

Bathos: Some Canadian Examples

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If irony is at the heart of much humour, the bite of the irony in Canadian humour is often tempered by self-deprecation. From Stephen Leacock's bumbling misadventures to urbanite Walt Wingfield's pathetic struggles as a novice farmer in Dan Needles' *Wingfield Series* of one-man plays, poking fun at situations in which someone botches what should have been a respectable, even noble, project is a familiar *topos* that appeals to the Canadian sense of humour. One aspect of this type of humour is frequently the use of bathos, the rhetorical figure consisting of "an unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the absurd or trivial" which is often "a commonplace or ridiculous feature offsetting an otherwise sublime situation, an anticlimax" ("Bathos"). Charles Baldick defines it as "a lapse into the ridiculous by a poet aiming at elevated expression" (22). In this paper I examine the collections of poetry by two Canadian authors who exploit the comic possibilities of *bathos* to great effect. The rhetorical procedures that they employ produce an entertaining and successful persuasion.

The first text, well-known to many Canadians, is Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks*. This book of poems by the Manitoba author's eponymous fictitious poet, upon whom Hiebert (1892–1987), has bestowed the epithet, the "Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan," and for whom he created a complex wife history, was chosen as one of the five short-listed works in the 2003 CBC Radio "Canada Reads" contest. It had already received considerable recognition when Stratford Festival actor, the late Eric Donkin, presented his one-man show of the poetry of Binks, posing in drag as Rosalind Drool, Hiebert's invented biographer of the poet. It is important to

distinguish between Paul Hiebert, author of the book about Sarah Binks, and Drool and Binks themselves, who are imaginary.

The second work is a corpus of agrarian poems mostly unpublished as yet, but perhaps with a future as celebrated as those of Binks. According to Naomi Norquay, the Toronto academic,¹ “discoverer” and compiler of the poems, these are the work of an equally “unsubstantial” author, Edith Babb, who Norquay claims was born and buried in Ontario, but spent most of her life in Manitoba. Like Hiebert, Norquay has fabricated a fictive biography and literary investigation of the invented poet. Two of Babb’s poems appear in the late broadcaster, journalist, and author Peter Gzowski’s fifth volume of the *Morningside Papers* and I personally own a rare copy of the manuscript of the entire Babbsian opus.

My analysis is based on the tongue-in-cheek rhetorical theory set forth in the eighteenth century mock treatise, a sort of anti-rhetoric, *Peri Bathous, or the Art of Sinking in Poetry*. Its serious model is the *Peri Hupsous (On the Sublime)* by the author known as Longinus. This work discusses literary aesthetics, using citations to illustrate outstanding examples of rhetorical procedures. *Peri Bathous* is supposedly penned by one Martinus Scriblerus, who also fits the category of imaginary authorship and who was invented by Alexander Pope and his distinguished cohorts (John Arbuthnot, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, Robert Harley) in the Scriblerus Club, from which they took their collective pseudonym. The rhetorical analysis by Martinus Scriblerus of the pedestrian verses of his contemporaries, unnamed but mercilessly derided, furnishes their travesty of a manual with an abundance of examples of poetry which are exactly what Longinus would have them avoid.² The Scriblerians had simply to

¹ Dr. Naomi Norquay is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University.

² Ian Gordon explains that “Pope told Joseph Spence, in 1737, ‘*The Profound*, though written in so ludicrous a way, may be very well worth reading seriously as an art of rhetoric.’ The reader needs to invert the narrator's comments so that any poetic virtue he praises is negative, and any poetic vice he disparages, positive. Read in this way the

re-write *On the Sublime* in an antithetical version to extrapolate the rules of the bathetic poetry of their targets. We can imagine their glee at such sport.

Besides relying upon enabling ghost writers who have inspired them to produce their works, these three invented authors, Binks, Babb, and Scriblerus, share a penchant for bathos, the “stylistic blemish” (Baldick 22) that Longinus used “as an antonym of sublime” (Dupriez, Halsall 79) and that Alexander Pope took from the Greek word for depth as the title of *Peri Bathous* (“*On Sinking*”). This rhetoric or manual on how not to write poetry is a satire aimed at the works of the “Moderns” of the day who, as they say, aimed high and fell low. That Hiebert and Norquay were influenced by *Peri Bathous* is doubtful, but for all that, their invented poets may well have been, so skilled are they in their use of bathos. Norquay was inspired by this call from Hiebert in 1947: “Who shall take her [Sarah Binks’] place? Some day, from the ever fertile soil of the West, another genius may spring. Some day!” (150). Edith Babb sprang from the ever fertile soil of the East and her “rural roots” go back, says Norquay, to 1857. Both scholars in their own right, Hiebert and Norquay pose as discoverers of literary figures whose verse they have made available in annotated form.

Binks and Babb have in common an adherence to one of the principal rules of *Peri Bathous*, which is: keep your readers in the dark. To appreciate the silliness of this advice, we might consider the counsel of another eighteenth century rhetorician, the French Bernard Lamy, who recommended clarity in writing, what he called le style “doux”:

When the things are said with such clarity that the mind makes no effort to
conceive them, as we say that the slope of a mountain is “doux” (gentle, easy)

treatise is consistent with Pope's critical position elsewhere: it is essentially a defence of critical principles of rational common sense, associated with the ancients, against the advocacy of florid elaboration, espoused by the moderns, with Pope's satiric spokesperson, Martinus Scriblerus, being ridiculed as the quintessential modern” (Gordon).

when we climb it without effort. To give this gentleness to a style, we must leave nothing for the reader to guess. We must sort out everything which could hinder him; ward off his doubts. In a word, we must say things to the extent that is necessary so that they are perceived. (359)³

Clearly, the Scriblerians recognized obscurity when they saw it and they mischievously attacked the authors who failed to recognize the flaw. The flaws are not simply syntactical errors, but rather inadequacies of rhetorical imagination and extravagances in the use of rhetorical procedures.

Both the intrusion of the trivial and absurd and the anticlimax which undoes an otherwise sublime situation that characterize bathos are perfectly achieved in Sarah Binks' poem "Take me away," written in the author's period of deep depression and "literary decline" (Hiebert 92). The poem hints repeatedly at her inclination to suicidal inclination, couched in the metaphor of leaving. How deftly she dashes our sympathies in the first few lines:

Take me away, my eyes are red with weeping.
Leave me alone, I cannot, cannot stay.
Though you may offer these many things for eating,
Take me away.

Anything for a rhyme, even a false one. This example, as Scriblerus reveals in his explanation of the figure, "owes all the spirit of the *Bathos* to one choice Word" (61), in this case, eating, although one could say that the poem had already collapsed with the repetition of the word cannot. The passage illustrates what the Scriblerians called "solemn nonsense." As Hiebert

³« On dit qu'un style est doux lorsque les choses y sont dites avec tant de clarté que l'esprit ne fait aucun effort pour les concevoir. Comme nous disons que le penchant d'une montagne est doux, lorsque l'on y monte sans peine. Pour donner cette douceur à un style, il ne faut rien laisser à deviner au lecteur. On doit débrouiller tout ce qui pourrait l'embarrasser; prévenir ses doutes. En un mot, il faut dire les choses dans l'étendue qui est nécessaire, afin qu'elles soient aperçues » (Lamy 359). Translation mine.

acknowledges, "Sarah, more than most poets, seizes upon the trivial, or what to less souls would appear trivial, incident and experience, the loss of Ole's ear to a duck, as an occasion for a lyrical outburst of pulsating beauty" (Hiebert, xx).

However, bathos is most commonly an "unintended failure," and while these fictional authors may be oblivious to the bathetic, hence the pathetic lapses in their writing, Hiebert, Norquay, and Pope and friends, whom we might call the extradiegetic⁴ authors of the works, are anything but naïve in their use of the device. When I asked Norquay if I might use her Edith's verses as the subject of this study, her reply was "while it is one thing to rescue the obscure from obscurity, should we be rescuing from oblivion the oblivious?" There are always two levels to the Hiebertian and Norquasian satire in these books, which include some very funny instances of bathos in the verses of their pseudo-authors and also in their own prose pseudo-commentary. This latter parodies historical documentation and literary criticism and is as counterfeit as Pope's literary precepts in *Peri Bathous*, which are those of Longinus, "stated in reverse" (Pope liv).⁵ Editor Edna Leake Steeves calls the work of the Scriblerus Club a satire of "literary dullness and ineptitude," but Scriblerus himself is quite serious when he describes the poetry of his paragon of the "Lowlands of Parnassus" (6) in the art of writing badly:

He is to consider himself as a *Grotesque* Painter, whose works would be spoil'd by an Imitation of Nature, or Uniformity of Design. He is to mingle Bits of the most various, or Discordant kinds . . . as it shall please his Imagination, and contribute to his principle End, which is to glare by strong

⁴ The term "extradiegetic," borrowed from narratology, means "outside the story." Here, it refers to Hiebert, Norquay, and the Scriblerian authors. Binks, Babb, and Scriblerus would then be "intradiegetic" authors.

⁵ Edna Leake Steeves explains, "The treatise [Longinus' *On the Sublime*] takes its place among traditional *artes poeticae* because it suggests the means by which this excellence has been and may be attained; Pope's essential purpose, on the other hand, is to ridicule literary ineptitude. The ancient treatise is in a definite sense Pope's model; he simply reverses its precepts in an extraordinarily sustained irony" (Pope).

Oppositions of Colours, and surprise by Contrariety of Images His Design ought to be like a Labyrinth, out of which no body can get you clear but himself. (17-18)

The framework of their collections allows Hiebert and Norquay to commit with impunity the faults that serious writers try to avoid. The real authors are exonerated by their impersonal academic stance; free to hyperbolize in the commentary the invented poet's favourable qualities, they make the "songstress" responsible for the compositional absurdities in the poetry. Neither author would have offered these collections in his/her/own name for fear of being taken seriously and thus disparaged and forgotten. I have attended a presentation of Norquay's recitations of the works of her Edith Babb for a Fine Arts club in a city in southern Ontario. It was not until she sang one of the poems to the accompaniment of her banjo that the members of the audience realized the spoof. Only then did they feel comfortable at laughing at the rest of the performance.

In the matter of putting the wrong word in the right place,⁶ it would be hard to decide who has the greater expertise, Binks or Babb. The latter's use of *Anticlimax*, which Scriblerus lists as one of the "diminishing figures . . . where the second Line stops quite short of the first, than which nothing creates greater Surprize" (53), can be appreciated in the following example.

Of the soloist with the "The Touring Grand Opera," she writes:

The lusty hero clears his throat,
And bellows forth a merry note.

But not the one the composer wrote. (Norquay 11)

Rhyme, by the way, is absolutely essential to the success of the strategy. Rhyme has the quality of augmenting the sense of aptness, even truth, of a line of poetry; the better the rhyme, the more

⁶ Or the reverse, one might say.

the thought persuades, because the rhyming word is often anticipated. In the case of bathos, however, the rhyme heightens the incongruity of the conclusion and so augments the hilarity.

Scriblerus devotes two chapters to the various figures of speech that contribute admirably to the effect of bathos. These are grouped in three classes: the Variegating, confusing, or Reversing *Tropes* and *Figures*, the Magnifying, and the Diminishing. Among the variegating, he includes *metaphor*, of which, he says the author, once started, “must be sure to *Run it down*, and pursue it as far as it can go” (47). One of Babb’s poems, “My Iron Steed,” her inspiration drawn from such models as Shakespeare, Oscar Hammerstein, and even Binks herself, transforms through both *metaphor* and *prosopopoeia* the traditional *paeon* to the horse into a similar song of praise to her bicycle. The poem is reproduced in the appendix; it illustrates how far a conceit can be “run down” under the wheels (or trampled under the hooves) of a master of bathos. It ends:

My horse! My Steed! My iron brown mare!
My companion for life’s wayward travel.
I’ll keep my eye out for which way to turn,
And she’ll watch for the ruts in the gravel. (18)⁷

Peri Bathous mentions mixed figures “which raise so many Images, as to give you no Image at all” as particularly confusing. According to Scriblerus, “its principal Beauty is when it gives an Idea just opposite to what it seem’d meant to describe,” citing the example of a poet writing of the *Spring* talking of “a *Snow* of Blossoms.” This is often the effect in Sarah Binks’

⁷ Coincidentally, this poem resonates remarkably with a passage from Longinus in his discussion in section II (2) of the existence of the art of the sublime. He writes: “The expression of the sublime is more exposed to danger when it goes its own way without the guidance of knowledge,—when it is suffered to be unstable and unballasted,—when it is left at the mercy of mere momentum and ignorant audacity. It is true that it often needs the spur, but it is also true that it often needs the curb.” The question now is “was Norquay influenced by Longinus in *Peri Hupsous*?”

poem, “The Hired Man on Saturday Night,” the model, incidentally for the Babb poem just quoted. It begins: “A horse! A horse! Give me a horse/ To dash across the frozen north” (36).

But if the north is frozen, how can her horse “wallow in the mire” as the poem goes on to relate? And should not that image have been placed in another of her *encomia* to farm animals, “Pigs”? Why is the horse “a noble barb with cloven hoof” and what is its “blatant snoof”? What is the boar she will “blot off the page” astride this Saskatchewan “Pegasus”? As Lloyd Wheeler says in his introduction to *Sarah Binks*, “Hiebert exploits incongruity in both diction and idea” (Hiebert xii). To illustrate this “discrepancy between the ideal and the fact” (Hiebert x), we need only to read in the Author’s Introduction to *Sarah Binks* where Hiebert, already well on the “ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace in writing,” as Steeves characterizes the bathos, situates the Sweet Songstress in historical context thus: On a small scale the Golden Age of Pericles in Greece, or the Elizabethan age of England, finds its counterpart in Canada’s fairest and flattest province. Already in brief historical perspective that age is beginning to take on an aura of romance. Sarah Binks was its artistic expression (xvi).

Edith Babb likewise exploits incongruity. Could anything be more profoundly unfathomable than her ode to Ontario farmland, “O! Sing a Hymn of Praise” (40-41), an outburst of passion in praise of “prairie sod,” that “precious loam,” the blessed grime,” the “holy dirt,” and her stunning *oxymoron*, “Soil immaculate”? On the other hand, perhaps Binks could be more enigmatic: one of her poems is entitled, “Me and My Love and Me” (89), the logic of which, I must admit, escapes this reader. On the stately subject of the Senate, Babb writes:

The Senate! The Senate! The Canadian Senate!

They meet in chambers, red.

Clause by clause they review our laws,

And then go home to bed. (26)

Scriblerus would probably refer to this usage as what he describes as “The Inanity, or Nothingness” (57). He offers this example: “The Glories of proud London to survey, / The Sun himself shall rise – by break of Day” (58). In an earlier strophe of the same laudatory poem on the Senate, Babb further indulges her fondness for word-play:

The Senate! The Senate! The Canadian Senate!
The Senators meet today!
They rule the land, from Ottawa – bland!
They do it with yeas and neighs.

While puns are not overly used, they are very effective because they are of the type that Stephen Leacock, in *Humour: Its Theory and Technique*, says are “lifted into a higher range when the confusion of the sound, accidentally as it were, brings out a secondary effect. . . . The pun in this case is not a mere verballity: it carries an underlying meaning” (22). Both the characters of Sarah Binks and Edith Babb – enthusiastic, even passionate, but for the most part autodidactic in their writing – are portrayed so convincingly that we accept these spelling errors such as “neighs” for “nays” as spontaneous, rather than contrived, in their poems.

In the discussion of the Passions in *Peri Bathous*, the author writes: “nothing contributes so much to the *Cool*,⁸ as the Use of *Wit* in expressing Passion: The true Genius rarely fails of *Points*, *Conceits*, and proper *Similies* on such Occasions. This we may term the *Pathetic epigrammatical*, in which even Puns are made use of with good Success” (42). And so they are in Babb’s poem, “On the Banks where he Braes”:

The piper wanders off alone
To squeeze the bag and sound the drone.

⁸ From Scriblerus’ discussion on the passions, one may infer that the “Cool” denotes a want of them. He equates “Coolness” with “Mediocrity” (Pope, 14).

The notes he plays are loud and clear,
They stop the heart and pierce the ear. (14)

But it is in “A Christmas Caroll,” an account of the birth of Edith’s baby pig, that this poet reaches her pinnacle of double entendre:

T’was in the darkest hour of morn,
The Chosen One, The Babe was born.
The night was black, the air was bitter,
When there in the barn, another litter. (15)

The poem ends outrageously:⁹ “The Babe, my Chosen One, whom I rescued from the stable;/Was destined for a crown of cloves upon our dinner table” (16).

Did I mention that Norquay’s father was a United Church minister? This poem leaves the reader very much in doubt as to Babb’s understanding of “double-entendre.” However, we understand that Norquay knew that the conceit had been extended so far as to defy common sense as well as political correctness and good taste. This is this is just what *Peri Bathous* extolled: “dullness, mediocrity, false taste, and critical and artistic obtuseness.”

Scriblerus recommends the use of “the Antithesis, or See-Saw, Whereby Contraries and Oppositions are balanc’d in such a way, as to cause a Reader to remain suspended between them, to his exceeding delight and Recreation” (50). I cite Babb’s “The Next Election” (23-24) for its richness in this figure:

We’ve finally won the right to vote,
And so, dear gentlemen, take note!
For there are many we’ll demote,
Come next election day.

⁹ So does the runt.

We'll vote them in, we'll vote them out.
They'll sink or swim, they'll smile or pout.
The men will know what we're about,
Come next election day.
We'll vote for peace, we'll vote for war,
We'll vote against or maybe for.
We'll vote the no-goods out the door,
Come next election day.
We womenfolk are more than able
To tell what's fact from what is fable.
We'll know a manger from a stable,
Come next election day.
We've had the truth, we've heard the story.
We've seen the Power and the Glory,
We're either Liberal or we're Tory!
Come next election day.
And so we are with no regrets,
The second meeker, milder sex.
But who'll know that when we mark our X?
Come next election day!

In my opinion, this is where *elocutio* of rhetoric unites with *inventio*,¹⁰ the figures of speech so perfectly expressing the intention that the two are inseparable. What better trope than *antithesis* to propose the argument of the polarity of the sexes, and in particular, to challenge the old masculine adage that a woman can never make up her mind? There are so many possibilities of interpretation of these verses that we, like the “gentlemen” they address, are completely

¹⁰ The theory of the interrelationship of the topics of invention in developing an argument and the rhetorical figures of style (*elocutio*) are explored thoroughly in both Sister Miriam Joseph's *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (New York: Hafner, 1947) and in Albert Halsall's *L'Art de Convaincre* (Toronto: Paratexte, 1988).

confused by their argument. One could argue equally that the poem mocks feminine political savvy or that it mocks masculine loss of power; that women are astute enough to see through propaganda, personal and political party opportunism, and politico-religious affiliation or that they are naive enough to think that they have achieved equality with men. It does point out correctly that at least they know that they have an anonymous vote, which allows them, like the men they taunt, to use it irresponsibly, with no fear of reprisals. The antitheses leave us with no idea whose part is taken. The women are as illogical as the men are exploitive.

Binks is equally effective with this device. As evidence I offer two examples from “The Song of the Chore” (89): Oh it’s time to milk or it’s time to not,” and, later, “Oh, it’s time for this and it’s time for that”. These two writers have found that point of balance in the Scriblerus poetic See-Saw.¹¹

Of the Magnifying figures, we find this explication in *Peri Bathous*:

A genuine Writer of the Profund will take Care never to *magnify* any Object without *clouding* it at the same time; His Thought will appear in a true *Mist*, and very unlike what it is in Nature. It must always be remember’d that *Darkness* is an essential Quality of the *Profund* . . . The chief Figure of this sort is; The Hyperbole, or *Impossible*. (51)

We may say of Sarah Binks not that she hyperbolizes the object so much as that she hyperbolizes its significance, and at the same time, its affective value. The depth of feeling in some of her poems is matched only by the depth of style, that is to say, “profund” in the Scriberian sense, or shallow. This next poem, “The Plight” (54), inspired by the first confessions of love between the cross-eyed Mathilda Schwanzhacker and the farmer, Steve Grizzlykick (Gryczlkaeiouc); I think readers will agree that the subtle hyperbole of the imagery in Binks’

¹¹ One could add, “or they haven’t.”

hands is equal to the amplification of the work which this poem was modeled on, and which you will no doubt recognize, despite the change of tense and, of course, the omission of the synecdoche:¹²

Is this the tree that saw our first love's plighting,
And those the leaves that heard our first love's vow?
And yonder limb that saw love's first delighting,
Is that the very limb, the self-same bough?
Is this the scanty shade where love first hit me,
And caterpillars tumbled from on high;
Is yonder ant the very ant that bit me,
And them the same mosquitoes in the sky?
Can this then be the tree that seemed so leaden,
And grey and dull a scant few hours ago?
Now all is changed; its branches reach to heaven,
And up and down the angel antlets go;
Time cannot change, though leaf and twig may wither,
And caterpillar struggle into moth.
This is the tree that heard love's first sweet blither,
This is the spot we loudly plighted troth.

This is not the only Binks poem in which the creative point of departure is readily identifiable. However flat the prairie, or the life of a female writer in that place and time, one could after all, read those great works of literature that could inspire a young author to the peaks of literary grandeur, to the summits of the sublime. It is not surprising that sometimes both Binks and Babb can not resist the urge to imitate their favourite authors. Like Longinus, Scriblerus

¹² Christopher Marlowe wrote in *Doctor Faustus*, "Is this the face [synecdoche for Helen of Troy] that launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

recommends imitation of other writers as an aid to one's own literary development:¹³ "That the true Authors of the *Profund* are to imitate diligently the Examples in their own Way [that is to say, of other mediocre writers], is not to be question'd, and that divers have by this Means attain'd to a Depth whereunto their own Weight could not have carried them, is evident by sundry Instances" (38). He also advises the imitation of the poets "who have excell'd in the Sublime" (39), the theory being that where a great writer can find "gold in a dunghill," the "Genuine Writer of the *Profund*" will find the reverse. You will have already noted some of the traces of a wide variety of authors that kindled the spark of Genius in the prairie songstresses, and there are many more. I am convinced, for instance, that Binks' poem "The Sparrow" (102), which is also about a toad, could have been inspired by Victor Hugo's touching poem, "Le Crapaud," from the epic, *La Légende des Siècles*:¹⁴ the similarities are unmistakable. Likewise, reciting her father-and-son dialogue, "Father, thy beard" (94), recalls Goethe's *Erlkönig*, immortalized in song by Schubert. The simplicity of tone, so appropriate to the subject matter of "The Little Lambs" (4 -5) by Babb, and the inevitable progression from the image of the gambolling lambs to the harsh reality of the sinister connection of the farm mortgage to the abattoir – from innocence to experience, so to speak – must have been influenced at least in part by Blake, to say nothing of John McCrae, in his poem "In Flanders Fields." It begins:

In yonder field where sheep do graze,
There lies a ewe in a mothering daze.

¹³ In her commentary on *The Art of Sinking or Peri Bathous* Edna Leake Steeves mentions the chapter on Imitation and states, "Longinus had observed that one way to attain the sublime was through imitation and emulation of great writers. Pope closely travesties his model here" Pope 143.

¹⁴ In « Le Crapaud, » an ugly toad is brutally stepped on by a priest, stabbed in the eye by the point of an umbrella of a lady passing by, and stoned by a group of boys who then eagerly await its death in a rain-filled rut, where it had crawled for relief. As they watch, a donkey-drawn cart comes along, heading right for the wretched animal. But at the moment of the toad's expected death, the donkey steps aside, saving its life. In "The Sparrow," a bird comes upon a "warty toad,/Who, toiling on a dusty road,/Did sweat beneath his heavy load." The sparrow assists the toad by shoving it along. Many references from the Hugo poem reappear in the Binks poem, both which make the point that a lowly animal has more "human kindness" than humans do.

Her young ones caper to and froe.

They stop and eat, they stop and go. (4)

In my opinion, the naïveté of such reference reinforces the caricature that the real authors create; the allusions to poets that their imaginary authors might have read is a rhetorical strategy on the part of the latter to enhance their uncertain ethos. This reminds us that at the imaginary time of the supposed conception of the poetry, it was a long way from Manitoba to London, New York, and Toronto, where writers and scholars gathered and works were published.

However, the work of Edith Babb cannot be critically treated without considering the influence of Sarah Binks herself on the less celebrated poet. There are so many poems of the two authors that correspond that we cannot mistake the debt that Edith owes to Sarah. Indeed, one of her poems is entitled, “Owed to Sarah Binks.” Ever one to pay homage, whether to the farmer and his wife, the spreader, the cows, the pigs, or the mortgage menacing above the whole lot of them, Edith was only giving Sarah her due when she chose exactly the same themes of which her illustrious predecessor sang. If Binks could translate from the German Heinrich Heine’s “*Du bist wie eine Blume*” (43) (“You are like one flower, / So swell, so good, and clean. / I look on you and longing, / Slinks me the heart between”), then Babb would translate from the French “*Je serais ton miel*” (16 -17) (“Oh, I’ll be yer honey, if you give me yer money”). We need only to compare “The Meeting” of Sarah Binks with “The Family Tree” (see Appendix) to see how useful a tool imitation is in attaining what Scriblerus calls “the Felicity of falling gracefully” (16) to the depths of bathos. There is probably another paper on the intertextuality of the works of these prairie poets.

The subjects of these poems — the hardships and hard work, the precarious economic circumstances, the curious mating rituals, and the down-to-earth everyday pleasures of the

agrarian community — are not trivial. We must remember that part of bathos is the act, and in the case of Binks and Babb, the art, of “aiming high” in writing. It is the expression, not the subject matter of their works that must be examined in the light of the principles of *Peri Bathous*. The flaws are in fact the true value of the verse, from the reader’s point of view. As well, they are the very virtues that Alexander Pope and his friends set down, with negative inference, of course, in their manual on bad writing. *Peri Bathous* exposes inadvertent glaring errors in Pope’s contemporaries, analyzing them, with their appropriate rhetorical terminology, point by point. By this standard, Hiebert’s Sarah Binks and Norquay’s Edith Babb do exactly what Scriblerus tells us to do.

One can simply accept this game at face value and appreciate the real authors’ entertainment; recognition of the joke is enough. As Leacock says, “thus does life, if we look at it from sufficient distance, dissolve itself into “humour” (287). However, there may be a broader recognition in these works. If we read some of the works of the “Confederation poets” (Bliss Carmen, Charles G. D. Roberts, Archibald Lampman, and others), we realize that Canadian poetry has had a tradition of unintended bathos that may have inspired Hiebert and Norquay. Some examples from the lyrics of these authors¹⁵ are so reminiscent of that style that we have to wince when we acknowledge that they are part of the canon of Canadian literature:

From *The Book of the Native* by Charles G. D. Roberts:

“Afoot”

Comes the lure of green things growing,

Comes the call of waters flowing, —

¹⁵ These excerpts are taken from the following web site: “Canadian Poetry: The Confederation Poets” at <http://www.uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/confederation/index.htm>.

And the wayfarer desire
Moves and wakes and would be going.

Hark the migrant hosts of June
Marching nearer noon by noon!

Hark the gossip of the grasses
Bivouacked beneath the moon!

From *Songs of Vagabondia* by Bliss Carmen and Richard Hovey:

“A more ancient mariner”

The swarthy bee is a buccaneer,
A burly velveteed rover,
Who loves the booming wind in his ear
As he sais the seas of clover.

From *Labour and the Angel* by Duncan Campbell Scott:

“In the Ruddy Heart of the Sunset”

In the ruddy hear of the sunset,
Fading and fading still,
A planet throbs and smoulders,
Over the sapphire hill.

From *Snowflakes and Sunbeams* by William Wilfred Campbell:

“To a Robin in November”

And thou, red-throated, comest back to me
Here in the bare November bleak and chill,
Breathing the red-ripe of the lusty June

Over the rime of withered field and mere;
O heart of music, while I dream of thee,
Thou gladdest note in the dead Summer's tune,
Great God! thou liest dead outside my sill,
Starved of the last chill berry on thy tree,
Like some sweet instrument left all unstrung,
The melodious orchestra of all the year.
Dead with the sweet dead summer thou had'st sung;
Dead with the dead year's voices and clasp of hands;
Dead with all music and love and laughter and light;
While chilly and bleak comes up the winter night,
And shrieks the gust across the leafless lands.

These extracts are not untypical. On the contrary, it is hard to find a strophe, let alone a poem, from these authors which doesn't remind us of the incongruencies of Sarah Binks and Edith Babb. There is a lesson to be learned from this comparison. We have only to think of the Air Farce comic, Dave Broadfoot, whose well-known characters, hockey player Big Bobby Clobber, or Sergeant Renfrew of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, to understand that our national humour is often based on the exaggeration of qualities that do exist. These characters are filled with a self-importance that always seems to end in a humbling result. In self-deprecation, we take another look at ourselves, and we gain some sophistication in the process. No one is writing those naïve verses any more – at least they are not getting them published. Perhaps Binks and Babb and other bathetic humorists teach us humility.

Stephen Leacock uses the terms “comic verse” for “verse that is written with the intention and with the effect of making it funny.” He compares this with “super-comic verse,” which “is written without the same intention but with the same effect. In the one case we laugh with the writer; in the other we laugh at him” (137). When bad writing is unintentional, it is bathos, but when *bathos* is intentional, it is irony. We are to read these poems as though the gaffs are bathetic because the poets had no ironic intentions, but we recognize the irony intended by the extradiegetic authors. There is nothing naïve about Hiebert in a line such as “[The farmers] play the quaint old-fashioned game of mortgagor and mortgagee” (68) nor in Norquay’s ode, “But the spreader has gone all to hack: It doesn’t spread, it spits it back” (3-4). *Peri Bathous* advises always that we “follow Nature.” There we have it, in the raw. It is my opinion that Binks and Babb do indeed write excellent bad poetry. They have in common with Martin Scriblerus a creator of another name with admirable writing skills and great wit. They write bathos for bathos’ sake. All violate our sense of decorum in the interest of humour. I am sure that the Scriblerians would agree, and that they would have welcomed these Canadian prairie poets into their club with a hearty chuckle.

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Appendix

EDITH BABB (Naomi Norquay)

MY IRON STEED

Some famous man in literature

Cried out (with no remorse),

To all the world around him:

“A kingdom for a horse!”

Empty words? Oh probably!

Like so much else I read,

Some men will promise anything,

To satisfy their greed.

Well, I’ve a horse, an iron steed,

With which I’ll never part.

Not for kingdom nor for country,

For she’s stolen away my heart.

She's beautiful! She's painted brown!
With a saddle of genuine leather,
And mud guards front and rear, so I
Can go riding in inclement weather.
My iron steed! My horse on wing!
With wheels that spin and whir,
And pedals to push and a bell to ring,
Who cares if I'm not demur!
With the wind in my hair, my petticoats fly
Behind me in wild abandon,
As I ride my steed through the countryside,
Choosing my routes at random.
The road is often a quagmire mess
With holes that cry out for correction.
But I love to go rollicking down the hill,
Spitting gravel in every direction.
My horse! My Steed! My iron brown mare!
My companion for life's wayward travel.
I'll keep my eye out for which way to turn,
And she'll watch for the ruts in the gravel.

THE FAMILY TREE

Great-grandpa met great-grandma at
the autumn country fair.

She'd such a pretty bonnet on; he Convert it into cash;
didn't mean to stare.

She coyly dropped her hankie where
he'd be sure to come upon it.

At last he had a chance to
meet and comment on it.

They stood beside the hog ring
where the judges were debating,
Which pigs deserved the first, the
second and the third place rating.

They spoke so very briefly, not much
more than a minute.

For great-grandpa that was enough to
know "there's something' in it."

They bade good-bye, great-grandma
smiled and lowered both her eyes.

She knew that stupid hankie trick
would take him by surprise.

But just before they were to part the
rain began to fall.

Great-grandma asked great-grandpa
to share her parasol.

They ran inside the dairy barn where

all the cows were mooing.

Great-grandpa thought this was his

chance to try some lover's wooing.

He shyly asked great-grandma to

attend the evening dance.

And she agreed. She did indeed!

Thus started their romance!

They waltzed and did a polka,

They reeled across the floor.

They do-si-doed and curtsied and

then they danced out the door.

A ten o'clock they headed home in

grandpa's two-seat carriage.

And underneath the harvest moon, he

asked her hand in marriage.

Two days later they were wed

by a circuit riding pastor.

They set a county record; no one else

had done it faster. *Etc.*

OWED TO SARAH BINKS

A poem's owed to Sarah Binks,

great-

Our poet laureate, methinks.

Her rhymes were many, thoughts were few.

Sometimes her poems combined the two. *Copyright Naomi Norquay 2000*

“The Organist” (abridged) by Thomas Lampman

In his dim chapel day by day

The organist was wont to play,

And please himself with fluted reveries;

And all the spirit’s joy and strife.

The longing of a tender life,

Took sound and form upon the ivory keys;

And though he seldom spoke a word,

The simple hearts that loved him heard

His glowing soul in these.

One day as he wrapped, a sound

Of feet stole near, he turned and found

A little maid that stood beside him there.

She started, and in shrinking-wise

Besought him with her liquid eyes

And little features, very sweet and spare.

“You love the music, child,” he said,

And laid his hand upon her head,

And smoothed her matted hair. . . .

“You love the music, then,” he said,

And still he stroked her golden head,

And followed out some winding reverie’

“And are you poor?” he said at last

The maiden nodded, and he passed

His hand across his forehead dreamily;

“And will you be my friend?” he spake

“And on the organ learn to make

Grand music hear with me?”