

MARIPOSA REVISITED

T. D. MacLulich

In her article "The Face in the Window: *Sunshine Sketches* Reconsidered" (*Studies in Canadian Literature*, 3 [Summer 1978], 178-85), Ina Ferris draws a provocative conclusion. She argues that the ending of *Sunshine Sketches* shows that Leacock lacked faith in his own imaginative powers:

Throughout *Sunshine Sketches* . . . the operation of the imagination is identified with fantasy, retreat, delusion. . . . 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. . . . 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. (p. 184)

Ferris makes her case forcefully. Nonetheless, I wish to disagree. In the first place, the town's uses of the imagination are not ridiculed in Leacock's book; they are sympathetically defended. In the second place, Ferris has neglected one of her own central insights. Although she initially stresses that "L'Envoi" implicates *both* narrator and reader as collaborators in its imaginative journey, she ends by applying the lesson of "L'Envoi" only to the narrator, who has apparently failed in his attempt to return imaginatively to Mariposa. In the third place, Ferris closely identifies the narrator with Leacock himself. On the contrary, I wish to argue that Leacock — the implied author behind *Sunshine Sketches* — is distinct from the narrator. At the end of *Sunshine Sketches* the author has knowingly succeeded in his imaginative endeavour. Leacock's book does not express a distrust of the imagination, but points out the power of fiction to control the emotions of even sophisticated readers.

Sunshine Sketches is Leacock's one deliberate examination of the "fictionality" of fiction. Even so powerful a work as *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* does not have the reflexive dimension which takes *Sunshine Sketches* beyond a merely sociological concern with the customs of late nineteenth-century Ontario small towns. In his later career Leacock succumbed, as Robertson Davies has

pointed out,¹ to the temptation to give his readers what they wanted: he became a popular entertainer, manipulated by his readers' expectations, rather than a fully autonomous artist. But in *Sunshine Sketches* Leacock triumphantly celebrates the power of the imagination. The knowing use of fiction to make readers aware of their own emotional susceptibilities makes *Sunshine Sketches* Leacock's most subtle and most successful work.

Throughout the book, as Donald Cameron points out,² the narrator plays on the theme of reality versus illusion, illusion being associated with Mariposa and reality with the city. However, the narrator's repeated suggestion is that in Mariposa *illusion is reality*. For example, the love affair of Zena Pepperleigh and Peter Pupkin begins as an absurd parody of a sentimental romance, but in the end the story has become — without losing its satiric tone — also a sympathetic account of the wayward course of human relationships. Most of the stories in *Sunshine Sketches* may also be interpreted in two ways, depending on whether they are read by our "city" or our "Mariposa" self. Josh Smith's machination to keep his liquor license may make him either a conniving trickster or a likeable rogue. Jefferson Thorpe's financial naiveté makes him at once a fool and a symbol of innocence and honesty, the victim of corrupt city swindlers. The fire which destroys the Anglican Church is either a criminal plot or a clever turning of the tables on city financiers, depending on your attitude to the large financial institutions of modern society. Likewise, John Smith's election victory is either an example of corrupt electoral practices or a zestful community ritual which strengthens the town's sense of collective identity. There is no doubt that we are meant to render an adverse judgment on the corruption, skullduggery, and stupidity of the townspeople. Yet we are also meant to see that in many ways Mariposa symbolizes a desirable state of affairs. The town takes care of its own; its citizens co-operate to show a common belief that the world is basically a benign and forgiving place. However misplaced their faith may be, the Mariposans are custodians of a perennially attractive human dream.

¹"Introduction" to *Feast of Stephen* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 19. This introduction is a slightly revised form of *Stephen Leacock* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970).

²"The Enchanted Houses: Leacock's Irony," *Canadian Literature*, No. 23 (Winter 1965), p. 32. This article has been reprinted in *The Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. George Woodcock (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), pp. 1-14.

Mariposa is a child's world, where evil cannot penetrate and no one can really be hurt by a pratfall or a social disaster. When the narrator slips a banana skin under his characters — when Jefferson Thorpe loses his money, when Dean Drone has a stroke — we know that no harm has really been done and that they will rise whole the next day. When the narrator strips away the masks for a moment, and we see a character naked — Josh Smith rigging the election, Peter Pupkin and Zena Pepperleigh showing their vacuous minds — we may feel a childish delight in seeing others made to look foolish, uncompromised by the sympathy that results from an adult's ability to put himself in another's place. But our response is cruel only as a child is sometimes cruel. The child sees things only from his own point of view; he is cruel because he does not believe an event has consequences beyond its instantaneous outcome. For the child, no discomfort or injury is ever thought of as lasting longer than an instant, and is not real anyway since it is not happening to him. Similarly, we do not believe that permanent harm can be done in Mariposa. In fact, at the end of almost every story in *Sunshine Sketches* the action is seen to have been a defense of the status quo, a defense of the very "enchanted" nature of Mariposa itself — rather than an abrasive confrontation with reality such as takes place in most conventional novels. The reader becomes aware that, no matter how dubious or ridiculous the conduct of the Mariposans, none of them is ever permanently changed or seriously injured by events.

Mariposa is depicted as almost perfectly self-contained; the outside world is only a confused rumour, in which it is better not to believe, for if you do, you are sure to lose some of your own inviolable idyllic magic, as Jefferson Thorpe does. The town's appeal is to the regressive qualities in our make-up, to our desire for security. Mariposa contains few anxiety-arousing activities or situations; for example, relations between the sexes are highly stylized, with almost all eroticism removed. There is little competition in the town, except when outside influences intrude. Throughout the book, we are invited to participate vicariously in forbidden activities, such as burning a church for the insurance, fixing an election, imbibing innumerable drinks, and engaging in endless gossip. We are presented with characters with whom we can sympathize and even identify, especially when they are doing something pleasurable or irresponsible. In short, Mariposa is a world of adults playing at being children, a world where child-men come to Smith's Hotel just to admire Josh Smith's enormous watch. It is a world which we know

we can never repossess and which we know was never really the true world, but which we yearn towards in Leacock's fiction because in our hearts we wish the world could in fact be so.

Sunshine Sketches appeals to a universal nostalgia for childhood, for a time when your immediate surroundings were, without question, the whole world. Leacock knows he is addressing city readers, whose nostalgia has been blunted by the materialism of their daily lives; yet he knows that nostalgia is there, ready to be evoked by the proper stimulus — and that it is all the stronger for its habitual suppression. Leacock tempts his readers to enter a timeless and magical world, where adults can still appear as embodiments of mysterious and powerful forces and dreams can still appear to be capable of coming true. He creates a world where frame houses really are enchanted castles; where time flows in circles, always returning back to its starting point; where there is no death and burial, but only a painless passing on and interment — a world where a little learning is a lot, where incompetence is normal skill, and normal competence is high ability. It is a world presided over by the imposing bulk of Josh Smith, who seems to possess magical powers and is hedged about with an aura of the forbidden. Josh Smith's profession and costume hint at a daring lack of self-restraint, a breaking of all conventions — which never in fact takes place. He is deliciously wicked, but nonetheless quite safe to know. Thus, on virtually every page the book exploits a nostalgia for a simpler and purer world, a child's world. But we as readers are never completely allowed to forget that both the readers and the narrator of the book inhabit the more sophisticated world of the city. We are given a dual perspective on the town, a view of things both as they appear from within Mariposa (the child-townsmen's view) and as they appear from a distance (the adult-city dweller's view). We do not necessarily openly acknowledge the nostalgic level of our responses, but it is nonetheless present, qualifying our awareness of Leacock's satiric intentions.

Sunshine Sketches begins by inviting the reader to an apparent feast of nostalgia. In the opening lines the narrator's voice engages the reader in friendly discourse, flatters and ingratiates him by assuming a shared knowledge, and assures him that in Mariposa he will find only the known, the familiar, the well-loved — there will be no unpleasant surprises:

I don't know whether you know Mariposa. If not, it is of no

consequence, for if you know Canada at all, you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns like it. (p. 1)³

Then the narrator sets about pretending to adjust the reader's perceptions so that Mariposa can be seen in its true colours. First, the local geography is presented. The steamer, tied with ropes the size they use on the *Lusitania*, floats on a lake which in its landlocked splendour is the only lake in the world. The town's chief thoroughfare is known as "Main Street," for is it not the only main street in the world? The reader is introduced to the bustling commercial and social life of Mariposa, a life as busy and gay as that to be found anywhere in the world. The reader may demur at this. But the narrator anticipates his objections: "Of course if you come to the place fresh from New York you are deceived. Your standard of vision is all astray" (p. 3). If you don't see what he sees, the narrator suggests, you are at fault. The obvious discrepancy in experience and standards makes the reader pause. But only momentarily. Quickly he realizes what the narrator means: subjectively, Mariposa is the whole world to its inhabitants. So the reader adjusts his vision and looks again. Gradually he is drawn in, his horizon contracted, until Mariposa becomes the world to him, as it already is to the townspeople. If the reader is not persuaded by the narrator's voice, then he is persuaded by the massive and colourfully draped figure of Josh Smith, nearly three hundred pounds of shrewdness, willpower, patience, ingenuity, and determination. Josh Smith is indubitably *there*.

The reader is completely taken in by Leacock's Mariposa — or almost completely. For the narrator's voice also contains overtones of irony, which the reader is (of course) shrewd enough to detect. The Mariposa Belle is not really as big as the *Lusitania*; the bustle of Main Street is not really equal to the bustle of Threadneedle Street or Lower Broadway. A second standard of vision — that of the man from New York or from the city to the south — is always present in the background, telling us that Mariposa, despite its microcosmic quality, is only a small town of five thousand souls, a smallest part of the world. Moreover, we are reminded of the characters' shortcomings often enough to keep our identification tentative, so that we may disown our own forbidden longings when the surrogates who embody them are revealed as childish.

³*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, New Canadian Library (1912; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960). All page references are given in parentheses in the text.

Throughout *Sunshine Sketches* Leacock causes the reader to experience the book on two levels simultaneously. On one level we perceive the pettiness of the characters and the selfishness of their actions. We recognize the limitations of a viewpoint that sees Mariposa as the navel of the universe. At the same time, we also recognize that this small-town society forms a seamless whole, within which the townspeople know their places perfectly. The town not only gives its inhabitants a sense of identity, but also closes ranks and defends them from upsetting intrusions originating in the outside world. Jefferson Thorpe falls from financial eminence not into despair but back into the sheltering and secure societal role he had temporarily vacated. The Mariposa court, though at times "a terrible engine of retributive justice" (p. 7), quickly squelches any hint of scandal surrounding the conflagration which rescues the Anglican congregation from bondage to their outsized Ark on the Hill. Thus, we are made to sympathize with, and even envy, the solidarity and security possessed by the citizens of Mariposa, even as we are amused by their idiosyncrasies and follies.

Leacock's principal means of manipulating the reader is his treatment of the narrator, the invisible extra character who actually guides the reader through the streets and byways of the town. The narrator has a disarming manner; he anticipates objections and agrees with them in advance. In this way, Leacock is able to forestall the scorn and ridicule that would come if his readers thought they were being taken for imperceptive fools. Yet the narrator's personality is really quite changeable; sometimes he is a townsman and sometimes an outsider. However, his inconsistency is not immediately obvious to the reader, for it is masked by the uniformly engaging tone of the narrator's speech. The reader, at each moment, identifies himself with the narrator, regardless of whether the narrator is sympathizing with the townspeople or is remarking on their failings. Only a highly critical reader is aware at first reading of the narrator's variability. When the book has been finished and put aside, more readers will begin to question the narrator's consistency. But Leacock has foreseen this questioning and has turned it against the reader. What the reader finally discovers is that the narrator's ambivalent reaction has been matched by the reader's own divided response to Leacock's little town in the sunshine.

Like the narrator, we as readers are also divided in our attitude towards Mariposa and its people. When we perceive the town as attractive, we are forsaking the "reality principle" which rules

ordinary life and responding to Leacock's book in an uncritical and unreasoned way; we are approaching the town as children would. For only a child can with full conviction view the world in quite the rosy terms it assumes for the citizens of Mariposa. But this not the whole story. Some remarks by Robertson Davies are pertinent. Basing his analysis of humour on Freudian ideas, Davies has written:

The humorist seeks to take us back momentarily to the intellectual freedom of childhood, when everything was fresh to us, and freshly apprehended; if something seemed stupid or unimportant to us, we said so without regard for what the adult world thought; so also, if adults thought it trivial or inopportune or possibly disgusting. The humorist does this, and part of the price he pays for his gift is that he is thought childish, or a trifler, when we have been snatched back into the solemnity of the adult's world.⁴

It is easy to see that when we find Mariposa appealing we are reacting in a childish manner. But Davies's comments also imply that when we laugh at the immature antics of the Mariposans, we are indulging in an equally childish but far less kindly fondness for seeing folly exposed and people made ridiculous. Then, when we have finished reading the book, a new reaction may set in. We may become embarrassed or disgusted at the immature level of our responses, and we may reject the book as trivial. Hence, recognition of the nostalgia inherent in *Sunshine Sketches* suggests that we must pause and ask ourselves an important question: Is it possible to go beyond the childish elements contained in our nostalgic reaction to the book and to respond to *Sunshine Sketches* in a way that is at once "adult" and sympathetic? Or should we feel embarrassed if we find ourselves responding with empathy to the gallery of none-too-bright misfits and know-nothings who inhabit Leacock's town?

Such a devaluing of the humorist's efforts does not in fact happen at the end of *Sunshine Sketches*. Paradoxically, the very admission of the power of childhood to overcome adult awareness is in the end the most "adult" theme of Leacock's best book. Instead of asking us to suspend our sense of adult dignity and engage in a bit of childish foolery, what Leacock actually does in *Sunshine Sketches* is to expose the childish motivations of much of what ordinarily passes for adult behaviour, including — and this is the last layer of

⁴"Introduction," p. 41.

irony — the reader's own reading of this very book. In *Sunshine Sketches* the longing for an escape to childhood operates in so unobtrusive a way that the reader is hardly aware of it until in "L'Envoi" he is trapped into admitting that the longing for escape has affected him, as well as the narrator of the book. At the end of "L'Envoi," at the moment when the book appears about to dissolve into unqualified sentimentalism, we are abruptly jerked back to reality. We realize that it is we the readers who have most strongly desired to return to Mariposa and that the narrator has found us out. Leacock deliberately catches the reader in the act of longing for an escape to childhood and then points out that the reader has actually been cooperating in his own evasion of reality. At the opening of "L'Envoi," the narrator's voice again lures the reader into complicity:

It leaves the city every day about five o'clock in the evening, the train for Mariposa.

Strange that you did not know of it, though you come from the little town — or did, long years ago. (p. 148)

And we nod in agreement, whether we were raised in a small town or not, for we all lived once in childhood's enchanted country not long ago. The narrator addresses us as one man reminiscing to another, gazing backwards down the perspective of the years to a vanished place we can never recover. Home, he says, now means the city, with its sandstone houses and Mausoleum Clubs. And we nod again, recognizing that this is true. Yet before he is done the narrator means to make us call Mariposa "home."

The narrator's plan of attack is brilliantly simple. First he puts us off guard by openly confessing his strategy: he plans to appeal to our nostalgia for childhood and home. He admits this obliquely by appearing to assert the contrary and insisting on the reader's distance from Mariposa:

But of course "home" would hardly be the word you would apply to the little town, unless perhaps, late at night, when you'd been sitting reading in a quiet corner somewhere such a book as the present one. (p. 148)

The thing is perfectly done. We recognize ourselves so exactly that we are not offended or embarrassed at being found out, but utterly charmed. As a result, both narrator and reader are ready to conspire to maintain a pleasurable mutual deception. Then the narrator begins

to work a transformation, and, as he flourishes his words, we find ourselves dreaming of Mariposa or whenever we were happiest; and we are drawn aboard the five o'clock train, which we, like the narrator, had thought was only the suburban commuter train. As the train passes the city's outskirts and the commuters drop off, we too recognize our friends Dean Drone and Judge Pepperleigh, and we let down our city reserve and bask in the aura of geniality that only a group of small town people can radiate. Meanwhile, at the periphery of our attention, dream transformations are taking place, which in our unalert state we take for reality:

The electric locomotive that took you through the city tunnels is off now and the old wood engine is hitched in its place. I suppose, very probably, you haven't seen one of these engines since you were a boy forty years ago — the old engine with a wide top like a hat on its funnel, and with sparks enough to light up a suit for damages once in every mile.

Do you see, too, that the trim little cars that came out of the city on the electric suburban express are being discarded now at the way stations, one by one, and in their place is the old familiar car with stuff cushions in red plush (how gorgeous it once seemed!) and with a box stove set up on one end of it? (p. 150)

When the Conductor calls "Mariposa! MARIPOSA!" we expect a literal return to take place; we are shocked momentarily when the narrator dispells the illusion and we find ourselves still in the Mausoleum Club. Our response to this awakening is itself ambivalent. As we immediately recognize, the dream of return was impossible. But we are not angry at the deception. We have been so taken in that for a moment we are overcome by the sense of something — something precious — which has been lost; and we can only pause and mourn, half-consciously sensing that it is a part of ourselves for which we mourn. We do not throw down the book, or feel angry with the narrator for deceiving us, for Leacock has made it plain that we have co-operated in our own seduction.

Perhaps we are justified in describing much of the work in Leacock's voluminous literary output as "childish" in a pejorative sense. In many of his later books, Leacock may well have played the clown or jester, as Davies insists. But in *Sunshine Sketches* the joke is ultimately on the reader. Leacock gives us the pleasure of feeling superior to his town and its citizens, but when we are returned to an adult awareness, it is Leacock who exacts a price, not the reader.

The price we pay is a consciousness of our own regression. While reading *Sunshine Sketches*, we are lured into being children on the level of our responses, and then we are made aware of what we have done. It is not that the reader is consciously taken in. But Leacock has appealed to a pre-existing willingness to believe in the benign world he portrays and has planted the seeds of an unconscious acquiescence, which he later raises to consciousness. At one point in *Sunshine Sketches* the narrator remarks: "in Mariposa all really important speeches are addressed to an imaginary audience of boys" (p. 34). This phrase exactly describes the willful suspension of an awareness of the harsher aspects of reality which is a feature both of Leacock's fictional town and of the reader's response to *Sunshine Sketches*. By the end of the book the reader discovers that he has been one of the "boys" whom the narrator is addressing. As we finish reading "L'Envoi," we can only admit that we have tried to play truant from reality, that we have tried to escape back to childhood, and that we have been well and truly caught by Leacock, here acting as a schoolmaster of the imagination.

University of Lethbridge