

R. D. MacDonald

Measuring Leacock's Mariposa against Lewis's Gopher Prairie: a Question of Monuments

After dismissing the diagnosis that Leacock was a failed novelist, Donald Cameron argues that Leacock's ambivalent and self-depreciating irony, his lack of a genuine viewpoint, is a symptom of one who lacks self-knowledge. Cameron sees this supposed failure of nerve, this failure of openness or intimacy, to be a too familiar weakness: ". . . painful self-criticism as opposed to defensive self-depreciation has never been a very important feature of Canadian life. . . ." Thus Cameron generalizes Leacock (and the typical Canadian) "shrinking from genuine contact with other people," hiding within the fixed views of racist and sexist biogtry, "reject[ing] . . . most kinds of involvement, even imaginative involvement, with other people." Leacock in his self-enclosure becomes a "prisoner who can only send out flashes through the chinks"; and in this all too Canadian metaphor, Leacock's works survive like "tough arctic plants, in a land where growth was never easy" (Cameron 173-74). Here one must infer that while the human "growth" is durable, it is stunted.

Cameron is typical of those generalizing critics who have pursued that elusive white whale, Canadian identity, and thereby have "looked over" and minimized individual works like *Sunshine Sketches*. Northrop Frye is perhaps even more "typical," himself the "archetypal" generalist, as he abstracts from our literature a beleaguered garrison threatened by an external natural world, "a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting" (830). Working from Frye, D. G. Jones traces in our literature a psycho/biblical myth of liberation: a "neurotic" psyche, imprisoned in an "old Testament world," beleaguered and threatened by

its own nature, its bodily existence, promises to become a psyche redeemed or liberated when body and soul are reintegrated. Jones's summary of our whole culture is not unlike Cameron's summary of Leacock: "It is a world in which life in all its fullness remains distinctly a promise rather than an actuality."¹ In *Survival* an "easy-to-use" "thematic guide," a "book of patterns, not of authors or individual works" Margaret Atwood schematizes the typical positions taken by the colonial victim; and in her *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, she abstracts the literary and historical Moodie into a mythic harpy, a repressed, self-conscious and stunted immigrant who never "took hold" and who thereby holds back the modern progressive spirit.² Dennis Lee in his literary criticism and poetry forces our history into a simple myth of cowardly acquiescence.³ Within such a generalizing and "minimalizing" milieu, one comes to expect metaphors like Cameron's "stunted arctic growth" or biographical portraits like those of Robertson Davies who pictures Leacock as a man of "great spirit, deeply troubled," lonely and diminished in his time by a provincial, pioneer and puritanical culture, and finally thereby not one of the truly "great artists [who] create intellectual climates . . ." (99, 113-34).

Against these generalists, then, I intend to draw closer attention to the coherence of Leacock's writing, to his wayward but meaningful ironies, to his sure and sympathetic awareness of his own and his reader's imperfections, and to his broadly inclusive grasp of how the world turns. And I shall use Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* as an external vantage point from which *Sunshine Sketches* can be more closely surveyed and appreciated. Using *Main Street* as a benchmark also takes one outside the Canadian hothouse and enables one to see how well Leacock's work stands up against that of his young American contemporary.

Before that, however, I must examine another kind of argument, similar in effect but different in source from Cameron's, that has been made against Leacock. In a strangely mixed obituary, Harold Innis, Leacock's brilliant contemporary in the social sciences, argues that Leacock failed to achieve his potential and that the "work of the humorist is destined not to endure" (226). Not only did Leacock's playful nonsense and the voracious demands of his reading public and publishers apparently impede Leacock's career as a social scientist, but also the cynical and institutional bias of the social sciences themselves "marred" Leacock's

work as a humorist and tilted it toward satire. They gave him an interest in institutions rather than persons. For that reason Leacock was less successful in reaching the highest form of humorous writing, namely nonsense, or to follow Chesterton "humour that abandons all attempts at intellectual justification." (223)

Thus to Innis, Leacock's fictional characters fail to grow into fully realized individuals; they become merely abstract instances of institutions. Again, then, Leacock fails—he creates pasteboard types and remains blind to the lived world of particulars not because of a fear of "self" or "intimacy" but because of the social scientist's propensity to generalize.

Certainly, Leacock's fiction abounds with impractical, out of touch "enthusiasts," but it is silly to suggest that Leacock himself is one of them. He is not a "mugwump" academic of Dean Drone's kind, spectacularly unaware of what the vernacular "mugwump" means and unaware of how his pragmatic friends use kerosene to cut through mathematics to save the church. He is not another Gildas, the geologist so caught up in his assays and hypotheses that he would never suspect that his ore samples had been "salted" by fraudulent mining promoters. Nor is Leacock another Spillikins, the leisure class romantic who has been "had" by Mrs. Everleigh. Unlike his fictional creations (Gildas, Drone, Spillikins) Leacock was not a simple-minded or Laputan believer; nor was he blessed with the "heavenly gift of short sight" (Leacock, *Arcadian* 79).

Though Leacock did ardently believe that a renovated British Empire could provide a brotherhood of the Anglo-Saxon race and thereby a wider and deeper citizenship than that of a little Canada, he was no ideologue of easy general answers—note his book title *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*. Leacock saw too well the disharmonies and frictions of the actual world, in part because he was certain that socialist utopias of the future and the tory pastorals of the past are available only as imagined realities. I contend then that Innis's antithesis of cynical "science" and inspired "nonsense" leads to a misunderstanding of Leacock's humor, Leacock's ironic imagining of man's imperfect lot—for even when Leacock works from Thorstein Veblen, he does not simply recast the social scientist's sharp generalizations into humorous instances; he does more than fit the imagined life of Mariposans and Plutorians into a prior scientific schema.⁴

In quite a different direction, Alan Bowker argues that Leacock's humorous writing advanced his career as a social scientist:

Initially Leacock's effectiveness as a political economist and social commentator was actually enhanced by his emergence as a humorist. Not only did he now have a wide audience, which devoured his every book, serious and silly, but he had found a new vehicle for his social ideas which was far more economical, inclusive, and persuasive than the relatively diffuse informal essay. By fusing humor with the insights of the social scientist, Leacock produced his finest achievements in either field, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914). (xvi)

Here, however, Leacock's fiction functions merely as rhetoric: his characters "illustrate the workings of social institutions;" his "insight" derives from and serves the social sciences. Thus Bowker can easily argue that

Leacock's failure to write the Great Canadian Novel or to do any of the other things he might have done is no tragedy; it could be so only to those preoccupied with works and not with lives. If he had specialized more in any field Leacock might have left a more lasting monument, but he would have been a lesser man. (xxxix)

Because, to Bowker, fiction here merely acts as a "vehicle" for the "insights" of the social scientist, Bowker can easily dismiss the literary "monument" as a measure of Leacock's importance.

While Bowker dismisses fiction itself as a genuine source of truth, I insist that to do justice to Leacock, one must attend closely to his writing, to his making of fictional truth. Thus again, to take the full measure of Leacock's accomplished work, *Sunshine Sketches*, I contrast it to that of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. While Lewis, the recipient of a Nobel Prize for Literature, may thereby himself have been made a "monument," Leacock is the one who truly made a literary "monument," a coherent and rounded whole, from his sketches of a little town. In his novel, Lewis the "idealist" misapplies and muddles abstractions; in his "sketches," Leacock the "realist" forms a substantial, coherent and rounded and durable whole—a "monument."

Consider what it is that the two writers shape. Leacock professes "to write something out of [his] own mind" and not to write about an actual

or particular town: "[Mariposa] is about seventy or eighty [towns]. You may find them all the way from Lake Superior to the sea, with the same square streets and the same maple trees and the same churches and hotels, and everywhere the sunshine of the land of hope" (*Sunshine* xv-xvi). By dangling the cliched phrase "land of hope," Leacock points to a generalized village, one stretched beyond the Canadian locale to include the American. In the last chapter, however, Leacock suddenly and unexpectedly removes "the land of hope" to an unreturnable past and reveals it to be, after all, no more than (and indeed no less than) the universal memory of all who have left behind the village of their childhood—a glowing picture now imagined or recreated from the urban darkness of the narrator's Mausoleum Club.

Even in his commissioned history, *Canada: The Foundations of its Future*, where Leacock chronicles the growth of the typical Ontario town from crossroads, railroad stops, and surrounding farming communities, he points to a larger and deeper human reality. The play of his fancy indicates a human reality more basic than the supposedly "unique" Canadian locale:

Then the village became a little town, with not one but rival stores, a drug store, a local paper and a cricket club. In it were four churches and three taverns. One church was of the Church of England, one Presbyterian, while the Roman Catholics, Methodists and Baptists divided the other two. On the map of Ontario Protestantism was everywhere, but Roman Catholicism ran in zig-zags. The three taverns were one Grit, and one Tory and one neither. Many things in Ontario ran like that in threes, with the post-office and the mail stage alternating as the prize of victory in elections. The cricket club is now just a memory, gone long ago. Thus the little Ontario town grew till the maples planted in its streets overtopped it and it fell asleep and grew no more. It is strange this, and peculiar to our country, the aspect of a town grown from infancy to old age within a human lifetime. (*Canada* 156)

Leacock's understanding of the town's growth arises from his basic view of the human life cycle, the sudden passage from infancy to sleepy, "overtopped" old age. Again his understanding of the financial boom of the 1880s, the settlement of the prairies, also arises from his immediate view of the human heart, the extreme subjectivity of the heart. Here economic "boom" is little more than a symptom of a buoyant spirit:

On the uplift of such a boom, a new town anywhere, a San Francisco, a Carson City, turns into a magic Baghdad—especially a place as small and as new as Winnipeg. Life in a boom town takes on an intensity, a focus not known elsewhere. It has no past. It has no elsewhere. It is all here and now, like the world into which each infant is born. In the light of such a rebirth, people see one another better. Everybody becomes a "remarkable man"—as he is—a "hell of a good fellow." And why not? It is a half-caught vision of what life might be all the time. (186)

In Leacock's vision of the all-too-sudden passage of man from motion to inertia, the infant is suddenly a sleepy old man overgrown by maple leaves; the robust adolescent swells a bubble of the present that will never break—but, of course, his booming or swelling vision does and must break: "The boom broke. The fortunes vanished. The good fellows turned back into ordinary people, many of them turning to down-at-heel survivals, glad of a treat across the bar." Yet as if to distance himself from the "economists who explained it all away as an over-expansion of credit," Leacock concludes (given his premise that "[t]he boom is the reality, the collapse the accident," and given the fact of a huge increase of population that followed in the prairies) that the Winnipeg boom need not have burst. Surely human hope is more real here than economic theory or fact.

The world of feeling, then, that Leacock shapes may seem at first arbitrary and insubstantial, his transitions and transformations mercurial and unforeseen. Certainly in each of the Sketches, the Mariposans are part of an unprogressive motion forever turning back on itself, unpredictable to all (except the two insiders/outsideers Josh Smith and the narrator): and yet each action works out as if by providence. Inside Leacock's olympian and ironic overview, the world is forever being set right despite the blind purposes of the sleepwalking Mariposans. Here one does not find a social critic (like Sinclair Lewis) projecting an urgent conflict between forces of light and darkness and demanding or promising future justice. Whatever is found wanting in Leacock's world is not measured against a promised (and perhaps confused) future but against the glaring hypocrisy of self-contradiction or against an unreturnable and idealized past.

How different, then, is Leacock's rounded and immediate vision of the human heart (in all its imperfection) from Sinclair Lewis's simplistic and muddled attack upon human shortcomings and his call for improvement!

In the opening of *Main Street*, the "rebellious" and youthful Carole Kennicott is introduced as the "spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest" (Lewis 12); at the close, she becomes "common-placeness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting" (422). Her stolid husband, Will Kennicott, sees her to be his soul, and she sees her mission to be the transformation of a prairie town into a garden town with a "village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street" (11). She is to awaken the villagers to a conscious sense of beauty.

But Lewis's plot itself repeatedly implies that Carole Kennicott cannot be taken seriously as a heroine or spokesman of reform. Her attempt to overlay medieval or colonial architecture upon the prairie town shows little sense of how people and place fit. Her house decorating in the Japanese style shows an uncritical replication of the chic images of a homes and gardens magazine. Her attempt to build a new Civic Centre becomes an ironic parable showing the futility of reform as each individual petitioned rides his own hobby horse. Her attempt at little theatre proves not only the uncritical spirit of the townsfolk but also Carole's own inability to direct the attention of her company and audience toward what matters. Even her wartime stint in Washington proves an empty feminist gesture: Carole's "independence" only leads to the conclusion that making ones living in either village or city is monotonous and to the dubious conclusion—is it Carole's or Lewis's?—that "institutions are the enemy" (413).

The men Carole loves (or is attracted to) also indicate a dubious reformer and an intractable world. Guy Pollock summarizes for Carole the "problem" of small town life, the mediocrity, the inertia, the living death "sustained" by respectability and envy: the "Village Virus," Pollock says, is "extraordinarily like the hook-worm—it infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces" (153-54). But while Pollock may have diagnosed this living death, he is himself a ghostly instance of impotence or inertia. Raymie Wutherspoon, the shoe salesman, becomes little more than a Veblenesque lackey transformed by the accidents of war and wife into a successful businessman; and Erik Valborg is finally not an artist or poet or man but a "ringleted" image on a Hollywood screen.

In *Main Street* Lewis's men of action cannot be taken any more seriously than his men of thought. Bresnahan the small town boy made good as big town car manufacturer is no more than a bully in his own

village and a bumbler in Washington; and Blausser the public relations man, the representative of boosterism, no more than a blowhard—fit subject for Lewis's parody. Will Kennicott, the country doctor, despite his unreflective solidity—"an undefined mass, as solid-seeming as rock" (56)—is for a time transfigured by Carole's eyes into a heroic man of action as he bulls his way through winter storms and performs surgery in country kitchens. But finally the fastidious eye and nose of Carole—or is it Lewis?—fastens upon the ugliness of Kennicott's unshaven stubble, his cleaning his ears with his finger, his licking his table knife, his inability to appreciate poetry, his obsession with the mechanics of running the furnace, his spitting, drinking and philandering, and the stale smell of his or their shared bedroom.⁵

Yet Lewis carefully draws attention to the ugliness of this angle of vision itself, for Carole is made to see herself in the puritan zeal of her neighbor Mrs. Bogart. Carole fastidiously notes the ugliness of Mrs. Bogart's "large face, with its disturbing collection of moles and lone black hairs [that] wrinkled cunningly. [Mrs. Bogart] showed her decayed teeth in a reproving smile" (181). Indeed when Mrs. Bogart runs the girlish schoolteacher, Fran Mullins, out of the Bogart home, out of job and town for having supposedly corrupted Mrs. Bogart's son, this puritanical zeal obviously indicates the dangerous consequences in Carole's dalliance with Valborg, but equally Mrs. Bogart's reproving zeal reflects back upon Carole herself:

"if that woman is on the side of the angels, then I have no choice; I must be on the side of the devil. But— isn't she like me? She too wants to 'reform the town'! She too criticizes everybody. She too thinks the men are vulgar and limited. *Am I like her?* This is ghastly." (183)

Thus while Lewis relates the "village virus" to the ugliness of hook-worms, he also relates remedy or reform itself to the ugliness of moles and to the lovelessness of the puritan spirit.

Indeed Lewis's social "criticism," the detail and composition of his portrait of society, seems to arise mainly from an aesthetic revulsion against the actual human world. For example, the train carrying the newlywed Kennicotts to Gopher Prairie becomes a "long steel box" in which Lewis brews the overripe stench of ordinary life and foretells the staleness of marriage. Lewis is not Whitman or Sandburg celebrating the

dynamic newness within the ordinary; instead he shows a world of decomposition and conveys it through the shrill mood music of the surreal or absurd:

A soiled man and woman munch sandwiches and throw the crusts on the floor. A large brick-colored Norwegian takes off his shoes, grunts in relief, and props his feet in their thick gray socks against the seat in front of him.

An old woman whose toothless mouth shuts like a mud turtle's, and whose hair is not so much white as yellow like moldy linen, with bands of pink skull apparent between the tresses, anxiously lifts her bag, opens it, peers in, closes it, puts it under the seat, and hastily picks it up and opens it and hides it all over again. The bag is full of treasures and of memories: a leather buckle, an ancient band-concert program, scraps of ribbon, lace, satin. In the aisle beside her is an extremely indignant parakeet in a cage. (25)

This is not a satirist's attack upon remediable faults but the purist's revulsion against the inevitable, irremediable stench and decay of humanity. Carole's hopeful dreams, then, are set within a despairing nightmare, a bizarre gothic or surrealistic atmosphere in which the "indignant parakeet" brings to mind an Edgar Allan Poe or a Eugene Ionesco.

Beyond this "all-too-human" world, however, Lewis sets landscapes which celebrate the permanent beauty of nature:

They drove home under the sunset. Mounds of straw, and wheat-stacks like bee-hives, stood out in startling rose and gold, and the green-tufted stubble glistened. As the vast girdle of crimson darkened, the fulfilled land became autumnal in deep reds and browns. The black road before the buggy turned to a faint lavender, then was blotted to uncertain grayness. Cattle came in a long line up to the barred gates of the farmyards, and over the resting land was a dark glow.

Carole had found the dignity and greatness which had failed her in Main Street. (60-61)

In this picturesque landscape (the colors reminiscent of an illuminated medieval scroll or a Keatsian autumn), the "dignity and greatness" of nature highlight the insufficiency of Main Street. Here (despite his earlier portrait of unwashed humanity), Lewis now suggests that man's insufficiency arises not from human nature but from human institu-

tions—from Main Street itself. Thus at the close, after Carole has returned to her husband, still dissatisfied, still insisting that the good fight must continue in future generations of women, her resolution is displaced once again into the countryside. Just before the final bedtime discussion of daughters as "bombs to blow up smugness" and of "keeping the faith," and of storm windows and screwdrivers, Lewis plays the following mood music—a melodramatic prose suggesting a false sense of ending, a hope contrary to the narrative of failed hopes:

She looked across the silent fields to the west. She was conscious of an unbroken sweep of land to the Rockies, to Alaska; a dominion which will rise to unexampled greatness when other empires have grown senile. Before that time, she knew, a hundred generations of Carols will aspire and go down in tragedy devoid of palls and solemn chanting, the humdrum inevitable tragedy of struggle against inertia. (431)

To a Canadian—and, I hope, an American—reader, this dream of dominion or empire sweeping uninterrupted all the way to Alaska, is disturbing: should one not ask what has become of Canada? Or is one to take this vista with a grain of salt—seeing once again the unthinking Carole, this time mouthing unawares the American platitude of manifest-destiny? Or worse, is one to see Lewis himself mouthing the platitude and failing to see how it runs against the current of failure in his narrative? In this embellished passage I suspect that the author and heroine are uncritically and unironically one and that neither Carole nor Lewis has really understood the "real" enemy—if indeed the enemy really is the Village Virus, the felt inertia, the pointlessness or meaninglessness of daily life. Thus when Lewis declares that Carole is the "ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting" (422), I must reply that indeed she is "ordinary" and she "protests" but that she is hardly "articulate" in the sense of presenting a clear and consistent understanding—for she (and Lewis) hardly know what she is for or against. The following passage should illustrate my point and provide a bridge back to the "articulate," if "[un]protesting," social criticism of *Sunshine Sketches*:

Under the stilly boughs and the black gauze of dusk the street was meshed in silence. There was the hum of motor tires crunching the road, the creak of a rocker on the Howland's porch, the slap of a hand attacking a mosquito, a heat-weary conversation starting and dying, the

precise rhythm of crickets, the thud of moths against the screen—sounds that were a distilled silence. It was a street beyond the end of the world, beyond the boundaries of hope. Though she should sit here forever, no brave procession, no one who was interesting, would be coming by. It was tediousness made tangible, a street builded of lassitude and of futility. (314)

The narrative context is important: Carole's attempts at reform have proven futile; in her coldness she has driven her husband into the arms of Maud Dyer; she has yet to meet the beautiful and artistic youth, Erik Valborg. In this context, the language and imagery evoke a mood of desperate wanting: the closely observed detail, the "thud of moths against the screen," catch and amplify the thwarted impulse, motion or meaning of human life—motion here pointing to inertia; sound, to silence. But Lewis is already drawing back from a full realization of futility as he transforms Carole's sense of meaninglessness into a mere readiness for her romantic relation with Valborg. The "dusky turbulence" of the young lovers' voices passing in the night vibrates through our heroine: "Suddenly, to the woman rocking on the porch of the doctor's house, the night came alive, and she felt that everywhere in the darkness panted an ardent quest which she was missing as she sank back to wait for—There must be something" (314). But given Lewis's narrative logic of failed hopes and the petty predictability of his fictional characters, Valborg too will, all too quickly, transform from "something" to little. Yet it is not only Carole's "ardent quest" that will fail; the novelist's attention to that quest distracts him from confronting or fully realizing the spiritual emptiness that the rocking-chair-woman has only half felt.

Thus while Harold Innis contended that Leacock's humor did not rise to the highest reaches, I reply that at the very least Leacock reaches further than Sinclair Lewis into the obscurities of the human heart. Certainly Leacock's Mariposans, too, blindly, "ardently" and mechanically pursue their "quests," but Leacock does not suggest that their failed quests are pathetic or tragic—indeed their failure is providential. If there is pathos here it resides only in Leacock's ironic overview of his sleepwalking villagers: in his small community, all seem insiders—in their overlapping groups, all belong to and participate in the genial life of the herd—but Leacock also uncovers (typically, at the close of his sketches) the unintended, unaware and uncommunicating isolation of the

individual. Leacock's Mariposans are like Lewis's townsfolk in their single-minded communal life but finally unlike as the unaware Mariposans settle back into the larger silence or stillness which Leacock suggests is an incommunicable spiritual mystery.

Thus instead of lampooning the failure of both reformer and reformed to achieve something better and instead of promising success in a distant future, Leacock consistently celebrates the villagers' unintended return, their circling back to their point of origin. In most episodes of this cyclical narrative, Josh Smith, the illiterate pragmatist from the frontier, becomes the active hero who successfully unties or "cuts through" the knot and returns the helpless Mariposans to inaction. Through the bribe of lavish but cheap meals and the expansion of his hotel into a thriving tourist centre, Smith achieves the return of his liquor licence—but keeping in mind the narrow conventions of the small town, he avoids overstepping the limit: he does not open the women's side to his bar. Jefferson Thorp, the barber (and for the moment, a successful dabbler in penny stocks) loses his paper fortune to American stock promoters; but his return to the barber shop, his daughter's return from drama school and the return of his wife's chickens and their small profits is construed as an unintended "success story"—for Leacock indicates that the small town tradesman has returned to exactly where he should be. (Note that in the great gold rush only Smith finally profits—by dealing in potatoes, not gold). The Mariposa Belle sinks but is raised by the ever resourceful Smith and returned to the town dock amid jubilation; and the narrator apologizing for his inability to raise suspense and to make his story go, explains finally the unreality of this urgency—the shallowness of Lake Wissanotti will not let the boat sink. And indeed Dean Drone's desperation over the church mortgage also proves equally "unreal" when Smith simply burns the church down, thereby permitting Drone's providential weakness in mathematics, his unintended over-insurance of the church, to pay off the old and rebuild the new. Even more so by virtue of providential error, the helpless and hopeless suitor, Peter Pupkin, is transfigured from "mere" bank teller and rich man's son into the man of Zena Pepperleigh's dreams, the swashbuckling hero of her historical romances: in an absurd instance of mutually mistaken identity, bank teller and janitor shoot at each other, and Pupkin with his grazed skull is credited with having driven off a bank robber. (Here bungling achieves what the two fathers, former schoolchums, had quietly foreseen or

expected.) Finally in the election debate over free trade with the United States—a perfect example of the cyclical and unprogressive nature of Canadian economic history—Josh Smith so befuddles everyone with his non-answers and hearty throwing about of statistics that he wins the election. In this triumph of active "common sense" over the abstractions of pseudo-science, the practical entrepreneur wins the privilege of being a Member of Parliament, one who can say and do nothing for the next four years.

In Leacock's last chapter, "L'envoi. The Train to Mariposa," the narrator (having magically transformed the suburban train into a Mariposa train, having caused the reader to anticipate the sharp pleasure of a prodigal's return home), suddenly reveals that after all it is all no more than an imaginary train of thought raised from the dead centre of the city: "And, as we listen, the cry [of the train's whistle] grows fainter and fainter in our ears and we are sitting here again in the leather chairs of the Mausoleum Club, talking of the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew" (153). Thus Leacock, our conductor, also returns and hands down his reader with a sudden and sharp sense of loss to a (more expensive) but lesser world, leaves us in the dark present merely "talking of" a sunlit world "that once we knew." Now one can understand why the narrator could not or would not get his story going, his comic apologies for mangling the proper order and suspense in his sinking of the Mariposa Belle. The point is that in this imagined remembrance nothing is meant to go anywhere but where it was, and "doing" and even "telling" is merely the holding action of a charmed world.

This stasis neatly fits the natural backdrop of Leacock's "action," "the placid lakes almost within echo of the primeval forest" (xvi), the "farms . . . thinning out . . . into great stretches of bush—tall tamarack and red scrub willow and with a tangled undergrowth of brush that has defied for two generations all attempts to clear it into the form of fields" (151). Nature in its unbroken seasonal cycle seems to be the source of the placid order, the inevitable and familiar cycle of "ordinary" human life. As Leacock tallies the seasonal and human round: the winter sidewalks creaking with frost, the darkness, and the frosted shop windows emphasize the human absence or remoteness; springtime is lumberjacks lying drunk outside Smith's hotel; the summer, Lawyer Macartney in his tennis trousers; and after "the maples blaze in glory and die" and "the evening closes in dark and chill," the Salvation Army gathers "around a naphtha

lamp [to] lift up the confession of their sins—and that is autumn. Thus the year runs its round, moving and changing in Mariposa, much as it does in other places." Here in Leacock's cyclical myth, even the harsh modern light of electricity is wilfully and fancifully turned back (in the winter dullness and "behind the frosty windows of the shops") "into coal oil once again, as yellow and bleared as ever" (5).

A similar conservation of time and energy is suggested in the luxurious indolence of Jefferson Thorpe's barber shop:

In the morning hours, perhaps, there was a semblance of haste about [shaving], but in the long quiet of the afternoon, as Jeff leaned towards the customer and talked to him in a soft confidential monotone, like a portrait painter, the razor would go slower and slower, and pause and stop, move and pause again, till the shave died away into the mere drowse of conversation. (24)

As for Thorpe's return, quiet and stricken, to his barber shop after he has been broken by the stock market, Leacock assures us that Thorpe is working late to pay back Johnson the Livery man—"but that's nothing—nothing at all, if you've worked hard all your life time" (35). Belittling the pain, Leacock implies that the little tradesman has returned with his integrity intact to where he belongs. Leacock also belittles the "boosterism" or hubris of the town that would be larger than it is: the villagers start from the Census population figure of 5,000 and through a series of hopeful estimates inflate that figure to 10,000; but the cyclical return of the Census taker, five years later, arrests or restores that figure yet again to 5,000.

While arguing that Leacock arrests change and belittles human pretension, I do not mean that Leacock is more "critical," in the everyday sense of the term, more "cynical," than a writer like Sinclair Lewis—though indeed beside Leacock, Lewis seems silly in his "uncritical" optimism, in his unwarranted or inadequately realized faith in progress. Nor do I mean that Leacock's humor is harshly reductive or that Leacock has a bad case of adolescent of tory "arrest." Certainly in his argument for a new imperialism, "Greater Canada an Appeal" (1907), where Leacock urges that the colonists take on a "wider citizenship" in their sharing of power and responsibility with the mother country, Leacock's conservatism implies a holding fast to old loyalties for the sake of a larger life. Thus Leacock may sound like a progressive as he

contends that we "must become something greater or something infinitely less. . . . We cannot continue as we are. In the history of every nation as of every man there is no such thing as standing still. There is no pause upon the path of progress. There is no stagnation but the hush of death" (6). But indeed it is precisely this "standing still" that increases the pathos of Leacock's conclusion to *Sunshine Sketches*: Mariposa is, after all, realized as a stilled world that we cannot live; we can only talk of it or dream of it. Similarly he forces one to realize the disparity, the lack of correspondence, between the world we think and the world we live, and thus to recognize the mind itself as an impediment to sure and quick action. Given the little we are aware, the little we think our own thoughts, the overriding power of the inner impulses and "outer" institutions that direct our intentions, action seems (as they say today) "problematic." Thus in *The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice*, Leacock explains why in the "age of the machine" we accomplish so little:

Few men think for themselves. The thoughts of most of us are little more than imitations and adaptations of the ideas of stronger minds. The influence of environment conditions, if it does not control, the mind of man. So it comes about that every age or generation has its dominant and uppermost thoughts, its peculiar way of looking at things and its peculiar basis of opinion on which its collective action and its social regulations rest. All this is largely unconscious. The average citizen of three generations ago was not probably aware that he was an extreme individualist. The average citizen of to-day is not conscious of the fact that he has ceased to be one. (86)

Is this the social scientist's cynicism that Harold Innis warned against? Certainly, in *Sunshine Sketches* the youthful love of Peter Pupkin and Zena Pepperleigh becomes an instance of our not thinking or feeling for ourselves. While the young "assume" the "reality" of their own feelings and disdain the "unreality," "the ordinary marriages of ordinary people," Leacock repeatedly applies the word "enchanted" to the love of the young and simultaneously implies that romantic love is "ordinary," ready-made, mass-produced, and yet performed unconsciously from an old script:

As for the enchanted princes, they find them in the strangest places, where you never expected to see them, working—under a spell, you understand—in drug-stores and printing offices, and even selling things

in shops. But to be able to find them you have first to read ever so many novels about Sir Galahad and the Errant Quest and that sort of thing. (98)

Pupkin's love melancholy is so exaggerated—one minute he is committing suicide; the next, bubbling over with seltzer, ice cream and lover's bliss—that his gigantic compulsion becomes unreal, inhuman, but all too familiar. Leacock catches the mad "drive" of love in Pupkin's powerful but helpless "cycling" past the Pepperleigh home:

. . . he used to pedal faster and faster—he never meant to, but he couldn't help it—till he went past the piazza where Zena was sitting at an awful speed with his little yellow blazer flying in the wind. In a second he had disappeared in a buzz and a cloud of dust, and the momentum of it carried him clear out into the country for miles and miles before he ever dared to pause or look back.

Then Mr. Pupkin would ride in a huge circuit about the country, trying to think that he was looking at the crops and sooner or later his bicycle would be turned towards the town again and headed for Oneida Street, and would get going quicker and quicker, till the pedals whirled round with a buzz and he came past the judge's house again, like a bullet out of a gun. He rode fifteen miles to pass the house twice, and even than it took all the nerve that he had. (99)

Even the consummation of the Pupkin's love in marriage is burlesqued: in romance, the lovers, a house and a sleeping baby may be "enchanted"; but the repetition and application of "enchanted" to the cutting of grass must imply overstatement and inversion. Surely Leacock implies that the "enchantment" of the "ordinary," depends not only upon the undisturbed sleep of the child but also of the parents: "But if you step up to speak to [Pupkin] or walk with him into the enchanted house, pray modulate your voice a little—musical though it is—for there is said to be an enchanted baby on the premises whose sleep must not lightly be disturbed" (123). In Leacock's wryly sympathetic love story, living-happily-ever-after depends then not upon the awakening kiss of the prince but upon the sleeping child and upon the undisturbed, collective dream of love.

How close then is the bliss of the young to the shared stillness of old Dean Drone and Dr. Gallagher? At first sight Drone and Gallagher seem isolated. Drone rides his hobby horse of ancient classical history; Gallagher, the history of the North American explorers and the archaeology of the Indians. Neither listens: each is irritated by the lack of interest

of the other. Yet Leacock beautifully encapsulates what they have in common, their incommunicable isolation and yet their unconscious acceptance of their common mortal lot:

As soon as the doctor laid his tomahawk on the table, the Dean would reach for his Theocritus. I remember that on the day when Dr. Gallagher brought over the Indian skull that they had dug out of the railway embankment, and placed it on the rustic table, the Dean read to him so long from Theocritus that the doctor, I truly believe, dozed off in his chair. The Dean had to wait and fold his hands across his knee, and close his eyes till the doctor should wake up again. And the skull was on the table between them, and from above the plum blossoms fluttered down, till they made flakes on it as white as Dr. Gallagher's hair. (56)

The whiteness of plum blossoms, skull and hair (and the suggestion of winter in the flaking and falling blossoms) emphasizes the shared mortality of the two men and, for the moment, the undisturbed stillness of their unaware union. And indeed once the church has been rebuilt and Drone "promoted" full circle to the fresh faith of the Infant Class, Leacock—despite his sharp joke that because of his stroke, the Dean can no longer appreciate complexities: he "finds that he can read, with the greatest of ease, works in the Greek that seemed difficult before, because his head is so clear now"—despite this joke at the expense of the cleared-out mind, Leacock returns the old to the attentive faith of the young, restores simplicity from the sophistications of reason—from "the newer forms of doubt revealed by the higher criticism" (86). And Leacock grants Drone the reality of his longing: "And sometimes—when his head is very clear—as he sits there reading beneath the plum blossoms he can hear them singing beyond, and his wife's voice" (86). While Leacock places the Dean firmly in the camp of the ineffectual and typically caricatures the religious for being "out of it," he does surely at the same time suggest something of the sublime in the dreaming bliss of the old man and the young lovers.

Given such simple-minded wish fulfilment, one might well ask how Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* could be a larger monument or a more serious work of social criticism than Lewis's *Mainstreet*. My answer is that the "critical" spirit asserted by Lewis and his heroine as the prerequisite of social progress is fully present in Leacock's writing. While Lewis makes the two sides of the reformer and of the still unreformed

look silly and while he seems confused about whether life is essentially absurd or progressive, Leacock sees more actively and single-mindedly around and through his characters, who thereby become more than mouthpieces in a polemical argument. Admittedly Leacock's characters hardly engage in real conversation or debate and that they hardly participate in the immediate living flow of human relationships—what D. H. Lawrence saw to be the wonderful reality of the novel. But Leacock repeatedly suggests in his fictional characters an otherness, a spiritual dimension, which makes his Mariposans more than mere stereotypes of small town life.

Consider, for example, how lightly Leacock touches upon the profound when he stills the violently intemperate Judge Pepperleigh, Pepperleigh who has flagrantly abused his position as judge in court by finding his all too guilty son, the town bully, innocent. Against the apparent loudness and hotness of the judge and against those on the outside who only see appearances, those as "ignorant as Miss Spiffkins, the biology teacher at the high school" who might scoff at Pepperleigh and feel sorry for his wife, Leacock insists upon and deliberately understates the silent, private and incommunicable reality of the Pepperleighs' love:

You might have thought differently perhaps of the Pepperleighs, anyway, if you had been there that evening when the judge came home to his wife, one hand pressed to his temple and in the other the cablegram that said that Neil had been killed in action in South Africa. That night they sat together with her hand in his, just as they had sat together thirty years ago when he was a law student in the city.

Go and tell Miss Spiffkins that! Hydrangeas—canaries—temper—blazes! What does Miss Spiffkins know about it all! (910)

Speaking in the understated voice of the village—knowing both inside and outside, and perhaps even for the moment taking on the Judge's voice of intemperate indignation—Leacock offers a glimpse of humanity in its silent compact of vulnerability and helplessness: he implies the larger "reality" within this "ordinary" love. Should we expect then (as Donald Cameron expects) a greater frankness or intimacy from Leacock? I contend that whatever his enjoyment of the easy laugh born out of malice, violence, incongruity or verbal tricks, Leacock in *Sunshine*

Sketches lived up to the highest form of humor which touches lightly and easily upon the sublime.

Thus against Sinclair Lewis's reforming and satirical zeal, against Lewis's reductive stereotyping of the small town, and Lewis's muddle of whether a nobler world is possible, Leacock shows a larger and more inclusive understanding, one which lightly (and often unexpectedly) reveals the sublime or noble in the midst of imperfection. And against Donald Cameron's conclusion that Leacock's isolation, his failure to be intimate, prevented him from living up to his potential, I answer that Leacock did hear, speak and amplify our small "private" voices: Leacock's ironic overview reminds us that the isolation and absurdity of our daily existence is only part of a larger human existence. A work like *Sunshine Sketches*, then, is not stunted. It does not fall short. Sketches here become a fully realized monument.

NOTES

1. See Jones, *Butterfly on Rock*.
2. See Atwood, "WHAT, WHY, AND WHERE IS HERE?," *Survival* (11) and "A BUS ALONG ST. CLAIR: DECEMBER," *Surfacing* (60-61).
3. See Lee, "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space," and *Civil Elegies*. I oppose Lee's reductive caricature of Canadian "acquiescence" in "Lee's 'Civil Elegies' in relation to Grant's 'Lament for a Nation.'"
4. I develop this idea with J. Kushner in "Leacock: Economist/Satirist in Arcadian Adventures and Sunshine Sketches."
5. While Carole's intimate, the Red Swede, Miles Bjornstam, is both conscious and active, Lewis keeps him on the sidelines as a "critical" chorus. Whatever hope Bjornstam had for Gopher Prairie ends with the death of his wife and child. His story shows America's failure to welcome or tolerate the foreigner or foreign ideas of reform. Bjornstam's departure for the Canadian prairies, like that of F. P. Grove's in *A Search for America* (1927), suggests the departure of the free spirit from the United States to Canada—though Carole and Lewis continue to mouth the dream of an "unexampled greatness" in a future North America.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. "WHAT, WHY, AND WHERE IS HERE?" *Survival*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- _____. "A BUS ALONG ST. CLAIR: DECEMBER." *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Toronto: Oxford, 1970.
- Bowker, Alan, ed. Introduction. *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock: The Unsolved Riddle of Social Justice and Other Essays*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973.
- Cameron, Donald. *Faces of Leacock*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1967.
- Davies, Robertson. "On Stephen Leacock." *Masks of Fiction*. Ed. Malcolm Ross. 1957. Toronto: McClelland, 1961.
- Frye, Northrop. "Conclusion." *Literary History of Canada*. Ed. Carl Klinck. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1965.
- Innis, Harold. "Stephen Butler Leacock." *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 10: 226.
- Jones, D. G. *Butterfly On Rock*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970.
- Kushner, J., and R. D. MacDonald. "Leacock: Economist/Satirist in Arcadian Adventures and Sunshine Sketches." *Dalhousie Review* 56 (1976): 493-509.
- Leacock, Stephen. *Arcadian Adventures*. 1914. Toronto: McClelland, 1914.
- _____. *Canada: The Foundations of its Future*. Montreal: House of Seagram, 1941.
- _____. "Greater Canada: an appeal." Bowker 6.
- _____. "Preface to the Original Edition." *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. Ed. Malcolm Ross. 1912. Toronto: McClelland, 1965.
- Lee, Dennis. "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space." *Boundary 2* 3.1 (1974): 156.
- _____. *Civil Elegies*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Lewis, Sinclair. *Main Street*. 1920. New York: New American Library, 1961.
- MacDonald, R. D. "Lee's 'Civil Elegies' in relation to Grant's 'Lament for a Nation.'" *Canadian Literature* 98 (1983): 10-30.