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“Draw a Squirrel Cage”: The Politics and Aesthetics of Unemployment in Irene Baird’s *Waste Heritage*

HERB WYILE

“ONE OF THE MOST PERSISTENT IMAGES that Canadians have of their society is that it has no classes” (3) wrote John Porter in 1965 in his groundbreaking study of Canadian society, *The Vertical Mosaic*. Revisiting that claim at the end of the twentieth century, sociologists Wallace Clement and John Myles found that little had changed. Researchers in North America, they argued, must struggle “to persuade a doubting public that it lives in a class society, that classes exist and have real effects” (3). Such a doubt arguably can be seen to pervade Canadian literature as well. As poet and critic Tom Wayman — perhaps Canadian literature’s most visible proponent of considerations of labour and class — has complained, “an accurate depiction of the central daily experience of Canadians [i.e., work] is absent from our culture” (6) — and indeed from North American culture as a whole (145). Furthermore, Robin Mathews’s charge in 1981 that Canadian literary criticism is dominated by a middle-class sensibility largely “unconscious of class, believ[ing] it irrelevant to the study of literature, or reject[ing] it as a dangerous or foolhardy concept to use in criticism” (65) still has a good deal of merit. Despite a rich and interesting history of labour in Canada, representations of work, labour agitation, and unemployment are fairly uncommon in Canadian literature, and, although there is some criticism that focuses on considerations of class and labour in the work of particular writers, the broader profile of such considerations in Canadian literature falls far short of that of, say, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, or feminism, about which numerous monographs, essay collections, and individual articles have been published over the last thirty years.

In some respects, there were developments on this front in the latter decades of the twentieth century, with critics such as James Doyle and Roxanne Rimstead and writers such as Wayman, Peter Trower, Helen Potrebenco, David Fennario, and others giving a good deal of attention to issues of work and class in Canada (though, as the list of writers suggests, those who write about these issues tend to remain outside the canon). The historical novel also has been adapted by other writers to examine similar concerns in the past. Heather Robertson's *Lily* (1986), Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* (1990), for instance, examine the heated relationship between workers and the establishment between the two world wars, a period marked by intense class conflict and increasing intervention by the state in the management of the relationship between capital and labour (largely in the interests of the former). Such retrospective representations of the interwar period serve as reminders of the volatility of an era that has mostly been forgotten. That volatility, however, was also captured in at least some of the literature of the time, and a particularly powerful representation of that strife that has been somewhat neglected is Irene Baird's 1939 novel *Waste Heritage*. A fictionalized portrait of the aftermath of the notorious Bloody Sunday clash in Vancouver in 1938 and the subsequent trek of striking unemployed relief workers to Victoria, Baird's novel "depicts the economic and ethical failure of modern industrial capitalist democracy" (Hopkins 85) in ways that continue to resonate in the present.

As James Doyle notes in *Progressive Heritage: The Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada*, the literary work addressing issues of labour and class politics that came out of the 1920s and 1930s tended to be written by those committed to radical political positions, including now-canonical writers such as Earle Birney and Dorothy Livesay, and lesser-known but more politically active figures like Torontonian Oscar Ryan (poet and organizer of the collective play *Eight Men Speak*), Toronto poet Margaret Fairley, and populist Nova Scotian poet Joe Wallace. *Waste Heritage*, in contrast, is self-confessedly the work of a politically uncommitted bystander. An immigrant from England who had lived in Vancouver since 1919 and moved to Victoria in 1937, Baird saw the plight of the jobless as "a rare opportunity" and (as she puts it) "'covered' the story as thoroughly as though some tough news editor had given me the assignment" ("Sidown" 84).

She accompanied the unemployed as they took their grievances to the provincial government in Victoria and had her doctor smuggle her into the strikers' quarters disguised as a nurse. Looking back in a 1976 essay, "Sidown, Brothers, Sidown," Baird notes that she had no connection "with Communism and I have never thought of myself as a radical if being a radical means wanting to overthrow the system we live in in favour of another political system" (82). In short, as Roger Hyman succinctly puts it, "Baird is not a radical, but her imaginative intensity has produced a radical novel" (82). *Waste Heritage*, then, is a fictional take, from a sympathetic eyewitness, on a key episode of the political struggles of a pivotal era in Canadian history.¹

After a relatively positive reception, however, *Waste Heritage* soon fell out of print, undoubtedly because the onset of war eclipsed the economic and political conflicts out of which the novel came. While Baird's other works — *John*, published in 1937, *He Rides the Sky* (1941), and her novel drawing on her long career in the civil service, *Climate of Power* (1971) — received positive but passing critical attention, in 1973, through the efforts of Baird herself, along with Dorothy Livesay and Toronto history professor Michiel Horn, Macmillan was convinced to republish *Waste Heritage* as part of its Laurentian Library series. A smattering of articles subsequently appeared in the 1980s, all lamenting the neglect of the novel, but since then *Waste Heritage* has sunk once again into obscurity (though the University of Ottawa's Press's imminent publication of a new critical edition of the novel, edited by Colin Hill, should help to remedy this).² While such attention may mean that it can no longer be considered neglected, *Waste Heritage* nonetheless deserves revisiting now, first of all because of the continuing relevance of its social concerns in an era in which "multinational capitalism in conjunction with reactionary political regimes are consolidating their undemocratic power and treating both representative and participatory governmental institutions as well as the masses of population with contempt" (Doyle 298). In many ways this current post-industrial consolidation of capital replicates the economic and ethical failings of that earlier era — increasing concentration of wealth, a lack of concern for the unemployed, a preoccupation with financial speculation, and a glorification of the markets. As a sustained contemporary fictional account of a significant moment in Canadian labour history, Baird's novel, which "depicts local class conflicts with documentary specificity and publicizes

them as prototypical” (Irr, *Suburb* 166), is an important social and historical document, a testimony to a heritage of class confrontation that the image of Canada as “the peaceable kingdom” continues to elide. Furthermore, the aesthetic challenges and accomplishments of Baird’s novel, highlighted by the limited extant criticism on the novel, also warrant revisiting in the context of contemporary theoretical, political, and cultural debates, because the novel quite consciously raises important questions about the relationship between politics and literary form. In the wake of poststructuralism’s challenge to both the apolitical formalism and aestheticism of New Criticism and to the teleological metanarrative of Marxism, literary critics have become increasingly cognizant of the interplay between politics and literary form, but also increasingly skeptical about the efficacy of literature as a vehicle for social change, and *Waste Heritage* arguably can be seen as anticipating some of these concerns. In various ways, Baird’s novel contends with the challenges of representing the inertia of collective action during the 1930s in a literary form — the novel — dominated by the Western tradition of bourgeois individualism and narrative linearity, and inscribes those very concerns into a narrative about the collective resistance of the unemployed.

As labour historians such as Bryan Palmer and Gregory Kealey in particular have pointed out, the period between the wars was an incredibly pivotal and formative one for Canada, and represented the most sustained class conflict and challenge to established authority in Canadian history. Starting with the Winnipeg General Strike as the main event of a strike-filled 1919, the era was marked by repeated and violent clashes between capital, the state, and labour: from the pitched battles of the Cape Breton coalfields, to the killing of striking miners in Estevan in 1931, to the 1935 On-to-Ottawa trek of the unemployed, which culminated in the Regina Riot. *Waste Heritage* is a response to one of the final acts of that era. In 1937, British Columbia Premier Duff Pattullo shut down joint federal-provincial forestry camps for the unemployed, and, in response, twelve hundred Relief Project Workers Union members converged on Vancouver, where they occupied the Post Office and the Art Gallery (Thompson and Seager 293-94). After the provincial and federal governments passed the buck back and forth for a month, on June 19 the Vancouver police forced strikers out of the Art Gallery and the RCMP cleared out the Post Office. In the latter case, tear-gassed protesters were made to run a gauntlet of police armed with billy clubs,

and their leader, Steve Brodie, a veteran of the On-to-Ottawa Trek, was beaten senseless. The sit-down strikers responded by going on a rampage in downtown Vancouver, shattering storefront windows and battling police. The strikers subsequently took their grievances to Victoria, where, after a period of stonewalling and negotiation between provincial and federal governments, then-Prime Minister Mackenzie King defused the situation by offering transportation home to all the unemployed who agreed (Thompson and Seager 294).

The few critics who have written about *Waste Heritage* have drawn attention not only to its value as a contemporary fictional documentation of this history but also to the interplay between its structure and thematic concerns. What makes the novel even more intriguing, but has not really been addressed in prior criticism, however, is its metafictional preoccupation with the interplay between politics and literary form (though Hill addresses this aspect of the novel in his introduction to the forthcoming critical edition). While one would not jump to claim *Waste Heritage* as one of those unsung precursors to Canadian postmodernist fiction (such as, for instance, James DeMille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* or Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*), the novel nonetheless is characterized by a palpable concern with how to represent the struggle aesthetically. This concern is inscribed in the narrative through the character of Kenny Hughes, a sensitive former schoolteacher and to some degree an extended stand-in for Baird in her role as eyewitness. Shy and somewhat ostracized as an eccentric, Hughes struggles with questions of form and motivation as he seeks to be the movement's chronicler: "This book of mine is to be more than just another book, it's to be a ... a kind of a social document, a book that will bring before the nation this whole problem of unemployment that is festering on its body like a bloody sore" (206). Baird herself says that the primary motivation behind the book "was the plight of the young men I saw, the plight of the jobless as a great human disaster, something I knew all Canadians should be made aware of" ("Sidown" 81), and that concern is foregrounded, in a muted metafictional fashion, through the character of Kenny, who hovers on the periphery of the main events. However, Kenny, unlike Baird, *is* one of the unemployed, and his situation very much shapes his capacity as a writer: he is "beginning to tarnish from two years of doing nothing. He used to be bright and inclined towards idealism, now he was introverted and occasionally bitter, knowing him-

self to be slowing down mentally with every added day of idleness. The only thing that kept him going nowadays and roused him out of himself was the idea of this book” (82). Concerned with considerations of naturalistic detail, dialogue, and character, “things no outsider could know about or get interested in because they were not important from an outside point of view” (148), Kenny thus articulates Baird’s obstacles in giving shape to contemporary events, as well as “keeping it clear of anything that might border on libel” (206) — presumably a reference to Baird’s fictionalizing of nonetheless recognizable people and events. Kenny obsesses over being different from the other unemployed men and is embarrassed at inquiries about the progress of his writing, haunted by a sense of stasis that mirrors the inertia of the larger movement as it waits for action on the part of reluctant politicians: “This quality of embarrassment was a symptom of the unrest perpetually at work in him nowadays, a haunting obsession of days and weeks and months going past, and his never getting anywhere” (182). Arguably, Baird uses the figure of Kenny to articulate her anxieties about the authenticity and earnestness of her own portrait: that of an outsider. In a sarcastic observation made about Kenny by one of the strikers, Baird signals her awareness of the obstacles she faces: “He’s writin’ a book all about the dignity of labor an’ the lousy capitalists. Boy, is he goin’ to burn ‘em up!” (125).

One of the primary challenges of *Waste Heritage* is to chronicle the fate of a collective movement in a literary form that, as Doyle for one argues, is not particularly compatible with collective action and “politically radical literary purposes” because of its “historical identification with bourgeois individualism” and “individual character development” (96). Baird’s consciousness of this challenge is once again signalled metafictionally, as Kenny, in wrestling with how to depict the movement, fixates on Baird’s protagonist Matt Striker as the key to it all, struggling to figure out his motivation and “penetrate him as a type” (267). Here Kenny foregrounds one of Baird’s solutions, which is to create a kind of unemployed Everyman, as is signalled all too readily by his name: Matt Striker. Beyond his unsubtle branding, however, Matt is very much individualized, as Baird, while focalizing most of the third-person narrative through Matt’s perspective, makes a sustained effort to convey the heterogeneity of personality and purpose within the collective. In Matt’s case, this particularity is suggested by the other principal reson-

ance to his name — that he is all too ready to strike out in a social and political struggle that calls for the restraint of the individual in the cause of the collective. Matt's volatility is the result of a dilemma shared by so many of his generation: that a past filled with deprivation and lack of purpose seems to lead to a future similarly devoid of promise. As is captured in the novel's title, Matt, like so many others in the movement, has been down so long that up is not just elusive but almost an abstract concept. Abandoned by his mother and raised by his improvident "dirty radical" father, Matt has as one of his first memories "bein' waked by a cop shinin' a flashlight on my face an' shovin' his hand under my mattress to feel for seditious literature" (115). This social alienation and lack of opportunity has continued into Matt's life as an old-young man. By twenty-three he has travelled so much, unsuccessfully scouring the country for work, that he can no longer claim residence in any province, his existential homelessness given official *imprimatur* by hostile authorities eager to avoid the moral and financial burden of helping the unemployed. *Waste Heritage* thus provides a fictional illustration of Palmer's observation that in the 1930s "state repression was the complement of state inaction on the fundamental issue of unemployment. Indeed, it might be argued that in the place of an effective program of relief and a forthright policy on unemployment, the state directed its energies to *managing* unemployment and *containing* the threat posed by the unemployed" (262). Matt's role in *Waste Heritage*, then, is to represent the larger forces that have shaped a generation; as Georg Lukács puts it, "The *typical* is not to be confused with the *average*..., nor with the *eccentric*. A character is typical, in the technical sense, when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society" (122).

Furthermore, the aesthetic challenge that Baird faces, of giving form to collective experience, mirrors the political tension at the core of *Waste Heritage*, as Baird, while focusing on Matt, chronicles the strains on and internal divisions of the larger group of unemployed men, depicting the challenges of political organization and the suppression of uncoordinated, arbitrary individual action that it entails. Arriving in Aschelon (a thinly disguised Vancouver) in the wake of the expulsion of the sit-down protesters and the bloody clash in the streets, Matt becomes increasingly committed to the movement and starts to draw "power from more than himself, purpose and direction from a source outside of and greater than himself" (33). Joining the organized unemployed protesters in Aschelon

gives Matt a sense of purpose that he has otherwise been denied by the wider society, but even as part of a collective effort Matt, “profoundly ambivalent about the collectivized social world to which he attaches himself, vacillates between integration into the organization and preservation of his own freedom of mind and values” (Willmott 34). Matt’s political commitment is a work-in-progress, and over the course of the novel Baird captures the challenge of restraint in an atmosphere of economic hardship and social intolerance, as well as the numbing stasis of the perpetually unemployed. Throughout the novel Matt and other characters must struggle with “taking it” — a recurring motif that encompasses the constant subjection of the unemployed to the strains of restraint, endurance, hardship, and despair.

This dynamic is reflected particularly in Matt’s relationship with Hep, one of the movement’s principal organizers, a character probably modelled, as Mathews notes, on Steve Brodie (74). Initially annoyed by Hep’s brusque organizational manner, Matt is subtly taken under his wing, but for much of the novel resists the discipline that Hep tries to instill in him, and skeptically suspects that he is a Red and a rabble-rouser. As Hep reassures him, though, he is merely channelling the energy of the men into something more collectively productive. Indeed, Hep exemplifies how the mass movements of the 1920s and 1930s were shepherded by committed and disciplined organizers who were often vilified and persecuted as Reds by the authorities, by capital, and by the public. In her 1976 retrospective, Baird herself observes, qualifying her political neutrality, that

I don’t praise or condemn some of the most important people in the novel who are obviously connected with radical politics. Those men greatly cared for the unemployed. They worked to get justice for the unemployed, and they appeared to many as well as myself the ones who were really willing to work hard to see that the unemployed — the jobless — got a decent break. (82)

Under Hep’s tutelage, Matt gradually comes to see the forest of collective action instead of the trees of individual interest, despite his developing relationship with Hazel, a woman he meets shortly after his arrival in Aschelon, with whom he daydreams of a life of stability and material comfort — a desire, as Caren Irr rightly argues, that is “for a family romance that marginalizes and objectifies women” (“Borders” 516). Hep entrusts Matt to deal with various “flare-ups” that threaten

to create a public scandal and thus derail the movement and, as the novel progresses, Matt comes to appreciate Hep's long-term view of the struggle: "You can't go beating yourself up against pinpoints of justice an' injustice, you've got to see this picture as a whole" (186).

At the same time as Matt provides a focal point for the narrative and a solution to the problem of representing collective experience, however, *Waste Heritage* also displays, once again through the figure of Kenny, a certain anxiety about that solution. For one thing, through Kenny, while Baird conveys a certain detached admiration of the kind of composure that such a long-term view requires, she perhaps at the same time sublimates her anxiety over her own status as an outsider representing the conflict. Facing the possibility of jail as he nervously prepares to go out on a tin-canning campaign in Gath (an obvious stand-in for Victoria), for instance, Kenny envies Matt's unself-conscious participation in the cause: "Hughes considered him handsome in a rugged, unfinished sort of a way. He can take it, Hughes thought, how I envy anyone like him that can take it. 'I want the experience,' he said with that touch of wistfulness that prevented his ever really being popular" (267). Indeed, earlier on, as the men enjoy a leisurely swim during the trek to Gath, Hughes studies Matt, "trying to penetrate by intuition what he could never hope to arrive at by experience" (183). Though he tries "to sense what went on inside of Matt, made him tick over" (183), however, he never gets "an inch nearer to the essential quality, the only part of Matt that would have done him any good" (184).

If focusing on Matt and his apprenticeship in the movement presents at best an uneasy solution to the challenge of representing a collective experience, another challenge Baird faces — again articulated through Kenny's preoccupation with writing a book about the experience — is "the entire absence of plot" (206). Having arrived in the wake of the riot, Matt experiences the movement largely in a holding pattern, and in scene after scene Baird portrays the tense, frustrated lassitude of the multitude of unemployed men as they are shepherded by the likes of Hep from one forlorn encampment to the next:

The lot was dotted with blanket rolls and cartons tied with string and a few battered grips. It looked like a refugee camp without the goats and women and children. The lot was patched with rank, oil-stained grass and the best sites went first, that is the sites with a small growth of grass to soften the uneven ground. If it had not

been for the presence of police and the drifting crowds, the piled-up junk and the backs of the rookeries, the heavy anger seething in the air, the scene might have been comic. As it was it was merely stark and crazy and dangerous. (36)

The headings of the four-part narrative structure of *Waste Heritage* (Aschelon, Transit, Gath, Transit) — the sequence emphasizing mobility rather than stability — figure the maddening irresolution, the absence of genuine developments, faced by the unemployed. Over the course of the novel, Hep and the other leaders organize a tin-canning campaign in Aschelon to raise funds to send a delegation to Gath, where the occupation of a public park leads to an ambivalent settlement with the government, including the dispersal of most of the unemployed to destinations east. All of this activity is conducted in an atmosphere of heightened social tension, requiring extreme discipline and restraint and involving a good deal of waiting, which Matt, short-fused and hungry for action, finds unbearable. As Hep observes, the situation of the unemployed strikers is different from “straight labor trouble”: “We can raise plenty hell in our way only, whatever happens, we got to keep the sympathy of the public an’ that means every swat we take we have to take with one hand tied behind our backs” (161). Forbearance, negotiation, and waiting, however, are not the stuff of dynamic plots, and, through Kenny, Baird foregrounds her consciousness of such narrative demands. When Matt first meets Kenny, another striker, Saul, witnessing Kenny’s frustration with chronicling events, provides a piece of advice that captures Kenny’s (and by extension Baird’s) aesthetic struggle: “Look, Kenny, what you are trying to do is crazy from the start-off. You are splitting your head to write about such things ... don’t do it. Draw a squirrel cage ... in one end, round an’ round, out the same end. Jus’ draw that ... [;] there you have the same thing in a few lines instead of in a hundred t’ousand words” (85). Saul’s pessimism is borne out by events, as — at the end of a narrative in which variations on the question “Where is this all going?” are asked routinely — the protest itself ends in irresolution: the “settlement does not offer jobs; it offers what is essentially institutionalized vagrancy, government subsidized bumming” (Hopkins 83). Most of the men are back to square one, drifting home to no work or to criminal activity, and Matt (at least initially) is on his way out with no visible improvement in his fortunes: “I come into town with just an address on a piece of paper an’ I’m goin’ out the same way”

(321). Indeed, after the settlement is reached, Hep says to Kenny, “you got nothing to make a book out of, ... no plot, nothing” (294), and Matt subsequently reflects on the justice of Hep’s description: “There’s no plot to it and no sense. Just a mess of talk and a bunch of boys sitting around on their tails and not getting any place” (296). Kenny’s dilemma, and Baird’s, then, is how to advance a narrative in which there is no progress — in other words, how to narrate inertia.

One of Baird’s key strategies in this respect is her scripting — in a style characteristically brisk, reportorial, and sociological — of a series of episodes that provide barometer readings, as it were, of the volatile atmosphere created by the crisis of the unemployed. The mood of the public is balanced on a knife edge between sympathy and guilt on the one side and fear, hostility, and hysteria on the other. As a column of unemployed men parade through Aschelon, for instance, Baird diagnoses the public’s stunned but ambivalent comprehension of the scale of the crisis:

There was not much talking among the men and their silence was grim and it was significant. It spread to the people themselves so that they watched silent and amazed and ashamed. The faces of the men silenced them. The sight of hundreds of them marching in this shoddy crusade and the knowledge of what lay back of it quieted the people and at the same time made them one in a common ignored evil and an old shame. But the people were not important, just as the borne slogans were not important nor the veiled hysteria nor the police peppered thickly along the route. The only thing that was important was the youth of the men marching. (44-45)

Public opinion, though, is both varied and fickle, and in a series of scenes Matt is forced to contain his rage and practice forbearance in response to often inflammatory remarks by members of the public, though he staunchly dramatizes the plight of the unemployed through restrained but acerbic rejoinders. Such volatility, furthermore, is not restricted to the public, as the ranks of the unemployed likewise teeter between a resigned, exhausted discipline and a flammable resentment and insubordination. This volatility is captured in particular in a scene in the seedy Gath flophouse in which the protesters have been lodged, where a vicious fight breaks out between two belligerent strikers after one of them complains that “We can’t push a spoon in our mouths without the okay of some goddam committee” (278), and the rest of the

men excitedly gather around, their thirst for action, and perhaps even blood, at least temporarily slaked.

Baird's principal strategy for dealing with the problem both of narrating inertia and of giving narrative form to a collective experience, however, is to concentrate on the relationship between Matt and Eddy, a fellow striker whom Matt rescues from a policeman's assault upon his arrival in Aschelon. His brain addled by the assault, the unpredictable Eddy is a threat to the movement — a firecracker in hot pursuit of a match — and, if not for Hep's willingness to entrust Eddy to Matt's stewardship, would likely end up in an asylum. As Matt reflects, Eddy "was tied in with everything that happened since that first Sunday. Eddy was the one thread running clear through" (273). This relationship modifies Baird's concentration on Matt as individual protagonist, instead focusing attention on the importance of mutual reliance and fellowship within the movement, and also gives the novel shape, as Eddy gets into a series of scrapes that threaten to ignite public opinion against the movement. On a series of occasions the pitiable Eddy attracts unwanted maternal attention from women in public, and his hysterical and unbalanced reactions lead to potentially scandalous physical confrontations. To extricate Eddy, Matt must put himself, and even at times the movement, on the line, as in the incident when, to rescue Eddy from the clutches of an opportunistic prostitute, Matt resorts to hitting her. In the process, Matt routinely finds himself torn between his allegiance to the movement and his allegiance to Eddy. As Hep warns, Matt's concern is not to be "just for you or for Eddy. If anything goes wrong you're responsible to every other man in this organisation" (41). By stressing Matt's relationship with Eddy as both humane and political, Baird highlights the larger bonds (and strains) that run through the movement as a whole and moves beyond the confines of bourgeois individualism.

The relationship between Matt and Eddy gives the narrative a relentless and almost deterministic sense of momentum that both feeds off and disrupts the tense atmosphere of stasis and inertia that otherwise looms over the movement (and, potentially, the narrative itself). The outcome of this relationship is heavily forecasted, as Matt senses from the beginning that Eddy is a kind of Jonah. When he first encounters and rescues Eddy and discovers that he has smashed a storefront window to reach a couple of candy bars, Matt prophetically observes,

“Goddammit Eddy, I never met up with a guy like you before. Maybe I should of left you to that cop after all” (16). As Eddy draws Matt into confrontation after confrontation, both men openly refer to the advisability of parting ways and suggest that Matt’s stewardship of Eddy will end in disaster. Furthermore, Matt’s friend Harry gestures to Eddy’s fate in responding to Matt’s determination to keep Eddy out of “one of them places”: “He’d a damnsite better walk right down an’ lay his head on the tracks” (110). Inevitably, it is Eddy who precipitates the novel’s climax when, after being rebuffed at a shoe store whose sales pitch — “COME AROUND SATURDAY AND GET A PAIR OF SHOES FOR ONE CENT” (301) — he has taken literally, he returns for vengeance and ends up assaulting a police officer. Matt, compelled to intervene once again, finally and catastrophically loses his restraint and brutally batters the officer, and Eddy is forced to call for help to prevent him from committing murder. The novel ends with Matt being hauled off to jail, while a traumatized Eddy walks into the path of an oncoming train.

The relationship between Matt and Eddy thus gives the novel a narrative unity and, more importantly, a circular structure that symbolizes the political struggles of the unemployed and represents Baird’s principal solution to the aesthetic challenges of portraying their plight. However, courtesy of Eddy, Matt comes full circle with a difference, when he is forced to intervene once again to prevent Eddy from being beaten by the police officer; thus the novel ends, as it began, with an act of violence. However, whereas the initial beating in *Aschelon* was gratuitously initiated by the police, at the end of the novel Eddy precipitates the fight and then calls for help when Matt refuses to relent in his assault. As Mathews underlines, Eddy’s unpredictability is the product of unprovoked earlier beatings (73-74), so even though Eddy literally starts the fight, the ultimate responsibility for the two ruined lives lies with a repressive system of authority of which police brutality is merely the visible arm. Eddy’s walking into the path of a train further brings things full circle (the novel opens with Matt arriving on a train) in a manner charged with political resonance, as Eddy is brought down while moving against the direction of a vehicle associated not only with industrial capitalism but also with the cause of the transient unemployed.

Martha Nussbaum argues that “the whole commitment of the novel as a genre, and not least of all its emotional elements, is indeed to the

individual, seen as both qualitatively distinct and separate,” and as a result it is “no accident that mass movements frequently fare badly in the novel, to the extent that they neglect the separate agency of their members, their privacy, and their qualitative differences” (70). This assumption underlies the critical reaction to the ambivalent political resonances of the ending to *Waste Heritage*. Baird’s focus on Eddy and particularly on Matt, who receives from Hep the same answer he has heard from countless prospective employers — “maybe tomorrow” (317) — when he expresses a desire for more responsibilities in the organization, threatens to defuse the power of her portrait of the collective experience of the unemployed. Doyle, for instance, suggests that the “tragic redundancy of the whole experience in *Waste Heritage*” (121) is somewhat politically neutralizing, because the movement’s failure is “not presented as the result of police and government suppression” (120). However, it can be argued that the effect of the circular structure of the novel is less politically deflating than Doyle maintains. As the title of the novel indicates, Baird intends to give a portrait of a generation whose potential has been squandered and who have been essentially discarded by society. Developing the dynamic, if tragic, relationship between Matt and Eddy within the larger stasis of the strike, Baird captures this sense of despair and squandering structurally, giving shape to what is otherwise shapeless, event to what is uneventful, and suggesting, ultimately, that something is bound to happen when nothing happens to so many. As Hopkins argues, the “indecision, irresolution, and inaction” pervading the novel are symptomatic of a diseased society, “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)” and that the “only possible outcome is personal and collective self-destruction” (78).

Although the collective action of the unemployed in the novel, faithful to the original event, produces little visible result, the fate of Matt and Eddy provides a more dramatic and climactic illustration of how such inertia takes its toll — and that it is not capital or the state that bears the brunt. Baird’s novel perhaps reflects what Lukács sees as potential shortcomings of (to use his term) critical realism, that the “class struggle will be described from the bourgeois point of view, its effects on society being demonstrated only indirectly, by revealing the

psychological and moral consequences” and that it lacks the ability “to portray the totality of a society in its immediacy and to reveal its pattern of development” that he prizes in socialist realism (99). Nonetheless, Baird harnesses the typical bourgeois preoccupation of the novel with individual development to make a point about the fate of the larger collective. Nor does the novel suggest, as Willmott contends, that Matt lashes out at a policeman as a symbol “of the authority not only of the normative society and government which have abandoned him, but also of the organization which opposes it” and that Hep’s effort to encourage Matt to sacrifice his individual desires for the interest of the collective “self-destructs, unable to repress the indeterminate passion and imagination of possibility that is all that is left to the desolated youth” (34). Furthermore, Mathews points out, the novel also has some harsh political lessons, as Eddy, whom Hep also has gone out on a limb to protect, precipitates the public scandal that Hep has been so diligently trying to avoid: “In the class conflict in which the group is engaged no weak links can be permitted. That may seem undesirable, cruel, and overly organized to the middle class mind. But the novel is not a middle class novel, and what it says about class structure, class interest, class exploitation, and class values makes it *mean* very differently from what a middle class novel means” (81). But this does not amount, as Hyman contends, to suggesting that the solidarity sought by the movement “is itself dangerous to the human values for which the movement is ostensibly struggling” (85), a conclusion that leads Hyman to erroneously attribute to the novel a liberal humanist individualism (87). Instead, what both Baird and Mathews make clear is that the movement’s authoritarian impulses are a necessary, if lamentable, defensive measure against the similar, but much more substantial and systematic, impulses of established authority, and that in fighting from such a disadvantaged position it is always a challenge to balance discipline and political efficacy with a sense of consideration and humanity (which is *not* the same as the cynical and expedient observation that to make an omelette you have to break a few eggs). Rather, what *Waste Heritage* captures is the uneasy dynamics of a necessarily dialectical movement between the interests of the individual and the interests of the collective.

What has been overlooked about *Waste Heritage*, then, is the way in which the interaction between such political considerations and considerations of literary form and narrative structure is self-consciously

foregrounded in the novel. Though Kenny is a somewhat marginal figure in the novel, and hardly a determining force on the shape the narrative ultimately takes, nonetheless through him Baird conveys the challenges of portraying the consequences of stasis without creating the impression that, effectively, nothing happens. Indeed, the lack of development in the plight of the unemployed is reflected in the fate of Kenny's book, which is forecasted from his initial appearance:

He sweated after technical detail and local color, trying to get at what was really going on behind this whole situation and all that naturally made him sensitive about the book in case it should not be published in the end. It never was published, not, as Hughes went around saying after, because it would have ripped the administration to pieces and forced a change of government, but simply because it was not a good book. Hughes had all the conviction and the sympathy and he moled around earnestly making notes, the only thing he forgot was to learn how to write. (83)

Though, as Hill argues, the failure of Kenny's book can be seen as Baird anticipating the reaction of "those who would call her novel too factual and artless" (n. pag.), here again the distinction between Kenny, as an exhausted and disenfranchised member of the unemployed, and Baird as an outsider is important to keep in mind, as elsewhere Baird conveys through Kenny a less self-deprecating belief in the significance of her material (presumably if it is given the right kind of treatment). Of Kenny's reaction to the "dirty dumps" in which the unemployed are stabled in Gath, the narrator observes,

He wanted to record the stink as fact. But he was also sensitive, more sensitive than the majority of the men round him, so while they came right out and called these places dirty dumps and then forgot them, Kenny worried over them in detail, looking for some angle of approach that would really handle the subject. If he had ripped into them and the book had ever been published, these dumps might have made Hughes famous. (267)

While *Waste Heritage* may not have made Baird famous either, unlike Kenny's book it arguably was a success, and through such self-reflexive musing Baird seems to be signalling her consciousness of the fact that one's chances of success have much to do with one's material (and by extension psychological) circumstances.

At a time when such "grand narratives" as Marxism have been

increasingly criticized as teleological and totalizing, Mathews's celebration of *Waste Heritage's* understanding of the need to take the long view in the process of collective resistance may seem outdated, but, as Doyle argues, "there is still a vital need for a creative literature that will help keep people aware of and resistant to the hypocrisy and injustice that are still characteristic of the private enterprise system" (298). To some the politics of *Waste Heritage*, like its often stilted dialogue, may seem nostalgically quaint, the novel amounting to little more than a kind of extended, leftist Heritage Minutes episode. However, as the United States' mounting debt continues to raise palpable concerns about an international financial crisis, and as the concentration of wealth proceeds apace heedless of looming social and environmental catastrophes, works such as Baird's *Waste Heritage* serve as timely reminders that, in some respects, we have been here before and that the consequences of unmitigated accumulation and speculation are largely borne not by those rolling the dice and doing the accumulating. Indeed, as in *Waste Heritage*, that burden has largely fallen to the young, as Robert Wright persuasively argues in *Virtual Sovereignty: Nationalism, Culture and the Canadian Question*. While the baby boom generation — which is now calling the political, social, and financial shots — came of age in an era of expanding opportunity and a nurturing welfare state, Wright contends, members of that generation have overseen a radical political and economic restructuring that has been profoundly to their advantage and to the disadvantage of "anyone born after 1965." Wright sees the latter group as having been "mired in an economic crisis unprecedented since the Great Depression" (167). This crisis is intensified, Wright argues, by the widespread sense "that young people are 'whiners'" or assuming a pose of alienation "as a kind of lifestyle accessory," and in the process, "the indifference (and in some cases, the antipathy) of public policy towards young people ... has helped to divert attention away from its root causes" (167). The generational diagnosis that Baird conveys in *Waste Heritage*, in other words, may not be a thing of the past. For the disenfranchised generation that Wright describes, an observation by a member of the public moved by the plight of the unemployed in *Waste Heritage* might have a lot of resonance: "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).

Indeed, in self-consciously wrestling with the challenges of balancing

the portrayal of the plight of the individual with that of the collective, Baird is trying to break from a linear concentration on individual development, characteristic of the bourgeois novel, that creates an atomization whose effect is, if anything, even more palpable at the end of the century. Social, economic, political, and technological developments might suggest that we live in an era radically different from the down-and-out society Baird depicts in *Waste Heritage*. However, Baird's emphasis on linking the alienated individual to the bigger picture of collective political response is, if anything, even more pertinent in our increasingly fragmented and commodified culture, overwhelmingly defined by "the logic of capital," which is, as Fredric Jameson argues, "a dispersive and atomistic, 'individualistic' one, an antisociety rather than a society" (343). Palmer sees "mass culture in the age of spectacle" as creating a paradoxical and alienating ambivalence between individual and collective experience "because of technologies and promotions that fragment the substance of being at the same time that they deliver the spectacle to ever-widening, but increasingly atomized, audiences" (387). Furthermore, in such a regime, power is diffused and resistance eminently co-optable, as patterns of cultural consumption mirror what is happening politically, "the suppression and repression of class in Canada; the incorporation and domestication of dissent" (Palmer 391).

In an era in which the novel as a form is being increasingly commodified and co-opted within the larger corporate machinery of cultural production, works such as *Waste Heritage* provide welcome reminders of the political and reformist energies that have been, and arguably still can be, channelled through it. However, given the blurring of the line between surface and substance, representation and reality in postmodernity, postmodern culture, as Jameson contends, presents unique obstacles to the formation of a genuinely contestatory response, as "we are *within* the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt" (62). Furthermore, "the inner dynamic of the culture of consumption is an infernal machine" (206), in which "we ourselves are plunged to the point of being unable to imagine anything else" (207). The challenge, then, is similar to that which Baird faced in writing *Waste Heritage* — to find a form in which to capture what is at once a very different but also in many ways a familiar reality. As Jameson argues, "the new political art (if it is possible at all)," will have

to find new forms of representation, a new way of mapping “its fundamental object — the world space of multinational capital” so that “we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion” (54). The challenge is, as it was for Irene Baird, to find the form to fit the times.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My thanks for the very constructive and generous suggestions of those who vetted this article for *Studies in Canadian Literature* and also to Colin Hill for his helpful advice and for providing me the opportunity to read the introduction to his edition of *Waste Heritage*, which is forthcoming from the University of Ottawa Press some time in 2007.

NOTES

¹ Baird was, however, less than sympathetic to racial and ethnic minorities, if the casual and unreflective bigotry towards Jews, Asian Canadians, Native peoples, and others that appears sporadically throughout the novel is any indication. As Hill notes, it is oddly apt “that Baird, in a text that purports to reflect accurately a contemporary Canada, indicates how deeply ingrained such attitudes were in Canadian society” (n.pag.). Hill concludes an extended discussion of this troubling side of the novel by arguing that “Ironically, these unpalatable portions of the text perhaps increase its value as a social document. Such scenes remind us of the depth of racist and anti-Semitic sentiment in 1930s Canada” (n.pag.). Though this article does not touch on this aspect of the novel, like Hill I would contend that any argument for the merit and continuing relevance of *Waste Heritage* must be tempered by a recognition of its gratuitous, thoroughly ingrained, and socially typical prejudices.

² See also Caren Irr’s “Queer Borders,” which continues the tradition of comparing *Waste Heritage* to John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* by “queering” the two novels and reading them and their critical reception in the context of the asymmetrical power relations between Canada and the United States.

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