foreground detail, the painting is more strictly luminist than any other work of O'Brien's to date. But the very specific character of the framing vegetation, its reference to the British picturesque tradition and the consequent feeling of familiarity and reassurance that this produces, locates the scene in place. The same scene which would otherwise have produced a transcendent, supra-national feeling, now takes on a specific nationalistic aura. The techniques used by the luminists to create a meditative mood in their paintings are here employed by O'Brien for a specific emotive purpose. Previously interested in primarily formal elements, O'Brien

is now interested in luminist expressiveness and idealism in order to communicate his nationalistic concerns.

Contemporary criticism repeatedly praised O'Brien's delicate touch and careful finish, but criticized his lack of strength and innovation.¹⁸ A contemporary review of *Sunrise on the Saguenay*, O'Brien's best-known painting today, and a highly symbolic painting at the time, suggested that "by toning down supposed coarseness, its force has been impaired."¹⁹ The critic for *The Globe*, 9 March 1880, expressed a similar view, this time regarding a New Brunswick scene, stating that the work lacked "that sullen grandeur which the subject would seem to demand."²⁰ It was understood that the intention of these paintings was to symbolize Canadian identity, to provide an image founded on the variety and ruggedness of the new land. The criticism seems all the more grudging since O'Brien, more than any other artist, was instrumental in promoting the landscape as a metaphor for national awareness. Yet it would have been neither true to his character nor faithful to his aims to exaggerate the "coarseness" of the landscape. Whether or not one agrees with his interpretation of the land, O'Brien's vision was a conscious one, consistent with his Tory upbringing and his class. It was not a view universally held, but nevertheless could be said to represent the Victorian aesthetic of the majority of English Canadians.

O'Brien neither superimposed a European pattern on the Canadian reality nor attempted to transplant the American experience. In accepting neither the American nor the British prototypes in their entirety, he succeeded in creating a delicate balance, a reflection of the dialectic between the two major forces on Canadian culture. Although the particular interpretation of the Canadian landscape was, in part, a product of his own temperament, it was also defined by something less tangible, and the Canadian identity of the paintings perhaps remains best clarified in opposition to its models.

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Notes

- 1 Newton MacTavish granted O'Brien "some skill as a water-colourist" (Newton MAC-TAVISH, *The Fine Arts in Canada* [Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada Ltd., 1925], 24) but concluded that his status as president of the Royal Canadian Academy "gave to his own work a consequence that is discovered in it even today by art collectors who attach much importance to historical interest." (MACTAVISH, 25) William Colgate agreed that O'Brien "by birth, breeding and education was admirably fitted for the task" (William COLGATE, *Canadian Art*, [Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1943], 30) of president, but dismissed his pictures, as "often destitute of imagination and invention." (COLGATE, 32) More recently, J. Russel Harper noted that the success of "gracious Lucius O'Brien" (J. Russell HARPER, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977], 203) was largely due to his "eminently suitable" (HARPER, 185) schooling and his father's "'respectable' background," (HARPER, 184) and Dennis Reid has stated that O'Brien "aspired to the upper classes, was conservative and gentlemanly, and his art reflected this sense of decorum." (Dennis REID, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973], 85).
- 2 Dennis REID, *Lucius R. O'Brien. Visions of Victorian Canada. Exhibition catalogue.* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1990).
- 3 *Ibid.*, xi.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 COLGATE, *Canadian Art*, 30.
- 6 For an excellent discussion of American life and culture in the nineteenth century, see Barbara NOVAK, *Nature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- 7 Marcia B. KLINE, *Beyond the Land Itself: Views of Nature in Canada and the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 5.
- 8 Lucius R. O'Brien, *Lords of the Forest*, 1874, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
- 9 Worthington Whittredge, *The Old Hunting Grounds*, c.1864, Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- 10 Asher B. Durand, *In the Woods*, 1855, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.
- 11 E. F. B. Johnston (1914), p. 605, in Macdonald, *Dictionary of Canadian Artists*, p. 1414.
- 12 Lucius R. O'Brien, *Whirlpool at the Chats*, 1877, The Weston Collection.
- 13 Lucius R. O'Brien, *Moonlight, Shanty Bay*, 1877, Mr. Murrrough O'Brien, London, Ontario.
- 14 KLINE, *Beyond the Land Itself*, 59.
- 15 Northrop FRYE, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Hunter Rose Co., 1971), 124.
- 16 John Frederick Kensett, *Beach at Newport*, c.1850-60, National Gallery of Art., Washington, D.C.
- 17 Lucius R. O'Brien, *Sunrise on the Saguenay*, 1880, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
- 18 *Canadian Monthly and National Review*, v.6 (1874): 88.
- 19 *The Mail*, Toronto, 8 March 1880.
- 20 *The Globe*, Toronto, 9 March 1880.

Résumé

LUCIUS R. O'BRIEN

Un représentant de l'époque victorienne en Amérique du Nord

La première rétrospective de l'oeuvre de Lucius R. O'Brien s'est tenue au Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario, en septembre 1990. Le catalogue dû au conservateur Dennis Reid, tout en témoignant d'une recherche approfondie, interprète l'oeuvre en la situant dans un contexte victorien au Canada. Il existe, selon l'auteur, une autre source possible d'influence sur cette oeuvre, source à peine mentionnée dans le catalogue bien qu'elle ait été, particulièrement dans les années 1870, aussi importante que la source britannique. Les peintres américains de l'*Hudson River* et les luministes ont servi de modèles stylistiques à O'Brien, et la vision américaine de la terre comme métaphore de la force et de la pureté du nouveau monde répondait au besoin d'une image nationaliste, fondée sur l'aspect physique du pays. L'attitude canadienne à l'égard de la nature ne suit pas, toutefois, la même direction que celle des Américains. Au Canada, le monde de la nature était perçu comme une force menaçante, hostile aux valeurs humaines et inférieure à la civilisation. Le respect des conventions et le besoin de dominer étaient un réflexe contre la réalité d'un pays sauvage et l'expression d'une mentalité coloniale. La culture victorienne de Lucius O'Brien, aussi bien qu'un milieu social privilégié, ont façonné son attitude face à la terre et contribué à donner un sens nouveau aux modèles originaux. O'Brien ignore la sensibilité nostalgique et transcendante des luministes, ainsi que le sentiment panthéiste des peintres de l'Hudson. Il dépouille les modèles américains de leur vigueur et les transforme en images discrètes, poétiques, du paysage canadien. Il s'approprie les éléments superficiels des oeuvres américaines sans se soucier de leur sens profond ni de leur émotion. Il les utilise pour traduire son propre idéal nationaliste, tout en continuant à se référer à la culture européenne. Cette approche éclectique caractérise son oeuvre pendant toutes les années 1870. Toutefois, par son refus d'utiliser intégralement les modèles américain ou britannique, il réussit à créer un équilibre subtil, reflet de la dialectique entre les deux composantes principales de la culture canadienne.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette