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Note

"This Magic Moonshine"

Fitz Hugh Lane and Nathaniel Hawthorne

Thomas R. Moore

A cat's-paw stipples the water's surface in the cove between Ram Island and Indian Bar near Castine, Maine, where 150 years ago Fitz Hugh Lane (1804–1865) painted at least two canvases: *View of Indian Bar Cove, Brooksville* and *Fishing Party* (figs. 1, 2). Indian Bar is essentially unchanged today; picnickers still row ashore from passing yachts, and a wildlife sanctuary has preserved plants and animals indigenous to the cove's shoreline. At Castine the only contemporary element to alter the nineteenth-century vista is a large, gray training vessel at the dock of the Maine Maritime Academy.

Lane's paintings participate in an extraordinary moment in American arts and letters: Albert Bierstadt and George Caleb Bingham were painting the American West, Lane and Frederic Church were at work in Maine, and four major literary works of the century were published: Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850). Although few records of Lane's literary tastes and reading habits exist, he most certainly was part of a creative surge in American arts during the mid–nineteenth century, and both Lane and Hawthorne were nurtured by similar intellectual and spiritual influences. Considering the artist and writer together as products of the same artistic milieu—which mixed luminism, transcendentalism, and romanticism—reveals an unexplored dimension of Lane's work.

Lane painted *View of Indian Bar Cove* and *Fishing Party* from the same vantage point on the bank of the Bagaduce River across from Castine, where he spent several summers with his friend Joseph L. Stevens Jr. *View of Indian Bar Cove* is a daytime scene that is transcribed in moonlight in *Fishing Party*. The pair viewed together reveals Lane's reflection on the transcendental properties of light. Lane's exposure to transcendentalism came through the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the experimental Brook Farm. His use of light in his art further connects him to a literary contemporary: Nathaniel Hawthorne, once a Brook Farm denizen himself.[1] Both Lane and Hawthorne use daylight and moonlight alternately to signify "true" and illusionary illumination. Daylight is the reality we usually perceive, while moonlight represents a more romantic existence. Each artist in his medium represents the ambiguity—but perhaps greater depth—of vision in semidarkness and the consequent questioning of what is visible in daylight. The two Lane paintings present an interpretive puzzle and suggest an enigmatic, Hawthornian dimension evident in these works.

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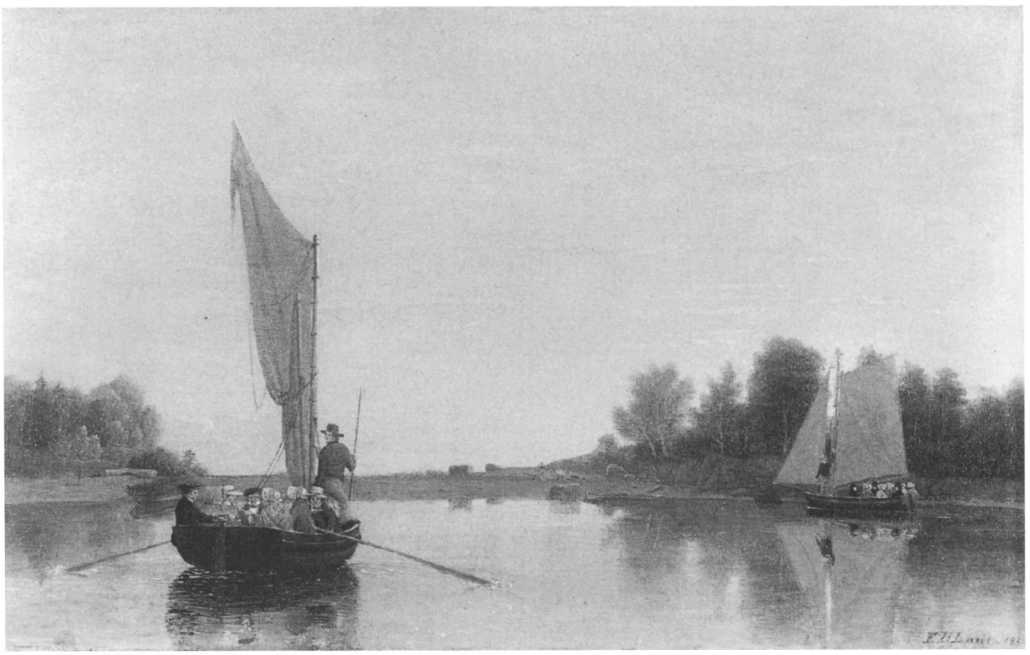

1 Fitz Hugh Lane, *View of Indian Bar Cove, Brooksville,* ca. 1850. Oil on canvas, 29.2 x 46.4 cm (11 ½ x 18 ¼ in.). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson E. Davenport

View of Indian Bar Cove, the daylight scene, is a typical Lane seascape: serene, calm, and meticulously detailed. The water is still and the sky a bit overcast; the sails on the two boats hang limp as fashionable picnickers approach the shore. Two young men pull on the oars of one boat while another member of the party stands on the bow with a boat hook as they near the beach. Reflections of boats, people, and trees are clear in the tranquil water. The vantage point of the artist and viewer is from the water, as if Lane himself were painting from another boat. The focus of the painting is the low stretch of Indian Bar bordered by stands of birch to the south (right) and oak or maple to the north. Jovial summer expectation mediates the scene.

In *Fishing Party,* the companion nocturne, Lane paints the scene from the same vantage point, but this time at night. A full moon in the east glints off the water. The white path of reflected moonlight draws the viewer to the strip of beach in the center of the painting. As in *View of Indian Bar Cove,* we find sixteen figures: eight ashore already, seven in a sailboat anchored off the beach, and one in the dinghy. The picnickers on land pair off to stroll in the moonlight or gather around a beach fire and cook mackerel. Whether the group is returning for an evening tryst or the rusticators have spent the afternoon and evening frolicking at Indian Bar is unclear.

A narrative exchange exists between the paintings: the same characters appear in both and a story is suggested. Despite the size difference between them—*Fishing Party* measures nearly twice the size of *View of Indian Bar Cove*—they work together to form conceptual pendants. Because the figures appear in both paintings, they are a departure from Lane's usual depictions of human figures as fixtures in the scenery, and take on a new importance. In *Gloucester at Sunrise* (1851), for instance, two groups of men chat on the docks, and in *Bar Island and Mt. Desert Mountains from Somes Settlement* (from the same year), the figures fish and row a boat. Their actions seem unimportant except to add detail, context, and immediacy to the scene. In the Indian Bar paintings, however, Lane poses the same figures twice; we are encouraged to speculate about the characters who hold (but withhold) their stories.

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While *View of Indian Bar Cove* depicts the simplicity of a summer picnic, *Fishing Party* suggests the illicit pleasures of the night. A boatman ferries the passengers to the glowing beach fire where they may sit in conversation or leave to walk along the beach in the moonlight. Three couples wait in the boat for the ferryman and the trip to the shore. What will transpire during the evening? In several stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a transformation occurs by night that is similarly suggested here. Both "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832) are initiation stories, tales of young men in their first confrontations with the mysteries (and sometimes depravities) of adulthood. In the daylight painting, all is innocence, just as it is in the opening scene of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown."[2] Faith kisses her new husband before his fateful trip into the shadowy forest. There he learns the "deep mystery of sin." At the story's end Brown is a changed man: "darkly meditative," "distrustful," and "desperate." What about Lane's nocturnal picnickers? And what about the seventeenth picnicker, alone (or perhaps rowed by his friend Stevens) with his sketch pad in the cove? Is *Fishing Party* reflective of Lane's speculations and desires?

Moonlight lends a different hue to reality. That is Hawthorne's primary focus, and perhaps Lane's as well.

Perhaps this is simply a crepuscular gathering of carefree vacationers on the Brooksville beach. But moonlight lends a different hue to reality. That is Hawthorne's primary focus, and perhaps Lane's as well. In Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Robin Molineux—after being ferried across a river—wanders through Boston looking for his kinsmen at night; the moonlight tricks him, obscures the identities of those he meets, and conflates reality and dreams. His search becomes, as Hawthorne writes, an "evening of ambiguity."[3] The fullness of reality is not always clearly apparent, and thus one must be ever wise to the "vibration" between "fancy and reality." Indeed, some essential truth may lie in the flickering, ambiguous moonlight. In "The Custom House," Hawthorne's introduction to *The Scarlet Letter,* he writes of "magic moonshine," of how in moonlight ordinary items "lose their actual substance." A sitting room, he muses, when lit by moonlight and perhaps a "glimmering coal-fire," becomes a place where the "Actual and the Imaginary may meet." And it is during an "obscure night in early May" when Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* keeps his vigil on the scaffold and "discovers a revelation, addressed to himself alone." An innocent reading of Lane's nocturnal *Fishing Party* is enriched and complicated when viewed over Hawthorne's shoulder.

To deepen the ambiguity and suggestiveness of the two Lane canvases, Indian Bar itself can be viewed from either an easterly position (from which I have assumed Lane sketched, off Ram Island) or a westerly position, in Smith Cove. The paintings do not provide sufficient clues in the tree outline for a clear determination of the artist's position. The full moon could hang (as I have assumed Lane painted it) in the east directly over the Bar; but it can also (as I have observed) be positioned in the west directly over Indian Bar. The implication of the full moon in the west is this: since it can only be viewed there in the early morning hours, the rusticators either would have had to have spent an entire night frolicking on the beach or they would have had to have risen in the early morning dark and damp to fish for mackerel, an unlikely event for vacationers. A third option remains: Lane might have ignored the astronomical impossibility of a full moon in the west in the early evening and simply painted it in from his easterly position.

Uncanny biographical resemblances link Nathaniel Hawthorne and Fitz Hugh Lane to the same artistic environment. Only four months, fifteen days, and twenty miles separate the births of writer and painter: Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, on July 4,

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2 Fitz Hugh Lane, *Fishing Party*, 1859. Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 76.2 cm (20 x 30 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Henry Lee Shattuck

1804; Lane in Gloucester on December 19 of the same year. Though no encounters between the two are recorded, these early-nineteenth-century residents of Boston's North Shore might easily have passed in the Salem depot or on a Gloucester beach, might have stood together momentarily for cover in a doorway on a rainy day, or might have attended the same Lyceum talk by Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau. Certainly each read the same newspapers, magazines, and gift-books.

Both came from families with deep roots in the earliest New England settlements. The two even had similar architectural tastes as well; Lane's Gloucester house on Duncan's Point duplicates the seven gables of Hawthorne's famous (and still standing) seven-gabled domicile in Salem. Both made extended trips to Maine: Hawthorne to study at Bowdoin, summer in Augusta, and tour the coast; Lane to summer and paint on Penobscot Bay. The parallel continues until death. Hawthorne died in Plymouth, New Hampshire,

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on May 19, 1864; Lane died in Gloucester, Massachusetts, just fifteen months later on August 12. And both were recorders of their times, Hawthorne in his essays (*Our Old Home*) and sketches ("The Old Apple Dealer" is one example), and Lane in his many renderings of nautical detail and harbor scenes.

Beyond these tenuous biographical connections—tenuous because apparently they never met—the parallels in their lives may bring us to a fuller understanding of their respective artworks. We will probably never know with certainty if Lane read Hawthorne's fiction or if Hawthorne viewed Lane's paintings, though Hawthorne's fascination with the visual arts (especially on his European travels) is well documented.[4] But Hawthorne's dark side, with its veils and ambiguities, corresponds to a darkness in Lane; taken together, they allow us to read the *Fishing Party* more fully.

Lane's luminist paintings are concerned with the *apparent* calm, with accurately depicting the lumps of drooping or furled canvas, with the shimmering of twilight on water, with the placid sea in the evening, and with the lengthening ripples made by an oar. *Ships off Massachusetts Coast* (1850s), *Becalmed off Halfway Rock* (1860), and especially *Approaching Storm, Owl's Head* (1860) all carry a fragile sense of serenity. Lane was very aware that the beautiful vessels he depicted were fundamentally commercial and offered their owners and crews either financial rewards or potential disaster—to the extent of loss of livelihood and even life. The destructive fury of the sea always hovers on the margins of his canvases. The serene veil of light that drapes these paintings implies the correlative darkness, and this dimension links him with Hawthorne. We know that Lane, like Hawthorne, was mesmerized by light: twilight, moonlight, and firelight become his metaphors.

Both Lane and Hawthorne were sufferers and searchers of faith. In the exploration of the ambiguities in life, we often find spiritual substance and answers to our most perplexing questions. Literature and art are built upon suggestion and interpretation, and depend on tensions between opposites—light and dark, the innocent and the fallen, hope and despair. In the pair of Brooksville paintings, Lane is exploring these dualities.

With its luminosity, its trickery and suggestiveness, light is the stuff of paintings. Think of that magic light pouring through the window in Vermeer's room in Delft, and how it lights the parted lips and pearl earring of *Girl in a Turban.* Recall how it casts a deep and meditative glow on the faces in *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid.* Consider Monet's fleeting light on the haystacks, Van Gogh's thirteen stars swirling through *The Starry Night,* and even Hawthorne's Ethan Brand and his self-immolation in the "lurid blaze" of the lime kiln. Light is mesmerizing, powerful stuff, and the dim light of stars—"magic moonshine"—may reveal as much as or more than the bright light of a summer afternoon.

Lane augurs the impressionist preoccupation with light, shows how the same scene can take on a new luminescence when cast in moonlight, and focuses on the transformative power of light. *View of Indian Bar Cove* and *Fishing Party* depict this transformation. Lane was clearly intrigued by the differing tone created by light in the two paintings: he later made new versions of both, an indication that the first renderings lingered unresolved in his imagination.[5] Nurtured in the same intellectual, geographical, and spiritual environments, Lane and Hawthorne have a similar thematic design: any apparent serenity of the natural or man-made world cannot be trusted to endure beyond the present moment.

The goal of any artist, whether working with language or pigment, is to stir our imagination, to call for a second look, to upset our easy apprehensions of reality. Both Lane and Hawthorne accomplish this by using twilight and moonlight to suggest

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other—perhaps deeper—ways of perceiving reality. In *Walden,* Thoreau's meditation on individualism and transcendentalism, he exhorts us to look more carefully "because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that *is* which *appears* to be." Just as there is a "thick and darksome veil" of language to weigh with Hawthorne, there is a corresponding veil of light to weigh with Lane.[6] The North Shore of Boston bred more than one artist who explored the trickery of surface meanings, and Hawthorne's thematic intersections with Lane suggest new layers of interpretation in Lane's moonlight paintings.

Notes

1 Elizabeth Garrity Ellis, "Fitz Hugh Lane and the American Union of Associationists," *American Art Journal* (spring 1985): 89; and Mary Foley, "Fitz Hugh Lane, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Gloucester Lyceum," *American Art Journal* 27 (1995–1996): 99–101.

2 Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," *New-England Magazine* (1835).

3 Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," *Token* (1832).

4 Rita K. Gollin and John L. Idol Jr. with the assistance of Sterling K. Eisiminger, *Prophetic Pictures: Nathaniel Hawthorne's Knowledge and Uses of the Visual Arts,* Contributions in American Studies, vol. 99 (New York: Greenwood, 1991).

5 John Wilmerding, *The Artist's Mount Desert: American Painters on the Maine Coast* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 47.

6 Hawthorne wrote in a letter in 1840 to Sophia Peabody, his future wife, that "words may be a thick and darksome veil of mystery between the soul and the truth that it seeks"; *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* eds. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, Claude M. Simpson, and Thomas Woodson, vol. 15 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962–88), p. 462.

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