

**“A SOCIAL MASQUERADE”:
THE IRONIC DISCOURSE OF *SUNSHINE SKETCHES OF A LITTLE TOWN*
(LEACOCK, 1912)**

ABSTRACT: Stephen Leacock’s novel *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) is a humorous narrative whose agenda seems simply to be that of causing innocuous laughter. My premise is that it does so, however, while making readers reflect upon the sociopolitical issues discussed through the irony of the narrator. Most of the events taking place in the fictional Mariposa are absurd – and that is also what makes them comical and ironic. The narrative confuses fantasy with reality, memories with events, imagination with facts, although the narrator’s interest is supposedly that of making readers certain about how Mariposa is “really” like. From a thorough reflection upon the verisimilar deal between author, translator, and reader I move to Leacock’s (1912) novel, discussing my translation of some of its excerpts – the first regarding philanthropy and the last about corruption. Ultimately, I reach the conclusion that literature is not supposed to serve the real, but to transform it, just as a town transforms a map. Closing the article with an elegy to translation, I reinforce my hypothesis that there is no perfect mirror if its level of perfection is measured through the faithfulness of its reflections: every reflected image is bent because any interpreter’s understanding of it is also inherently bent. In the social masquerade of literature, communication is only possible through the abstract reasoning of a rather metaphysical contact between the involved agents; and the only truth available in the text is precisely the one hidden behind the lies it tells.

KEYWORDS: Canadian Literature; Irony; Humour.

RESUMO: O romance *Sunshine Sketches of a Little town* (1912), de Stephen Leacock, é uma narrativa de humor cujo foco parece ser simplesmente o riso inócuo. Minha premissa é que ela o produz, entretanto, enquanto oferece aos leitores uma oportunidade de refletir sobre questões sociopolíticas discutidas através da ironia do narrador. A maioria dos eventos que ocorrem na fictícia Mariposa são absurdos – e é justamente isso que os torna cômicos e irônicos. A narrativa confunde fantasia e realidade, memórias e eventos, imaginação e fatos; ainda que o interesse do narrador pareça ser o de mostrar aos leitores como Mariposa é “de verdade”. Após uma profunda reflexão sobre o acordo de verossimilhança entre autor, tradutor e leitor, eu parto para o romance de Leacock (1912), discutindo minha tradução de alguns de seus trechos – o primeiro ligado a filantropia e o segundo sobre corrupção. Por fim chego a conclusão de que a literatura não deve servir o real, mas transformá-lo, assim como uma cidade transforma um mapa. Fechando o artigo com uma elegia para a tradução, reforço minha hipótese de que não existe espelho perfeito caso sua perfeição seja medida pela fidelidade de seus reflexos: toda imagem refletida é adulterada, bem como toda interpretação. No baile de máscaras literário, a comunicação só é possível através da racionalidade abstrata num contato metafísico entre os agentes envolvidos; e a única verdade disponível em um texto é aquela que ele esconde entre as mentiras que conta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura Canadense; Ironia; Humor.

By irony, in its very widest context, I do not refer to that negativity of attitude we associate with common irony, but rather to the very principle of negation itself. The difference between irony as “dry mock”, or perverse negativity, and irony as unlimited capacity to negate, or oppose, ideas, is not a difference in the kind of operation the mind performs but rather a difference in the mind’s intentions toward the observed content. (Bert States, *Irony and Drama: A Poetics*, p. xvii)

Introduction: The false causality

That the marginal position humour occupies in literary criticism is questionable is no novelty – since the emergence of tragedy and comedy the logic of a hierarchical organisation of them (the former at the top and the latter at the bottom) has remained pretty much the same; but, as already implied, what goes unnoticed is the input humour has always provided for the development of literature and for – perhaps even more important – people’s interest on the literary world to be triggered. The breaking with tradition happens, I dare say, much more through laughter than through tears. Moreover, literature shall thereby address serious matters, to be politically motivated, willing to provide reflections upon both somber and buoyant matters; but, before all of that, it first needs to be read and to become significant in peoples’ lives – something humorous literature has very often been able to do. In the end, one of the assets of humorous literature, as well put by Unal Aytur (2005, p. 35) in his article “Humour and Satire in English Literature”, is the fact that “[h]umour works chiefly by stressing the contrast between the ideal and the real; it has produced some of the finest works of art in English literature”. Setting of from such premise I get to the words of Lynch (1984, p. 2):

Sunshine Sketches demonstrates that Leacock [...] believes that such an appreciation of the past is necessary to a full life, a life which develops organically rather than one which is radically cut off from its roots. By means of its imaginative humorous vision, *Sunshine Sketches* enacts [...] a return to Mariposa via the train which is the book itself, a distillation and embodiment of its virtues with an honest appraisal of its faults.

Stephen Leacock’s novel *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) is a humorous narrative whose agenda seems simply to be that of causing innocuous laughter; it does that, however, while giving readers the opportunity to reflect upon the sociopolitical issues discussed by the author through the irony of his narrator. Just as laughter might result in serious reflection, the advent of an apparently idle imagination, in this sense, should not be seen as irrelevant, but actually as essential for the reader to question the real through the advent of the unreal. Given the problematic dualism – dividing fantasy and reality, fiction and fact, the historical and the

literary, etc. – this moment gives us perhaps a good opportunity to theorise upon the pertinence of humour within such debate and its contributions for a new look upon the “real” to be suggested.

For the organic development of *Mariposa*, humorous vision requires us to boost imagination, as “objective truth, knowable to any rational perceiver, does not exist; Leacock's narrator is not a philosophical realist in that sense; the truth about *Mariposa* depends upon perspective, subjectivity, or, in literary terms, on point of view” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 5). It is precisely the issue of point of view that gives readers’ access to a subjective truth, to the detriment of an objective one. This is so for most of the events taking place in *Mariposa* are absurd – and that is also what makes them comical and ironic. The narration confuses fantasy with reality, memories with events, imagination with facts; even though the narrator’s interest is supposedly that of making readers certain about how *Mariposa* is “really” like. The reader is nonetheless able to notice that he is behaving in an ironic fashion – and that things are not what he poses them to be.

The researcher him/herself might be asking: Is *Mariposa* a representation of Orillia, the town Leacock has lived while in Canada? Is the contemporary Orillia, in Ontario, similar to the early XX century *Mariposa*? These questions are two things: useless and unmanageable. When it goes to the problem of literary autonomy not only to fantasise upon reality but actually to invent it, a pivotal step is to bear in mind that there is nothing specific to reality that makes it “more real” than fiction itself – if Leacock has invented *Mariposa*, then it exists. What happened is not more factual than what could have happened, since our access to what has occurred is not less fictional than our access to what has not, in epistemological terms. In *Figures of Literary Discourse* (1972, p. 71) Genette poses that literary verisimilitude “owes its existence as narrative to its relation to the story it tells; it owes its existence as discourse to the narration that proffers it”.

There is, in this sense, no reality impinging upon fantasy – there is no real fighting against an illusion; when it goes to literature such conflict is innocuous, and actually worthless, since, in the end, “reciprocally the narrative assumes its identity as narrative discourse only insofar as it tells a story – otherwise it would not be narrative – and only insofar as it is proffered by someone – otherwise it would not be itself a discourse” (GENETTE, 1972, p. 74). Literary discourse, therefore, depends on its condition as a narrative to be elaborated, developed, and verisimilar – it depends on a writer, his/her text, and, ultimately, on the reader. This is so for, eventually, it is the reader who, in the end of the line, transform the literary discourse into something real – his/her reading gives imagination a shape, and, in this specific case, puts Mariposa in the map.

Literature, in this sense, is not supposed to serve the real, but to transform it, just as a town transforms a map – i.e. the literary is not a means for one subject to objectify and constrict historical events, it is a tool for such events to be expanded to an extent whereto only literature could get them. In “Inference, Causality, and the Levels of Narrative” (1990), Roy Jay Nelson provides a distinction between “true causality” and “false causality” through Genette’s notion of “motivation”: the “anterior details ‘caused’ by a plan for ulterior events”. Such motivation would, in this sense, be working as a sort of “false causality”. “It is a ‘false’ causality inserted in the story to mask the ‘true’ causality, which I situate in the narration, and which is antichronological and based on intent” (NELSON, 1990, p. 90).

The false causality which structures motivation is essential for the functioning of the literary discourse; an event needs to be motivated by something symbolic in itself – it needs to be larger than it might seem to be at first. The true causality, therefore, would be the reason why an event is placed where it is – it is the linear relevance of a literary moment for the following moments of the narrative. By the same token the false causality is a writer’s tool to take the reader through the pages in a smooth fashion of cause plus effect – creating a logic for

the literary discourse whereby something happens because something else had already happened. The “false” causality, thus – the fictional elements providing the armour for literary motivation – is a process of masking the author’s communication with his/her readers through the text.

In Nelson’s view “the function of such masking is verisimilitude. If we know the reasons for an event before it happens, if it is ‘motivated’, it appears more plausible, verisimilar: prepared consequentiality is in operation” (1990, p. 72). Literary communication can thus only take place through this metaphorical discourse; through the abstract reasoning of a rather metaphysical contact between author, text, and reader. The only truth in literature is the one hidden behind the lies it tells. Bearing that in mind, the purpose of my following brief analysis of some of the narrator’s assertions within the sketches is to make out if and how s/he makes use of irony to create a “false causality”. That is, by masking facts and imposing an illogic logic throughout his/her manipulation of events. More specifically, I shall tackle mainly with the appearance of philanthropy and corruption in the narrative, as to see which kind of treatment both these instances receive.

Discussion: “Thanks, but no thanks”

Before getting to the text, it is worth mentioning that a good illustration of the dodgy nature of literary verisimilitude is the fact that many writers have written completely fictional tales on historical events with no purpose of being faithful to documented history, but solely to tell a distinct version of events (a literary tradition which Linda Hutcheon has named “historiographic metafiction”). José Saramago, for instance, takes readers close to the characters he verisimilarly describes in novels such as *Baltasar & Blimunda* (1982) and *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991); he does not talk therein about historical and religious heroes or conquerors, but tells the story of the common man and woman, who tend to be forgotten in historical

descriptions, giving us the idea that their personal stories are less relevant than the official history we learn in school. Saramago's novels are boosted than with an opportunity of actually moving way beyond more acknowledged sources of historical versions, an evidence that "verisimilitude helps us perceive tightly knit causal chains, and gives us assurance in filling the myriad little gaps (and the larger ones, too) between events" (NELSON, 1990, p. 94).

It is by perceiving such tightly knit casual chains that both little and large gaps are gradually filled in, through our own interaction as readers with both author and text. The process of historiographic metafiction – category wherein I deem Leacock's (1912) narrative able to be inserted (as it retells part of Canadian history from the perspective of undocumented fictional individuals) – gives historical events a chance to become less biased. In the history of the world many histories are forgotten, and inventing new ones is the only way to recover (or, better, reinvent) what has been lost. Nevertheless, the more one puts him/herself in the middle of a search for fixity the more s/he ends up allowing fluidity to emerge: "it is within the paradoxical desire for permanence within the continuity of change that we invent meanings which rise and fall in each wave of insight, and transform themselves even in our seeming grasp of them" (ITWARU, 1990, p. 8).

Fixity seems a grand presumption of many texts. For indeed, is not a text written, a formal body both textural and textual, "a printed arrangement in which there is also a telling and a reading?" (ITWARU, 1990, p. 9) Curiously, the literary text is in itself inherently concrete and fixed as a textual written structure – but this is a structure whose framework gives volatility to such text, letting the abstract and the concrete to affect one another. Itwaru's (1990, p. 9) rhetorical question is a very good one, and he would later answer by explaining how his notion of fixity implies, controversially, a necessary and unavoidable association with fluidity: "There is here a fictive link. My interpretation of the signs contained in the print is my transformation of the language guidance given by the writer. This is a duality. The work as work exists in my

having called it into being” (ITWARU, 1990, p. 10). In this process of becoming, literature engages in our reinterpretation of signs and obliteration of dualities. The “self” and the “other” implicated within such picture can only interact if a mirror is provided, a mirror for translating and redefining meanings. There is dialogue, and not an opposition between the observer of images and the observed images – our mind allows literature to speak, and our interpretations are a response to such discourse.

“To start with, a story must be more than just a series of obstacles. If the main character only needs to survive a string of hurdles to attain the ultimate goal, the reader might have an enjoyable ride but not gain much in the way of meaning” (LAMPMAN, 1895, p. 1). Any literary event can be real in its own terms, any space can be conceived materially, and any fictional individual can be given life – no matter how apparently unreal s/he might look. Literary characters are characters like anyone else; like a political figure, like you and me – the fact they have never materially existed does not change the fact they are characterised just as we characterise ourselves. In our minds, every imaginable person is a person, period. By the same token, “[i]t doesn’t matter whether such characters are human or non-human, male or female, culturally bound or universal; the essential unity of their inner struggles and outer quests remains the same” (LAMPMAN, 1985, p. 2). That is to say: what could have been, in literature, simply is. End of story.

But if it is not how “real” a character, the space and time s/he occupies, and his/her discourse happens to be that should make a difference to the reader, the critic, and/or to any other subject, what is there for us to do with literature? Well, what is behind such apparatuses is providing us with a channel to rethink something concrete through the unrestrained abstractness of art. As a matter of fact, “many people around the world regardless of language, culture, or time have expressed their most important ideas through such tales” (BARRON, 2012, p. 3). The verisimilar experience of reading a text and permitting it to be materialised

notwithstanding its made-up authenticity emerges as one of the most effective occasions for a singular and innovative discourse to surface – one that could never surface if it depended solely on the “real” and concrete world to establish itself. Therefore, and still according to Barron, “[u]ltimately, fantasy is true [...since...] the unique power of fantasy springs from its ability to selectively distort reality in pursuit of truth” (2012, p. 4). Distorting reality, the fictional construction of a literary text can and does allow us to look at some reflections not as mere reflections, but through different perspectives – making us able to spot details that we could not see beforehand.

“Fantasy shows us reality not through a perfect mirror, but through a bent mirror – so the biggest questions of life can be more fully illuminated and explored” (BARRON, 2012, p. 6). In what concerns literature, and especially translated literature, I dare say that there is no perfect mirror if its level of perfection is measured through the faithfulness of its reflections: every reflected image is bent because any interpreter’s understanding of it is also inherently bent. No image is the same, for those who look at it are never the same. In literature, the narrative is constructed by everyone involved in the process: author, text, and reader. The ultimate role becomes that of the reader: that whose varying contextual conditioning and particular perception of signs make his/her readings ever-changing. Hence the absence of any perfect mirror and/or reflected image. Reality needs fantasy to thrive, and vice versa inasmuch as it is only “[w]hen the provocative stories we see in that magical mirror contain believable characters, realistic places, and meaningful ideas that they have the power to change our lives” (ITWARU, 1990, p. 3). For the literary world, as for anything else, the truth and the untruth are not antagonistic, but inseparable partners.

This is pretty much to say that the mirror of literature is a channel not to another world, but to another dimension of this world, the “real world”. In this sense if the material mirror I have in my bedroom is applied by me to see how I look with certain clothes, the mirror of literature

gives me an opportunity to imagine myself wearing clothes that I would never conceive purchasing in the first place. After all, literature materialises not limited to its fictive context, but fairly capable of going beyond such context: “Literary production as the imaginary of a consciousness at work is informed by, and informs, as well, as transcends these contexts” (ITWARU, 1990, p. 10).

Finally, it is high time I said that, informed by the context of the early XX century Canada, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (LEACOCK, 1912) does indeed, in many occasions, transcend the basic epistemes of its locale through the nourishment of such imaginary. One of these recalcitrant sources of experience that are provided in Leacock's (1912) novel is, in my view, the novel's characters' skepticism towards the philanthropy of the bourgeoisie. In several moments of the novel attempts at demoralising the supposed benevolent characters of those people who define themselves as philanthropists emerge. When describing the actions of philanthropic characters, the narrator, together with other characters, realise that, even though the philanthropist poses to be unwilling to make inequality disappear, his/her donations are never directed to those who are indeed marginalised by global sociopolitical and financial organisation.

In this sense, Leacock (1912) raises readers' awareness to the fact that, many times, peoples' will to give money away has nothing to do with their preoccupation towards other subjects; it has to do with their inner satisfaction, their own acknowledgment within the bourgeois society. Their selflessness, controversially, is guided their selfishness. Even though the philanthropist was praised and defended in acknowledged and counterfeit spaces for their exhibition, there were other simpler places wherein their character could be apprehended more effectively. In the following excerpt the narrator explains how the inner body of a person's character could be dissected in Jeff's barbershop. It was not through the pompous and grandiloquent institutions that one could get at the real worth of a man, but in one's going to the barbershop and talking

idly about such person. The narrator describes this unknown man almost as an animal, who can be imagined cleaned and “put up for auction”.

I may say in parentheses that it [going to the barbershop] was a favourite method in Mariposa if you wanted to get at the real worth of a man, to imagine him clean sold up, put up for auction, as it were. It was the only way to test him. “And now look at 'em”, Jeff went on. “They make their money and what do they do with it? They give it away. And who do they give it to? Why, to those as don't want it, every time. They give it to these professors and to this research and that, and do the poor get any of it? Not a cent and never will”. (LEACOCK, 1912, p. 39)¹

The barber's view may be taken as the view of an uneducated and/or ignorant person, but can it be completely discredited? I would not say so. We laugh because it makes sense, and it does make sense because there is some truth to it. Jeff's criticism is not against the fact that those people who make their money without much difficulty just decide to give it away. The problem is that such money is given to many peoples and institutions, but never to the most marginalised amount of people in the society. The philanthropists he scorns finance research, but fail to demonstrate any sort of empathy toward the starving individuals. These have never been given such attention and, as Jeff sees it, never will be. Of course researches are important and professors need funding for their projects to work effectively, in this sense I do not believe at all that Leacock's (1912) critique aimed to raise any questions towards such fact being himself a professor, a researcher, and an intellectual.

Jeff is simply performing a common social dichotomy: the fact that the privileged ignore and diminish the importance of the unprivileged, who expectedly responds with contempt and disdain towards the interests of the former. If such issue already existed and was already addressed by Leacock in the 1912's Canadian context, I dare say it has been irrevocably

¹ Posso dizer, em parênteses, que [ir ao barbeiro] era o método favorito dos moradores de Mariposa para quando eles quisessem captar o valor real de um homem, imaginá-lo limpo, negociado, exposto como se em um leilão, por assim dizer. Essa era a única forma de testá-lo. “E agora olhe pra eles”, continuou Jeff. “Ganham dinheiro e o que fazem com ele? Eles dão. E pra quem é que eles dão? Oras, para aqueles que não querem, toda vez. Dão dinheiro pra tal professor ou pra tal pesquisa e etc., e os pobres recebem alguma parte disso? Não recebem nem um centavo e nunca receberão”. (Every translation of Leacock's novel brought herein is mine)

potentialised in the contemporaneity. Today, such kind of discourse can be heard in every corner of Brazilian streets – streets divided between those who think they are too important to listen to people of a lower class, and those who believe the projects of those first subjects who deem themselves important have no importance or feasibility at all. Having said that, at this point it becomes evident to the readers that we are tackling here with an unreliable narrator – one that shall narrate the events as s/he thinks would serve him/her best. The instantaneous outcome of having events told by such a tendentious narrator (whose discourse seems to differ from the reality as we are able to see it) is humour.

In overall terms, humour, it seems, is an aspect that can and is indeed capable of putting America together; and for my bridge between the original text and my translation to be effectively constructed and kept functional such humour might serve this research pretty well. Constance Rourke, in the book *American Humour: A Study of the National Character* (1959, p. 109), demonstrates how there is “scarcely an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related, few which in some sense it has not governed. It has moved into literature, not merely as an occasional touch, but as a force determining large patterns and intentions”. It is indeed due to the fact that this inherent humorous aspect of the American character, and also since it has come from experience to be moved into literature as a force determining further patterns, that such connection between the Canadian readers in the early XIX century and Brazilian ones in the contemporaneity is not something to be taken as unlikely.

This does not mean humour can be taken for granted, or regarded as an institutionalised realm in America –I say that based on humorous pieces that aim to raise awareness and whose purpose is to apply irony as a tool to make readers ponder upon social issues. But, besides these, one can easily pinpoint the existence of that sort of humour that has alienation as its main goal – inasmuch as the comic nature of anything that aims at causing laughter depends on its endless reinvention before those systems that can and should be made fun of, until it has no voids. One

could conclude then that the narrator's humorous discourse has to do with the usage of irony, as s/he inverts the logic of philanthropy – criticising those who donate money to research. Such critique is amenable to be reclaimed and seems to keep being effective even more than a century after the original publication of the novel, as the object criticised is still in operation.

Likewise, and now moving to the second and last excerpt to be analysed, the critique articulated by Leacock's (1912) narrator in what regards the elections, and all the corruption and dishonesty related to it, is also far from being strange to the contemporary readers. Raising awareness to fruitful discussions such as this one seems relevant for me not only to profitably transfer such meanings but actually boost them as often as possible. A moment when, in my reading, I judged it would be fun and helpful for Leacock's (1912) irony if I manipulated it more actively once again, is when the narrator talks about Edward Drone – who was the politician affiliated with no party and seemed to be the most honest one among all the candidates. The narrator describes his campaign as miserable, it looked as if he was “lost” from the beginning. Drone's level of familiarity with the functioning of political campaigns in the town left much to be desired; wandering round from farm to farm and envisaging almost no prospects in the future landscape, he ends up being like a shipwrecked person unable to explore the island he is living in. Drone tries to take his words to any people who, in his view, could vote for him to win, reason why he decides to go and talk to every farmer just to let them know about what he was promising – or better, what he was *not* promising.

Here and there you might see Edward Drone, the Independent candidate, wandering round from farm to farm in the dust of the political buggies. To each of the farmers he explained that he pledged himself to give no bribes, to spend no money and to offer no jobs, and each one of them gripped him warmly by the hand and showed him the way to the next farm. (LEACOCK, 1912, p. 139)²

² Por aqui e por ali pode-se ver Edward Drone, o candidato do partido independente, vagando de fazenda em fazenda na poeira das carreatas dos outros candidatos. Para cada um dos agricultores, ele explicou que ele se comprometeria a não oferecer nenhum suborno, não gastar dinheiro público com frivolidades e a não oferecer cargos de confiança durante a campanha. Assim, cada um desses agricultores apertou-lhe calorosamente a mão dizendo “obrigado, mas não, obrigado” ao mesmo tempo em que apontavam qual caminho deveria tomar para a próxima fazenda.

Here, right at the very beginning of the political campaigns, we already get to know that he was really the only honest candidate was. At the same time, he was also the one with the minor chances of winning the elections.³ This is so for even though he pledged himself to give no bribes and said he would spend no money and offer no jobs for his political objective to be achieved, no one was willing to vote for him – in fact, they only respectfully gripped him warmly by the hand showing him the way to the next farm, which means they had no interest at all in endorsing his political position. This is the moment when, in my translation, I added the sentence “[...] *dizendo ‘obrigado, mas não, obrigado [...]’*” as to reiterate Leacock’s irony when exposing the farmers lack of concern towards what was being proposed by the candidate. In the end they wanted public money to be spent, they wanted to receive the bribes, and they wanted to have jobs offered by the politicians – someone promising to do none of such things could not be taken seriously. That is how these campaigns work, that is how candidates become able to win or to lose the elections, and that is what Drone did not get.

Again, Leacock’s irony here goes way beyond the early XIX century within Canada, being pertinent within any other society haunted by corruption. That is our case, and the case of many other regions, which makes such fact both good and bad – bad because, after so long, it was high time we overcame such difficulties and abolished such bizarre tradition of political treachery and dishonesty, instead of repeating, masking and depending on it, and good because it is such condition that makes Leacock’s (1912) novel capable of being as, or perhaps even more, meaningful for my target readers. It is important to bear in mind that this discussion can only be conceived because, in a first moment, subjects who read the previous excerpt would interpret as desirable for Drone to be listened and given a chance, since he was being the only

³ Drone’s characterisation is rather close to that of Tom Kirkman, the accidental U.S.A. president played by Kiefer Sutherland in the television series *Designated Survivor* (ABC, 2016), who is the only incorruptible politician in the story, but gets the job because everyone else is dead. Drone, unfortunately, would not be so lucky.

one trying to carry out a frank campaign. What turns the excerpt into an ironic description which would end up putting forth a rather funny result – i.e. the farmers failing to trust in the only trustworthy candidate – is the inversion in logic, the idea that what takes place is exactly the contrary of what should be taking place.

According to Vandaele, on the one hand, humor has links “with primitive parts of the brain, parts associated with socialization, (shared) emotions and (reduction of) danger or hostility” (2008, p. 147). This is how our first contacts and responses as humans to humour would take place, when the “primitive parts of the brain” – which seem to work rather well for most other primates, that also use laughter as an element for socialisation – interact with those “parts associated with [...] (shared) emotions” – which, in a first moment, would be those between parents and offspring. “On the other hand, humor is not just laughter; it is laughter that has been captured as a useful response to uncertainty, surprises, and insights constructed by our symbolic mind” (VANDAELE, 2008, p. 148). This is what the reflection upon Drone’s candidacy effectively demonstrate, since, after inserted in a specific social structure and invited to gaze upon it, readers’ laughter is turned into a symptomatic response to uncertainty, surprises, and insights. We have seen stories like Drone’s, and part of us is laughing not to cry.

The honest and fair candidate is exactly the one that no Mariposan is going to vote for – what makes such situation laughable is thus the interaction between the “primitive parts of the brain” with those that have been erected by the complex connections of our symbolic minds. As both excerpts brought and analysed herein demonstrate, the novel, I dare say, is much more complex than an uncritical look would make one think at a first moment. In fact, and as it has been thoroughly exposed, to consider humorous texts less complex than more “serious” ones would be a blunder. For someone to be laughing at something else, there is a very idiosyncratic context in the background of such interaction. In the end, for the comic to exist, the possibility

of the tragic also needs to be there – and vice versa. Moreover, when laughter is caused the goal is very seldom directed towards providing pleasant moments per se.

The fact that there is no train stopping by at Mariposa is, in the end, a sad fact – how much work would there be to grant the town with a functional station? The ghost station, whereby trains pass daily without leaving or taking any passengers, is a metaphor of the town's condition – forgotten in space and time, left aside by the movement of progress. In the words of Vandaele, “humour may and does have various textual and ideological functions, which all deserve to be taken into account” (2008, p. 151). In the specific case of Leacock's (1912) novel it is the author's political and social agenda that is, and inevitably would be, underlying these various textual and ideological functions. Who cares if this is a depiction of Orillia or not? It is not that Leacock's biography was necessarily doomed to be serving the need of informing readers about what he means in one or another excerpt, but the very opposite – the text is autonomous, it does not need information on the author to be understood, but informs readers about the author and makes them curious to look for more deepness into his thoughts. That is, all of these aspects which deserve to be taken into account are not outside the novel, but, consecutively, surfacing its seemingly limited atmosphere.

Final remarks: “On the surface of living society”

It is worth reminding that Canadian literature, regardless of the piece, is a consistent stance, and has not, on the whole, been explored as it deserves to be; studying more Canadian authors and elaborating upon more aspects concerning the country would be pertinent for freeing the artistic productions of such nation from the peripheral condition whereto it has been taken. Among the great writers it has produced, Stephen Leacock is surely one that deserves to be put in the spotlight. As detected by my reading, analysis, and translation of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Leacock (1912), the author manifests expertise as a social scientist to, through

humour and irony, put into question the political, religious, social, and identity flavour of the period wherein his text belongs. Such is an evidence that Bakhtin is right to assume that “laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (1984, p. 32).

When dealing with the analysis and translation of humour, one must pay special attention to the following issues: 1) the dangers of marginalising the literature of times and spaces mistakenly taken as irrelevant to us, 2) the relevance of the absurd and the idle to our serious, important, and hushed matters of contemporaneity, 3) humour as a consistent means to political and social awareness, 4) translation as an autonomous and original process of creation and establishment of new epistemological reasoning. This is why my literary analysis of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (LEACOCK, 1912) pay special attention to the ironic tone of the narrator as a means to understand some of the issues unveiled within his discourse. The analysis and reflection upon my translation choices when bringing the novel to my target context, as to elaborate upon the effects of laughter and the possibilities for refabricating laughter in a brand new space and time, on its turn, is still a work in progress – and my apologies for that.

Besides, given the space and time constraints of an article, reflecting upon such issues would not be possible unless I did it superficially – reason why I decided to focus on the narrator’s usage of irony as to articulate a critique on the issue of honesty and benevolence in the narrative. Dealing with humour and with irony is not an easy task – no matter how peripheral laughter might be in academic terms. Any scholar, when dealing with a text that makes fun of something it might be paradoxically taking seriously (much more seriously than many texts that look at issues seemingly with “more respect”) must be aware s/he is not grappling with a perspicuous narrative – i.e. in many occasions such narrative might mean the very opposite of what is written. Like in music, to literature the silence might mean much more than the noise –

many times it is what is left aside, and not what is objectively articulated within the discourse of the narrator, that provides the translation researcher with vital information to scrutinise the work and propose pertinent possibilities for reframing such work in the target context. Society is a living being, and laughing at such living being is one of the most consistent means to making out its flaws and assets. Reinforcing the assets and trying to solve the flaws would, in this sense, be the most expectable activity for those who are capable of looking at both sides.

In the words of Bergson, “[a]ny image suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable. Now, such a notion is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made, on the surface of living society” (1914, p. 28). In Leacock’s narrative, the surface of his living society, one is required to rethink the effects and applicability of laughter in terms of social and political matters; matters that might be, as seen so far, reaffirmed or put into question through an ironic gaze upon them. The first stances of humour that would surface in the human experience are those caused by children’s fun and jesting during their so recurring discoveries regarding the world that surrounds them. And I am pretty sure that humour has always, and shall always keep accompanying us, from our birth to our death; laughing is part of us, of our whole lives – and the one who lacks a smile also lacks a part of life, one that can only be achieved thereby.

Without having been as impacted as adults by the context they live in, such detail does not hinder children from laughing nor from crying; these are genetically programmed behaviours, which have to do with our biological constitution and human evolution not only as a manner to experience the material world, but to interact with it. We receive, taste, and respond to the world through laughter. This initiation in humour is what Freud would later call “play”: “Play – let us keep to that name – appears in children while they are learning to make use of words and to put thoughts together. This play probably obeys one of the instincts which compel children to practise their capacities” (1991, p. 18). Analysing and translating Leacock’s (1912) novel into

Portuguese, therefore, does not only entail a respect to the source and target contexts whereby humour can be maintained, it also entails a respect for the instincts which compel readers to experience laughter. Such instincts are, for a reading public, much more multifaceted than for children, simply because such public has gone through much more experience. Experience affects directly the functioning of these instincts, instincts without which humour would never be possible to surface.

The superficiality of the text, therefore, must thus be overcome for the connection between what goes beyond the words and readers' mental state of comic responses to be promoted. As we can see, the complexity of laughter is not less palpable than the intricacy of seriousness since, in fact, "[h]umor is known to challenge translators. It is often seen as a paradigm case of untranslatability" (VANDAELE, 2008, p. 148). In this sense – and since the author's irony and the comic effects it entails permeate the entire atmosphere of the novel – I agree with Vandaele (2008, p. 150) when he says that, when dealing with humorous literature, "any translation failure will therefore be very visible". What is important, nevertheless, is not what the author really meant, but what his text really does; therefore, and bearing in mind we are dealing with a literary piece that depends on causing laughter, inevitably "it is obvious that the translator has failed when no one laughs at translated humor" (VANDAELE, 2008, p. 148).

It is nonetheless rather easy to say "it is obvious that the translator has failed" when the reader does not laugh; as usual, when things do not happen as expected it is due to the translator's inability to be as good as the writer was – on the other hand, if things work well, it is due to the quality of the writer. I do not want to fight that battle – this is a confrontation I chose to set aside. Vandaele's (2008) position seems to be here in parallel with what is second nature to most subjects when the process of translation is addressed – process wherein credit is only given to the translator when mistakes are supposedly made. Furthermore, if on one hand it might be effortless to translate his humorous sketches when they are overtly funny and

focusing on issues that might be (erroneously) considered universally laughable, “[o]n the other hand, the translator of humor has to cope with the fact that the ‘rules’, ‘expectations’, ‘solutions,’ and agreements on ‘social play’ are often group- or culture-specific” (VANDAELE, 2008, p. 151).

Nevertheless, such rules, expectations, solutions, and agreements do not need to be culture-specific in the sense that supposedly only Canadians from the early XX century would be able to get within the literary social play; they only mean that the translation should be proposed carefully enough for the spatially and temporally specificities of the original novel not to hinder such comprehension. That is, it is because humour “is only accessible to those who are at least vaguely acquainted with the parodied discourse” (VANDAELE, 2008, p. 149) that such parodied discourse must not be turned into the villain or the victim of the original systems of meaning. In this sense, the relative or absolute untranslatability of humour – that Vandaele (2008, p. 149) believes to be “generally related to cultural and linguistic aspects” singular to its original circumstance – can and should be reconsidered; since, for a literary piece to keep living – no matter how relative or absolute its untranslatability might seem to be – it needs, unavoidably, to be translated.

Enthralled by the narrative, we naturally stop caring about the real world and start caring about the fictional one – such process inverts systems, as this vicarious experience transforms what exists into nothing and what did not exist into something. When, through irony, s/he sets forth two unexpected criticisms: the first regarding those people who donate money to research and the second concerning those who decide to undertake an honest political campaign, Leacock’s narrator is not really trying to “convince us”. The ironic subject, metaphorically and subjectively, says the very opposite of what it is actually saying; and, in the case of the excerpts brought herein, perhaps it is the logic of fraudulence that is being put into question, as well as the naturalisation of moral corruption. In this sense, even more complicated than interpreting

such exaggerations is interpreting if the person “responsible” for them is either the writer or the narrator – there is, apropos, no clear tips for us to know that for sure. This confusion empowers humour effects, as we realize that even the author himself is willing to be constructed as a fictional character in our reading (which can be noticed, for instance, in his preface at the onset of the story). Leacock (1912), as his narrator, surfaces from the pages of the book as part of the narrative, a passionate Canadian who applies irony to exaggerate on issues he believed needed our attention. And, indeed, I am pretty sure they still do.

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