THE FACE IN THE WINDOW: SUNSHINE SKETCHES *RECONSIDERED*

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In the final chapter of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town,* the narrator turns to a "you" who is simultaneously himself and the reader and offers this advice: "No, don't bother to look at the reflection of your face in the window-pane shadowed by the night outside. Nobody could tell you now after all these years. Your face has changed. . . ."[1] This act of self-scrutiny, implicating both narrator and reader, is the central event of *Sunshine Sketches.* Through his anonymous but intimate narrator Leacock generalizes less the collective, external experience of small-town life than the individual, internal experience of recognizing and attempting to integrate a self fragmented through time. "L'Envoi" redefines the focus of the entire narrative, exposing the internal nature of its ostensibly external journey and firmly establishing the narrator as the locus of concern. Through the ending Leacock builds into his narrative its own reinterpretation by providing the cue to the rereading that must now take place if his imaginative exploration is to be understood fully. And such a rereading demands that we take seriously the interiorization of fiction in the final pages.

Despite being widely read and taught, *Sunshine Sketches* remains one of the most underestimated narratives in our literature. A recent biographer of Leacock has dismissed it as "a parochial treatment of parochialism."[2] Certainly, the surface naivete, crudity, and shallowness of the book encourage underestimation, and its light tone discourages critical seriousness. Reinforcing such discouragement is the formidable voice of Robertson Davies declaring that Leacock "would have laughed at a critic who grew too serious about his work."[3] But it is also Davies, we remember, who insists on the deep vein of melancholy in Leacock and who chooses the darkness of "L'Envoi" to represent *Sunshine Sketches* in his *Feast of Stephen.* Moreover, the hybrid nature of the work itself creates a confusion that muddies discussion and flattens the narrative. The ongoing (and rather tired) debate about its generic status, for instance, continues to invoke a tradition of formal realism inappropriate to Leacock's book.[4] By recognizing that the

[1]Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town,* New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960), p. 152. Further references will be incorporated in the text.
[2]David M. Legate, *Stephen Leacock: A Biography* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1970), p. 63.
[3]*Stephen Leacock* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 7.
[4]Donald Cameron, for example, leans heavily on Ian Watt's paradigm for the novel in his argument for Leacock's potential as a novelist. See *Faces of Leacock* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1967).

formative impulse of *Sunshine Sketches* is a psychological one, rooted in the narrator's knowledge of his changed face, we can not only uncover a different and deeper coherence than commonly recognized but also locate Leacock's narrative in the mainstream of modern Canadian writing. This is not to say that Leacock is a conscious literary innovator or a significant precursor of more recent fiction. He is not. But *Sunshine Sketches* — largely unintentionally perhaps — is a more modern and serious work than commonly perceived. By isolating some of its neglected resonances, we can account more satisfactorily for its enduring power.

The memorable final chapter suggests that the source of that power lies in the narrative voice that here assumes centre stage. Through the internalization of landscape and action in "L'Envoi," the narrator stands revealed as the weary, disillusioned inhabitant of the city we had suspected him of being. The imagery surrounding him points to the underlying impetus for the journey into the past that has constituted the main narrative line. Images of night, autumn, and the Mausoleum Club evoke the problems of time and death that haunt the narrator's present, accentuating the psychological urgency of his imaginative return. Time has eroded his sense of a coherent self, and the creation of Mariposa signals an attempt to rediscover a past self lost "in these long years of money-getting in the city." Through memory and imagination, he may be able to reintegrate the self and so make sense of the moments of his existence before death cuts off the possibility of meaning. By referring to himself as "you," he not only draws the reader into this process but underlines the internal split, the self-alienation, that "L'Envoi" as a whole dramatizes and accepts finally as irreparable. Between Mariposa and the Mausoleum Club, as the typography itself emphasizes, there can be no permanent bridge. The train connecting past and present cannot forge the final link, and the selves of then and now remain irretrievably separate. Sitting in the Mausoleum Club, the narrator is left with an empty present and a past that is a nostalgic memory rather than a sustaining presence. Unlike Margaret Laurence, whose *A Bird in the House* recalls *Sunshine Sketches,* Leacock cannot find a way to affirm a continuity of the self through time. But in focusing on this problem of the continuity of the self and formulating it in terms of an experienced disjunction between past and present, Leacock's work draws on impulses close to those animating not only Laurence's fiction but also that of other contemporary writers as diverse as Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, and Margaret Atwood. "You have to go home again," asserts Morag Gunn.[5] Leacock's narrator tries to do so, but, like the speaker in Al Purdy's "The Country North of Belleville," he has lost his way.

The melancholy awareness of time as separation and disintegration that surfaces so dramatically in the final chapter informs the whole narrative structure of *Sunshine Sketches.* But in rereading the whole in light of the

[5]Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: Bantam, 1975), p. 302.

final interiorization of fiction, the private dimension of this awareness emerges more clearly. Details interpreted previously in terms of social theme assume a psychological significance, generating a new level of narrative coherence. Thus the disposal of Mariposa's small stone church, recorded in the fourth section, becomes emblematic of psychological process in the narrator. Faced with the question of what to do with this symbol of its past, the town initially decides to incorporate the stone into a new structure. When this proves "impracticable," it contemplates refashioning the stone into a wall as a "token." Eventually, the town abandons entirely the idea of retention, selling off the stone to a building contractor, and the old church," like so much else in life, was forgotten" (p. 61). Despite its light, satiric touch, the passage has a peculiar poignancy, an emotional resonance exceeding that required by its social theme. The explanation lies in its personal significance for the narrator as an image of his own relationship to the past. The actions of the Mariposans — their gradual discarding of the past and choice of money in exchange — mirror his own actions and suggest how the changed face of "L'Envoi" came into being. Contemplating his reflection here, the narrator posits a relationship between the self-fragmentation he now recognizes and his repression of his past: "Perhaps if you had come back now and again . . . it [the changed face] wouldn't have been so" (p. 152).

This is not to deny the public, social level of *Sunshine Sketches* as a humorous exposure of small-town consciousness, but it is to suggest that *Sunshine Sketches* operates simultaneously and skilfully on several levels. The narrator's Mariposan pose, for example, constitutes an essential strategy in rendering both the social theme and the explorative private journey. Its role in shaping the satiric public vision is well-known and need not be discussed explicitly; our concern is with its function in articulating the psychological theme. In his effort to discover an authentic continuity of the self, the narrator forges a complex voice that mingles the perspective of a Mariposan with that of the city-dweller and so endeavours to fuse the two central experiences of his life. By adopting the tone of a Mariposan, he reactivates the perspective of his youth, capturing through language the values of Mariposa and his own youthful sense of the town as the boundary of the universe. This naive and confident voice is overlaid with the sophisticated adult voice of experience as language modulates from the folksy rhythms of "Anyway, they were fair and straight, this Cuban crowd" to the educated cadence of "It seemed to spoil one's idea of Jeff" (pp. 30, 33). The voice that stumbles over "eggnostic" and "Gothey" can also handle "theodolite" with ease and casually slip in a reference to the *Iliad*. But the very transparency of the Mariposan pose *as* pose suggests that in bringing to bear upon a single image the divergent perspectives of youth and maturity, the narrator has succeeded less in integrating the selves than in reinforcing his sense of their disjunction. This is particularly apparent in his

use of mock-heroic techniques where the double perspective operates most strongly. Josh Smith, for instance, prompts a sequence of Napoleonic allusions that serves simultaneously to recreate the view of childhood and to undercut Mariposa's pretentious self-image. Irony is both indulgence and exposure: the narrator participates in the imaginative world of childhood even as his adult self performs the critical act of judgment. But no significant relationship between the two modes of the self emerges. Rather, they remain juxtaposed, thus only underlining the gap between then and now. Such is the typical pattern of the mock-heroic strain in *Sunshine Sketches.* Whether it takes the form of a reference to the "colossal thickness" of the telegraph poles or to the "enchanted princes" of Mariposa, irony tests the self as much as the town and exposes the hollowness in both.

There are moments, however, when the technique becomes more problematic, when irony apparently changes direction as the voices of innocence and experience merge briefly. The voice of experience mingles a critical awareness of the limitations of youth and of Mariposa with a deep yearning for its own lost innocence and simplicity of feeling. Such a yearning permeates the evocative description of Lake Wissanotti on the morning of the ill-fated excursion of the Knights of Pythias. Lingering over the "last thin threads of the mist" and the "long call of the loon," the narrator conjures into being "the land of the silent pine and the moving waters" (p. 36). The utter simplicity of scene calls forth a corresponding simplicity of response and implies a lost relationship to landscape now possible only in memory and the imagination. Immediately following the passage, the ironic mask of the cantankerous provincial returns: "Don't talk to me of the Italian lakes, or the Tyrol or the Swiss Alps. Take them away. Move them somewhere else. I don't want them." Here the mock-heroic does not yield its usual deflation of the Mariposan sensibility. The moment stands as one in which the selves of then and now achieve a temporary fusion of perspective, their values merging as the experienced adult voice meets the ignorant youthful voice in response to Lake Wissanotti. The comic dismissal of the European Sublime is meant seriously. Such moments are rare and rarely unambiguous, marked by a tentativeness apparent even in the above instance where the nervous rhythms of the provincial voice indicate an underlying uneasiness. Uncertainty of tone marks a similar moment when the narrator asserts that the "foyer of the opera in Paris may be a fine sight, but I doubt if it can compare with the inside of Eliot's drug store." Having set up the expected deflation, he disorders the pattern by pausing and adding, "for real gaiety and joy of living" (p. 111). He may well mean what he says. But we cannot be certain. Such passages, with their blurring of the direction of the irony, raise the possibility of achieving a coherent perspective rooted in a coherent self. But they are only transitory moments, constituting glimpses and guesses. More typically, the pattern is one of the separation of past and present, of juxtaposition rather than integration, culminating in the bleak recognition that

"Your face has changed."

Reinforcing the psychological implications of the double voice is the way in which the shape of the external world created by the narrator reflects his sense of a dissociated self. His mind is drawn persistently to isolated or split selves as he turns Mariposa into an extension of his own predicament, translating inner anxieties into external forms. He transforms his own sense of isolation into the isolation of his characters, summing up in the memorable image of Dr. Gallagher and Dean Drone delivering unheeded monologues to one another all the isolated selves of Mariposa (p. 45). Furthermore, the town contains a striking number of characters who suffer from a sense of internal disconnection, most commonly in the form of a frustrated or buried self. The narrator points to the assumptions behind his characterization when he generalizes from the case of Dean Drone: "There was a buried author in him just as there was a buried financier in Jefferson Thorpe. In fact, there were many people in Mariposa like that, and for all I know you may yourself have seen such elsewhere" (pp. 79-80). From Dr. Gallagher to Mallory Tompkins to Myra Thorpe to Peter Pupkin, the Mariposans possess a frustrated level of the self released by the narrator through comedy, pathos, romance, or satire. Where his problem is the relationship between successive selves, theirs is typically that between layers of the self, for Mariposa is a static world released from time. The narrator has lifted his characters out of the horizontal plane of linear time in which he himself exists and placed them in a vertical, spatial plane that allows him to focus on and yet evade his problem.

Such evasion is most apparent in the figure of Dean Drone who, since the externalization of self here admits the problem of time, serves as the closest surrogate for the narrator. The very opening of his story introduces the presence of time and death in the contrast between the plum blossom tree and the aged Dean and in the action of leaves fluttering onto the skull on the table. The pastoral mode in which the Dean exists softens the sense of relentless linear movement but does not deny it. As the narrative evolves, it becomes apparent that the intrusion of materialism into the unworldly existence of Dean Drone is merely the final blow to a spirit already undermined by time and an experience of internal disjunction. Like the narrator, he suffers from the sense of a severed past, having forgotten the Greek for which he received a medal fifty-two years ago. Struggling to decipher the Greek texts, he, too, strives to establish a continuity of the self. But between the world of his youth and the world of now there exists a hiatus dramatized by the death of his wife. The formally ordered world of his little Anglican college with its "clipped hedges" has been replaced by the pragmatic order of a Mariposa dominated by the picaresque figure of Josh Smith. Isolated, archaic, Dean Drone endeavours to connect then and now but cannot succeed within the parameters of his current reality. So his dilemma is resolved magically. After his stroke, the Dean experiences a

sudden reintegration, finding that he can read Greek "with the greatest ease" and can hear his wife's voice. In the final tableau the Dean, drifting peacefully toward an easeful death, has been lifted out of time and reality into a timeless world where the pastoral vision is possible. He is a wish-fulfilling figure, but the sober implication is that his internal and external alienation can be resolved only through the magic of a fiction.

Dean Drone illuminates the way in which the imagination and its fictions provide the narrator with a liberation from time. *Sunshine Sketches* is shaped as much by the urge to escape time as by the attempt to come to terms with its passage; Mariposa dissolves even as it defines the problem of the self. The whole creation of the town deemphasizes temporality and the irreversibility of linear sequence. "There it lies" on a perennial June afternoon, its timelessness reinforced by the extensive use of the habitual present. Closure within the Mariposan context deliberately stills linear time: the stories typically conclude in the present tense, and the endings possess a tableau-like quality which stretches a moment into forever. The Pupkin household is forever young and enchanted; Dean Drone sits perennially under the plum blossom tree. While the Dean may be dying, he never actually dies. In fact, he turns up again in the two chapters immediately following his own story, and his reappearance points to the insistent anti-chronology of the narrative. Continually, Leacock undermines the tendency to translate the linearity of the reading process into a corresponding linearity of fictional time.

Mariposa is a static world rendered in terms of timeless fictional modes, but it is enclosed by a framework of reminiscence, a form which acknowledges the inescapability of time. The collision of Mariposa with the world of time in the final chapter accounts for the curious emotional impact of recognizing the Mariposans on the train. At this moment, as Donald Cameron points out, the narrator seems to have grown older, while the Mariposans "are perfectly unchanged by the passage of time."[6] These final pages force the direct recognition of Mariposa as refuge from a relentless chronicity and clarify its role as a wish-fulfilling dream for both narrator and reader. Drawing together the psychological strains of the narrative, the last chapter generates a powerful impact and thus suggests that the enduring appeal of *Sunshine Sketches* has less to do with its social function as collective memory than with its indulgence of the private, subliminal self. This use of fiction as a way out of time contains literary as well as psychological implications, developing not only the theme of the self but also the related theme of fiction. Fiction, Frank Kermode reminds us, endows time with a human shape, provides a meaningful order.[7] The narrator, conscious of himself as a story-teller, is well aware of this function. "I am afraid that this is no way to tell a story," he announces when, in violation of

[6] *Faces of Leacock*, p. 145. [7] *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).

chronological sequence, he reveals the fact of the Mariposa Belle's accident. The revelation, he explains, has been triggered by his pondering "the contrast between the excursion crowd in the morning and the scene at night" (p. 42). Contrast prompts the desire to discover cause, to connect rationally the antithetical moments. Here he identifies the basic impulse of fiction to provide connections and to transform mere successiveness into significant sequence. A story, he implies, is a rational construct of chronological time, imitating and making sense of its linearity.

The tales of the Mariposans imagine different ways of structuring personal time through different literary modes. But whether time appears as the downward curve of disillusionment (as for Jeff Thorpe) or as the rising curve of fulfillment (as for Josh Smith), it possesses a rational shape and coherence. Such sense making, however, as the narrator seems to realize in his comment on his own narration, is a fiction, "a story." Scepticism about the authenticity and adequacy of fiction underlies *Sunshine Sketches* and accounts for its obvious literariness that keeps constantly before the reader the conventionality and fictionality of its resolutions. Romance, pastoral, and picaresque provide the patterns of reconciliation and meaning. Even as the patterns are mocked, they are realized — but only in Mariposa. Time here has been turned into timeless literary convention, and Mariposa differentiated sharply from the real world. While narrative stress on the artificiality of the creation signals a recognition of the inadequacy of traditional modes as models for contemporary experience, no new model emerges. The narrator has not found a fiction that will suffice; his time remains unreconciled.

The distrust of literary convention in *Sunshine Sketches* goes beyond its traditional function as a strategy of comedy and realism and points to a basic distrust of the imagination itself. Throughout *Sunshine Sketches,* as both theme and shaping force of the narrative, the operation of the imagination is identified with fantasy, retreat, delusion. Within the stories it appears as snare and distortion — Jeff Thorpe dazzled by the imaginative appeal of Cuba, his daughter deluded by visions of an acting career, Zena Pepperleigh falsifying the world through the lens of romance. For the narrator, as we have seen, it functions primarily as retreat from a painful reality. The train of the imagination may be "the fastest train in the whole world," but it can offer no sustaining insight into the narrator's existential condition. Even when *Sunshine Sketches* acknowledges the sustaining power of fiction, as in the case of Judge Pepperleigh and his son, it stresses the falsehood involved. Indulging in the freedom and release that the imagination offers, Leacock yet exposes these as illusory. The view of the imagination implicit in *Sunshine Sketches* is thus sceptical and limited. Leacock identifies the imagination with fantasy, unable or unwilling to distinguish between the two. The distinction, as Leacock's much admired Dickens well knew, is crucial. Aware as Dickens is of the real dangers of the uncontrolled imagination and of the ease with which it can be debased into

fantasy, he nevertheless affirms its genuine creativity and essential truth. But Leacock lacks this confidence. And it is this, finally, that lies at the root of his failure to develop the complex artistic potential tantalizingly present in *Sunshine Sketches*. While Davies is doubtless correct in identifying Leacock's social insecurity, his desire to be liked, as contributing to the decline after *Sunshine Sketches*,[8] this insecurity but masks a deeper, more crippling uncertainty — the distrust of his own imaginative power.

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[8]See *Stephen Leacock*, p. 26.