

## “How Strange Life is!”: The Performative Narrator and Chaucerian Similarities in Steven Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*\*

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Eckert, Kenneth. “How Strange Life is!”: The Performative Narrator and Chaucerian Similarities in Steven Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*.” *Studies in English Language & Literature* 45.1 (2019): 199-216. Stephen Leacock’s humorous *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) is now less known outside Canada, but was in its time possibly more recognized abroad than the country was, and remains a foundational touchstone of Canadian fiction. Yet its genial humor has brought it affection but slighter academic regard, and its amorphous narrator has received criticism for his claimed inconsistency in knowledge level and identity. This article asserts that this alleged inconsistency can be explained by the example of Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*. While it is an odd connection, Chaucer also deploys a narrator who knowingly employs a lowered or counterfactual viewpoint, and so both the poem and the *Sketches* are contextualized as explicit performances. Recognizing the narrator’s guise as an admitted reciter separate from his fictive story may help elucidate this critical issue and raise regard for Leacock’s masterpiece. (Hanyang University ERICA)

**Key Words:** Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Geoffrey Chaucer, *Sir Thopas*, Canadian fiction

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## I. Introduction

Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) endures as a foundational classic of Canadian fiction for its amiable, welcoming humor, and much of Canada's outsized comic tradition in writers and actors owes itself to both Leacock and *Sketches*. While Leacock is less read outside Canada now, in his time he could count as fans Groucho Marx, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Theodore Roosevelt (Kohler 51), and he was courted by Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford to write screenplays for them (Lynch, *Life* xx). Dr. Leacock's reputation had already been established as an economist, with his *Elements of Political Science* (1906) a standard classroom textbook, though he had begun to dabble in humor with two minor works, *Literary Lapses* (1910) and *Nonsense Novels* (1911). *Sketches* began as a commissioned series of installments in the *Montreal Star* in the winter of 1912, and was expanded and reprinted in book form that August, featuring eleven segments with a closing "Envoi" where the narrator addresses the auditor in the Mausoleum Club. While some sketches are narratively standalone, they are not independent. Characters recur, stories reference events in other stories, and two-thirds of the book consists of three storylines woven over multiple sketches: Reverend Drone's attempts to expand his church, Peter Pupkin's courtship of Judge Pepperleigh's daughter Zena, and Josh Smith's election campaign.

As Canada's original *ur*-humorist, analogues to Leacock may be found in Mark Twain or Charles Dickens (two authors he revered), and one index of Canada's youth as a country is that its arguably first major author died only in 1944. In terms of scholarship, this recentness can be an advantage, for much Leacock criticism is informed by writers who knew him firsthand or secondhand. Yet one perennial problem with Canadian letters is that it can be cliquey and stagnant—the tiny club of literary titans in the Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal corridor, where *of course* one has been printed in *Maclean's* and knows Margaret Atwood personally, inhibits fresh voices and more objective readings of Leacock. Unsurprisingly, non-Canadian

analyses of his work are sparse. In consequence, reading an article on Leacock written by an academic who shared a faculty office with him at McGill is valuable for its anecdotes but problematizes analyzing the text separately from the author's persona.

Serious scholarship on *Sketches* only began in the fifties, often treating four central issues. The first concerns its genre character: is the book a novel, a "proto-novel" or "para-novel" (Spadoni lvi), a story collection, or something else? While individual sketches have been anthologized, early editions called its divisions chapters, and Gerald Lynch argues persuasively that the sketches form a matrix of interrelated themes (*Humanity* 60). The second concerns national identity: did Leacock see himself as Canadian, American, or British? Flexibly, Leacock described himself as any and all three when it suited him, writing "we do things differently over in America" (qtd. in Steele 60, emphasis his), using the demonym continentally rather than nationally (Watters 23). Leacock questioned whether there could even be a uniquely Canadian literature in an increasingly globalized world (Steele 67). Third, what is the register of its satire: does it see the fictional town of Mariposa and its naïve denizens with superior derision as a Juvenal or Swift would, or is its vision gentler and more inclusive as a Horace or Addison would take? By consensus Leacock deploys a jovially ironic tone with a dollop of Victorian pathos, and while some, such as Robertson Davies, disagree and read *Sketches* as "ferocious and mordant" (qtd. in Cameron 124), most take at face value his dictum that warm joshing is more 'civilized' than cutting satire. This has done Leacock few favors, for in 1912 as now his legacy has been dismissed as "lightweight amusements and unchallenging satire" (*Humanity* ix), or as a *New York Times* review patronizingly writes, enclosing "a faint glimmer" of Twain ("Amusing Sketches," 156).

A fourth issue, and one this paper hopes to bring new arguments to bear on, interrogates the narrator's seemingly discrepant or equivocal identity. Scholarship has not yet agreed what the *Sketches* narrator is in light of his apparent changeability in knowledge and tone. We expect a consistent persona and do not receive it; critics

have objected that the narrator seems sophisticated and intelligent at some moments and jarringly as credulous as his insular small-town bumpkins at others. Later the festively joking voice clashes with the world-weary and moralistic one of the final “Envoi.” Lynch posits that the book verges on having three narrators, those of the introductory, story, and “Envoi” (*Humanity* 60). Why does this question matter? A century of sporadic criticism has still not firmly pegged the narrator, inviting fresh analysis. Second, the narration so overwhelms any dialogue that it forms the bulk of the text and its messages. The narratorial issue thus intersects with the previous matters of genre and satirical stance in determining exactly what *Sketches* is trying to accomplish.

In recent work I have argued that Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas* from *Canterbury Tales* is funny because the narrator deliberately relates an insipid romance and pretends to a dramatic register to amuse the reader with its incongruity to the story, and to get revenge on the patronizing Host with its telling. It may seem a peculiar gambit to use this reading of Chaucer to freshly explain Leacock. Leacock dismissed classical literature as “poor stuff” and medieval texts as “primitive” (qtd. in Cameron 59), and he condemned Chaucer as “positively nasty or unjustifiably licentious” (qtd. in Cameron 35). A cursory inspection in July 2018 of Leacock’s extant library at his summer home in Orillia, Ontario, now a museum, reveals only one lean Chaucer volume by W.W. Skeat among a plethora of Victorian tomes. Desmond Pacey is the only apparent critic to note a similarity between the two authors, and in regard to their shared conservatism, not writing style (183).

Yet Chaucer may help recharge analysis of Leacock by scrutinizing how their narrators comically function. While I will draw from the wider text of *Sketches*, I would like to center on one of its best-known segments, “The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias,” to stress how Leacock’s narrator *performs* his role as a storyteller, at or at a distance below his own knowledge level. This has been peripherally noted before, particularly by Ina Ferris who remarks we are meant to see “the very transparency of the Mariposan pose *as pose*” (175)—though her

argument focuses on how this pose is presented ironically and accusingly to the tired, jaded 'you' of the "Envoi" looking out the window. I would like to scrutinize through closer reading *how* this pose is narratively and structurally catalyzed. Demonstrating this will hopefully help resolve questions relating to the perceived incongruities of the narratorial persona and show a wider logic to a book which has been loved, but unfortunately condescended to.

## II. Leacock's Narrator: Critical Allegations of Inconsistency

Leacock's narrator so dominates the sketches that play adaptations had little dialogue to work with (Findley 8). Because there is scarce other information available to the reader from characters' discourse, criticism has treated the narrator severely for his supposed inconsistency. Like his townspeople who equally have a "Celtic nature," "Scotch honesty," "English spirit," and Yankee patriotism (SS 41, all refs. Bentley), his identity and allegiances are plastic. In knowledge he can be sophisticated and philosophical, and he can be "naïve, unsophisticated, baffled" (Cameron 132). At times he parrots the blinkered boosterism of the Mariposans, who think their main street dwarfs the "cramped dimensions" (SS 1) of those in London and New York and believe Harland & Wolff were inadequate to build the Mariposa Belle (SS 38); at other times he has an urbane maturity, such as in the "Envoi" where he speaks as the affluent club member who has traveled and can judge objectively. In sympathies, "sometimes he is a townsman and sometimes an outsider" (MacLulich); he claims to have affection for Mariposa but depicts a town full of hypocrites, gullible rubes, and con men, and Dooley laments "we are simply not sure what moral perspective we are being asked to adopt" (5). His reportage is contradictory (Bush 169), or at best "equivocal" and "evasive" (Zichy 51), and Ed Jewinski gives up and convicts the text of "unreadability" (112) in its refusal to give a straight account not destabilized by another.

It may help to first clear the decks by defining what the *Sketches* narrator is *not*. An easy but unlikely hypothesis is that Leacock juxtaposes viewpoints as a sort of modernist literary technique. But Leacock is no Joyce or Woolf, nor do his extant library or writings reveal the slightest interest in modernism; Jonathan Meakin goes so far as to call *Sketches* an anti-modernist text (in Spadoni lx). Leacock dismissed the discipline of psychology itself as useless and dangerous (MacMillan 34), mitigating against reading his narrator as inhabiting some perceptually unstable “truth” position. The further argument that Leacock was a prescient postmodernist is even more unpersuasive. Jewinski’s claim that the narrator deploys a Derridean “deferral of meaning” (107) in his abstruseness implausibly places Leacock in a *weltanschauung* sixty years after the book’s writing, and one which he would likely have rejected out of hand. Karla El-Hussan argues that the narrator’s “balancing between sympathy and distance” (175) is a means of establishing the unity of the sketches within a text, for paradoxically, the stories consistently have the *same* inconsistent narrator; moreover, the duality can be explained by reading the “Envoi” narrator as viewing Mariposa thirty years later with adversative boyish nostalgia and adult knowledge (177). While such a reading is helpful, it feels as though more can be done—and it still situates the narration as incompatibly conflicted if not erratic.

An opposite inference is that in his narratorial slips Leacock displays the lack of control betraying a novice or dilettante author. Leacock undeniably wrote hurriedly for the *Star*’s deadlines (Spadoni xxxvi), and did not rate *Sketches* as his best work afterward (MacMillan 72). He seems to have done minimal editing, as he was occupied with a vacation in France before the book’s publication. Curiously, his narrator jokes about the Mariposa Belle, “Oh, pshaw! I was not talking about a steamer sinking in the ocean and carrying down its screaming crowds of people into the hideous depths” (SS 47)—in *spring 1912*. Leacock cannot be faulted for a story appearing March 16 if the Titanic sank four weeks later, but he did nothing to soften the text after, even retaining the Harland & Wolff reference, the same company which fabricated the Titanic. Printing it that August unchanged would have

been akin to releasing a book in late 2001 humorously depicting jet airliners flying into skyscrapers. Yet there are no recorded contemporary objections to the story. It is too easy a conclusion to blame Leacock's craft; and his 1943 Mariposa vignettes for the war bond effort, while less childlike and depicting a more jaded town aged by depression and war, still have the comic technique of a dual-level narrator.

A further likely false route out is to parse the narrator within the "American mainstream of little-man humor" (Rasporich 78), as an honest naïf: in that time Twain's Connecticut Yankee, and in ours Forrest Gump. This will not do. The little-man reading ignores the narrator's occasional omniscience as he takes a "god-like view of his community" (Davies 21) and reports characters' thoughts or private actions. Second, critics have noted that Canada had less tradition of this trope, and that a more typical period stance is of a sensible "whiskered bachelor gentleman" (Rasporich 80), or "country squire" (Pacey 161), as was Leacock in summer life. R. E. Watters reads the diplomacy borne out of insecurity in the Canadian psyche as a result of its tenuous position between the American and British empires into its literature, calling the typical Canadian protagonist a negotiator rather than a Walter Mitty (31). Third, if Leacock's narrator is not knowingly being silly, much of the pathos of *Sketches* which he delicately elicits is reduced. It is because the reader identifies with the narrator as intelligently sensitive that Pepperleigh reporting his son's death to his wife is moving, as he sits in the night "with her hand in his" (SS 87), forcing a reassessment of the judge's earlier tantrums. In his book on humor Leacock emphasizes the yin-and-yang roles of pathos and humor as tempering each other, and he also wants Dean Drone to be both laughed at and liked—the last we see of the Dean is that in his reverie he can hear Greek choruses "singing beyond, and his wife's voice" (SS 82). It is hardly a sarcastic or naïve ending, as the stroke-induced delusions bittersweetly foreshadow his nearing death.

A final distraction to be cleared away is the narrator's claimed *moral* inconsistency, which can be explicated by Leacock's other writings. The failure of

the narrator to condemn the Mariposans' faults only suggests irregularity in those who do not share Leacock's apparent moral sympathies. While Lynch views Josh Smith as selfish and calculating, Leacock seemed to respect practical, self-made men in the model of his uncle E. P. (Lynch, *Life* xvii; Davies 22). Smith elsewhere shows his soft side when he retains the "caff" (SS 19), and the narrator winks at benign or hearty Falstaffian hypocrisy, just as in real life Leacock jovially flouted prohibition laws—in dry Orillia a delivery boy once commented about Leacock's orders of rye whiskey, "Does the guy bathe in this?" (Kohler 51). The narrator has "an amused tolerance for incompetence" (Magee 277), refusing to condemn Drone for his bungling of the church's expansion. While Leacock had little observable religious faith, his narrator's sympathy for his characters' peccadillos suggests not inconsistency but a charity befitting his occasional god-like viewpoint. As a last coda, agreeing with the Mariposans is not automatically a flawed stance. Why cannot the narrator honestly be moved by hearing his national anthem sung over the water at night and prefer it over a European cathedral (SS 46) (Ferris 176), or really feel there is nothing like a partridge or duck (SS 142) from a northern Ontario lake? Such tastes can be scorned as unrefined, but they can also be praised as bucolic and pastoral; Leacock himself saw Paris, and evidently instead chose the life of a country squire.

### III. Chaucerian Connections and the Winking, Counterfactual Narrator

So far I have only indicated what the *Sketches* narrator is *not*, and more is needed. Chaucer is also read as employing warmer carnival humor in his colorfully dubious pilgrims, as opposed to Langland's angrier moral invective. C. S. Lewis lamented that postwar criticism tried to find "all manner of ironies, slynesses, and archnesses, which are not there" (163-64) in the *Canterbury Tales*, but it is never difficult to find *myrthe* and *pleye* in Chaucer, an author who avoided the rawer

political or personal satires which brought danger to court poets such as Jean Froissart (Pearsall 69). The orthodox argument that *Sir Thopas* bitingly mocks medieval romances (see Charbonneau 650-1) was not shared by his near-contemporaries, who called it merry or "Chaucers jest" as Thomas Coryatt did in 1611 (qtd. in Dane 355). But admittedly little otherwise links these authors separated by six centuries. However much Leacock saw himself as an heir of Britain, he held that its humor reached a proper civilized levity only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with sparing regard for former eras or even for Shakespeare, excepting an affection for Falstaff (*Humanity* 43). Surely Dickens, who ends *Hard Times* by addressing his "Dear reader" (398), is a better example of an author dropping his narrator's mask and exposing the text as a fictive canvas?

Yet again I adduce the example because a close reading of *Sir Thopas*'s comic workings may productively help to illuminate Leacock's. *Thopas* is successful because its humor is multilevel. At a character level, Thopas is absurdly effeminate as a knight for preparing for battle with gingerbread and licorice (VII.854, all refs. Benson). At a structural level, the story invokes the recognized genre markings of a romance (dashing knight saves imperiled maiden from monster) and then punctures them into comic nullity: Thopas's maiden is comfortable and does not need rescuing (VII.815-16) (see Finlayson 47). Finally, at a narratorial level the Chaucer-pilgrim speaker's counterfactual reportage deftly infuriates the Host: a forest with deer and rabbits *isn't* perilous (VII.756), Thopas *doesn't* bear "the flour / of roial chivalry" (VII.901-2), and the elegiac register mismatches the events: swearing oaths on plain bread and beer *isn't* heroically dramatic (VII.872). If this were all merely a stupid narrator botching a vapid tale the joke is adequate—but it is funnier when contextualized as cleverly and deliberately lame, sarcastically told to requite the Host for superciliously requesting a dainty, pleasing story (VII.711). The tale has no climax, being interrupted by Harry, but the amusing outcome is him fuming that "thy drasty rhyming is nat worth a toord" (VII.930) while Chaucer-pilgrim grins "elvishly" (VII.703). The humor of the tale is mediated by it being an oral

performance heard by the other pilgrims, as are the *flyting* tales told by antagonistic pairs such as the Miller/Reeve or Friar/Summoner.

Leacock does much the same at all three levels. In characterization many of the Mariposans are also ridiculous. Pepperleigh flies into a rage when his Conservatives lose a seat because he “can’t bear to see the country go absolutely to the devil” (SS 83) or hurls a canary cage into the bushes because the “blasted bird wouldn’t stop singing” (SS 84); Dean Drone is more interested in his tedious Greek stories, fishing, and mechanical toys than in his pastoring duties (SS 55); Smith bribes the town elders with food and alcohol to restore his liquor license, sets fire to the indebted church for insurance money, and contrives fake telegrams to pronounce him leading in election results. A humorous discrepancy lies between what characters ought to be but are not: a judge should have a steady temperament and impartiality, a pastor should care for his flock’s spiritual needs, and a town burgher should show integrity, just as a knight should have chivalric dignity. Where topaz was a medieval gemstone of chastity and hardly associative of masculine virility, the ironic *pepper* and *drone* gags embedded in Leacock’s character names also signal their comic failings.

Deploying a reading of Chaucer here also helps to show the sequential predictability of Leacock’s narrator’s dual levels as deliberate paired moves rather than random stances. As argued, much of Chaucer’s comedy in *Sir Thopas* is a dramatic claim or register subsequently burlesqued. The land of Fairye he rides into is “so wilde” (VII.802), but no one bothers to confront him, “neither wyf ne childe” (VII.806); he charges out on his steed, but it only “ambil in the way / ful softly” (VII.885-6). Lynch notices that Leacock also uses the rhetorical devices of “ironic reversal, deflation, undercutting” (“Smith”). Far from sporadically flipping between town hick and worldly outsider, the narrator reliably makes a naïve claim and then winks at the reader knowingly for a laugh. After mock-innocently noting that Josh Smith is coming to the boat with sandwiches, he notes that he “can hear them clinking” (SS 40) and knows that Smith carries two bottles of whisky. The narrator

sustains a feeling of military attention to promptness in boarding the ship ("Notice it!" SS 39), which the auditor knows will never impact anyone, confirmed when the *Belle* leaves late. Another favorite Leacock turn is what he called "exploded clichés," where romantic statements are literalized or punctured, such as when homely Miss Cleghorn wishes she could be buried at Indian Island, and the narrator jokes that "no one had time to attend to it" (SS 49) (*Humanity* 95-6). These rhetorical couplings evince not irregularity but comic dexterity.

These humorous deflations also operate at a wider structural level. Leacock plays with the Victorian literary and theater plot tropes of his past, invoking and then anticlimactically nullifying them. The sinking of the *Belle* promises melodramatic scenes of danger and valor, but the trope is drolly undercut when the ship's passengers instead salvage the sinking rescuers from their useless boats "in one of the smartest pieces of rescue work ever seen on the lake" (SS 50). The chivalric cry "Women and children first!" (SS 49) is made, but the ensuing reason is less lofty: the shaky boats would not be able to hold "a lot of heavy men" (SS 49). The interlude where the narrator reports that certain people were spared the sinking has the precision of a detective mystery, but then thwarts the tenor with mundane reasons: Towers' and Yodel's lives were saved because they did not feel like going (SS 39). Pupkin's courtship of Lena marks off a sensational vaudeville romance with its faux-suicidal lover, but ends with a shoot-out in the bank cellar against—the confused caretaker. Thus Pupkin is "shot dead," then "dangerously wounded," and finally only stunned by a grazed bullet (SS 109). Lynch posits that Pepperleigh's odd contempt for Pupkin while later welcoming, if not orchestrating, his courtship of Zena alludes to Shakespeare's Prospero (*Humanity* 109)—but if so the device is comically nugatory. In "Pythias," the move's funniest deployment, the *Belle*'s passengers rush headlong toward a marine tragedy until the narrator mentions that the lake's water is only a few feet deep, and the tension dissipates as the ship rests on a bank, reassuring the reader that it is safe to laugh at the discrepancy between registers.

The humor of these pairings is effectualized, as with *Thopas*, by the audience's shared confederacy in the narrator's duplicity. Some careful mischief lies in the climax to "Pythias"; the narrator counterfactually ignores his momentarily previous fears and situates himself and the townspeople as cool and unflustered the whole time ("pshaw!" SS 52), insouciantly bragging that it is "the little things like this that give zest to a day on the water" (SS 52). Here we know the narrator is lying, and he knows we know, as he chooses to briefly emulate a lower but amusingly self-justifying level of understanding—just as Jefferson Thorpe's daughter Myra plans a theatrical career upon her father's sudden wealth, only to chirpily rationalize that "if there's one thing she hates, it's the stage" (SS 39) when the money is lost. Cameron is one of few to see he is an "intelligent man feigning simplicity," also noting that "the speed with which the narrator moves from cowardice to courage when the steamer sinks, for example, is both attractive and credible if the narrator is only pretending to be unaware of the inconsistency" (134). For the narrator to not know how to spell *Goethe* (SS 42) but subsequently report a conversation on Champlain's expeditions and Xerxes's invasion of Greece (SS 43-4) is more than inconsistent: it is incredible, suggesting deliberateness, even if the narrator is possibly only mimicking the girls' mispronunciation of "Gothey."

#### IV. Leacock's Man Behind the Curtain in "Pythias"

The highpoint of *Sir Thopas* is not the tale itself but its stopping when the exasperated Host interrupts, "namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee" (VII.919), and the reader is reminded of the tale's status as a performance for the pilgrims. In "Pythias" the narrator similarly blurts out the ending and then tut-tuts, "Dear me, I am afraid that this is no way to tell a story" (42). Lynch gripes that "true art" (*Humanity* 64) would demand a different approach; but the narrator's aside gently forestalls any anxiety by reminding the reader he is only telling a story (Ferris 177).

The narrator recurrently remarks on his activity as he "confirms the repeated descriptions of certain details, or he asks whether he has already mentioned special facts" (El-Hussan 180). He even makes a metaliterary joke on his tale as print fiction by having Lena and the Mariposan girls dream of clichéd romance novel heroes such as "Algerian corsair[s]" (SS 94) and Hungarian desperados who will sweep them away into "enchanted" futures, although here the magic is comically miniscule in that the girls settle for local "enchanted" homes (SS 94). Leacock in real life dabbled in movie screenplays, radio, and early television (Curry 23; St. Pierre), and there is a filmic sense to the stories supporting their situation as performed scenes: pieces often end with a "strongly visualized scene" (Thomas 100), whether an exterior freeze-frame of Pupkin's stilled home or the bustle of the Mariposa Belle returning, and always with the audience as observer while the image zooms out and fades.

All of these threads reinforce the narrator's identity as a storyteller-bard admittedly performing—and in real life Leacock was fond of this role, reciting his stories to friends and on radio. B. K. Sandwell remembers hearing Leacock tell "practically every one of the Sunshine Sketches as dinner-table anecdotes" (163). Leacock's narrator, like those of Dickens, Twain, or Chaucer, is not well-distinguished from the author. In his 1943 Mariposa segments he centers his segments around Jeff Thorpe's barber shop, noting that *he*, Stephen Leacock the economist, has "spoken of [the barber shop] before" (206) (Milne 75). His 1912 *Star* pieces have names borrowed from real Orillians, and Leacock reportedly received a reproach from his mother over his depiction of Dean Drone and grumblings from locals over being caricatured. Moritz and Moritz claim the consternation is "mostly legendary" (147), and Leacock Museum curator emeritus Daphne Mainprize remarks, "the families who *weren't* in *Sunshine Sketches*... were equally upset because he *didn't* poke fun at them" (CBC). Yet the faux-sinking of the Belle is plausibly modeled on a similar incident in adjacent Barrie, Ontario in 1902 (see Lower). Similarly, gold was found at Kirkland Lake near Timmins in

1911 (MacMillan 65), and speculators like Jefferson Thorpe would have been familiar in real life. The Smith election sketches further reveal a narrator suspiciously knowledgeable about the political science of campaigns (Moritz & Moritz 149). Leacock changed some names in *Sketches* and rather unpersuasively avers at the beginning that Mariposa could be anywhere—but it is difficult to avoid seeing him ventriloquizing his narrator from lived experience.

Such a reading has limits. Orillia and Mariposa, and Leacock and the *Sketches* narrator, are not necessarily coterminous. But where *are* the boundaries between the two? Like Smith, who is always neither drunk nor sober, Leacock never seemed fully facetious or earnest. While he continued to write comic stories for the rest of his life, he regretted that it affected his academic career, as social scientists tended to view him as a humorist. Despite writing six books on history alone and being offered \$1,000 to give a lecture on economics to New York bankers (Frankman 52), he once wrote with exasperation, “When I stand up before an audience to deliver my serious thoughts, they begin laughing. I have been advertised to them as funny, and they refuse to accept me as anything else” (qtd. in Lucas, 122). Nevertheless, Leacock also wagged that one could make a parrot an economist by teaching it to say ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ (qtd. in Frankman 56). While his writings and mood took on a more autumnal bleakness in old age, his last words in Toronto General Hospital were “Did I behave pretty well? Was I a good boy?” (qtd. in Lynch, *Life* xx). Leacock is recollected as gregarious and affable—Davies feels that his art suffered because “he wanted to be liked” (26). Yet in his writings and life it is not always clear how much joking or seriousness Leacock’s persona contains, and so it is also difficult to discern to what extent his narrators *are* him.

Yet where Leacock-as-narrator takes his materials from is less critical than their status as admitted recitals. If the narrator “shift[s] his two or three masks with entire freedom” again like his townsmen who join conflicting fraternal organizations (Bush 170), in the final “Envoi” the mask is taken off for good. We hear the narrator tell us that he has been sitting in a leather chair talking about “the little town in the

sunshine that once we knew" (SS 145), in a tone much like the Preface's real-life Stephen Leacock, an urbanite who also frequents private clubs (Moritz & Moritz 150). The regaling is frankly a conversational act, just as Chaucer-pilgrim admits his tale as a performative speech act to pass time. Mariposa-ness may be a real virtue or memory, but Mariposa the place is a spoken pawn for both the book's auditors and those in the club. In terms of their status as acknowledged fictional characters, the Mariposa townspeople *could* come from anywhere; if the train trip were not an agreed act of imagination for the Mausoleum Club men, the narrator would otherwise need to explain how thirty years later Pepperleigh and Drone can still be on the train (SS 143) rather than their fictive types. This genericity is also essential to the narrator's dreamlike image of the train trip that exists only in his and the auditor's longing minds, so nimbly and sweetly ended by the narrator's heartbreaking coda that the whistles and welcoming calls have faded and they are back in the enervated deadness of their "mausoleum" club.

## V. Conclusion

Leacock's late life was less sunny, with his wife deceased, persisting health problems, and a mandated retirement from McGill in 1936 which he bitterly railed against. He skipped his son Stevie's graduation ceremony in 1940, spouting, "Oh, to hell with it. People would say who is that funny old man in the shabby clothes and answer the funny old man was Stephen Leacock and that he was probably drunk" (qtd. in MacMillan 143). Leacock nevertheless helped foster the unique Canadian style of humor which he doubted would ever exist. It is curious that while *Sketches* has been beloved by generations, it has attracted less critical respect due to its lightness of tone and a Victorian-influenced style which was outmoded even within Leacock's lifetime with the growth of modernist fiction. A century later, whether Leacock saw himself as Canadian, American, or English is even less compelling as

a scholarly issue. Yet whether or how the *Sketches* narrator navigates his ambivalent or incongruous reportage remains unpersuasively argued.

It seems an odd stratagem but is hopefully productive to use Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, so foreign in both time, space, and affinity from Leacock, in analogical comparison. Yet its juxtaposition serves to emphasize that the *Sketches* narrator, far from indicating inconsistency or an inexperienced authorial hand, situates himself as a performer amusing his audience with a bard's toolset of rhetorical techniques, purposefully rising and dipping between guises and identities. In summary, he does this by utilizing moves such as comic pairings of lofty/naïve declarations with earthy/knowning ones, while underscoring his actions as the understood performative ones of a storyteller reciting a fictive narrative. Such a reading may helpfully reenergize analysis of and respect for this wonderfully funny, sad, and national touchstone of early Canadian humor.

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