

Afterword: O'Brien and America

Stuart Levine

John Brushwood remarked recently that Esteban O'Brien uses the United States somewhat as Henry James used Europe. As James often transplanted Americans abroad so that their peculiarities would stand in higher relief against the "known" background of European culture, so O'Brien with his Mexicans and the U.S. Knowing our country well, O'Brien can use it effortlessly.

Indeed, the United States is something of an old shoe for O'Brien. Consider the matter of his name: "O-bree-yén" is how it is usually said in Mexico, but the author can speak unaccented network-radio American English when he is in the U.S., and is comfortable with "O'Brien." When he was writer-in-residence at Brown, some colleagues, at his suggestion, called him "Steve"; in the Faculty Club one day I also heard a woman with a border-states twang argue, "Yeah, but Esterbayun ...," which he plainly didn't mind either.

The American content of the stories in this selection is by no means uniform in importance. We might arrange them in order in terms of the "weight" of that content, from lightest to heaviest (although such a ranking is quite arbitrary, a bit subjective, and not especially convenient as an order in which to discuss the pieces). America in "Hendrickje" is no more than a relatively stable backdrop to provide perspective in a country whose foreground is notably unsteady. "Retiro and Coyoacan" is about Argentina and Mexico, but the story does include a built-in chorus of *gringo* Latin-Americanists, an obtrusive American "translator" and a soap opera. In "Steve Coin and the CIA," we deal with an American abroad and at home, with violence and decency in several cultures. "Contact Hitter" finds O'Brien trying to explain U.S. topics – baseball, ethnic identity, social class – to a group of Mexican friends. The Americans Phil and Judy are central characters in "God and O'Brien in Jamaica," for this too is a "comparative-cultures" story, though, as O'Brien says, it is also largely about the interior of his own mind. In "Sweet Science," finally, O'Brien actually writes in English, as an American.

The notes below are intended to point up how *cosas estadounidense* – "United States-ish material" – connects to some of O'Brien's major themes, and to touch on a few details which, it was suggested, might be helpful to the reader.

"Hendrickje." (*Chicago Review* 37.2-3: 177-86 and 194.) "The town has history," but no clear location; Rosario, Tucumán, Córdoba and La Plata, regional Argentine cities, all contributed. Even Argentina is never named, but that is where the author lived when he wrote "Hendrickje."

O'Brien's painter is an international figure, cosmopolitan in a way one is more likely to encounter in Argentina than in most other Latin American countries. The overt American (United States, that is) content of the story is slight – the restaurateur has worked in Detroit – but the United States, O'Brien says, is always present here because it offers a way of thinking which protects the unnamed painter and his unnamed wife from the Argentine gloom: collapsing economy, collapsing governments, collapsed confidence. The painter is thinking in dollars in more than a financial sense.

But it would distort the story to stress this element. "Hendrickje" is set vaguely in Argentina, and written by a Mexican in exile. Its themes are among O'Brien's favorites: "the survival of privacy in unexpected locales," the impact of international trends and tastes on regional life-styles, the mysterious action of love, and the nature of art.

Hendrickje Stoffels was Rembrandt's model and mistress, the mother of his son, Titus. *Bathsheba* and *Woman Bathing* are paintings for which Hendrickje served as model. *The Venus of Willendorf*, circa 15,000-10,000 B.C.E., is a four-and-three-eighths-inches-high stone figure, possibly a fertility goddess or object. "Una rubia" is a blonde.

"*Steve Coin and the CIA.*" American-ness shows in a number of ways in "Steve Coin." There is some United States setting – Coin did his cricket-playing at a midwestern university, the locale of the terrible confrontation at the story's end. Coin is American, and O'Brien wants his Mexican auditors to understand Coin's complexity; O'Brien does not like stereotypes. (That is true even in small details. The cricket-organizer is Scots; Scotland is not an area in which cricket is very important.) Coin is a teacher of American literature, and O'Brien borrows heavily from Coin's favorite book, bringing the United States to Latin America through *Moby Dick*. Ishmael told the Town-Ho's story in the Golden Inn in Lima, Peru. O'Brien says he tried to tell *this* story in Lima, but that sabotage prevented him. He has settled on a coffee-shop with a similar name, the *Cafetería Dorada*. It happens to be in *Colonia Napoles*, a section of Mexico City where the streets are named for U.S. places – Pennsylvania, Kansas, Nebraska, and so forth.

O'Brien's friends are sophisticated and politically liberal; they are also pro-feminist, though they retain the habits of *machismo* in their banter; it takes a while to realize that the banter is ironic. They do not know Argentina at all, or the United States as well as O'Brien does. As in "Retiro and Coyoacan," comparison of the three nations is conducted partly in terms of sexual mores. O'Brien's Mexican buddies kid one another about their at least partially apocryphal sexual exploits; O'Brien acknowledges an affair with a young American woman in

Buenos Aires. But the American Coin is more private. The story deals, alas, with comparative violence, too: coups in Argentina, terrorism in Peru, an arson attack on a library in the United States. O'Brien loses two friends, the old man he has met (and liked) at the commuter-station in Buenos Aires, and Coin. Nor should we ignore the CIA-spy line. O'Brien is whimsical, but he and Coin feel that the United States makes too many needless mistakes in dealing with Latin America.

Courage is a theme here, and it happens that the *gringas* in this tale display it. The Fulbright women are foolish, but they are also brave; their behavior has feminist overtones which O'Brien wants his auditors in the "Golden Coffee-Shop" to catch. And quiet Coin, who went unarmed into battle with them though he knew they were foolish, can also go into battle himself when truth needs to be defended.

"Retiro and Coyoacan" (*New Mexico Humanities Review* 34 [1991]: 111-26 and 157) is "about" comparative cultures and about the nature of art. Set in Argentina and Mexico, it is also set, perhaps even rewritten, in the mind of an American translator. O'Brien does not know what turns on his muse, but he connects her with layers of paint on a wall and with sexual love. Grief and the artist's invitation, we are to believe, make the translator an artist, too. Sexual love plays its part for him, as well.

The United States is used also, as so often in O'Brien, as a reference-point, a given. The radio serial at the start is like a U.S. soap opera. Its story is set in a New York Neverneverland. And O'Brien, full of metafictional zeal, introduces real people, all of them American professors who write about Latin American literature (Donald Yates, John Brushwood, Seymour Menton), into his fiction. They are reference-points as well, for they measure O'Brien's quality and help regulate his fame and reputation. Borges has a walk-on role, too, but the great Argentine writer wants to go to the movies to see an American musical he loves.

There is also a range of U.S. associations which (perhaps) originates in the translator's mind – football slang, for instance, and the sexual slang about "a piece of tail." That most readers of the story are likely to be *gringos* is a running joke, though, to be fair, along with the U.S. references and real people – the scholars already named – Poe, I. B. Singer, A. P. Ryder, Frank Lloyd Wright – there are also Fuentes, Byron, Trotsky and Chagall.

Sweet Science was written while O'Brien was at Brown; it is a tour de force in the sense that the "Bech" books by John Updike are: Updike writing from within an invented urban Jewish-American sensibility when his origins are

small-town Pennsylvania protestant; O'Brien trying on the skin of Americans in a middle-sized city, signing the thing "Stephen O'Brien." Updike protected himself carefully and cleverly from errors (he thought that Hanukkah was a major holiday; I don't remember another mistake). O'Brien was coy, too, avoiding areas he felt he couldn't handle, and slipping in, so far as I could detect, just one, deliberate, calling card: the observation about the Mexican double-left in the boxing sequence.

But the story is more Mexican than that. In a talk in Tulsa, O'Brien noted that when a Latin American says that he has been to Argentina, he means Buenos Aires; to Mexico, Mexico City; to France, Paris. Tell a Latin America that you have been in Detroit, and you might be asked, "But did you get to the United States?" because the significant United States is assumed to be New York. O'Brien knows better, and "Sweet Science" goes out of its way to educate Mexicans: creativity, originality, "real" discovery (or even unconventional sex) do not have to be limited to one city. Other critics have noted the pedagogical impulse in O'Brien. Always the teacher, he wants his countrymen to learn about aspects of the life of other nations which could benefit them. "Sweet Science" is set where it is in part because he wants regional Mexican cities to thrive as this U.S. town thrives.

The title is from A. J. Liebling's wonderful book on boxing, *The Sweet Science*. In an early draft, O'Brien also used the term, "the fancy," language which Liebling says he borrowed from the British fight writer Pierce Egan (c. 1772-1849); O'Brien put it in Daisy's mouth: she called Eddie, her viola-playing lover, her "fancy-man." The setting is carefully unspecified. It is not Providence – the college a hundred miles east where the string quartet plays Prokofiev would be in the Atlantic Ocean – though it has some things in common with Providence, and a Providence institution, the Rhode Island School of Design, is mentioned. It is not Tulsa, Denver, Albany, Des Moines, Omaha or Louisville either, though, again, those are places O'Brien knows and likes. They contribute.

O'Brien feels strongly about regional centers. He asked at a reception in St. Paul, Minnesota, whether people felt that the quality of work at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis had declined, or whether he just had had bad luck in the productions he had been able to see in recent years. He was plainly concerned. He believes when he is in such places that he is in "America," though he likes New York as well.

His love of boxing is genuine. He frequents the Arena Coliseo in Mexico City, preferring the Wednesday-night cards to those on the more publicized (but less well-matched?) Saturday nights. So with music. He enjoys being around musicians. He met Yo Yo Ma in Lawrence, Kansas, and liked him immensely, but also listens to regional artists. (He admires the Miracord Trio, based at

Grinnell College in Iowa, for instance, and the Volker String Quartet in Kansas City.) O'Brien asks to sit in at rehearsals, listening to the music, the talk, the arguments, the working-out.

God and O'Brien in Jamaica. The love of music which is evident in "Sweet Science" affects the form of O'Brien's tales, too. Certainly *God and O'Brien in Jamaica* is as thoroughly contrapuntal as Huxley's *Point Counter Point*. The unnamed young man "all fresh and soap-smelling" introduced near the very end of the story is there for musical reasons. He has become quite deaf from Jamaican bar music. Jamaican loud music does not merely suggest the terrible Voice which controls the world of O'Brien's visions, it is part of a quasi-musical structure, one of a number of elements which are presented, varied, developed, augmented, recapitulated, transformed.

Consider O'Brien's insistence on the career of the slight Indian physicist. The young man is intellectually quite the opposite of a mystic, yet his quest has a mystical, religious quality which connects with O'Brien's discoveries about his own visionary life. The story opens, after all, with a discussion of Huxley's views on the similarity of visions in different cultures and ages. So the gentle Indian scientist seeks the shining path – a path of terrible violence. Violence, we have already learned, is one of the things which will trigger O'Brien's visions. The conversation about Huxley, then, is to tell us that O'Brien understands and worries about the ties between his chemically-induced visions and those of saints, mystics, madmen. The themes of that conversation echo musically in other details and events.

The American elements in "God and O'Brien in Jamaica" are obvious enough, and important. They too are treated contrapuntally: the continuing love-song of the Americans Phil and Judy weaves sweetly through the texture of this work. So too with the contrast between nationals of different cultures. Again and again, Americans and Japanese, for example, are shown interacting, but they are no more important than are the Cubans, Jamaicans, and, of course, the two Mexicans whose love affair has moved them to contrive a Jamaican proximity.

Contact Hitter. A title from the jargon of "the national pastime" makes it obvious enough why this story should be included in the selection of O'Brien's "American" tales. Baseball is far too central here to be dismissed with some such statement as, "It is symbolic of larger themes and issues." Still, baseball does serve to highlight special aspects of the two cultures which the friends turn over in their minds as they eat *ceviche*, watch a good ballgame, and nurse their cold beers on the beach. There is the touchy matter, for example, of expertise,

which Americans like to think of as a national trait – witness our uneasiness with signs of its lapsing: space telescopes that will not function, or high-tech products imported from the Orient.

So O'Brien shows us both *gringo* expertise and some Mexican as well. His impatience with national or sexual stereotypes is splendidly evident in the figure of the young Mexican woman whose specialty is agricultural economics. On a humbler level, the *ceviche* seller in the bleachers has found an attractive way to market a product – raw pickled fish – which one would think would be most difficult to merchandise.

In complicated contrast is the way that the young American boy learns how to bat. We are dealing with expertise again, but this time the expected relationship between prowess, manliness and courtship is comically scrambled – the girlfriend's big brother teaches the clumsy boy to be a good hitter because he wishes his sister well!

Those who know O'Brien well know that he is concerned about Mexican xenophobia. It is probably no accident that he devotes so much attention to peculiarities of type, race, gender, background, and profession. Just as he shares the general Mexican resentment of American stereotyping of Mexicans – the sleepy figure with the big sombrero – so too he resents Mexicans' own assumptions of their own cultural uniformity. In the back of his mind, of course, is his own awareness of his bit of Irish ancestry, an ethnic peculiarity which makes related peculiarities resonate from him. Hence his decision to set the story in the odd boom town of Coatzacoalcos. Hence the comparison between Mexico's Jewish community and the situation of Jews in the United States. Just as he will have us remember that the United States is not a country of "plain vanilla *gringos*," so he wants Mexicans aware that their own nation is by no means racially or culturally monolithic.

At the heart of his work is the strongly-held conviction that lives are led more fully when the rich variations in human cultural inheritance, ability and personality which he has observed play themselves out free of the jealousies, hatreds and fears which stereotyping produces. That is why the attractive young woman has so unexpected a profession. She is an agricultural economist for the same reason that the ex-ballplayer reads good new literature and shows up at lectures, for the same reason, too, that Phil and Judy drive a hybrid Japanese car "expedited" by a Chinese Jamaican, and named for a Jewish ceremonial food.