INCONGRUITY AND NOSTALGIA IN SARAH BINKS

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"Sarah, more than most poets, seizes upon the trivial . . . as an occasion for a lyrical outburst of pulsating beauty." This statement in the "Author's Introduction" to Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks*[1] provides the key to Sarah's humour of which, as of trivia, she has more than most poets. The humour arises from the incongruity of linking the trivial and the lyrical — and if the lyrical is not truly lyrical, the more obtrusive the incongruity and the greater the humour. As Lloyd Wheeler points out in his Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition, "Hiebert exploits incongruity in both diction and idea" (p. xii). Incongruity in diction is made manifest by the failure of Sarah's attempts at the lyrical mode:

> 'Tis not for he the sparrow pipes
> Nor blows the bull-frog in the rill.
> Ah, not for he the heron wipes
> His stately nose upon his quill.
> ("How Prone is Man," p. 103)

Incongruity in idea varies in intensity from poem to poem, depending upon the subject being expounded, but in general it stems from Sarah's unconscious conviction that the trivial is a fit subject for lyricism. If one were to adopt the numerical-minded criticism of Sarah's "Dr. Taj Mahal, D.O., of British Columbia" and attempt to number the poems in a hierarchy of humour, one of the most useful criteria would be incongruity, and the funniest poems would be those in which the incongruity echoes loudest.

In order to examine those echoes, I shall extend the concept of incongruity to apply to the general states of mind of the poetess, the fictional "Author," Hiebert, and the reader. An incongruity or discrepancy between what is real and what is perceived or fancied is sustained at all levels, thus maintaining throughout the contrast necessary for humour. Beyond that, the basic charm of the work, I think, rests upon nostalgia; it is nostalgia that keeps us interested in the opposing views and keeps us unperturbed by their conflict. The humour arises from our awareness of reality and, at the same time, from our bemused recognition of naive expectations still half-believed.

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[1] Paul Hiebert, *Sarah Binks*, New Canadian Library (1947; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969). Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

In somewhat the same way, one of the attractions of Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* can be viewed as its suspension of our disbelief in the goodness and serenity of small towns.[2]

The incongruity in Sarah's state of mind can be readily distinguished from that of the "Author's"; the distinctions between the "Author" and Hiebert and between Hiebert and the reader are less easily isolated. Sarah is more consistently blind than her critic to any discrepancy between reality and the fitness of her response to it. The "Author's Introduction" describes Sarah as having "that same confidence and joy in [her] native land which is the heritage of all poets" and as crying out "in a sudden awareness" (p. xv). She cries out, for example:

> It's spreading time, and once more all around me,
> The air is rich, and fields are flecked with gold
> ("Spreading Time," p. 99)

> To the forty below at break of day,
> To climbing up, and throwing down hay,
> To cleaning out and carting away,
> A paean of praise I bring.
> ("The Song of the Chore," p. 89)

> The farmer is king of his packer and plough,
> Of his harrows and binders and breakers,
> He is lord of the pig, and Czar of the cow
> On his hundred and sixty-odd acres.
> (p. xvii)

The "Author's" comment introducing the last example is "she spread the fertilizer with a lavish hand," and that insight sets him apart from Sarah; as is hinted here and elsewhere in his commentary, the narrator is not at one with Sarah and does not share in her total confidence and joy in the reality that is Saskatchewan (though, as I will argue, he may wish Sarah *were* justified in her optimism). The "Author," nonetheless, does accept the poems seriously (seriously enough to study, supposedly), and that separates him from Hiebert and the sympathetic reader who accept, by means of a nostalgic response, not the poems but some of the subjects.

At one level, then, for the real author (Hiebert) and for the reader, the humour presumably lies simply in the fictional reality (made concrete for the moment by Sarah and her chronicler) of this versifier, Sarah Binks, actually accepting the notion of manure-spreading, frigid choring, and desperation farming as activities of joy. But do we read only to scoff at the grossly

[2]See David Savage, "Leacock on Survival: *Sunshine Sketches* Sixty Years After," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1, No. 4 (Fall, 1972), 64-67. Savage writes: "In *Sunshine Sketches,* Leacock is easing the pain of his own survival by laughing at it. He is able to laugh at it because he sees it all in retrospect. To me, the sunshine of the little town seems not, as Robertson Davies suggests, "very often . . . the glare of the clinician's lamp," but the warm sunshine of youth remembered" (p. 65).

misinformed? Do we laugh at the girl's inferior mind from a lofty confidence in our own superiority? Do we laugh simply at the badness of the poem? Or the banality of the critic? On the contrary, we laugh because we ourselves have briefly shared Sarah's naivete; her simple faith supported precariously by the dry acceptance of the fictional "Author" has lured us for brief phrases into a whimsical Edenic mood, into a wish for a world of innocent perfection, a wish, however, that is dissipated in the next phrase in laughter, laughter at the incongruous improbability of it all. Yet, as the "L'Envoi" reminds us implicitly at the end, *wouldn't* it be pleasant if Saskatchewan farming were a pastoral idyll, if one *could* only go back to some such time:

> Oh I'll nevermore go back,
> Where the granaries strain and crack,
> And at dusk, from fields returning
> With their teams and empty racks,
> Come the boys; the sound of pumping —
> Running water — horses thumping
> In their stalls — and tired voices —
> Hank and Ole, Bill and Mac'.

On this last page of his book, Hiebert is not exploiting any obvious incongruity:

> Sounds of dogs, and creaking wagons,
> And the heavy smell of grain —
> And the call of distant voices
> That I'll never hear again.

This final note of nostalgia can also be detected, blurred slightly by "the misty pastels of spreading time," in the fifth last paragraph of the book (p. 149), and it is significant that Hiebert also uses these lines in his opening Dedication, so that the book is thus framed by the suggestion of nostalgia for a golden age:

> After all, what was the beauty of sky and field and rain-drenched hill, of prairie swept by storm, of dazzling alkali flat, of hot fallow land in the sun of the summer afternoon, of the misty pastels of spreading time? . . . they belonged to the prairie and to the West — . . . they were of Saskatchewan for all time. (p. vi)

As the fictional "Author" makes clear at the outset, Sarah was "the product of [this] her immediate environment. She was the product of her friends, of her books, and of the little incidents which shaped her life" (p. xvi). It is the nature of these friends (Ole, Mathilda, Rover), books (the tattered geology text), and incidents (even the large incident of a trip to Athens-like Regina) that provides the incongruity and therefore, according to my criteria, the humour of the verses dealing with them. Sarah's friends, books, and

incidents all have that mark of trivia upon them, so that lyrical tributes to them evoke amusement. But, as an important addition, these aspects of Sarah's environment also have a quality of nostalgia that directs the reader's response toward shared enjoyment, not contemptuous laughter. As the "Author" says, "Without Saskatchewan at its greatest, at its golden age, Sarah would have been just another poetess" (p. xvii). The concept of nostalgia as an extra dimension in Sarah's poems, nostalgia for a different world and for a time when one thought it possible, allows us to accept, I think, the "Author's" statement. Sarah's poems are often particularly memorable because they evoke familiar pastoral scenes recollected as clichés. And again, the "Author's" statement that the poems "are significant in that they are expressions of facts and events in her life" (p. xx) makes sober sense if we realize that the facts and events of Sarah's life are significant *because* they are representative of a golden age to which we will "nevermore go back," a life reminiscent of the

> Sounds of dogs and creaking wagons,
> And the heavy smell of grain —
> And the call of distant voices
> That I'll never hear again.
>
> ("L'Envoi")

The effect of both the incongruity and nostalgia depends utterly, of course, on the reader's at least unconscious awareness of the discrepancy between Hiebert's and Sarah's understanding of a subject. It is unlikely that anyone, for a few centuries yet, would mistake the irony intended by Hiebert in Sarah's expression of joy in the chores of manure-spreading. If Sarah likes that sort of thing, that's the sort of thing she likes, and we are amused by her unusual preference. It may be possible, however, to conceive of a reader, without a general knowledge of Saskatchewan, who does not share the "Author's" stereotyped view of its *belles lettres* and who, as a result, loses some of the comic effect when told that Sarah's "rhyming of 'visible' and 'contemplation' is not in the best traditions of Saskatchewan literature" (p. 47). My point is that to appreciate the incongruity the reader, consciously or not, must share at least for the moment Hiebert's view of most subjects in order to share his amusement at both Sarah's poesy and the "Author's" academic pose.

With such poems as "Spreading Time" and "The Song of the Chore" the shared view is too obvious perhaps to be either visible or contemplated, but a moment's reflection upon "The Farmer is King" may show forth the apparent. The incongruity and humour of the poem are dependent upon the reader's awareness that the farmer does *not* live like a king — "lord of the pig, and Czar of the cow" though he may be. The reader's awareness of the real situation is juxtaposed to, and contradicts, this particular expression of Sarah's "confidence and joy" in her native land (p. xv). That confidence and

joy, nonetheless, *were* expressed seriously in earlier literature of the prairie. Consider, for example, Robert Stead's "The Prairie," a poem published thirty-seven years before *Sarah:*

> Where wide as the plan of creation
> The Prairies stretch ever away,
> And beckon a broad invitation
> To fly to their bosom and stay;
> The prairie-fire smell in the gloaming —
> The water-wet wind in the spring —
> An empire untrod for the roaming —
> Ah, this is a life for a king![3]

Stead's notion that "this is a life for a king" is presented plainly and honestly by Sarah:

> The farmer is monarch in high estate
> Of his barn and his backhouse and byre,
> And all the buildings behind the gate
> Of his two-odd miles of barbed wire.
> (p. xviii)

Stead's poem expresses the high hopes of the early settler who either needed the impossible dream to lure him on, or simply had not yet learned of the difficulties. Sarah's poem presents both the high hopes and the lack of realization, and the incongruity creates humour. We do not laugh at the failure or the stupidity of the contrast, however; the recognition that the high hopes were, and are perhaps still, conceivable prevents us. We see, through a kind of nostalgic lens, a worthy truth on both sides. Independence, oneness with the land, freedom in Nature — we cannot scoff at these aims. Yet, we cannot, like the early Stead, pretend to have achieved them. We both recognize the incongruous reality and feel a nostalgia for a lost possibility. From the combination of incongruity and nostalgia emerges our rueful enjoyment, an enjoyment we share with Hiebert, for there is something about Sarah and the way of life she represents that places us on her side: we wish the world were as simple again, just as innocent and honest.

The most successful of Sarah's poems, to my mind at least, combine incongruity of idea and diction with this appeal to nostalgia. Incongruity in idea alone can border on hyperbole. An incident cited in the "Author's Introduction," "the loss of Ole's ear by a duck," is probably as hyperbolic as any; but the resultant poem, "The Cursed Duck," and its culmination,

> She loved him as only a woman can love
> A man with only one ear,

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[3]Quoted by Lawrence Ricou in *Vertical Man/Horizontal World, Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 21.

is not as good a "bad poem" (p. x) as "Hi, Sooky, Ho, Sooky" (pp. 52-53), which has incongruity in idea in its plot, additional incongruity in its diction, and an aspect of nostalgia in its general subject matter. The idea that Steve would fall in love with the voice of neighbouring Mathilda sweetly calling the sow is appealingly incongruous:

> And oh, I think I'll hide again
> For just a sight of you,
> And hear your own sweet voice again
> Call "Sooky, Sooky, Soo."

Sarah's heightened diction and her use of the lyrical mode add to the fun of the obvious discrepancy between the call of romance and the call to the sow to come and get her "swill," come and get her "goo." Sarah is trying to make lyric verse out of a pig's ear. In addition, there is a nostalgic air to the whole subject of rustic romance, the farmer's daughter and the sturdy swain, that recalls some sense of honest emotion, deserving hearts, and candor rewarded:

> I've seen you plodding through the dust
> And plugging through the wet,
> And at night against the window-blind,
> I've seen your silhouette.

As incongruous as the entire concept is, the reader is favourably disposed towards Steve and Mathilda and hopes that they will live happily ever after. The blend of nostalgic charm and incongruity of idea and diction make "Sooky" one of the most appealing poems in Sarah's canon. Although "The Skin Age" (p. 125) has a similar romantic interest —

> Patrick O'Neil O'Connell,
> Late of the Mounted Police,
> And Moon-in-the-Eyes Macdonald,
> Are blessed, but not by the priest —

and is cleverly styled, it does not have an incongruity of idea or diction equal to "Sooky" and thus is not so funny. To go to the other extreme, Sarah's least successful poems, to my mind, are those such as "Space" (p. 82) and "Time" (p. 78) —

> My son, there is a space between the ears
> That must be filled, for better or for worse —

in which there is no nostalgia inherent in the subject and in which the incongruity is not so much in idea or in diction as in Sarah's assumed role or state of mind. The "Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan" is not singing of

her immediate environment here. The farm girl is trying her hand at philosophy, an incongruous attempt on the face of it, but too one-faceted to match the appeal of "Sooky."

This examination of the poems, then, focusing on the elements of their humour makes clear the importance of Sarah's characterization. As I noted at the beginning, Sarah's distinctiveness as a poet is her use, "more than most poets," of the trivial. Her role of the unknowing farm girl. unembarrassed by trivia, is most suited, moreover, for the natural blending of incongruous idea and diction overlaid with nostalgia. One of the flaws, in fact, in "The Skin Age" (p. 125) is that Sarah appears to step out of her role and become too clever:

> For although Moon might choose a cathedral
> A blessing, a book, and a prayer —
> She's going to be dodecahedral,
> Since Patrick's a bit off the square.

A much more Sarah-like perception of the shape of pregnancy occurs in "The Wedding Dress" (pp. 55-56), which also has a touch of nostalgia provided by the catalogue-shopping:

> On page two hundred and sixty three
> Oh, there's the very dress for me
> . . . . . .
> Though after the wedding day we find
> It's short in front and long behind,
> And winds on heath
> Get underneath
> And ratle bones, and ribs, and teeth,
> For wedding day with wedding wreath
> I want to look refined.

Sarah's potential for incongruity diminishes when she departs from her role as ingenuous farmer and unstudied observer of the "facts and events in her life." In order for these "diverse ingredients, the broad, the wild, the grotesque" to make what Wheeler calls "their appropriate contribution to the whole" (p. x), Sarah must remain true to her role and view the ingredients unembarrassed and unknowing. It is the function of Hiebert's critic-narrator to keep Sarah's role consistently limited and to provide enough coherent story-line so that Sarah's series of encounters with the various ingredients of her existence remains plausible. As we have seen, when Sarah becomes too clever, as in "Skin Age," or too philosophical, as in "Space" and "Time," the potential for humour is dissipated.

The general success of Hiebert's work attests to the general success of the critic-narrator in almost always arranging each brief burst of Sarah's verse in a somewhat incongruous setting. In the preliminary comment for "The Pledge," for example, the critic-narrator suggests that the subject is

"the age-long story of a young man (Steve) taking leave of his beloved on the eve of battle" (p. 59). Immediately, in the first verse, it is clear to the reader, by the ironic 'fall,' that the subject is no such thing:

> Mathilda, fair, to Thee I pledge
> This cup of applejack;
> I drink — and should I fall tonight;
> Weep not, nor hold me back.

Sarah's ironic ignorance of the incongruity between battle and booze-up makes that ironic juxtaposition all the more humorous for being unrecognized by the poetess. The treatment of "Lullaby" (p. 57) in both setting and verse is less successful. Here the critic-narrator does not seem to be knowing enough; his introduction of the poem as a soporific adds little to the implication of the title, and in her verse Sarah is more knowing than naive:

> Sleep, my darling, sleep away,
> Daddy's gone to town with hay,
> And at four o'clock will come
> The man who sells aluminum.
>
> .....
> Count the hours, count the sheep,
> Sleep, you little nuisance, sleep.

The effect is of a knowing and deliberate irony that is controlled by Sarah herself within the poem. It is one of the few poems in the book where Sarah steps completely out of character — "Space" and "Time" could simply be viewed as bad choices of subject — and it is also one of the few poems that can be extracted from the narrative without weakening the humour of the verse, a humour built upon deliberate irony, not incongruity.

Because of this exception, one can appreciate the role of the narrator in sustaining incongruity elsewhere — even though the narrator's own viewpoint toward the material is not always clear. Presumably, he is aware of the irony in "The Pledge" and is indulging in the dry wit of academia with his comment about "the age-long story of a young man . . . on the eve of battle." In his presentation of "Lullaby," he refrains from noticing any irony at all. Such inconsistency and critical blindness are perhaps what Hiebert thinks most academics are made of. In any case, the narrator in his own character is also a source of incongruous humour to the reader. His method is impeccable while his content is not. He persists in his stance of judicious critic while straight-facedly assessing Professor Marrowfat's words on "which is Binks and which is Drool" (p. 127), or Sarah's undoubted ability to "shovel it out" (p. 121). He persists in his role of conscientious biographer while reporting that "the pensive mosquito wandered unafraid" (p. 27), that "the name Turnip may have been Americanized to Thurnip and later to

Thurnow" (p. 28), and that "the original manuscript was carefully sawn off . . . and used for kindling by the curator . . ." (p. 58). The total design of Hiebert's book is not simply of intersticed prose and verse, but of two sustained characterizations, Sarah's and the "Author's" or critic-narrator's, which maintain in an over-all pattern the uneven balance of incongruity.

Sarah's own style, as we have seen, turns upon incongruity. Examples are many and varied. There is the incongruous diction of "Calf" (p. 29), a work on a par with "Sooky," in which the homiest of nostalgia-laden details are juxtaposed with the most formal phrases:

> That licked my hand with milk bespread,
> Oh calf, calf! Art dead, art dead?

In "Hiawatha's Milking," the joy of the parody of Longfellow's diction is intensified by the coincidental irony of having Red Brother "back at his chores" doing the actual milking. In "Storm at Sea" (pp. 137-38), the incongruity is metaphorical:

> Ah, many a sailor, when help is past,
> Has gone to the bottom, caboose-end last.

The euphemism from the world of railways is undoubtedly familiar on the flat, far-sighted prairies but is an anomaly when applied to the world of ships. In "Square Dance" (pp. 135-36), the incongruity is mostly physical:

> Swing Mirabel, Margie, and Joy
> Swing Mrs. McGinty,
> Six feet and squinty,
> Two hundred and twenty — and coy.

Where Sarah's own style does not provide the incongruity, the narrator comes to her aid, as in his comment following "The Parson's Patch" about the unconventional rhyming of 'visible' and 'contemplation' (p. 47). Again, in "Ode to Spring" it is the narrator's footnote on that strange bird the "snearth" and its "first recorded instance" — "Sarah was always a keen observer of nature" — that adds a Binksian incongruity to the otherwise orthodox preference for spring over winter.

Within his own prose style too, as Sarah within hers, the narrator provides some neatly incongruous turns. The opening of the book is an excellent example, with the polite and dignified account on the first page culminating in the Hon. A. E. Windheaver's blunt intrusion: "It was hot as hell!" A brief thrust at education administrators also turns upon an incongruous notion: "What a pity . . . to go through life without an education . . . if he had only paid his fees" (p. 63). Hiebert, through the narrator, often manages to share a two-sided view with the reader in the

space of one sentence: "It is conceivable that the well might have developed into a spa of international reputation had it not been for the drought" (p. 72). The two-sidedness reflects a geniality of character that shines through the levels of incongruity and nostalgia.

Hiebert and his reader see merit on both sides, merit in those of simple faith and merit in those who face reality. Possibly, too, the nostalgic view indulged in by Hiebert and his readers creates in both a genial attitude toward the flaws and excesses of both Sarah and her critic. Martin Esslin, speaking of Absurdist drama, says: "The dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality . . . without illusion — and to laugh at it."[4] In Hiebert's *Sarah Binks,* geniality is reflected in man's ability to face the discrepancy between accepted reality and incongruous fancy — and to laugh at the discrepancy. Hiebert looks back not in anger, not in despair, not even in existentialism, but in nostalgia.

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[4]Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 316.