

# **‘We are all philosophers; we cannot help being’: Credos, Life-choices and Philosophy in Murray Bail’s *The Pages***

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According to one famous postulate, ‘an unexamined life is not worth living’. The words, originally attributed to Socrates, gained notoriety at Sydney University, where they were appropriated as a polemical exhortation to successive generations of eager students by Professor John Anderson. More recently their spirit has been dramatised by the autodidact Wesley Antill, in Murray Bail’s fourth novel *The Pages* (2008), in response to the insistence of a lecturer from the same department that the would-be philosopher must ‘become a *singular* person’ (65).<sup>1</sup> How Antill transforms this adage into deeds, and his legacy to posterity, in the form of piles of manuscript pages, is Bail’s ostensible subject. Yet answers to such important questions as what precisely his life amounts to, or the purpose of his miscellaneous jottings that constitute the book’s concluding section, have proven tantalisingly elusive. ‘These fragments are presented as the sum total of the philosopher’s disjointed lifetime of thinking. Or maybe they are a tracing of the land itself speaking hesitantly. Equally they may be simply the outcome of Sophie’s erratic coffee-spill. Who knows? The novel ends by remaining a work in progress’ (Krauth 11).<sup>2</sup> Certainly the narrative avoids unambiguous closure, and achieves that ‘resistance’ to facile readings that Bail has long admired in other works of art.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as I hope to show, the careful orchestration of its diverse scenes and five main characters provides important clues to this final section and the work’s overall import, while through the fate of Wesley Bail is able to highlight the issue of philosophy’s potential contemporary role, as well as to probe abiding existential dilemmas.

Seen in the wider context of the Australian’s *oeuvre*, *The Pages* reads like a summation of many of his preoccupations. Rather than representing a ‘turn’ towards philosophy, its prominence here reflects a long-standing, serious engagement with the discipline.<sup>4</sup> Epistemological and ontological issues have been a mainstay of Bail’s fiction, as well as a subject for protracted study and a cause of domestic acrimony: ‘You think you’re so smart, reading all that philosophy ... You think you know everything. And reading out from that book of Hinduism, saying how good it is. Phoney! You don’t believe anything beautiful, you’re so harsh’ (N17).<sup>5</sup> This tirade is lent credence by being jotted down for further reflection in his notebooks, where Bail also acknowledged, after more than two decades as a full-time writer: ‘Psychology and philosophy: too much of one, not enough of the other’ (N304)—referring presumably to his attachment to the novel of ideas, rather than psychological probing, which was already signalled in *Homesickness* (1980).<sup>6</sup> Its plot consists largely of a series of unpredictable visits to overseas museums, real and imagined, by an eclectic group of Australian tourists. Yet an attentive reading of these apparently random events reveals an authorial concern with mutability, self-knowledge and Australian identity (Attridge, Ommundsen, Wilson). His tourists describe their antipodean homeland as a place of ‘nothing really yet’ (H393), its people as given to quipping to hide unease at their own emptiness (H297), while their shared predicament is arguably represented by Violet Hopper wandering confused in a London maze, whose hedges are cut to spell out ‘Nosce te’, or know yourself (H111): according to antiquity the irreducible basis of all knowledge. Though his

tourists fail repeatedly to achieve a sovereign vantage-point from which they can make sense of their experience, the quest for one emerges as a leitmotif in Bail's later novels, nowhere more starkly than in *The Pages*.<sup>7</sup>

Also *The Pages* is arguably the product, at least in part, of an authorial wish to make a final, creative reckoning with existence. In published extracts from recent notebooks, time's winged chariot is audibly nearer. 'You're here briefly—work, give shape' (N260) reads one clipped entry, with its distillation suggesting that not a moment was to be lost, and the concluding extract sums up this more sombre mood: 'No use saying: If only we could live longer, there is not enough time etc. The brevity of life is in the design; it applies to every one of us' (N306). This heightened awareness of '*tempus fugit*' conjecturally fed into Bail's unremarked advocacy of the combative generalisation. In the programmatic essay, 'Continental shift', in which he sets forth his preference for fiction that embraces speculation of all sorts, comment and bold invention, Bail is unstinting in his praise of 'fearless "generalisers"' (34). Their pronouncements 'send timid and ordinary minds rushing for the exits', and constitute a stark intellectual challenge to the remaining readers.

The bold assertion coming in at an unexpected angle: it forces the reader to sit up, and either agree or not. It can be as jolting as a slap across the face. A writer sometimes can gain satisfaction only by provoking a duel. By 'generalising', these writers throw off an infectious energy ... How does he know? Is there sufficient truth in it? Probably it cannot merely be dismissed. ('Continental shift' 34)

Bail's supporting examples drawn from European literature make no distinction between the author and narrator. Nor is any clearly signalled in *The Pages*, which is studded with sweeping generalisations, intended presumably to provoke thought and debate.<sup>8</sup> There, too, Wesley foregrounds one of the author's recurring concerns:

The puzzle can never change: 'How do I relate to the world and to that which I call my life?'

Except it needs to be generalised. (196)<sup>9</sup>

And generalised it is through the fates of the five main protagonists, while the vexed local issue of a land apparently inimical to intellectual pursuits is revisited in terms of philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

*The Pages* is a modern-day fable about the dilemmas of knowledge and personal credos, which offers lessons of individual as well as national import. Its setting is an indeterminate pastoral hinterland, a day's drive west of Sydney, where unlikely situations are thinkable, as well as mythic stories in 'the broadest sense' (N282).<sup>11</sup> Conceptually it is built around, and dramatises, antithetical endeavours to make sense of reality, with the opposition of reason and imagination, explored in *Eucalyptus* and earlier works, being replaced by philosophy and the cognate disciplines of psychology and psychoanalysis.<sup>12</sup> Two women from Sydney, a lecturer in philosophy, Erica Hazelhurst, and her friend, the psychoanalyst Sophie Perloff, drive to the country property of the Antills ('a name with a history, a name stuffed to the gills with squatter connotations' [20]). The present generation consisted of Wesley, the eldest, his brother Roger, and their sister Lindsey. Spurning 'the fine art of wool-classing' (42), Wesley broke with tradition to seek broader knowledge in Sydney, first in the inner suburbs, then in

numerous lecture theatres, before narrowing his focus to philosophy and resolving to make an original contribution to the field. A third, crucial response to existence is an untheorised acceptance of nature's abiding rhythms, enacted in the daily life of the siblings on their rural holding. There, as an initial glimpse of the garden suggests, unexpected intersections and incidents, 'implying the presence, surely, of patterns and complexities' (31), are to be reckoned with.

If the novel affords a key to the miscellaneous comments in its final section, then this must be deduced from the life-choices it depicts, as well as from the traditional link between philosophy and personal conduct—currently out of favour in the academy but not forgotten by Bail.<sup>13</sup> *The Pages* ends, after all, with the adages: 'To live simply and quietly is almost a philosophy' and 'We are philosophers; we cannot help being' (199). Here Wesley comes close to articulating the traditional identification of philosophy with the actions and lives of its proponents. The death of Socrates is narrated by Plato as the capstone on, and vindication of, a distinctive way of thought and existence. Diogenes' world-vision is synonymous with his domicile in a barrel. From its Western inception in Athens and Rome, the 'philosophical life was envisaged as a choice detectable through the events and decisions of biography' (Miller 10). The thinker was a practitioner, as well as directly concerned with the translation of his ideas into *Praxis*. The obverse of this is 'the contemporary perception that philosophy is best understood as a purely technical discipline, revolving around specialized issues in semantics and logic' (Miller 6). Marx's famous call for the reintegration of theory and *Praxis* signalled not only the birth of a revolutionary program, but also the distance professional philosophy had moved away from its classical origins—an estrangement interrogated and contested in *The Pages*.<sup>14</sup>

The academic parameters of thought, and its sequestration from daily life, are represented by three carefully chosen members of the Philosophy Department at Sydney University. The blighted and blighting nature of the current discipline is signalled by its leader, Professor L.K. Thursk. Dressed in the livery of academic freedom, 'pullover and bulky shoes', that is more suited to the banks of the Cam or walking on the heath than to Sydney's clammy humidity, L.K. has a well-honed repertoire of dignity-conferring mannerisms. A profile is presented to supplicants, hands are pointed under his chin (like 'an Indian prince wondering whether to give salaams'), and even his most banal utterances are interspersed with a ponderous 'hierarchy of throat-clearings' (16). These suggest the difficulty of articulating profound thoughts ('for much of what composed the world was unsayable' [16]), while additional gravitas is afforded by the legend of his yet-to-be completed life's work, a 'long-awaited study of George Sorel' (16). Erica discerns here the 'fussy drapery' of a bachelor's existence; the narrator the props and mannerisms of an academic sham: 'He was like a plumber who had lost his tools' (16). The aura of learning long ago replaced the substance. Seated in a venerable building, supposedly 'weathered and worn smooth by the never-ending revision of ideas' (17), his hollowness and non-productivity escape public scrutiny and censure, while time, become 'a honeyed substance' and embalmer of arcane traditions, has lost its usual meaning and urgency: 'the good professor would happily have waited more or less all day for an answer' (17). In short, this sandstone realm seems inimical to originality: 'Erica wondered whether a fresh, angular philosophical method could ever be realised here' (17).

Wesley is spared the longueurs of Thursk, but has the misfortune of encountering pedestrian Renmark, who seems equally impervious to the weather or original ideas. Always dressed 'in

nothing but an open-necked shirt' (63), he projects on campus not intellectual rigour or Andersonian turbulence, but the hallmarks of once-prized academic amateurism: 'the rude good health of the long walk, the heath, the stout walking stick, and all that' (63). The initial statement made about him is categorical and defining: 'It was said in the staffroom: "Renmark is not remarkable"' (63). Predictably his lectures are a fund of out-worn but once influential theses, which place the discipline almost beyond local reach. First, philosophy is so difficult, so profound, as almost to defy utterance, and demands prolonged, intense preparation (64). Secondly, he subscribes to the clichéd nexus of setting and mental make-up, dubbing his discipline 'a by-product of the Northern Hemisphere' (64), fostered by complex social conditions, as well as towering peaks, 'cold sharp air and the path alongside the rushing river' (79)—scarce attributes on the world's driest continent. Australia is corresponding devoid of original thought. Though thus handicapped by birth, impressionable Antill can draw succour from the nexus, posited by Renmark, between the existence led and the soaring life of the mind—hence Wesley's later maniacal insistence on creating the appropriate context to think and write in, or the slavish replication of hallowed Gothic silhouettes in the central quadrangle of Sydney University. These same cloisters, which can pass off asinine assertions as inherited wisdom, are arraigned for harbouring nonentities, for breeding prejudices detrimental to native talent and for severance from, as well animosity towards, the special conditions offered by the New World.

Finally, according to these pen sketches of its salaried guardians, philosophy, as practised in the antipodes, is not only second-hand and second-rate but a life-narrowing occupation. Renmark's private life remains shadowy; probably there is virtually nothing to describe. Certainly his sexual urges are appeased at Kings Cross 'down the seedier end' (68). The sole glimpse of him interacting with anyone is with a bottle-blonde: 'they were negotiating; and the lanky lecturer in philosophy followed her up some stairs ... Antill felt a flood of affection for the determined shape of Clive Renmark going forward, always forward' (68). Wesley's hero worship is palpable. Others might see here evidence of an isolated, failed existence, in which he is not alone: six of the seven member of Sydney University's Philosophy Department 'lived alone ... unmarried' (16). This extraordinary lack of personal sharing and involvement is excused by the cliché that 'the solitary life was known to strengthen clarity of thought', followed by a list of notorious freethinkers, who did much to detach philosophy and personal morality from the strictures of religion: 'Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Spinoza, Simone Weil—and anyway who would live with those sort of people?—and don't forget Diogenes' (16). Querulous, self-centred and outspoken individualists, ill-adapted to the arts of compromise and engaging empathy, many of them conjecturally would have agreed with Erica 'about feelings—this was a really difficult area, without solid foundation, more trouble than it was worth; better to keep the lid on feelings' (5-6).

Hazelhurst, the third member of this august department, is struggling against the effects of a stunting education and upbringing. Her family was stoic and taciturn to the point of muteness. Her father, a watch-repairer by trade, preferred to scribble amounts owed on a scrap of paper rather than utter them to a customer. His profession demanded utilitarian attitudes and a concentrated gaze fixed all day on mechanical minutiae—with potentially dehumanising consequences encapsulated by a 'protruding magnifying thing' fitted to his face, which made him repellent even to his daughter (6). Fittingly he died without fuss and only then, with personal control disrupted, uttered 'an unexpected noise, not exactly a word' (6). These domestic lessons in exactitude and repression are reinforced by Erica's disciplinary training. Taught to avoid 'incomplete or hazy thoughts' (5), and to dismiss emotions to the category of

refractory 'non-thoughts' (4), she wonders whether she has 'become harsh—was she a hard woman?' (5). Although not 'dissipated' (72), she is habitually hesitant and avoids personal entanglements. 'Sooner or later every man presented difficulties ... The other person as obstacle! It was why she allowed herself to live alone' (92). Her feelings, however, are conflicted. She exudes calm self-containment and formidable intellectuality (18), yet still hopes she is 'attractive to others' (72). Her innate but understated femininity produces within her tensions that are more easily ignored by her male peers. In brief she, like her friend Sophie, is also face to face with Antill's quandary: 'Now more than anything Erica wanted to make sense of her life' (7).

Potential solutions to this dilemma are offered by psychology and philosophy, and their rival claims to knowledge and personal fulfilment are tested through the trajectories of their respective acolytes, Wesley and Sophie. She represents an alleged antipodean preference for the truth-claims of Freud's discipline. Whereas abstruse reflection has singularly failed to strike vigorous, independent roots in Sydney, a more recent European form of achieving self-understanding is depicted as having swept all before it, to make 'Sydney the most psychological city in the world' (10). Here and in numerous related comments, Bail exploits to the full the license he accorded 'fearless "generalisers"'. In former times, the narrator continues, the 'collective stammering of the self' and 'general moral darkness and obscurity' found answers in philosophy (8), while 'the unevenness of everyday life' provided 'proportion or self-correction' to individual ideas and credos (12). Australian belatedness allegedly assured that by then 'the important philosophical questions had more or less been settled' (9), and that new nostrum, namely 'psychology, and its vine-like offshoot, psychoanalysis' (10), were on hand. These had great appeal in a society based on economic individualism. In place of a recondite intellectual pursuit, a patient had only to delve into the self, and strip back layers of socialisation and camouflage to achieve fundamental insights. The novel's verdict on the current vogue of 'excavation through words' (11) and on unthinking enrolment in the 'age of the self' (12) is harsh—like Bail's judgment on 'many hundreds' of modish, I-centred narratives, as 'a kind of applied psychology [that] has taken over storytelling, coating it and obscuring the core' (E24). An entire city is depicted as enthralled by, and subscribing to, this talking cure, whereas 'at the very word "philosophy" people in Sydney run away in droves, reach for the revolver; they look down at their shoes, they smile indulgently; they go blank' (9).

The intense, unabashed focus on the self at the centre of the psychoanalytic encounter is shown in Sophie Perloff to promote self-absorption and severance from the baffling, wider world. Her insularity and tell-tale lack of general curiosity are immediately signalled: she 'had never been over the mountains before. And she was forty-three' (1). Also subsequent descriptions highlight the self-enclosed nature of the psychoanalytical enterprise. Its practitioners strive to ensure their premises replicate 'the cave-like atmosphere first tried and found to yield interesting results in Vienna' (10), in order to produce the desired 'murmuring hum ... blending into one, each and every word and sentence circling around the self, nothing else' (11). Sophie, although her given name evokes the Greek for wisdom, and her family name the pearl or traditional symbol of enlightenment, is one of Bail's most confused and self-centred characters. All mannerisms, interests and everything in her vicinity lead infallibly back to herself—like lost object viewed as 'clues to herself for someone to follow... sunglasses, a glove, keys, books, purse, and, once, her virginity' (2-3). The jarring inclusion of what was formerly a woman's most prized attribute among a litany of mundane objects encapsulates modern relativism, as well as the shifting parameters of moral judgment and

guilt over which Sophie now presides. Equally damning is the depiction of psychoanalysis as an incubator of endless self-obsession. Hence in Sophie's case 'interest in others tends to be perfunctory, impatient, showy' (12), for her consuming impulse is to focus on her 'own attention-requiring state of mind' (41).

This excessive egotism, which is shared by philosophers, has negative effects that are central to the novel's covert argument. Its main consequences are twofold: an overweening, potentially uncompromising sense of self, which makes deep contact with others extremely rare, if not impossible, and utter blindness, or indifference, to the predatory dimension of one's behaviour. She first displays a dearth of sympathy on their drive westwards when her conversation becomes one long monologue, 'reeled off' without regard for Erica, which reduces their friendship to 'a demonstration of familiarity that required no response' (3). Indicative of this disposition, too, is her lack of empathetic connection with men, including lovers, as well as a preference for situations that confirm her power ('the inevitable weakness in men, of seeing the effect she had on them' [25]). Courting and the sexual act aside, 'Sophie found intimacy difficult. She couldn't sufficiently involve herself' (25). Hospitality, which includes aspects of fellow-feeling, is another no-go area: 'The psychoanalytical person plumps up the pillows and leaves it at that. To extend hospitality to another person subdivides aspects of their difficult, hidden self' (41). Her major problem, in brief, is that 'she could not reach out' (25). The same self-centred focus also renders her oblivious to personal boundaries, the needs of others and social codes. Most seriously, given her position of trust, it drives diverse breeches of professional conduct, from her failure 'to remain neutral, be the conduit' (23) for others' revelations, to sleeping with a patient, an ex-priest ('These men are fascinating, believe me' [25]). These infractions culminate in her proposed solution to her liaison with a married man: 'The wife is an irrelevance. She does him no good. My idea is that he becomes one of my clients. I consider that a brainwave. I would see him regularly' (168). This, the final vignette of Sophie in the book, constitutes a damning verdict on her, and on dangers inherent in her profession. To the end, she remains as divorced from the feelings of others as she is from the surrounding countryside—which to her appears lifeless and empty (29). Her precious selfhood remains sacrosanct, undivided and a prison.

Pursuing life according to the dictates of modern philosophy proves no easier, and involves a similar insistence on the rights of the inviolable 'I'. In Wesley's case its first, crucial assertion is associated with violence, and marks a decisive break with family traditions that spell constraint and deprivation. Home for him means life dictated by the rising sun and seasonal cycles, a sprawling homestead with an absent mother, farm duties instead of culture, and parents immersed in material pursuits: a father obsessed with horse-flesh as well as livestock, and maternal wealth reaped from the production of a new line of shoe polish. The adherence to codes and precedents, which figures so prominently in a pastoralist's life, is also a feature of father's legal retainer, Mr Mannix. His hallmark is 'motionlessness' (19) set off by precisely calculated gestures, his calling mandates that people be 'assigned clear, material value' (17). An education in wool-classing would have involved for Wesley preliminary inscription in the practical, materialistic mindset shared by these two men, and perhaps led eventually to enrolment in conventional, patriarchal attitudes. He rebels. Generational conflict escalates into 'a full-blown shove', and the eldest offspring, having metaphorically killed his father (Clive 'fell on his knees, kicking up a puff of dust' [42]), sets off like a modern-day version of the New Chum to garner enriching experience, and hopefully reshape his own identity and destiny.

Wesley may have escaped Clive's authority, but he has inherited his father's, and everyman's dilemma, which is the unruliness, unpredictability, and ultimately the menace projected by creation. 'Life is the intruder on thought' is one recurring version of the issue; another is 'the puzzle' that precedes it in the same note: 'The puzzle? What are we doing *here*? What can be described. Et cetera' (194). Sophie concentrates on Eros to the virtual exclusion of Thanatos, or the death drive. Clive and Wesley are unable to do this. Though father does not speak of this threat directly, strictly regimented aspects of his existence seem intended to counter nature's waywardness. He has mandated 'iron laws' of dining attire (33), and averred sweepingly that 'all a man needs is a preoccupation, preferably involving classification' (47). His own were horse breeding, which attempts to improve on and systematise the vagaries of nature, and the 'solitary pleasure' (47) of philately, involving known numbers of exempla and catalogued variants. Yet Clive's ordered existence depended on exclusions similar to those practiced by professional philosophers. On trips to Sydney, for instance, he made a point of not visiting his estranged wife, even when they were residing in the same street ('it was a few minutes from the Astor' [47]), while stamp collecting does not eradicate all indices of incompleteness or lack of control. These nag at Wesley, and he imagines the solitary pursuit of philately as being 'centred, unusually, not on the specimens secured in rows, but in the contemplation of those that were *missing*' (47). His fancied vision of father, 'from his swivel chair' identifying 'the gap in the pattern of his life' (47), serves primarily as self-revelation. It anticipates a life-course in which the process of acquiring knowledge (or filling in perceived gaps) threatens to become an end in itself, as well as points to deeper unease.

Renmark provides him with a calling, but mortality supplies the undeclared incentive to practise it. Tirelessly Antill seeks 'the occasional truth not revealed in ordinary life' (82), initially in book-lore, later as a hospital porter. Instead he remains a prey to inarticulate, primal emotions during a violent struggle with his co-worker, Hendrik Sheldrake, over status and territory, then on a visit to his mortally ill antagonist, when he longs to ask: 'if he was afraid. What can it possibly amount to—being alive, on two feet, and being aware of it ... coming to an end' (100). These timeless issues occupy his thoughts, whereas Sheldrake, fixated on the shortfall of inherited creeds, has glued the Scriptures to his walls 'in case I forget what a load of baloney it all is. I want to be reminded every day' (100). An existential void opens from which Antill chooses to avert his mind, as he does again in London, where he lives unconcernedly with the tangible absence of a comforting faith: 'the pale shape' left by a former crucifix on the darkened wall' of his room (118). On two crucial occasions it takes a double dose of death to break through this wilful oblivion and alter his life-course. First Sheldrake and his mother die on the same day, driving Wesley to the philosophers, in vain, 'to explain turmoil, better still to correct it' (101). Later the example of Spinoza, even though he succumbed to consumption at forty-four, inspires the hope that intellectual achievement can transcend mutability, and Antill 'to create a philosophy so I could die happily' (149). Nevertheless, it requires the deaths of Rosie, in a car accident, and of Clive to see him return home and proceed with its composition.

None of the standard philosophical or psychoanalytical/psychological approaches succeed in dispelling the deep-seated malaise of the young characters who profess them. Unquestionably Antill's frustrated, alienated existence exemplifies his concluding adage that the philosopher, *ipso facto*, 'is a dissatisfied person' (194). His specialist counterpart in Erica is a prey to related contradictions and doubts: 'Nothing much happens in my life. My movements feel minimal; and it doesn't always feel right to me' (28). Also Sophie, despite a contrary,

unabating drive for self-gratification, fares no better. The facile answers and prescribed situations dictated by her self-obsession have not assisted her to make transformative connections with others, nor to dispel her own dimly intuited 'obscurity' (24). All run the risk of being either too self-engrossed or 'too rigorously theoretical, which allows you not to participate in the life' that surrounds and virtually prods you (74). Yet philosophy can also require a practitioner 'to think clearly about what lay not on the page, but directly in life in front of him' (102). This distinction is categorically made and evaluated in the final four sections of the novel. These afford alternating accounts of Erica's and Wesley's life-choices, which culminate in her assenting to the affirmative attitudes and tender intimacies of Roger Antill. She opens herself to existence, whereas Wesley, committed to the notion that more is to be learned 'from study than "life"', remains isolated, a victim of 'Tunnel vision' (191) and, physically, prematurely blighted.<sup>15</sup> In short, the same living, mutating creation that snatched away Rosie affords an alternative to abstruse, theoretical disciplines, as well as a potential source of life-wisdom upon which the book's hopes for humankind arguably hinge.

The land, not crenellated institutions, is Australia's major resource, and it affords a litmus test of character. Here, as the opening line suggests, wonder-inspiring scenes are daily renewed: 'AT DAWN—what a word: the beginning of the world all over again' (1). Yet the countryside, which is also subject to climatic and seasonal cycles, partakes of change, continuity and death. The challenges and opportunities it offers are therefore diverse. In each generation, for example, it implicitly raises questions of purpose and ends, while its perennial forces and patterns must be reckoned with constantly on a working station. There exhibitions of elemental power range from a violent thunderstorm and flooding to the less spectacular but relentless wasting of farm implements and buildings, which 'return to earth, though not entirely' (94). Predictably Sophie, unable to render herself open or amenable to outside influences, is baffled by the silent otherness of the countryside. She cannot wait to return to the familiar terrain of the city, whereas Erica responds positively to the fact that every minute of their drive took them further away from the known and safely routine. Only for Wesley does the pastoral property represent the known and rejected. He much preferred 'inner-Sydney—a city of verticals' to 'the sweep of the landscape' (109), or solitary egotism to the implied sameness and oneness of his native countryside. Hence he acts the part of a prodigal son *manqué*, not rejoicing in his homecoming, but seeking to erase what it has to offer as distracting or superfluous: he ruthlessly takes a chainsaw to a beautiful stand of red gums to render the visible terrain as barren and blank as possible. Nevertheless, this pastoral landscape can potentially provide what mountains have to the European mind: a place of calm remoteness conducive to thought, and 'a feeling of closeness to the original nature of things, the beginning from where an explanation can begin to be constructed' (104). It also affords a sparse arena in which Erica tries 'to make something meaningful of the conflicting mass of impressions, propositions. Et cetera.' (72) found in Wesley's notes and her own life.

Crucial to her pastoral education is Wesley's antithesis in the younger sibling who stayed at home, Roger Antill. Separated by seven years, the two brothers were profoundly divided in temperament and 'opinions on every subject under the sun' (58). Roger is practical, matter-of-fact and approaches problems with 'common sense, which he has in spades, comes from being on the land' (58). Behind the clichéd explanation lie acceptance of, and willingness to work with, nature's rhythms—the unqualified 'gift' that Holland internalised in *Eucalyptus*: 'it had crept into his body, as it were, and settled, always there' (E130). Roger apparently has a similar 'natural advantage, which is to be envied' (E130). It colours his response to every incident, and even inflects his speech which, with 'stops and starts and false trails' aplenty,

seems to follow 'the contours of the meandering landscape' (87). Thus a ewe, seemingly on the verge of drowning with only its head above water, excites in Erica violent agitation, a failed rescue bid and continued consternation, whereas Roger, a man otherwise intent on saving his flock (76), seems unperturbed. He prioritises correctly, and focuses on pulling Erica out of the river rather than the sheep (91). He and his sister do not seek to micro-manage their environment, but when necessary leave nature to take its course. They live happily with imprecision and gaps, with a landscape devoid of black lines of demarcation (109), and with other conditions anathema to those striving after rational explanations. Hence the Sydney academic is initially unsettled by Roger: 'Seated beside her this man consisted of a large number of gaps. Everything he did or said was unsatisfactory to Erica, even when they saw ahead. . . [the same] sodden sheep struggle out of the shallows, and he said nothing' (92). Later one measure of her progress is acceptance of all his sister embodies: 'Lindsey was easy company. The way she allowed, and even encouraged gaps, imitated the landscape' (170).<sup>16</sup> It will be Roger's, not Wesley's, approach to life that changes the course of Erica's existence.

To reach this relaxed, acquiescent state, and the wider potential it portends, the hard selfhood towards which Wesley aspired must yield in Erica to softness and a more porous self. A foretaste of this 'weakening' comes on arrival at the homestead when she is overcome by faintness: 'Erica, with no warning, had a dizzy spell. She almost keeled over' (35). In the country her feelings oscillates in response to antithetical influences. Typically the task of assessing Wesley's accumulated writings reinforces disciplinary firmness and closure ('Concentrating, she hardened. It was something she was aware of' [171]), whereas outside she demonstrates a growing receptivity towards creation that involves a willingness to subdivide, merge and even lose aspects of the self. A silent plea 'to be humble' (70) accompanies acceding to the heat and 'wider silence ... surrounding, swarming and entering her' (70), and is a prelude to 'allow[ing] herself to blend into gullies' (88). Full immersion, however, comes only with a recasting of the familiar lost-in-the-bush motif. One afternoon, on emerging tired after perusing Wesley's manuscripts but resolved to embrace 'dispassionate logic' and 'expressionless firmness' (172), she loses first her sunglasses, then her bearings in the local landscape. Her vaunted mental processes land her, virtually unprotected, in the notoriously dangerous Australian outback, with her life perhaps at risk. There, although she may sit 'on a very large rock—to "gather her thoughts"' (173), it is Roger who gathers her up, drives 'in the opposite direction to where she had been heading' (174), and implicitly teaches her a lesson in inter-dependence and empathetic communion.

Fuelling Erica's original inertia and defensiveness was apprehension of vulnerability and the unknown. She is keenly aware of a pattern in herself of 'remaining friendly enough' but holding back, for the opposite 'would mean opening up—to what exactly?' (36). The novel provides diverse answers. Her rewards for incrementally relaxing the tight defences that preserve the self constantly augment. First she perceives how paddocks 'bulge' (81), then the 'curvaceous ... casual harmony over gradual distances' of the earth (88). Later she discerns from a window of Wesley's shed intimations of a bond that subsists throughout creation, to which Wesley was blind: 'Gradual were the patterns, no limestone outcrops, gorges, river, no patch of green grass; no sharp lines of black, either. Gradualness possessed an endlessness' (109). Nature of course can, and has, presented other and more fearsome faces, but even these causes of personal consternation are arguably much defused, when integrated within an endless schema. Thus Erica, while sitting on the verandah's liminal space, shares at last the younger Antills' ease with gaps of all kinds, and registers a major change in herself: 'It was the general immensity she was no longer afraid of. "Over-arching", a word she had used in

her philosophical work before' (177). Now the woman trained in precise, abstract formulations is obliged to recognise not only that 'out here ... everything already existed without description' (76), but also what 'over-arching' always implied: a subsuming, potentially benign creation in which she, too, plays a part.

Instead of seeking in vain to understand and control the whys and wherefores of existence, humans, according to *The Pages*, need to embrace all its phases and cycles. Typically they seek to 'frame' or 'contain' events, to borrow the terms of a professional picture-framer (181), with plans, suppositions and philosophies, with fences, buildings and windscreens. The resulting constructs are inevitably 'one remove from truth' or actuality (181), and liable to disappoint. The formulator can be left particularly vulnerable, as when the sudden death of Rosie tragically shatters Wesley's framing, grand design, precipitating his mental breakdown. Something, however, remains of individual effort, whether in perishable manuscript pages, or outside in scattered 'signs barely decipherable, as if under water' (88), while existence in its entirety is not diminished, for like the landscape 'after rain it returns changed, but basically the same' (88). The stark antithesis to framing is '*To Be There and To Wonder*', another Wesley adage that captures Hazelhurst's attention (128). Evidence of having surmised its worth emerges in her new-found power to wonder at nature's repeated marvels, when the dawn of the book's opening page yields towards its conclusion to sunset: 'the sky down the end screaming out heat and immensity, the great cycle of day turning into night, cockatoo-grey feathery, and pink-tinted, until gradually, suddenly, closing down' (169). In joying at this daily-repeated movement through gradual transitions to a sudden 'closing down', Erica in effect is embracing the enactment of mutability, together with the full cycle and many stations of life, against the backdrop of open-ended 'immensity'.

*The Pages*, true to Bail's long-held aspiration of creating thought-provoking works that resist immediate and easy comprehension, arguably proposes an ideal interchangeability between philosophies and individual existences only dimly intuited in Wesley's concluding notes. The final pronouncement, 'we are philosophers; we cannot help being' (199) is almost tantamount to grasping, as in classical times, that to act is potentially to be a philosopher. In stark contrast, as Erica learns and Wesley unwittingly demonstrates, today's academic discipline rests on an arid and scarcely sustainable dichotomy of life and thought, and tends to promote solitary, eccentric existences. Their antithesis is Roger, whose first words significantly are 'I've been to the funeral' (61), and who embodies *Praxis*. His actions constitute a life-philosophy that embraces all creation's vicissitudes and harmonies. His concluding 'philosophy' of the hand, for instance, although theoretically jejune, involves the direct translation of thought, or more accurately 'wishes of the mind' (192), into practice. Here emotional impulses trump rational dissection, and usher in Erica's instinctive acquiescence to his touch. An earlier, unattributed postulate that 'for philosophy to be possible today it would have to begin afresh...where there was no thinking, no philosophy' (36) has in effect been achieved, not by meditating in remote European fastnesses, but in the Australian countryside, under local conditions which typically give rise to 'thoughts put into practice' (161). The final glimpse given of Erica is unambiguously affirmative. By subtly changing her 'frame of reference' to embrace what cannot be quantified and logically analysed, by emerging from the chrysalis of constraining codes and upbringing ('She felt different. Something was going on' [193]), she has come to see existence, not as 'the intruder on thought', but as its revelation-rich instigator: 'And through the windscreen and at the side remained the landscape, warm, golden and still, which she hadn't until then seen before' (194).

<sup>1</sup> An extended version of this essay can be found in Michael Ackland, *The Experimental Fiction of Murray Bail* (Cambria 2012), in the Cambria Australian Literature Series. Series editor: Susan Lever <http://www.cambriapress.com/cambriaserie.cfm?template=87>.

<sup>2</sup> Similar vagueness and uncertainty was a feature of virtually all reviews. For further examples see Flanery, Huxley, Simms and Wallace-Crabbe.

<sup>3</sup> This desire, arguably implicit in his preference for the novel of ideas, emerges also from various statements and jottings, like the following *Notebook* entry:

The importance of resistance: without it the viewer, or the reader, hardly contributes. Going from Cézannes to the roomful of Cossington Smiths—resistance was what was missing. After Mallarmé, Valéry ‘could no longer suffer impure poems, which could be understood at once and without resistance. Everything seemed naïve and slack after they had read him’. (N274)

<sup>4</sup> Philosophy has been by no means the only cognate discipline to attract his interest. Apart from literature in translation (‘Continental shift’), Bail has also drawn repeated inspiration from the visual arts (Ackland, ‘Matisse’).

<sup>5</sup> *N* indicates a page reference to *Notebooks*, *H* to *Homesickness*, *E* to *Eucalyptus*. Unattributed parenthetical page references to Bail’s work are to *The Pages*.

<sup>6</sup> This preference was part of his revolt against the once-dominant Australian realist tradition (Chisholm 41-42, Davidson 274-76). Unlike major English authors, their European peers, he argued, were ‘concerned as much with invention and speculation as with tracing the usual psychological contours’ of protagonists, and with securing for themselves creative elbow room (‘Continental shift’ 34).

<sup>7</sup> The commanding vantage-point can assume physical form, such as Uncle Vern’s home in the Adelaide Hills (*Holden’s Performance*), or philosophical and methodological form, such as the frequent attachment of his characters to empiricism and classification.

<sup>8</sup> According to Bail, ‘art will always be a rendition of the self’ (‘I Am’ 267), by which he means a ‘reflection’ of ‘what is within’, done ‘without ... compromise, whatever the cost’ (‘I Am’ 267). Reflection, of course, does not denote mimetic recording, but rather the subjective processing and imaginative refraction that make McCahon’s Elias series, for example, ‘among the most intimate extensions of himself’ (‘I Am’ 266).

<sup>9</sup> Wesley, of course, offers a satirical refraction of many of Bail’s own traits and preoccupations, such as pedantry, intellectual pretensions and ambitious schemes, and of the author’s own preferred work-and life-strategy of dedicated withdrawal. Craven, noting the autobiographical dimension of Wesley’s depiction, described this ‘wonderful book’ as ‘a fictional self-portrait that seems to cost not less than everything’ (23)—whatever that may mean.

<sup>10</sup> On Bail’s earlier engagement with these concerns, especially in *Holden’s Performance*, see Ackland, ‘Politics’ and Dixon. More generally, the negative evaluation of local intellectual capacities is a manifestation of cultural cringe and imperial condescension, as well as a wide-spread conclusion drawn from the antipodean pursuit of material self-betterment and sport. In 1880 Henry Kendall, for instance, lamented the country’s obsession with sporting over intellectual brawn in ‘An Idol of New Barataria’ (Ackland, *Kendall* 101-4), while in ‘Middleton’s Rouseabout’ Henry Lawson famously characterised Andy, his type of the Coming Man, as: ‘Hasn’t any opinions/Hasn’t any “idears”’ (Ackland, *Penguin* 263).

<sup>11</sup> According to Bail, ‘without the underlying strength of myth, fiction may well be pleasant and interesting, and perhaps even topical, but lacking in deeper-depth, and so, portability’ (N288).

<sup>12</sup> *The Pages* does not distinguish rigorously between the two, and although psychologists and psychoanalysts have very different training, procedures and career structures, Bail lumps them together as practitioners of the talking cure and promoters of an undeviating focus on the self. Both groups are analysts of the psyche, which is the broad approach targeted in the novel.

<sup>13</sup> Bradley noted that ‘the novel seeks to distinguish two ways of understanding philosophy: the first as a system of thought ... the other more like a process, or way of being, a matter, to borrow from Montaigne, of learning how to die’ (19). Yet he concluded that there was ‘something oddly attenuated about *The Pages* ... too much of the book feels underworked, even contrived ... [it] lacks the crafted elegance of Bail’s best work’ (20), while Flanery asserted, concerning the author’s view of Roger and Wesley Antill, ‘it is unclear what side Bail is on’, and of the book’s conclusion that ‘this limp ending is something of a disappointment’ (23).

<sup>14</sup> This disjunction, already pronounced in German idealism, was arguably augmented by the mathematically-inspired approach to logic promoted in the early twentieth century by Frege in Jena, and Russell in Cambridge. This brief genealogy, of course, begs the question of how their legacy was transformed by Wittgenstein, and the Austrian’s wider influence (see Grayling 25-82, Stroll 37-47). His writings certainly interested Bail and his actual life may have inspired aspects of Wesley’s portrayal; however, these complex issues lie outside the scope of the present paper.

<sup>15</sup> Typically his reasons for summoning Rosie to join him in Europe were self-centred: 'Aside from wanting to see Rosie, and be comforted by her, I had the idea of showing her my progress, how I had changed, I mean how I had improved, how I had become wiser' (185).

<sup>16</sup> This is a mark of their blossoming 'friendship, as only two women know how' (164), and in pointed contrast to her relationship with Sophie.

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