Thematic Structure and Vision in *Waste Heritage*

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For decades, on those few occasions when it was the subject of criticism or analysis, Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* was praised as a powerful and accurate social documentary, and blamed as an artistically inadequate novel. Recently, however, that habitual stance has been significanly challenged, and its deficiencies and misdirection exposed. In a persuasive and lengthy survey of the critical history of the book, Roger Hyman demonstrates that judging the novel as, primarily, an exercise in historical sociology (because it deals accurately with historical economic circumstances) prevents attention's being paid to its aesthetic qualities.[1] At best, this view presumes that the artistic elements of the book are merely decorative; at worst, it covertly assumes that money and work are topics that appear in fiction only as elements of propaganda. With art reduced to administrative status, the discovery of artistic deficiency becomes almost inevitable.

To establish the artistic nature of *Waste Heritage* as the primary subject of discussion and evaluation, Hyman places the book within the intellectual boundaries of the "novel of engagement." Prominent in the early decades of this century, the form accepts working class reality—including elements such as wages, jobs, unemployment, relief, unions, and strikes—as being as relevant to human experience, and as worthy of serious artistic consideration, as the most subtle and refined developments of the soul. It succeeds as fiction to the extent that it deals with these additional elements, not as exemplifications of economic theory or political doctrine, but in terms of their role in human emotions, human relationships, human behaviour. The novel of engagement demands, as fully as any psychological novel, the mediating sensibility of the artist, not merely to record experience accurately, but to examine, interpret, and reveal the human

[1] "Waste Heritage and *Waste Heritage:* The Critical Disregard of an Important Canadian Novel," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17.4 (Winter 1982-83): 74-87.

meaning of human experience. In these terms, *Waste Heritage* is at least the "minor classic" that Hyman judges it to be.

The occasion upon which *Waste Heritage* is based was the expulsion by the police, in June 1938, of unemployed men who had occupied the Vancouver Post Office for nineteen days. After the clubs and tear gas had driven the sit-downers out into the streets of Vancouver, some two thousand men trekked to Victoria to confront the government directly. In Victoria, the men were housed in abandoned hotels. Baird, a newspaper reporter, toured these hotels, disguised as a nurse.

In her novel, Baird retains the general outline of these events, but the novel goes well beyond—although it certainly contains—a compelling, realistic description of them. To prevent fact from dominating meaning, she dislocates her narrative geographically. The province is never named; Vancouver and Victoria, with deliberate irony, are called Aschelon and Gath respectively, after Philistine cities conquered by the Israelites when they occupied the Promised Land.

Primarily, however, to make the significance of historical event manifest, to reveal the truth contained within events, Baird constructs her narrative according to a consistent thematic pattern designed to show, comprehensively, the personal and social reduction of sensibility, opportunity, and behaviour caused by the chronic economic crisis of the Depression. Repeatedly Baird depicts characters and situations which illustrate or emphasize particular personal or social consequences of the Depression. The novel contains unemployed men, workers, police, citizens, small businessmen, a working woman, and a committed labour organizer. They engage in conversation, confrontation, relationships, riots. By the end of the book, she has examined individual personalities, class and social tension, and government responses to social protest.

But whomever and whatever she writes of she casts within the framework of a pattern in which the essential features are indecision, irresolution, and inaction, which lead, when they lead anywhere, only to futility or self-destruction. As the novel progresses, Baird projects a progressively comprehensive vision of a society in torment, a society suffering at all levels—from the personal to the politically corporate—from a complex of contradictory and irreconcilable impulses and from tensions (between goals and means, aspirations and opportunities, desires and accomplishments). The only possible outcome is personal and collective self-destruction.

Fundamental to the thematic consistency of *Waste Heritage* is the character Eddy, large-framed, strong, only eighteen years old, who has almost literally been beaten senseless by the Depression. When he is introduced in the first pages of the novel, he is being beaten on the head by a plainclothes policeman wielding a billy club. Eddy has been beaten before, and his mind has been damaged. His memory, even of his own name, is not always clear. His being, his goals, have been reduced to one obsession: to get a decent pair of new shoes. For Eddy, new shoes represent complete liberation from economic and spiritual depression; but Eddy has become so addled that he is unable to work effectively toward any goal, and he is subject to outbursts of uncontrolled violence when he is under psychological pressure. On one occasion a policeman seen across the street makes him frightened and agitated; on another, he assaults a woman from whom he has asked directions to a shoe store. Towards the end of the novel he even attacks Matt, his friend and protector, and almost chokes him.

Eddy's obsession with shoes provokes the final crisis of the novel when he misinterprets the meaning of a one cent sale being held by a shoe store. He offers one cent for a pair of shoes and creates a disturbance when the salesman will not sell them to him. When his friend Matt intervenes, Eddy calls for the police to help Matt, but Matt is arrested. Distracted, fearful, Eddy runs away from the crowd that has gathered and, in a state of panic and despair, stands directly in the path of a locomotive.

The central character, Matt Striker, twenty-two years old and a wanderer for years, has been beaten in riots and strikes before. He arrives in town just after the expulsion, joins the organization of men who will make the trek, and unwillingly becomes Eddy's companion and protector. Baird portrays him as a man of some self-awareness and sensitivity. Other characters note that he is more than ordinary; he is the only character to develop—albeit abortively—a relationship with a woman; he is chosen to be an enforcer within the unit of men; and he uses his wits, as well as his fists, to settle trouble and to extricate Eddy from difficulty.

But, his exceptionality allowed, Matt's predicament and the tension and contradiction dominating it are essentially similar to Eddy's. Matt wants from the economic system only its most ordinary and conventional rewards: a job, a wife, a future as a working wage-earner. But his only hope for achieving them is to join the trek, to openly present a challenge to authority through mass action. Although more provocation is required, he, like Eddy, is subject to violent outbursts, a "rage blindness" which,

when it comes upon him, he cannot control. Several of these occur in the novel, some of them even directed against Eddy. The one that comes over him during the argument about Eddy's one cent shoes leads to his arrest.

Matt's relationship to the organization of unemployed men is particularly dominated by ambivalence. On the one hand, he is pleased and gratified by the sense of belonging, the purpose and the solidarity, it provides him. On the other, he repeatedly feels

> as though his identity were being sucked away and absorbed by the powerful currents of an organization. It made him touchy and defensive; at the same time it gave him a feeling of excitement.[2]

Never in the course of the novel is Matt able to resolve this inner conflict between personal and collective identity, and his inability to discover a coherent, integrated orientation to himself, to Eddy, to his girl Hazel, to the organization, or to society, leaves him in a state of angry and impotent frustration.

Above Matt in the organization is Hep, a dedicated and politically conscious labour organizer and agitator. His goals are freedom and economic justice, but his methods are, ironically, hypocritical. In working for freedom and justice, he demands absolute discipline within the organization and calls for a denial of self in favour of the organization. Yet he is willing to manipulate elections within the organization, and he is willing to provoke repression from the authorities, in order to attract more recruits and to build commitment among the men on the trek.

Commitment among the men, is, at best, unreliable. Many have joined the trek not to reform society, not even to get jobs, but because of the temporary prospect of a dry bed, company, and regular meals. They are susceptible to slipping from demonstration to riot or to slipping away from the organization individually to try to find work.

They are often caught in irreconcilable conflict between anger at and loyalty to the state. For example, disembarking from the ship that has taken them to the island where the capitol is located, one young man disparages the police and soldiers standing guard at the dock as cowardly lackeys of establishment

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[2] Irene Baird, *Waste Heritage* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939; rpt. 1973) 28. All citations are to this text.

power. He is instantly turned on by the marcher beside him, a veteran, whose comments show him caught in a tangle of blind patriotism and economic outrage:

> "Damn right, I was overseas . . . the most you know about defendin' your country is what you read in the funny papers!"
> "Okay, Pop, don't let it get you all steamed up."
> "Steamed up! You'd get steamed up if you'd fought through six wars . . . six wars . . . an' come home rattling with a bunch o' ruddy metals an' have to live on three dollars an' twenty-seven cents a month an' have to listen to the way they run things nowadays!" (123)

Baird emphatically illustrates that the frustrating contradiction prevails also in society at large. One newspaper calls the men "a handful of malcontents and transient panhandlers," but another publication refers to unemployment as "a national responsibility demanding action by national authority." In the numerous short encounters the men have with citizens, about half the people are sympathetic and give change or cigarettes. The other half abuse them and will not give even so much as a match. Baird's police waver between heavy-handed intervention and withdrawal, wanting nothing more than simple public order, but having no certainty of how to achieve it.

Even the most generously inclined elements of society find themselves unable to comprehend or to influence significantly the maelstrom of inertia in which they find themselves. Harry, a one-armed owner of a small café, is used by Baird to represent a kind of benign capitalism. Harry always gives handouts of food to any unemployed who come to his establishment. Emotionally he sides with the aspirations of the demonstrators, and Baird establishes that there is an instinctive bond of sensibility between Harry and Matt. But Harry has only intermittent charity and compassion with which to try to help Matt and the men. His body has been maimed; so, too, has his sense of social responsibility. When he reads the newspaper accounts of unemployment and protest, he is reduced to confusion and immobility: "I read that an' then I read it again an' then all I end up with is one beautiful headache" (106).

The tension between anger and inaction is most acutely felt when opposing impulses occur within one individual, such as Matt or Harry. Part of the trek down island is by convoy, and Hep strikes up a conversation with a driver who has volunteered his car for the trip. The man is outraged at economic conditions: he has two sons trying to find work. Simultaneously, he reveals

his incredible reluctance to take direct action to solve his problems:

> "I'm not one to make trouble an' I never did hold with a lot of pumped up newspaper talk but things can't go on the way they are now." (151)
>
> "I never had no use for Reds, nor for Red talk, but a man gets to look at things different when they hit him where he lives." (152)
>
> "Jesus Christ, don't get me talkin' this way, it makes me sweat all over!" (152)

He cannot collapse; he cannot act. He can only endure in immobility and irresolution. He knows the destructive failure of the economic system, recognizes that fundamental change is necessary to eradicate economic exploitation, but is unwilling to disrupt society in any significant way.

Through another character, Hazel, Baird depicts the pervasive and long-term social consequences of the Depression as they impinge, not just on unemployed single men, but on every person in society. Hazel is the only major character in the novel with a job, but, under Depression conditions, working for a living is only marginally better than unemployment. When Matt first sees her, he sees

> a synthetic blonde with small pale features . . . her hair was tied with blue ribbon. Her face was the deadest thing [he] had ever seen. When she spoke her voice was that way too, flattened out. (42)

Hazel has a job—because female employees cost less than male employees—but she has no security of tenure. When Matt expresses satisfaction at having an organization behind him, Hazel comments ironically that, because of her work in a department store she also is familiar with the nature of large organizations.

Like Matt's, Hazel's ambitions are modest:

> I want a home of my own, a place where you don't get chased around and spied on, where you don't have to punch a time clock every morning to prove to yourself that it's another day. I could do with a slew of kids, too. (94-95)

When Hazel quits her job to retain her dignity, the prospects for her and Matt are not diminished: their impossibility is

merely clarified. Without reliable employment, they have no hope of getting married, of having a family, or of having a normal domestic life. The Depression not only destroys the present; by preventing people from making long-term personal commitments to social cohesion and continuity, it destroys the future as well.

Contradiction and uncertainty prevail; remedial action may be demanded, but seems unlikely to be effective. The men identify the government as their enemy, but, Baird makes obvious, the government is as confused and, consequently, as indecisive and torn by incompatible motives as the citizens it governs. Since the government has no idea how to rescue the economy, it devises a plan to make the men just go away.

The government settlement does not offer jobs; it offers what is essentially institutionalized vagrancy, government subsidized bumming. Non-residents of the province will be granted $3.07 relief for one month and transportation back to their home province. Provincial residents will be eligible for $6.70 every ten days as long as they do not collect the money twice in any one town (309). But since Matt has "lost his domicile," has been declared to be a non-resident of his home province because he has been away from it so long, neither scheme is open to him.

To underscore the absolute domination of contradiction and chaos in society, Baird maintains throughout *Waste Heritage* the image of the crowd—a form of social order whose primary principle of organization is, at best, tenuous. A crowd contains, more fully than its impulse towards cohesion, an impulse towards disintegration, for the basis of its existence is not a network of relationships, as in a society, but only transient proximity and shallowness of purpose. Throughout the novel there are crowds—men who march through the streets in organized demonstrations, people who gather to watch an arrest, spectators who assemble at sports events, mobs that gather spontaneously. Few novels contain so many people, and fewer still deal as fully and as fluidly with the psychology of large groups. Baird describes crowds as behaving in the same confused, self-contradictory ways as the individuals and classes she examines in the novel:

> [The crowd] moved mechanically and its mood changed from sport to hunting; the animal quality was there and the prey was there and they were being drawn to one another. (48)
>
> Suddenly the mass movement ahead seemed to falter and lose momentum. (48)

> The crowd's form began to change. It changed from the tight, infuriated mob formation and began to open out and lose direction. Gradually the numbers fanned out and began to scatter and remained milling uncertainly about the streets. (49)

> The crowd broke and scattered. The hysteria was played out now, leaving the air flat and heavy and uncharged. The people were no longer a loud and conquering mob but an unled herd stampeding for home. (69)

Juxtaposed to the image of the crowd is Baird's presentation of the organization into which the men have formed themselves. Unlike a crowd, which is spontaneous, fluid, and uncontrolled, the organization is deliberate, structured, and disciplined. Its power for concerted action is identified as a potential means of effecting change and solving the problems of economic and personal dislocation.

But, as Baird depicts it, the organization is troubled by the same tensions and contradictions that subvert other facets of society. Clearly the organization is dominated by leftist organizers, but few of the men have any deliberate leftist political orientation. The organization demands discipline, obedience, and the suppression of self and individuality in service of solidarity and group cohesion. It is organized along the lines of, and uses the terminology of, an army. It has headquarters, divisions, squads, and squad leaders, and the men march in ranks four abreast. Yet the men within it want personal economic freedom within a democratic system of government. Also, unlike an army, which is raised by a nation, the organization exists only by virtue of voluntary commitment—a commitment that cannot be enforced and which always has the pressures of impatience and boredom and futility undermining it. When a settlement between the men and the government is reached at the end of the novel, the organization has no future, no reason to exist.

To compound the irony, Baird includes comments in the novel to show that, eventually, military organization will contain a bizarre form of salvation for the men. Dispersed throughout the novel, along with hints of revolution, are prophecies of war, and also the judgement that, when an army is needed, the unemployed will suddenly become not just valuable to society, but instantly heroic. The war will provide the government with the opportunity to institute the national mobilization of manpower that it was not able to manage in peacetime, and which it had, in fact, regarded as a threat to civil order and scrutiny.

Through the perverted purposefulness and social unity provided by war, the final waste of the individual and of social harmony will be accomplished. Prosperity will return through the ultimate fulfillment of the heritage of waste in a society that equates human value with economic value. The war will falsely change waste into plenty by intensifying and consolidating the institutionalization of human waste that society already practises.

In *Waste Heritage,* Irene Baird describes the quintessence of the civilization in which she lives. The novel embodies her vision, and articulates it with consistency, thoroughness, and vividness. The truth of human despair she reveals reaches considerably beyond documentary accuracy, and beyond the realistic presentation of the more obvious problems of industrial capitalist democracy. Beyond mere historical accuracy, also, is her apprehension of an economic truth that applies to more than this episode in Canadian history: *Waste Heritage* depicts the economic and ethical failure of modern industrial capitalist democracy. Her accomplishments—projecting a comprehensive insight through a complex and consistent aesthetic pattern, rendered in terms of the experience of ordinary human beings—places Irene Baird and *Waste Heritage* in the front rank of Canadian literary achievement.

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