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"Dying to a melancholy wail that echoes into the woods"—Stephen Leacock's "sensitive" romance of small-town Canada

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Abstract
Hailed as one of Canada's most complex and contradictory literary figures, Stephen Leacock rose to international fame through *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), a classic of early twentieth-century Canadian literature and an enduring example of gentle, affectionate satire that draws upon the tradition of Victorian social critics such as Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll. In this paper, we propose a revaluation of Leacock as a humourist by examining the function of description in constructing a "sensitive" romance of small-town Canada, with a view to highlighting both connotations of the word—a sensorial account of everyday experience and a highly responsive assessment of communal life. By referring to a number of relevant textual excerpts, we argue that Leacock's descriptions of places and people, fundamentally dependent on sensorial elements, have a double function. On the one hand, they provide for what McDonagh (2007) described as "the sense of place" that characteristically underpins realist fiction, "mediating, or even making, readers' relationships with the world" (50, 51). On the other, they invite the audience to partake in the critical exercise by formulating the moral message of the story. Thus, Leacock's sense-mediated accounts are essential to readers' comprehension of the text as a mirror of a society captured in its transition from infancy to maturity and its subsequent search for a distinctive national character. In Leacock's sketches, sights and sounds testify to the author's conservative outlook and faith in empire while eloquently illustrating his satirical stance on both "provincialism" and "globalism".

Keywords: Stephen Leacock, Canada, description, identity, "sensitive" romance

> It is almost night now. You can still see the trees and the fences and the farmsteads, but they are fading fast in the twilight. They have lengthened out the train by this time with a string of flat cars and freight cars between where we are sitting and the engine. But at every crossway we can hear the long muffled roar of the whistle, dying to a melancholy wail that echoes into the woods; the woods, I say, for the farms are thinning out and the track plunges here and there 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.
>
> —*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*

Stephen Leacock—a Canadian "romance"

Canada is a land of contrasts and paradoxes. The country whose motto *A mari usque ad mare* ("D'un océan à l'autre" / "From sea to sea") evokes the idea of endless possibilities, the promise of prosperity (as envisioned by the first European explorers in search of a shortcut to the mystic and bountiful Orient), as well as diversity, inclusiveness and equal opportunities, is also known through historical and literary accounts as a land of wilderness, conflict and arduous search for identity against the push-pull of local and global forces that have shaped the course of its existence. From village ("kanata") to confederation and on to global power, Canada has remained as much a project as an ideal. In this paper, we will focus on one particular account of this multifaceted yet polarised space, as reflected in one of the most popular Canadian literary works—Stephen Leacock's beloved *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), a classic of early twentieth-century Canadian literature that continues the tradition of Victorian social critics such as Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Lewis Carroll in the form of a gentle, affectionate satire. While Leacock is unanimously acclaimed for his mastery of humour, he is also a keen observer of detail, and his prose is punctuated with finely wrought descriptive passages of great suggestive power. As we will try to prove, in Leacock's descriptions of places and people, sensorial elements perform a double function: they simultaneously immerse the readers in the spirit of the place, allowing them to experience the world through the characters' or the narrator's perspective, and invite the audience to get engaged in formulating the moral message of the story and become part of the critical exercise. Leacock's descriptions and characterisations help in constructing a "sensitive" romance of small-town Canada, providing both a sensorial account of everyday experience and an observant reading of community life.

For most readers, Leacock does not need an introduction. Therefore, we include here only a succinct biographical presentation that may prove useful for contextualising the later references to his text. In fact, Leacock's life and career can itself be aligned with the notion of "Canadian romance", reflecting the aforementioned paradoxical and multifaceted dimensions of his country and culture. Born in Swanmore, England, on 30 December 1869, Leacock made a name for himself as a polymath, with a career that verifies the typical Victorian ideal of the self-made man. A satirist and essayist, teacher, historian and political scientist, Leacock boasts a career that most certainly qualifies as an early Canadian success story. He immigrated to Canada with his family at the age of six and got educated at Upper Canada College (where he also taught for nine years) and later at the University of Toronto (where he received a BA degree) and the University of Chicago (which conferred his PhD in political science in 1903). The same year, he joined McGill's department of economics and political science, becoming head of department and remaining there until retirement, in 1936. Between 1915 and 1925, he was the best-known humourist of the entire English-speaking world, following in the footsteps of eminent predecessors like Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Throughout his life, he received numerous distinctions and awards, including the Lorne Pierce Medal and the Governor General's Award. To preserve his legacy, the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour was established in 1946 and, since 1947, awarded in recognition of the best Canadian humour writing. Besides writing humorous sketches, Leacock also produced articles on social issues, economics, politics, science and history. In fact, his best-selling work during his lifetime was his first book, *Elements of Political Science,* published in 1906. Leacock was also actively engaged in the Conservative

Party. In his political views, he valued the community over the individual, organic growth over radical change, and the golden middle way over the extremes. These beliefs are also evident in his satires, which attack unrestrained individualism, materialism, and technologization. However, by our contemporary standards, his political stance can be seen in many ways as racist or anti-feminist (as exemplified, for instance, by his opposition to universal suffrage). As a humourist, he is best remembered for *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), an exploration of individual and community in the fictional Canadian small town of Mariposa, and its follow-up, *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914), a satirical, but more detached description of the life of the "upper crust" society in an American metropolis. Amongst his other well-known writings (both literary and otherwise), we note *Nonsense Novels* (1911), *Essays and Literary Studies* (1916), *Frenzied Fiction* (1918), *The Garden of Folly* (1924), *Humor: Its Theory and Technique*, (1935), *Too Much College* (1939), *Our British Empire* (1940), *Canada: The Foundations of Its Future* (1941), *How to Write* (1943) or *The Boy I Left Behind Me* (his unfinished autobiography, published posthumously in 1946). Satire and didacticism are two essential ingredients of most of these works.

Starting from these preliminary remarks and drawing on the contributions of a number of scholars, in what follows we will provide a conceptual framework which should facilitate our situating of Leacock's "sensitive" romance of Canada.

Liminality and borders—in search of Leacock's idiom

> Many of my friends are under the impression that I write these humorous nothings in idle moments when the wearied brain is unable to perform the serious labours of the economist. My own experience is exactly the other way. The writing of solid, instructive stuff fortified by facts and figures is easy enough. There is no trouble in writing a scientific treatise on the folk-lore of Central China, or a statistical enquiry into the declining population of Prince Edward Island. But to write something out of one's own mind, worth reading for its own sake, is an arduous contrivance only to be achieved in fortunate moments, few and far between. Personally, I would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
>
> —Preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*

Leacock's confession in the "Preface" to the *Sunshine Sketches* highlights the difficulties of writing imaginatively. Penning a work of fiction is an arduous effort and success is to a large extent a matter of inspiration and of finding the right expression for one's thoughts. Developing one's own distinctive idiom is an even more troublesome affair, but the journey, like Alice's adventures in Wonderland, may prove enlightening and enormously rewarding. Exemplary in this sense are the thoughts of a seminal figure of Canadian literary theory and criticism, Northrop Frye, whose own (theoretical) search for the defining Canadian literary idiom has informed the work of many later theoreticians (most notably, Margaret Atwood). Thus, in *The Bush Garden*, he argues that what sets apart Canadian sensibility is not the problem of identity itself, but the "paradoxes" surrounding identity. Canadian literary sensibility "is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some riddle as 'Where is here?'" (Frye 1971, 222) A central preoccupation of Canadian literature, Frye adds, is with the "unknown", which is responsible for the creation of a particular sense of "isolation":

> To feel "Canadian" was to feel part of a no-man's-land with huge rivers, lakes, and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen. "From sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth"—if Canada is not an island, the phrasing is still in the etymological sense isolating. One wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested, so built into it. (222)

Unlike in American culture, where the "frontier" is seen as "circumventable", the Canadian "frontier" is an omnipresent reality—"a part and a condition of one's whole imaginative being", which "separated the Canadian, physically or mentally, from Great Britain, from the United States, and even more important, from other Canadian communities" (222). This, Frye argues, led to the development of a "garrison mentality"—a characteristic of self-sufficient communities, that respect law and tradition, but which are constantly threatened by an insensitive and seemingly unconquerable natural setting:

> Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological "frontier," separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting—such communities are bound to develop what we may provisionally call a garrison mentality. (227)

In Frye's interpretation, the "garrison" is a "closely knit and beleaguered society" with "unquestionable" moral and social values, requiring one to take a clear stand (fight or flight) (228).

Frye's "garrison" concept is also relevant to discussing Leacock's imaginative representation of provincial Canada, raising an important question. If, as Leacock suggests in the "Preface" to his *Sketches*, Mariposa is a representative Canadian small town, a fictionalised conglomerate of several real places, more exactly, "about seventy or eighty of them", that can be found "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" (Leacock 2002, 5), does its existence reflect the characteristics of the "garrison mentality"? As we will see, the answer is only partially affirmative—like Canada itself, the author's descriptions of Mariposa and its inhabitants situate them in an intermediate and unstable position between complementary poles.

The second question, derived from the summary of Frye's ideas, concerns the relevance of the "border" to Leacock's humorous depictions of the Canadian province. On North American grounds, the preoccupation with the "border" has a long history, most prominently in the concept of "frontier" in American literature and popular culture. The notion is not foreign to Canada either. As Andrews explains, the Canadian-American border has played a vital role in developing a "distinctively Canadian humour tradition" (2000, 140). The border is fraught with contradictory (yet complementary) valences—it is contested and usurped while being reinforced and sustained at the same time:

> How, then, is this paradoxical relationship to the Canadian-American border—as a line to be crossed over, violated, or even erased, yet also as one to be sustained and reinforced—articulated by twentieth-century Canadian critics of this nation's literary humour, from Stephen Leacock to Margaret Atwood? What kind of rhetoric is used to describe the forty-ninth parallel, and how is English Canadian humour either differentiated from or aligned

> with American humour in order to strengthen the status of English Canadian humorists internationally? (141)
>
> The border is a liminal space that can be used to secure difference or reinforce similarity according to the social, political, and cultural concerns of various twentieth-century Canadian writers and critics. (141)

This takes us to a third question: to what extent is Leacock's humorous presentation of the Canadian province expressive of some form of "liminality"—for instance, between the "local" and the "universal"? Do the Mariposans strive for "difference" or for "similarity"? In fact, Mariposa itself embodies the concept of "border" or "liminality", as suggested even by some of the theories that try to explain the origin of the name of Leacock's fictional small town. As Spadoni aptly points out, one such theory was proposed by David M. Legate, who argued that Leacock's inspiration was the Township of Mariposa in Victoria County, a small settlement bordering on the northeast shore of Lake Simcoe. In Leacock's time, the place was better known in the United States, for having been the site of a gold rush in 1850 (Legate 1970, 62; Spadoni 2002, lxii). Moreover, Mariposa's real life equivalent, Orillia, can also be considered a "liminal place", since it borders on two lakes, Couchiching and Simcoe (Spadoni 2002, lxiii).

As for Leacock's own stance on the "border", a first answer can be found in his political writings. Andrews notes that for Leacock the "border" represented a form of political resistance against the pressure of American culture and a way to reinforce allegiance to the British Crown. As a staunch supporter of the British Empire, Leacock fervently opposed the notion of a "distinct" Canadian literature, given the ongoing process of historical amalgamation that would eventually erase the distinctions between Anglophone cultures and nations (Andrews 2000, 143). Moreover, as Conrad Black points out (2013), as early as 1909, in his essay "The Monroe Doctrine" Leacock argued that it was in Canada's best interest to not become too dependent on the United States for protection (it is worth noting though that during World War II, historical necessity led to Canada's sovereignty being "mortgaged" to the US, as a "sensible measure" in face of the Japanese and Nazi threat).

However, despite his British loyalist position, Leacock's preoccupation for the "border" is, on the whole, rather hazy. As Andrews further explains, since Leacock did not believe in the existence of a distinctly Canadian humour, he did not address the subject of the "border" explicitly. When it does surface though, obliquely, it should be regarded merely as an effect of the search for national and cultural identity that underpinned the age in which he lived:

> Leacock [...] essentially dismisses the existence of a uniquely "Canadian" brand of humour. Instead, he aligns himself with the more powerful and prominent tradition south of the border. The forty-ninth parallel is relegated to the shadows within Leacock's analyses of humour and nation, an arguably self-serving strategy for improving the status of English Canadian literary humorists (and sales of their works) at a time when the country was struggling to define itself. (141)

In fact, another way to read Leacock's claim about the composite and generic character of Mariposa is through the lens of his "universalist" leaning. Andrews aptly points out that Leacock strove to remain "international" in his appeal as a humourist. This effort can be attributed to two possible reasons: on the one hand, Canada's "colonial" character (i.e. a form of provincialism), which made it inadequate to foster a writer like Leacock and, on the other, to his belief that a universalist stance as humourist may have offered better chances

for Canadian humour to be accepted worldwide (Andrews 2000, 144). Leacock's own literary models were located beyond the border, in Britain, respectively, America—Dickens and Twain, whom he considered the paragon of achievement in humour (144). They represented the quality standards Leacock measured himself against in his search for a personal "brand" of humour (143). Of the two, particularly important is Dickens, for whom Leacock nurtured an admiration that transcended the humourist's ideals. In Leacock's view, the Victorian writer epitomised a set of values characteristic of a world in which individual greatness was still highly ranked, a world already on the brink of extinction:

> There are many younger people now, so we are told, who do not read Dickens. Nor is it to be wondered at. We live in a badly damaged world. It is a world of flickering shadows, tossed by electric currents, of a babel of voices on the harassed air, a world of inconceivable rapidity, of instantaneous effects, of sudden laughter and momentary tragedy, where every sensation is made and electrocuted in a second and passes into oblivion. It is a world in which nothing lives. Art itself is as old as man, and as immortal. But the form and fashion of it change. Dickens lived and wrote in a world that is visibly passing, the age of individual eminence that is giving place to the world of universal competence. (Leacock 1936, 2)

These lines are redolent of the same nostalgic attitude that transpires in the sensitive characterisation of Mariposa he provides in the final sketch of the series, "L'Envoi. The Train to Mariposa", used as the epigraph of this paper: the "long *muffled* roar of the whistle, *dying* to a *melancholy* wail that echoes into the woods" and the farms "*thinning out*" or the track that "*plunges* here and there into great stretches of bush" (Leacock 2002, 154, emphasis mine). Upon revisiting the place, Leacock's city-forged narrator wistfully notes the resilience of yesteryear's Mariposa, the "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" (Leacock 2002, 154). The melancholic tone of the passage makes it clear, however, that resistance is futile and that Mariposa is now but a quaint retreat from the tumult of the metropolitan existence. The future may not be so bright after all, as "sunshine" seems to be lying elsewhere.

In light of the above, we can conclude this section by noting that Leacock's general stance on Canada is non-partisan. As Ron Dart explains (2002), this represents in fact a "centrist" position, that came to inform most of Leacock's political and economic thought too:

> Leacock, from his PHD forward, argued for an economic middle road between a market economy in which the unseen hand would guide the fortunes of a state into the wealth of nations and a leftist approach to the economy in which the proletariat would overthrow the bourgeois, the state as an interim ethic would own the means of production and distribution, and, in time, via the Hegelian dialectic of history, the state would wither and a utopian classless society emerge. It was such a centrist economic position in which Leacock acutely noted both the appeal and limitations of capitalism and communism that defined his economic position.

In our opinion, this "tight-rope" position (as Dart has called it) can be extended over Leacock's entire conception of Canadian identity and the dialectic local–universal. In light of this, *in-betweenness* (and related characteristics— *liminality* and *complementarity*) can be considered integral to Leacock's fiction and of his literary approach. In order to illustrate this, in the following section of this paper, we will take a closer look at some of its manifestations, as they transpire through many of the descriptive passages of *Sunshine Sketches*.

"The tissue of every day and hour"—Leacock's affectionate portrayal of small-town Canada

> Hitherto Mr. Leacock has devoted his fortunate moments to irresponsible fantasies and burlesques. Here he breaks new ground as a chronicler of the annals of a small Canadian provincial town. But he is careful to tell us that Mariposa, on the shores of Lake Wissanotti, is not a real town: "on the contrary, it is about seventy or eighty of them." Similarly the characters engaged are not portraits but composite photographs: they represent types, not individuals. We are quite content to accept Mr. Leacock's caveat. The important thing, from the point of view of the reader, is that they combine certain local characteristics with a great deal of essential humanity—freshness with familiarity. The peculiar attribute of the Mariposans is their youth and hopefulness. He does well to call his chapters "Sunshine Sketches," for they have a most welcome freedom from the fashionable pessimism of old-world fiction. The Mariposans have their ups and downs, but they have an invincible resilience; and unquenchable belief in their town and its future; an inexhaustible fund of public spirit. They combine ferocious political partisanship with a complete social solidarity.
>
> —Review in the *Spectator* (London), 24 August 1912

As this excerpt from one of the earliest reviews of Sunshine Sketches suggests, Leacock's construction of the Mariposans reflects their liminal, fluid position. They stand out through a unique blend of local peculiarities and universal traits, a "freshness" complemented by "familiarity". They are exposed to the vagaries of cultural and historical change, but they remain united and hopeful; while individualists, they also have a deep passion for the communal good.

In fact, upon closer investigation, we can see that Leacock's satire of small-town Canada reverberates with liminality on all levels. A first instance of in-betweenness can be found in Leacock's choice of genre—the sketch or the short-story cycle. As Kolinská points out, Anglophone Canadian literature has defined itself through its duplicitous relationship with the two major English-language literary traditions—the British and the American one. On one hand, Anglophone Canada's belonging to the British Empire (from a political and cultural point of view) represented a form of resistance in front of the expansionist tendencies of American culture; on the other, Anglophone Canada had been open to integrating new experiences, idioms and expressive modes, in its quest to find its own distinctive "voice" (2009, 141). Under such peculiar circumstances, ever since Thomas Chandler Haliburton (who had the merit of adapting this literary form to the needs of Canadian prose fiction in the first half of the nineteenth century), the short-story cycle has emerged as one of the defining literary genres in Canadian literature—"a collection of loosely arranged episodic stories, interconnected by the time of the narrative, more or less loosely delineated space, and by the main character, or a group of characters that freely overstep the borderlines between the particular parts of the whole." (148) The short-story cycle, Kolinská adds, "resonated with the needs, as well as real possibilities, of the newly developing national literature: a structural, narrative, and development openness, coming near to a 'natural' style of storytelling" (148).

Leacock's own collection of such stories also points in the direction of another contribution of this literary genre. Starting with the very title of the book, the writer's intention clearly transcends the need to provide merely an accessible narrative medium. "Sunshine Sketches

of a Little Town" exudes a genuine sense of place. As McDonagh astutely observes, the sense of place is a key ingredient of realist fiction: "[w]ith the emergence of place as a key constituent of realist narrative, literary texts that conform to readers' realist expectations begin to exude what is often referred to as a "sense of place." (2007, 50). The sense of place, the scholar further argues, has a certain ontological function: as produced in narrative fiction, it has a heightened role in mediating and even making readers' relationship with the world (51). In this sense, the "representation" of place is as important as its presentation in fiction, being "part of a more profound shaping of the world that encompasses our perceptions, conceptions, and experiences of 'reality' itself" (52). In light of this, it is not far-fetched to suggest that Leacock's ambition was to construct a fictional world that would serve as a metonym for Canada and present it credibly.

Drawing on these points, let us now provide an overview of the main characteristics of Leacock's *Sketches* that can be read as examples of liminality / in-betweenness.

The first of these is not inherent to the text itself but arises instead from the reception of the book. As Simpson and Martin sum up, *Sunshine Sketches* elicited a contradictory response upon its publication: many Orillians (who actually served as inspiration for various characters) frowned upon what they perceived to be a short-sighted characterisation while the larger audiences, outside Leacock's immediate critical field-of-vision, applauded the subtle and entertaining qualities of his narrative art:

> *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, although outraging the citizens of Orillia, delighted everyone else, including audiences in other countries. The same can be said for *Literary Lapses* and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, collections of sketches shot through with Leacock's wit and sharp eye for human absurdities. (Simpson and Martin 1985)

An almost similar opinion is expressed by Margaret MacMillan, who notes that the success of *Sunshine Sketches* is due to it being recognizably Canadian for the international readership, while providing a familiar image of provincial life for the Canadian readers (2009, 63).

Closer to the text, liminality also appears in Mariposa's dual relationship with the world. Mariposa appears familiar with the world outside its boundaries but, inevitably, it is also shaped by the course of universal events. This is best seen in one of the most popular sketches in the volume, "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias". All throughout the story, Leacock's narrator obsessively draws attention to the locals' eagerness to emulate other communities. We learn that in Mariposa, habits and identities are in a constant flux, and even the town itself changes with the seasons:

> On St. Andrew's Day every man in town wears a thistle and shakes hands with everybody else and you see the fine old Scotch honesty beaming out of their eyes.
>
> And on St. Georges Day! —well, there's no heartiness like the good old English spirit after all; why shouldn't a man feel glad that he's an Englishman?
>
> Then on the Fourth of July there are stars and stripes flying over half the stores in town, and suddenly all the men are seen to smoke cigars, and to know all about Roosevelt and Byran and the Philippine Islands. (Leacock 2002, 45)
>
> After the winter, the snow melts and the ice goes out of the lake, the sun shines high and the shanty-men come down from the lumber woods and lie round drunk on the sidewalk outside of Smith's Hotel — and that's spring time. Mariposa is then a fierce, dangerous lumber town,

> calculated to terrorize the soul of a newcomer who does not understand that this also is only an appearance and that presently the rough-looking shanty-men will change their clothes and turn back again into farmers.
>
> Then the sun shines warmer and the maple trees come out and Lawyer Macartney puts on his tennis trousers, and that's summer time. The little town changes to a sort of summer resort. There are visitors up from the city. Every one of the seven cottages along the lake is full. The Mariposa Belle churns the waters of the Wissanotti into foam as she sails out from the wharf, in a cloud of flags, the band playing and the daughters and sisters of the Knights of Pythias dancing gaily on the deck.
>
> That changes too. The days shorten. The visitors disappear. The golden rod beside the meadow droops and withers on its stem. The maples blaze in glory and die. The evening closes dark and chill, and in the gloom of the main corner of Mariposa the Salvation Army around a naphtha lamp 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. (Leacock 2002, 13)

Mariposa is perceived as amorphous, malleable, and perpetually constructible. In its turn, the larger world occasionally "impinges on Mariposa", such as when outsiders arrive in town lured by the discovery of minerals (MacMillan 2009, 65).

On a third level, liminality and complementarity also appear in the qualities of Leacock's prose. Findley notes that while Leacock's dialogue is inherently "weak", his prose is characterised by brilliant "orality". Leacock's dialogue is "unspeakable", but his writing compensates for this shortcoming through strong "theatricality", because he is a "master at creating scenes" (1986, 9). Leacock's refined style is best experienced when "transcribed theatrically", so as to be performed on the stage or on television or simply allowed to unfold in front of the mind's eye (9).

Closely related to this point is Leacock's narrative strategy—namely, the adoption of the distanced position of the ironist-raconteur (Thomas 1986, 97). Leacock convinces his readers that he is a disinterested narrator, through a gesture of self-deprecation, but in fact he ardently wants them to listen to his story (98). From the very outset he creates the conditions for the appropriate reception of his stories by contrasting reality and appearance, creating the impression that the real is in fact mere appearance:

> 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 just like it. (Leacock 2002, 9)
>
> Of course if you come to the place fresh from New York, you are deceived. Your standard of vision is all astray. You do think the place is quiet. You do imagine that Mr. Smith is asleep merely because he closes his eyes as he stands. But live in Mariposa for six months or a year and then you will begin to understand it better; the buildings get higher and higher; the Mariposa House grows more and more luxurious; McCarthy's block towers to the sky; the 'buses roar and hum to the station; the trains shriek; the traffic multiplies; the people move faster and faster; a dense crowd swirls to and fro in the post-office and the five and ten cent store —and amusements! well now! lacrosse, baseball, excursions, dances, the Firemen's Ball every winter and the Catholic picnic every summer; and music —the town band in the park every Wednesday evening, and the Oddfellows' brass band on the street every other Friday; the Mariposa Quartette, the Salvation Army — why, after a few months' residence you begin to realize that the place is a mere mad round of gaiety. (Leacock 2002, 11)

In fact, Thomas further explains, in Leacock's little town "nothing is what it seems". Leacock keeps us at a comfortable distance from the witnessed events, inviting us to watch "a series of episodes, short feature films, more accurately cartoons" (1986, 98). And so, not only does the town change with the seasons or the social and political circumstances that influence its existence, but the reader's view of it is also constantly challenged and reshaped.

Similarly, liminality appears in the ambiguity and semantic gaps that underpin the narrative. As Jewinski explains, while many critics have noted the difference between what is said and what is known in Sunshine Sketches, they have overlooked that this is an essential quality of the book, not an accidental feature (1986, 107). Leacock's characterisations are intentionally misleading, providing readers with a plethora of information the author deems necessary for understanding his view of the place, characters, or situations, but often preventing a clear and complete understanding of the scene. Thus, Jewinski further argues, the readers of *Sunshine Sketches* are "thrust into what Derrida would call a gap in the 'text,' a place from where the individual inferences lack meaning" (110). Leacock's descriptive terms are ambiguous and the syntax of his sentences is deliberately "evasive" (114). As a result, the text "remains silent, and the reader is caught in the web of 'textuality', the various ideologies that may influence his 'reading'" (117). We can see this in the following passage, where we experience the political fervour surrounding the elections in Mariposa vicariously, as a hypothetical scenario of participation envisaged by Leacock's narrator. The actual truth remains elusive—a mere projection of our own desire for the authenticity of the scene:

> I wish you could have witnessed the scene in Mariposa that evening. It would have done your heart good, —such joy, such public rejoicing as you never saw. It turned out that there wasn't really a Liberal in the whole town and that there never had been. They were all Conservatives and had been for years and years. Men who had voted, with pain and sorrow in their hearts, for the Liberal party for twenty years, came out that evening and owned up straight that they were Conservatives. They said they could stand the strain no longer and simply had to confess. Whatever the sacrifice might mean, they were prepared to make it. (Leacock 2002, 148)

While the shattering of readers' expectations regarding truth has the theoretical advantage of opening up the text toward alternative interpretive paths, the task is complicated by the presence of paradox and irony, which "do not reconcile the variant readings, but rather encourage and multiply them (Jewinski 1986, 112). Such is the case of the ending of the earlier-mentioned "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias", where the national anthem, performed after the successful but embarrassing "rescue" of the Mariposans stranded on the almost sinking *Mariposa Belle,* can be read both as a sign of triumph and of failure (112):

> Look at the lights and the crowd! If only the federal census taker could count us now! Hear them calling and shouting back and forward from the deck to the shore! Listen! There is the rattle of the shore ropes as they get them ready, and there's the Mariposa band, — actually forming in a circle on the upper deck just as she docks, and the leader with his baton, - one - two - ready now, - "O CAN-A-DA!" (Leacock 2002, 60)

Complementing the peculiar character of Leacock's prose, the blending of romance and realism further enhances the liminality and fluidity of the *Sketches*. For instance, in the sketches with a romantic plot at their core (those focusing on Peter Pupkin's love for Zena Pepperleigh), Leacock blends these complementary modes because he believes a love story is never what it seems (Lynch 1986, 90). In fact, in these episodes, we see the transformative

power of love, which changes reality into a kinder thing, within the limits allowed by human folly (91). Peter Pupkin is an eloquent example of Leacock's mastery of characterisation and scene-building, as exemplified in the following passage, where the narrator constrains the readers to create a picture of the character by relying on impressions they may never have had in reality:

> I think you remember young Mr. Pupkin, do you not? I have referred to him several times already as the junior teller in the Exchange Bank. But if you know Mariposa at all, you have often seen him. You have noticed him, I am sure, going for the bank mail in the morning in an office suit of clinging grey with a gold necktie pin shaped like a riding whip. You have seen him often enough going down to the lake front after supper, in tennis things, smoking a cigarette and with a paddle and a crimson canoe cushion under his arm. You have seen him entering Dean Drone s church in a top hat and a long frock coat nearly to his knees. You have seen him, perhaps, playing poker in Peter Glovers room over the hardware store and trying to look as if he didn't hold three aces, - in fact, giving absolutely no sign of it beyond the wild flush in his face and the fact that his hair stands on end. (Leacock 2002, 96–97)

We see thus that in his descriptions and characterisations, Leacock not only relies on the readers' present ability to visualise narrated experience, but prescribes for them a predetermined history of sight, thereby forcing them to occupy a position which justifies the implied authorial perspective. Inevitably, the readers become active participants in the making of the romance.

Another instance of "in-betweenness" transpires through Leacock's humour, which appears somewhat self-contradicting, as it does not immediately reflect a satirical and critical impulse. Indeed, as he admitted in *Humour and Humanity,* the best type of humour is "gentle", "harmless" and "without malice". Humour can be a mode of self-knowledge, but it is also a coping mechanism that helps us deal with disappointment; as such, it can even be palliative (MacMillan 2009, 54–55).

Last but not least, and immediately dependent on Leacock's position regarding humour is the blending of satire and kind approval. Leacock's treatment of Mariposa, while mostly satirical, remains affectionate and, at times, it even becomes nostalgic. Thus, while he mocks "Mariposa's foibles, its follies, and its frequent hypocrisies", he is never scathing or cynical, possibly exhibiting "a certain regret that he cannot go back to the more innocent times of his youth" (MacMillan 2009, 69). This is best seen in the last sketch, a sort of melancholic afterword, in which we see Mariposa again from the later perspective of someone who has lived in the big city:

> There, —you hear it?—the long whistle of the locomotive, one, two, three! You feel the sharp slackening of the train as it swings round the curve of the last embankment that brings it to the Mariposa station. See, too, as we round the curve, the row of the flashing lights, the bright windows of the depot.
>
> How vivid and plain it all is. Just as it used to be thirty years ago. There is the string of the hotel 'buses drawn up all ready for the train, and as the train rounds in and stops hissing and panting at the platform, you can hear above all other sounds the cry of the brakesmen and the porters:
>
> "MARIPOSA! MARIPOSA!"
>
> ****

> And as we listen, the cry 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. (Leacock 2002, 156)

The final impression of Mariposa is the perfect apex of the "sensitive" romance of the place. Now, the actual place recedes before the recollected image, its concreteness being dissolved by nostalgia. Mariposa has thus earned a privileged position in both individual and collective consciousness.

In the wake of the points presented in this section of our paper, we can say that Leacock's sensorial portrait of Mariposa and its inhabitants, filtered through the perspective of a privileged but biased narrator, is at its core imbued with a didacticist intention. While the descriptions and characterisations in Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* entitle us to some sense of place and life in Mariposa, the result is conditioned by the narrator's selective and subjective account, and additionally complicated by the qualities of his written style and humour, resulting in the truth never fully being accessible. Ultimately, Mariposa's true "reality" remains elusive. However, it is precisely the lacunary knowledge and critical engagement with the implied perspective that allows us also to play an active part in formulating the moral message of the story. As Thomas has noted, Leacock "miniaturized" the world of Mariposa, making it possible for his readers to observe the world from the comfortable "armchairs of the Mausoleum Club" (1986, 101). The approach is similar to Thackeray's method throughout *Vanity Fair*, or to Dickens' foray into his characters' possible destinies at the end of *Hard Times*, both of which underline the authorial intention to prompt the reader to pass a moral judgement on the fictional universe:

> However, "we" are the readers and the final implication is clear if we wish to take it: if we do not like the Mariposa revealed to us, we still have to share in responsibility for it, for we have chosen to leave the town and to stay outside, in the comfortable leather chairs of our Mausoleum Clubs. (Thomas 1986, 101)

In the final analysis, the incontestable merit of Leacock's "sensitive" romance of small-town Canada is that it offers both an account of mundane experience and a critical evaluation of provincial life.

Conclusions—understanding Canada through Leacock's eyes

At the end of this investigative journey, let us formulate a number of conclusive remarks regarding Leacock's appreciation of Canada as conveyed in *Sunshine Sketches*. As Lucas has pointed out, a careful reading of the *Sketches* reveals the presence of two voices in the text. On the one hand, there is the voice of the author, that covers that of his literary personae, a voice marked by his conservative creed and multi-national proclivity. On the other, there is the voice of a human being, who fuses "irony, wisdom, and an iron compassion" in a "golden humanity":

> This voice is not the breath of Leacock's mixed "national" postures or of his political and social convictions. It is a voice out of the very marrow of the man's inner life and sensibility. Hark and you can hear it—soaring above all that he has made in the image of any political allegiance, any nationality, any literary precedent. (Lucas 1986, 127)

The same close reading proves that *Sunshine Sketches* addresses in fact both questions involved in Frye's discussion of the Canadianness of Canadian culture—"where is here"?

and "who am I?", despite the critic's declared preference for the former. Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches* presents a picture of Canada in a moment of transition and on a journey to find its defining identity between the antipodes of provincialism and globalism. As the last sketch in the volume suggests, Leacock looks at Canada through a nostalgic lens. As such, Mariposa emerges as a place that reverberates with what we can call "imperial nostalgia". In fact, even this "imperialism" can be regarded as a "liminal" affair. In *The Sense of Power*, Carl Berger notes that Leacock's "imperialism" informs most of the *Sunshine Sketches*: "For Leacock the imperial ideal meant a determined effort to accept the obligations of nationhood and to fulfill the promise of freedom" (Berger 1970, 28 qtd. in Robertson 1986, 39). Rather than being a political objective, imperialism is an alternative that can ensure the escape from "materialism", "partyism" and "race and religious wars". We can refer here back to Leacock's commentary on Canadian literariness. Steele points out in this sense that in Leacock's opinion, Canadians could not develop a unique national literary voice due to a process of "cosmopolitan amalgamation" (1986, 67). He argued instead that literature, in particular humour, could represent the common foundation of an "imperial community". Moreover, humour could be used "to exorcise outmoded social behaviour" (Steele 1986, 67). Leacock's representation of Canada through fictional Mariposa as a rather nondescript, but inclusive and cosmopolitan-minded community also fits with his belief in the role of the British Empire as the engine of democracy, as already proven in his time in some of its more advanced dominions (64). For Leacock, "Anglo-American imperialism was the highest stage of man's political evolution" but at the same time a "world empire" was an inevitable outcome of historical progress (65).

Consequent on these, as Vanderhaeghe aptly observes, contrary to Leacock's own claim, Mariposa is not simply an archetypal Canadian small town "that can be plopped down anywhere in the country to do duty like a Hollywood set". Such a limited perspective would imply, in fact, ignoring the complexity of Canadian realities. In fact, Mariposa is a reflection of a broader historical and cultural reality—"a picture of a lost world, an Edwardian town basking in a bright sunshine of confidence, peace, and stability". It is the embodiment of an idyllic life that eventually was shattered by the terrors of World War I but, equally importantly, it is an Anglophone town and an Ontario town (Vanderhaeghe 1986, 20). On a higher, more symbolic level, Mariposa is also closest to what a "conservative" utopia would look like: an "organic society" governed by shared norms and values, that observes tradition and religion. As such, it may just be a dream, but it is a dream that reveals what people were like at a certain moment in history (21). Therefore, *Sunshine Sketches* should be regarded as an expression of regional Canada and as a testimony to the diversity of the country. In this capacity, the book could become useful as a guide for Canadians to learn about other Canadians, beyond the confines of their place and their time (21).

In closing, we should turn to assessing Leacock's achievement as a portraitist of Canada in transition. His "sensitive" (i.e. both sense-mediated and cognisant) rendition of life in Canada in the years before World War I, with its peculiar mix of conservative-imperialist tendencies and globalist-progressive flirtations, makes him "one of the great interpreters of this country" (Vanderhaeghe 1986, 17). Other scholars some to confirm this appreciation. Margaret MacMillan's argues in this sense that Leacock remains quintessentially Canadian in his outlook because he managed to capture in a credible way the essence of provincial Ontario at the turn of the century. Leacock stands out through "his ability to puncture pomposity, to show up hypocrisy, to mock the powerful and self-important, and to encourage

Canadians to laugh at themselves" (2009, 73). This point of view is also complemented by Werner's remark that Leacock's gentle humour as "master of Mariposa" is what qualifies him to be part of the gallery of the greatest satirists the world has produced (Werner 2002).

In the end, Leacock's art and achievement rank him in status with one of his eminent literary models, Charles Dickens, whose merit, in Leacock's own words, is to have managed to remain both "funny" and "great" (Leacock 1936, 306). Despite providing a picture of Canada at a particular moment of its historical development, Leacock's work has stood the test of time. This, as he himself suggested in reference to Dickens, is no small feat, but the ultimate sign of true genius:

> Transitory popularity is not a proof of genius. But permanent popularity is. People of the adolescent generation of today may have the impression that Dickens is passed by in favour of a rising group of newer men. This is not so. These newer men come and go, rise and fall, and are forgotten. Dickens stays. Forty years ago newer writers were replacing Dickens; and thirty years ago; and twenty. The world today does not know their names. (Leacock 1936, 307)

In the grand gallery of Canadian literature, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, with its quaint and affectionate depictions of Mariposa, remains a convincing testament to Leacock's "permanent popularity".

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