

Michael Ackland. *The Experimental Fiction of Murray Bail*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2012, 229 pp.

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Michael Ackland, in *The Experimental Fiction of Murray Bail*, explores the creative struggles and the published works of a man he classifies ‘among the most intellectually challenging and inventive of contemporary Australian novelists—and one of the most enigmatic’ (1). Long overdue for such a study, Ackland’s *Bail* comes to us from the start as a provocative figure, a man of ‘mystery,’ (2) a ‘dazzling’ creator (2). As Ackland leads us through Bail’s formative experiences and the fiction born out of those experiences, we witness the development of a major Australian talent.

Ackland uses the first of his four chapters, ‘Enamored with Art and Ideas: The Early Bail,’ for an overview of the writer, sketching out key formative details and surveying his first published volume entitled *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975). Personal information about Bail is scant. We learn that Bail grew up as one of four children; that he married, became a father, worked in advertising for thirteen years; that he enjoyed racing cars and motorcycles; that photography became an obsession. More important to Ackland is the sociocultural context from which Bail emerged: Adelaide, the city of his youth and early adulthood in the 1940s and 1950s. To Bail, Adelaide was a city ‘overwhelmingly reactionary, Protestant, and fiercely defensive of time-honoured standards’ (4). Ackland describes what the young Bail perceived as the national ills of that era; Australia was a place of ‘almost deafening emptiness’ (4); boring, ‘stultifying’ (4), a trap, a prison. The national ethos glorified stories of White heroism—Eureka, Gallipoli and so forth—and narratives presented in ‘dun-coloured realism’ (18). For Bail, this national ethos rejected virtually all modernist art. There was no *Ulysses*, no cubist painting. It is not surprising that at age 27, Bail took the conventional path awaiting those dissatisfied with a convention-bound Australia: the sojourn abroad.

Bail lived overseas for six years—two in India, four in England, with trips to Europe and America. London proved a catalyst for the developing artist, for there he was beset by the foundations of the Australia he so disliked, ‘the peculiar ordinariness of the British’ (10), the practical nature which he saw as leading to the realism dominating Australian art. Bail’s *Longhand: A Writer’s Notebook* (1989) reflects on those years, showing the burgeoning writer at work, ‘determined to examine his responses with the utmost rigour’ (11). The visual arts drew his interest most consistently, infusing him with the ‘radical potential’ of art (14). He came to see himself as ‘chosen’ (13). He formulated views that provide the foundation for his life as an artist. The realist tradition was the enemy of artistic invention in Australia; British and American writing suffered from a similar grounding. More appealing were such European writers as Proust and Kafka, writers ‘preoccupied with concepts, myths, and theoretical issues’ (15). Rejecting character-centered or character-driven fiction, Bail saw the ‘novel of ideas’ (17) as his forum.

Contemporary Portraits (1975) was Bail's first major publication, appearing after his return to Australia. Although half of the stories had been drafted before he went abroad, the published volume resonated with the inspiration from that period; the collection was, in Ackland's words, 'a stark break with dun-coloured realism' (18). Despite his respect for modernist European writers, Bail was not interested in exploring inner consciousness, and instead aligned himself with views of art as independent of reality; the artist needed to remind readers of the artifice inherent in writing. He found the fullest inspiration from the visual arts, which to him were far ahead of the other arts in breaking with tradition in multiple and divergent ways.

Ackland highlights those stories which most evidently lay the groundwork for Bail's career as a novelist of ideas. Linked to Bail's passion for photography, 'Huebler' shows the limits of the camera as it presents a man who wants to 'photographically document ... the existence of everyone alive' (24). 'Zoellner's Definition' focuses on a set of murals purported to express 'the foundations of knowledge' (26); instead they highlight all that cannot be expressed. 'The Drover' Wife,' drawn from Henry Lawson's story and the Russell Drysdale painting, finds the narrator confronting the latter piece, claiming it depicts his absconded wife and trying to invent a story of her life, both with him and afterwards, based on the details he sees. Yet the assembling of these details cannot compensate for his loss. Throughout this discussion Ackland suggests that these stories exemplify the 'multilayered' potential of fiction (19). His discussion of *Contemporary Portraits* sets a foundation for exploring the novels in the ensuing chapters.

Ackland's approach is similar with each of Bail's novels. There is close reading with running commentary. The most effective chapter, in my view, is the second, focusing on Bail's first novel, *Homesickness* (1980). It remains the author's most challenging work, and Ackland's full discussion conveys best Ackland's idea of Bail as an 'experimental' writer. A group of travellers set out from Australia on an international tour, a familiar trope for those seeking connection with the larger world stage. This journey, however, has no well-defined path or clear destination; the travellers often appear muddled as well. They travel to Africa-London-Quito-New York City-London (again)-Moscow. As Ackland observes, Bail's travellers, though named and described, are not an individuated bunch. Readers are treated to individual observations; we have smatterings of liaisons or conflicts between members, but the encounters between traveller and site become part of a collective experience. An 'evolving group identity' (84) determines action, or—more accurately—inaction when faced with the unexpected, the horrific, the bizarre.

Because *Homesickness* fails to deliver on the expected, because there is no character with whom to identify and no identified quest, because the narrator refuses to give readers a metaphoric wink that all or most is in fun, readers have found the novel quite puzzling. Ackland's careful detailing of the first stop in Africa illuminates Bail's intent throughout the novel. They have come not to a specified city or country, only the land mass, the 'Dark Continent,' that in the nineteenth century became the target of colonial ventures and the source of colonial anxiety. In this exotic world the travellers elect to visit several iterations of that most European of institutions, the museum, where they are flummoxed by two aspects of the exhibits. First, expecting to find managed versions of Africana, they find displays of Western objects that include lawn mowers, bicycles, televisions. Why come to Africa to see an arrangement of dental

devices?, the travellers ask in bewilderment. Ackland here notes Bail's underlying challenge to modern notions of tourism: Why visit a place like Africa, exotic and vibrant, and go to a museum? Second, the display items, the displays themselves, are worn, tired, and frayed. Ackland links the worn appearance to the declining influence of the once-dominant Western powers. Yet in expressing their disappointment with Africa, the travellers can also exercise their sense of superiority.

The subsequent stops feature an odd array of museums—El Museo de Piernas (Quito), the Institution of Marriage (New York), the Centre of Gravity (Moscow)—and a growing pattern of disillusionment and confusion. The director of El Museo de Piernas boasts that 'this is the most significant museum you'll ever see' (73), though his bias is evident (the director has one leg). One traveller comments that '[a] lot of these museums become the same' (75); for others the bizarre displays provoke unanswerable questions. To Ackland the museum and divergent reactions from the visitors illustrate the Bail theme that the world is too vast a place to be grasped. We as individuals can only perceive according to our limits. Neither can the travellers grasp the Equator, a mathematical rather than a real place that has no connection to the 'metal rail' pinpointing the spot, giving the group something to look at.

Ackland asserts convincingly that *Homesickness* 'underscores the absence of defining centres and the fallibility of master narratives' (97). In London, which Ackland defines as 'the home of master narratives' (56), the group feels particularly ill at ease. The controlled environment of the hotel exudes stability and safety, yet rooms retain signs—a hair, a fingernail—that others have passed through them. Such items hint at a theme that gains momentum in this section: death and human denial of death. London is at the center of a dead empire, a city of museums commemorating the dead. At one gallery the group passes through a photograph exhibit, documents of the once-living testifying to the fleeting nature of life. On the second visit to London the highlight is a visit to the shop Zoellner & Roy G Biv Definitions, Maps. Here masses of books and maps and printed matter naming, describing, and classifying the world are presided over by a decaying duo while outside this failed attempt to enclose and order is 'turbulent, confounding diversity' (89). London exerts a defeating power over the several travellers. Meaning is either confounding or unavailable.

Homesickness, in Ackland's assessment, challenges readers to confront life and to act rather than observe, something Bail's travellers consistently fail to do. In New York one member of the group, Hofman, is hit by a falling flag, then jeered at by bystanders. His mates look on, talk about what they see, but nobody acts. They witness a gang rape during their tour of the Game Park, but despite the 'horror' expressed by one (85), none tries to stop 'this unscripted savagery' (85). The group meets these violent acts with the detachment defining their observation of museum exhibits. Ackland accounts for the resistance to act, their failure to intervene in this manner: 'The likelihood of spontaneous, selfless action, already lessened by callous detachment and egotism, is further militated against by an evolving group identity' (84). Although Ackland has identified Bail as a pessimist, though the novel continually presents our travellers lost and clinging to one another, he insists that Bail provides hope for meaningful acts as performed by certain great figures encountered in the novel's museums and by a handful of small but real

actions taken by individuals—Ackland singles out one, Borelli, who switches off the light inviting onlookers to the violence in the Game Park. ‘In the New World original actions still seem possible’ (99), he states, noting that Bail’s subsequent novels all take an Australian setting.

Ackland’s discussion of *Holden’s Performance* (1987), Bail’s second novel, succeeds in making the novel sound more interesting than readers have generally found it. The author once again works in a satirical vein, moving his targets to Australians during Bail’s formative era. Ackland’s chapter title, ‘The New Andy,’ refers to a figure in Lawson’s poem ‘Middleton’s Rouseabout,’ ‘a figure characterized by endurance, sound health, and intellectual impoverishment’ (108). The guiding question for the novel, in Ackland’s view, is one that might be posed in this manner: Will you act or let yourself be simply taken along by events? The subject used to explore this question is Holden Shadbolt, the Australian everyman, central to this *bildungsroman* in parody form. Solely a product of nurture, bearing no discernible resemblance to either parent, Shadbolt is shaped by Adelaide, which is represented in Bail’s novel as an ordered, unimaginative city laid out in straight lines. This rigid, conformist environment affects the ways that Shadbolt and his mates perceive the universe; they believe what they see, accept only what can be verified. Shadbolt learns to avoid complicated situations, anything that might make life difficult. Falling under the tutelage of his uncle Vern, one of whose mottos is ‘never exceed the facts’ (115), Holden’s education is chiefly ‘a closing down of possibilities’ (120).

Ackland reinforces his vision of Bail as a novelist of ideas as he follows the author’s exploration of personal and national identity. With Holden as everyman, Ackland sees the novel as tracing the history of Australia: its rise as a British colony and its later gravitation toward America, a place most comfortable in being ‘acted upon’ (129). The desire of Holden and his fellows for the uncomplicated appears through their work creating cinema newsreels, a process by which the events of the day become contained by the technical limits of presentation and made comfortable, not alarming, to audiences. Local and national leaders are those who can use this bent toward the uncomplicated to their advantage; Holden Shadbolt thus falls under the sway of autocrats and con men who claim positions of power. Holden’s education has led him to ‘dependence ... self-effacement’ (140). In Ackland’s reading the central characters contribute to Bail’s vision of the ‘bland emptiness at the heart of Australian existence’ (141).

Ackland conveys well the humorous aspects of *Holden’s Performance*. Certain incidents—take the scene in which a cinema patron’s vomit, as it moves about the floor, approximates the shape of the Australian continent—indicate Bail at his most inventive. Yet Ackland early in the chapter dampens any mounting enthusiasm for the novel: ‘[T]he work’s primary focus on a cluster of ideas and locations raises problems that ... are never resolved’ (109). By the last section Holden has become ‘a one-dimensional repetitive cipher’ and the satire of much of the novel slips into ‘heavy-handed farce’ (142). Ackland abruptly leaves off discussion of *Holden’s Performance*, treating it as a failed experiment as he moves to examples from Bail’s short fiction that also explore the deadening effect of suburban conformity on the national psyche. One such story, ‘The Seduction of My Sister,’ presents a stultifying context suddenly disrupted by new neighbors, the Gills. The Gills provide the hope needed in a world populated by the likes of Holden Shadbolt, as Glenyse, sister of the narrator, has the imagination to escape next door, to

see in the Gills not a disruption but an opportunity. The story explores themes evident in *Holden's Performance* but in a style and with a brevity likely to hold the attention of readers.

In the final chapter, 'Life Classes with the Master: *Eucalyptus* and *The Pages*,' Ackland continues with his approach, the close reading with commentary, and he notes approvingly that with these two novels Bail moves beyond the 'bitter satire' (153) running through *Holden*. Both novels show the author's skill at creating sympathetic characters as well as his interest in linking ordinary life to elements of folklore, fable, and myth. Both works feature protagonists with ambitious goals, though 'neither venture wins authorial endorsement' (155). The setting for both is a rural area west of Sydney, and in both, characters grapple with the 'puzzle' of existence. Each novel underscores the author's painstaking approach to writing: *Eucalyptus* (1998) was published eleven years after *Holden's Performance*; *The Pages* appeared ten years later (2008).

Eucalyptus, in Ackland's view, opposes reason with imagination, scientific knowledge with storytelling. Bail grafts the European fairy tale on to the Australian scene, as Holland, the lead character, sets a test for all would-be suitors of his daughter: to name all species of eucalyptus growing on his property. With echoes of the ubiquitous museums in *Homesickness*, naming is a way of ordering, then dominating the world, growing out of a 'primal unease and a quest for reassurance' (163). Naming gives an illusion of mastery over the physical world.

Ackland lays out succinctly the positions occupied by the figures inhabiting Bail's landscape. His imaginative potential long repressed, Holland approaches the world in the only way possible. Roy Cave, the suitor most likely to complete the test, has found something solid in eucalyptus to counter his sketchy self. Ellen, the fairy tale princess stand-in, has not yet unlocked her imagination or released her emotions. Ackland places Holland at the center of a continuum with Ellen, innately receptive to nature, at one end, and Cave at the other, a man for whom nature is a thing to be named. For Holland eucalyptus provide a refuge from the mysterious world of women. Ackland enumerates prominent fairy or folk tale elements: a father and widower with a grown unmarried daughter, a prince in the form of a swagman who becomes the novel's Scheherazade. Unperceptive and often insensitive (and much closer to Cave than to Ellen, I would argue), Holland has warned Ellen about men who tell stories; the stranger, with the wisdom possessed by the fairy-tale prince (who in other stories might fight his way through brambles or kiss and awaken the poisoned heroine), understands the real test—that the true suitor must win her heart.

In addressing *Homesickness*, as I have noted, Ackland succeeds in uncovering the design shaping an often-bewildering work. With *Holden's Performance* he demonstrates how clever aspects of conception do not add up to a satisfying novel of ideas. Here Ackland falters. *Eucalyptus* was an international hit, a novel praised by reviewers and readers alike, a work replete with original touches, from eucalyptus species names serving as chapter titles to characters reminiscent of Australian bush stories (Holland, Cave) interacting with European fairy-tale figures (Ellen, the stranger) to the stories that begin as distractions from the larger narrative but reveal themselves as essential. Yet Ackland's method of close reading and commentary misses the magic. He aligns Holland with the European project in the New World; New Holland was, after all, one of

the early names for the southern continent. That project involved the attempt to create Europe in the Antipodes, on land not suited to such attempts. Symbolic of this larger effort, Holland has tried to recreate an English park with many varieties of eucalyptus trees, but like the trees, which resist taking on a polished, manicured look, the world is chaotic and cannot be managed. Ellen cannot be contained either. Ackland identifies the purpose of the novel's structure once the stranger appears. He employs storytelling to awaken Ellen's interest in things outside herself. Certain stories emphasise how the unplanned comes to pass. The stories are full of puns, facts stated with no evidence, imaginative leaps; they end abruptly or trail off. As the stories pull Ellen out of herself, spark her curiosity, they awaken her to desire. Ackland delivers a sound reading of *Eucalyptus* closing with the union of Ellen and the stranger as they face a life allowing for the accidental and improbable, but his methodical discussion flattens the novel. I am losing sight of the 'experimental' quality of Bail's work.

The Pages is, in Ackland's words, a 'modern-day fable about the dilemmas of knowledge and personal credos' (188). Ackland asserts that this novel grew from 'increasing pressure to make a final reckoning with existence' (187). The question haunting *The Pages* is a persistent one for the nation: can Australia produce original thought? Ackland fills in the background for this question. Australia developed after the heyday of prominent European philosophers. As a colony and then a federation, Australia was not the site for religious wars or other Old World strife; the acquisition of wealth and comfort has occupied citizens foremost. To Bail, Ackland claims, philosophy, as a reflective or academic endeavor, has no relevance to the Australian world; popular psychology and psychoanalysis have supplanted it. As Ackland says, therapy is an enjoyable experience for many, an opportunity for self-indulgence. It is an individual experience—but the great world is still outside.

Characters in *The Pages* are generally too self-involved to connect to this great world. Wesley Antill, the philosopher whose work Erica Hazelhurst has traveled to read, sought a philosophy not subject to the vagaries or caprices of the world. Philosophy in its abstract nature excited him; then life intruded. Sophie Perloff, the Sydney therapist accompanying Erica, has no profound link to others and no ability to evaluate her own behavior; everything around her must in some way connect to her. The landscape, a traditional staple in Australian writing, in Ackland's assessment 'provides a litmus test of character' (211). 'Australia's major resource' (211), the landscape is a space rich in potential; it is empty only to those who cannot or will not see. For Sophie it is empty; she cannot wait to return to the city. For Wesley the home station represents all that he has rejected in his quest. Ambivalent about his native country, Wesley finds that in Europe, he is recognised everywhere as an Australian; retreat to, not embrace of Australia is the result. Roger, Wesley's brother and lifelong rural resident, has a common sense view nurtured from life. The drive west, so repellent to Sophie, opens the world to Erica in unexpected ways.

Ackland gives an exhaustive study of the novel. Coming to this long-awaited work after the marvelous *Eucalyptus*, I could not help finding *The Pages* an anticlimax, lacking the excitement and depth of his best work. Ackland's examination led me back to the novel. His remarks regarding Bail's view of philosophy as a contemporary study were especially illuminating regarding *The Pages*, which, to Ackland, depicts the author's view of the sad state of the

discipline in the twenty-first century. In the Philosophy Department of Sydney University, Erica's professional home, theory and praxis are separated. Philosophy operates only as a subject of academic study disconnected from the larger world. Ackland makes clear that he does not share Bail's opinion, but insists that this view is essential to the novel. The young Wesley Antill became an acolyte of one Professor Renmark, whose neatly ordered lectures conveyed the belief that Australia was inimical to thought; in his devotion Wesley failed to notice that Renmark lacked a personal life. Faculty members in the current departmental incarnation know nothing about their colleagues. Erica, one of these, neither stands out nor puts herself forward in any way. *The Pages* traces her journey away from this constrained way of living into something greater and freer. Her study of Wesley's writing, the purported purpose of her trip, reveals his rigidity in his philosophical searching and his unhappy life. Most important to Erica is what occurs outside of these pages. Ackland argues that certain clichéd elements—Roger as the easygoing, likable station resident and likely match for the uptight, overeducated visitor, Erica's finding herself lost in the bush—are essential to Bail's larger aim. Bail's insistence that 'we are philosophers' (218), that to act is potentially to be a philosopher, is borne out as Erica decides consciously to abandon her academic life and remain out here with Roger. If I still do not consider *The Pages* Bail's best work, if I might label it his novel least deserving of the label 'experimental,' I appreciate Ackland's success in treating *The Pages* as a substantive contribution to Bail's fiction.

I remarked in the opening paragraph that Bail was long overdue for an extended study. *The Experimental Fiction of Murray Bail* has addressed that need with a thorough overview of this major Australian artist. Although including a fuller picture of Murray Bail the man might have enlivened the discussion (and by this I mean the inclusion of, literally, photographs), Ackland selects essential aspects of the developing artist as foundation for his extended discussion of the fiction. As he moves into the examination of first the short fiction and then the novels, we are prepared to interpret the product of this author. Ackland leads us through Bail's fiction, revealing the complexity of the author's framework and his achievement in execution of those 'literary ideas which beg to be resolved' (13). I resisted occasionally the undeviating nature of Ackland's approach, so consistent throughout in its manner of investigating each work. I have already recorded how that consistency works against his attention to *Eucalyptus*, and he stumbles a bit in addressing *The Pages*. Filling his pages with quoted material, Ackland allows cited passages from the novel at times to overwhelm his ideas. Yet, in *The Experimental Fiction of Murray Bail*, readers have a sound guide to the Bail *oeuvre*, one that should aid in reading or rereading. Devotees might especially take up his newest novel, *The Voyage* (2012), and apply their insight to this text.

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