The Roads Back:  
*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and George Elliott's  
*The Kissing Man*  

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. . . So it is that each one of them in due time marries an enchanted prince and goes to live in one of the little enchanted houses in the lower part of the town.  
**Stephen Leacock, Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town**

... People in town never considered the possibility of a birth-giving without the familiar old figure standing on the walk outside the house. . . . There he'd be: a gnarled, brown old man, his back curved, standing still, his sharpening machine down on the walk in front of him. . . . The grinderman is there, outside the door to a birth-giving so that the father and child can love.  
**George Elliott, The Kissing Man**

Stephen Leacock in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*¹ and George Elliott in *The Kissing Man*² both use the microcosmic world of an Ontario small town for an exploration of the mysteries of time and memory. Their attitudes and effects are very different, however. While Leacock preserves the distance of the ironist-racounteur with an occasional excursion into sentimentality, Elliott's narrator moves always on the inside, speaking through first one, then another of his characters. Leacock first takes us on a walkabout tour through Mariposa, then halts our movement to treat us to a series of filmic episodes that sets us up as the spectators we continue to be throughout. Elliott draws us in, past the frames of his pictures, to feel for and with his characters and to identify with their ongoing journeys.
Leacock's narrator begins deprecatingly, as a practised story-teller, blandishing his audience into listening to him, though he is, in fact, as compulsively determined to be heard as the Ancient Mariner himself: "I don't know whether you know Mariposa. If not, it is of no consequence . . ." (SS, p. 1). The introductory pages constitute a brilliant setting of place and time, a juxtaposing of long shots and close-ups:

There it lies in the sunlight, sloping up from the little lake that spreads out at the foot of the hillside on which the town is built. . . . On the Main Street itself are a number of buildings of extraordinary importance—Smith's Hotel and the Continental and Mariposa House, and the two banks (the Commercial and the Exchange), to say nothing of McCarthy's Block (erected in 1878), and Glover's Hardware Store with the Oddfellows' Hall above it (SS, pp. 1-2).

Then the narrator extends the reader's field of vision, at the same time establishing his appropriate reception of and response to all the sketches that will follow, by the series of appearance and reality contrasts in which the real is named appearance only and the inflation of comedy makes itself manifest:

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 . . . why, after a few months' residence you begin to realize that the place is a mere mad round of gaiety (SS, p. 3).

The five final paragraphs of this introduction begin, "Outside of Mariposa there are farms that begin well but get thinner and meaner as you go on," and end, "Thus the year runs its round, moving and changing in Mariposa, much as it does in other places" (SS, pp. 4-5). They climax and summarize the appearance/reality play that has just gone on—and to anyone of my generation with small-town experience, they are among the most poignantly funny and true lines in all our literature. When they finish, Leacock's scene is set—and so is the reader's relation to it. The town has been framed, miniaturized into an endearing magic world of its own, an enchanted, static world, where nothing is as it seems and, also, nothing is threatening to the outsider/reader/viewer.

Leacock then leads his readers to ringside seats from which we watch and listen in to a series of episodes, short feature films, more accurately cartoons, whose characters overlap and whose attributes and adventures are completely recognizable as likely, though comically inflated. If we recognize our own peccadilloes, our neighbours', or Canada's, in characters and events, it is with an amused, rueful, but ultimately comfortable sense of enjoyment, not dismay. And always we are comfortably outside the scenes we are watching, not required or invited to feel
more than a momentary sentimental sympathy for Dean Drone for the loss of his self-esteem, or Judge Pepperleigh for the loss of his son. At the end, of course, Leacock rounds it all off and gives it all away—we have been especially distanced indeed, in the elite "leather chairs of the Mausoleum Club, talking of the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew," stopping time for the exercise of affectionate memory, of amused, ironic, worldly wisdom, mixed with a certain measure of condescension.

In nineteenth-century American political parlance the comfortably superior group in the Mausoleum Club would have been called "mugwumps," the term that so bewildered and distressed Dean Drone. Mugwump meant a fence-sitter, one who did not have the nerve to dirty his hands with politics and so was seen as being ineffectual in the real business of life. Leacock's use of the word as a key factor in the episodes centring on Drone and his church points to one of the chief literary sources of *Sunshine Sketches*, a book called *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, by William L. Riordan, published in 1905. We are used to thinking of Leacock in conjunction with Thorstein Veblen, especially the congruities between Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. I would argue that in *Sunshine Sketches* George Washington Plunkitt is the prototype for Josh Smith, the hotel-keeper, and, to a lesser extent, for Jefferson Thorpe, the barber. Plunkitt and his career as Chief Boss of New York's Tammany system, State Senator, Assemblyman, Policy Magistrate, County Supervisor, Alderman and Millionaire, fascinated William Riordan, a New York reporter. He interviewed Plunkitt repeatedly at the place Plunkitt called his office, Graziano's bootblack stand in the old New York County Court House. The substance of the book that ensued is Plunkitt's, but the conception and the writing of it are Riordan's. Arthur Mann, the Smith College historian who introduced the 1963 edition, calls Plunkitt a "lovable rogue," and sums him up this way: "The fairest way to evaluate him is by his own standards. To Riordan he said that, 'if my worst enemy was given the job of writin' my epitaph when I'm gone, he couldn't do more than write: George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities and He Took 'Em'."

For us the point is how much the real Plunkitt sounds like one or other of Leacock's creations. Here is Plunkitt speaking in Riordan's chapter called "Honest Graff and Dishonest Graff":

Everybody is talkin' these days about Tammany men growin' rich on graff, but nobody thinks of drawin' the distinction between honest graff and dishonest graff... .

Jest let me explain by examples. My party's in power in the city, and it's goin' to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a new park at a certain place.

I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.
Ain't it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? Of course it is. Well that's honest graft.

On the day of the great election in Missinaba County Josh Smith deployed his boys with an equal cunning, so blatant that it almost seems innocent:

And it was just at this juncture, with one hour of voting left, that Mr. Smith emerged from his committee rooms and turned his voters on the town, much as the Duke of Wellington sent the whole line to the charge at Waterloo. From every committee room and sub-committee room they poured out in flocks with blue badges fluttering on their coats.

"Get at it, boys," said Mr. Smith, "vote and keep on voting till they make you quit" (SS, pp. 144-45).

There are massive differences in the effects of the two texts, however. While Plunkitt is a primer for power-bosses throughout, very funny but breath-taking in its assumptions of manipulative politicians and malleable electorate, Leacock's ameliorating genius softens such effects again and again. Jefferson Thorpe, the foolish, bedazzled, and greedy speculator, dreams of helping the poor and the blind with his loot. After the great crash,

...things are not so bad. You see it was just at this time that Mr. Smith's caff opened, and Mr. Smith came to Jeff's Woman and said he wanted seven dozen eggs a day, and wanted them handy, and so the hens are back, and more of them, and they exult so every morning over the eggs they lay that if you wanted to talk of Rockefeller in the barber shop you couldn't hear his name for the cackling (SS, p. 35).

Likewise the story of Dean Drone, the incompetent clergyman, ends with a scene of affectionate pathos:

So you will understand that the Dean's mind is, if anything, even keener, and his head even clearer than before. And if you want proof of it, notice him there beneath the plum blossoms reading in the Greek: he has told me that he finds that he can read, with the greatest ease, works in the Greek that seemed difficult before, because his head is so clear now.

And sometimes—when his head is very clear—as he sits there reading beneath the plum blossoms he can hear them singing beyond, and his wife's voice (SS, p. 86).

All of Leacock's sketches end with a strongly visualized scene, sometimes of stillness like this one, sometimes full of bustle and noise, like the grand torchlight parade to celebrate Josh Smith's victory or the rescue of the Mariposa Belle. But we are always outside the frame, safely detached from involvement in and responsibility for the action.

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!" (SS, p. 54).

Leacock played the enchanter when he wrote *Sunshine Sketches*. He stopped time; he placed his readers comfortably in the armchairs of the Mausoleum Club and he miniaturized Mariposa for his viewers, as he reminds us at the end: "How vivid and plain it all is. Just as it used to be thirty years ago" (SS, p. 153). With the broad strokes of his comic wand he trivialized real issues and then dismissed his whole conjuring as a nostalgic exercise: "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" (SS, p. 153). 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.

George Elliot wrote *The Kissing Man*, not to stop time, but to join past, present, and future in an ongoing, nurturing process, supportive of the growth and development of individuals. He took as his epigraph this passage from T. S. Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*: "But when I speak of the family, I have in mind a bond which embraces . . . a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote." After *Sunshine Sketches*, *The Kissing Man* is the next landmark in our small-town literature. Like its forerunner it is made up of a linked series of sketches or stories, and it, too, is influenced by an American work, though one very different from Riordan's, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). The technique of Elliott's work is entirely different from Leacock's; Elliott is engaged in pulling his readers into the text, into the action and the issues, not in separating us from these. Most particularly he invites and persuades us into a recognition of kinship, with each other, with men, women, and children of the past, in the present, and on into the future.

*Winesburg, Ohio* stands, with remarkable solidity, as an ancestor behind *The Kissing Man*. Anderson looked at the small town from an angle of vision very different from Leacock's and he saw a clouded scene. He looked at individual striving and loss and pulled his reader in with him, to identify with the characters, not to sit comfortably entertained outside the field of action. His "Book of the Grotesques," the introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*, is, in particular, so apt to Elliott's work that it, too, could serve as epigraph:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truth himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful. The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his book. I
will not try to tell you all of them. There was the truth of virginity and
the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of
profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds were
the truths and they were all beautiful.

And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched
up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a
dozens of them.

It was the truths that made the people grotesques... the mo-
ment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his
truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the
truth he embraced became a falsehood.\(^5\)

*The Kissing Man* was published in 1962, but Elliott worked on its
stories for many years before, eventually persuaded by John Gray of
Macmillan to collect them into a book. His town is not named, but it is, he
told me, a composite southern Ontario town within easy distance of Lake
Huron. Its geography is that of Strathroy where Elliott worked on the
newspaper, *The Age Dispatch*, right after the war. Many of its names,
Geddes' department store, Doc Fletcher, and the Butlers, for instance,
are Strathroy names. In fact George Elliott told me that one of the impel-
ling reasons for his writing had been conversations with Doug Geddes,
who used to tell him stories of Strathroy in which "he seemed to be trying
to tell me more than he could express." Years before Northrop Frye wrote
the "Conclusion" to *The Literary History of Canada* Elliott was writing
about the "Garrison Mentality" facet of small-town life and its effect on
individuals.

But he was also writing about "The Way Back," the title of his final
story and the clue he leaves with us to continuing community and
kinship. The time centre of *The Kissing Man* and the central explication of
his ideal occur in the book's fifth story, "A Room, a Light for Love." At the
end of World War I Gerald returns to Allie, his wife. Proprietors of the
Queen's Hotel, they begin their married life again. Its centre—and the
town's—is the Queen's Hotel drawing-room with its great crystal chandelier,
the setting of all the parties they give for the community. The chandelier is Allie's symbol for both individual love and community
bonding. As the years pass and the parties dwindle, Allie ritualistically
breaks a pendant for every friend who dies. When she herself dies Gerald
and Dougie Framingham, who had loved her since boyhood, voice their
memories and the story's meaning:

"Don't you remember, Doug? The first party in the draw-
ing-room? Helping us to put up the chandelier?..."

"But what's the use of knowing," Gerry said. "Alison is dead and
it's over now. It doesn't much matter when it started. It doesn't matter
what she meant. She was going against the way the world was and it felt
right to me and I helped her all I could, but it doesn't matter now."

"It does matter," Doug said. He felt like the boy-man again,
helping to carry handfuls of crystal pendants up the stairs to the draw-
ing-room.

"No, we're growing old and it doesn't matter. We're just making
old noises."
"But don't you see? Now we have a right to. It matters to the new ones coming along to hear our noises" (KM, pp. 61-62).

Gerry goes downstairs and destroys what is left of the chandelier and all its pendants. Then, "one loving, remembering voice flowed into the other. The chandelier was destroyed, so the thread of memory had been established and the two old men took turns remembering."

Time in The Kissing Man stretches back two generations and forward two from the dating of this story—four generations from the marriage of Tessie and Mayhew in story one, "An Act of Piety," to the birth of Dan and Victoria's baby in story eleven, "The Way Back." Throughout, the essence of time is seen to be process, movement, and a continuity whose essence is love. At the end of "An Act of Piety," Honey Salkald remembers his grandmother, proud Tessie, and Mayhew, his grandfather. He knows that "the past was in him, never to be forgotten or ignored. But he didn't know whether he was to forgive. He wanted only to keep what was good and pass it on" (KM, p. 12). Proud Tessie had worn a black velvet ribbon around her neck, signifying to herself her apartness from the common Irish who had moved into the neighbourhood, and also her general fear of the unknown "other," explained to herself as a fear of catching the goitre that disfigures her neighbour woman. In the book’s context, however, the ribbon signifies a cut-off between heart and head, Tessie's wilful breaking of community with herself and with her neighbours.

Mayhew, her husband, was of a different stamp. When he lay dying he wouldn't see the minister: "Oh, don't bother," you said. "I've got a religion better than what you offer" (KM, p. 9). At his funeral "Uncle Dan recited 'Thanatopsis', the way you said he was to," and thus the words of William Cullen Bryant voice Mayhew's belief and the book's benign message about the process of man's life in time:

... Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world, with kings,
The powerful of the earth, the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun, the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. ...
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

Many times in The Kissing Man the flow of time and the concept of the unity and continuity of all things are reiterated. In "You'll Get the Rest of Him Soon" Froody watches, mystified, as Doc Fletcher buries a tiny bit of pink (obviously a piece of the umbilical cord) in his backyard and hears him mutter, "you'll get the rest of him soon." Honey Salkald spies on the doctor on another, similar occasion:

There the doctor was, standing up straight with his arms up above his head, looking down into the grass.

The doctor sounded a lot like an Anglican minister, Honey said later.

"Seventy years isn't much, the way you keep track of it," the doctor said, "a breathing spell while you wait for the rest of him. You'll feel him growing from now on; a little restless in a few years; then an urgent longing; then the discoveries and finally the contentment. Nourish him the way you do all of us. Be patient with him because you'll get the rest of him soon. There is no question of reward" (my italics, KM, p. 44).

The characters who are really involved in the process of living and who are for life in The Kissing Man are not bound by the tough old Calvinistic God of rewards and punishments. Mayhew is one of them, Doc Fletcher is another; the Kissing Man, who compassionately kisses lonely women in Geddes' Department Store, is one, as is the Man Who Lived Out Loud, who lay down and died when his attempts to make people really live finally became too much for him. Johnson Mender, who knows that children might show his son Tom, Mordy Macdonald, and the minister the way back to kinship and community, is another. They are all wise old men in the literary tradition of Tiresias—their prototype goes far back beyond written literature. They are all outsiders to the hide-bound little town and they all formulate Elliott's perception of time as a natural process and continuum and of our kinship opportunities and responsibilities as we live our times.

The Kissing Man is like an overlay, a palimpsest on Sunshine Sketches. Leacock caught and capsule his town for us forever, under glass, much like the little buildings and tiny figures which used to sit still within a glass paperweight on my grandmother's parlour table. But if you shook the glass, the snow came down and down, and the scene was blurred and full of movement. Elliott in his time shook the glass, and now we can also see within it the old man fishing under the willow tree, and hear him giving pledges of hope and continuity to the boy, Finn:

"But the leaves fall into the water in October," Finn whispered.

"Yes. A leaf of love, a leaf of loneliness, a leaf of regret, a leaf of remorse, a leaf of compassion, a leaf for everything good and forgotten, for everything bad and always here. They fall into the pond and the trout eat them."

"The trout?"
“Sure. There are trout in the pond, son. Everybody in town thinks the trout have gone, but the big ones are still here in the pond. You've got to be patient to see them. That's all.”

“I thought the pond was fished out long ago.”

“This pond is never fished out. Look at it. A widening. Holding the water that comes down the creek, holding it back for a few minutes, then letting it through the mill-wheel and down the race and going on. That's what's important. Going on because it must. But here in the widening the pond catches all that falls from the willow and the trout eat it. The fish are there now, taking from what's upstream, staying here at the widening, taking from the tree, avoiding the lures, living, living.”

“Do you believe that?” Finn got up to go.

“Believe? I know” (KM, p. 78).
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