



THE  
EXPERIMENTAL  
FICTION  
OF  
**MURRAY  
BAIL**

**MICHAEL ACKLAND**



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Michael Ackland

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*For Rhonda*





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study of Murray Bail examines the ideas that underlie and inform his work. It would have been possible, of course, to focus on other aspects of his writing, such as his satire and humour or his affinities with modernist experimental fiction. These are undeniably important components of his work and are duly acknowledged. In interviews, however, Bail has repeatedly chosen to stress his affection for the novel of ideas and his affinities with this tradition, whether manifested in Europe or the Americas—and my study emphasises accordingly this dimension of his work.

My thinking and writing on Bail have received important impetus from the series editor, Susan Lever, who read and commented critically on this book in manuscript, and from the editors and specialist readers of the following journals, in which earlier versions of segments of this book appeared: *Antipodes*, *JASAL*, *The Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, and *Festschrift für Australienstudien*. The errors, oversights, and blemishes that undoubtedly will be detected by subsequent readers are of course my sole responsibility.

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## SOURCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Articles by Chisholm, Davidson, Grealy, Lysenko, and Sayers quote or paraphrase Bail. Parenthetical references to Bail's own work employ the following abbreviations: *E*: *Eucalyptus*, *H*: *Homesickness*, *HP*: *Holden's Performance*, *IF*: *Ian Fairweather*, *L*: *Longhand*, and *N*: *Notebook*.

## CHAPTER 1

# ENAMOURED WITH ART AND IDEAS

### THE EARLY BAIL

Murray Bail is among the most intellectually challenging and inventive of contemporary Australian novelists—and one of the most enigmatic. Although a writer of truly international stature, he has preferred to lead a self-effacing, intensely focused existence so that interviews not linked to a recent publication are as rare as his novels. These have appeared haltingly, at intervals of almost a decade. Composition for him is painfully slow and hard won. His entire output, after more than forty years' labour as a writer, consists of four novels supplemented by two volumes of short fiction and sporadic works of nonfiction, plus a handful of uncollected stories. This record attests to a stern, exacting engagement with his craft, an engagement that has occasionally led to harsh judgments. When asked in 1990 to comment on the state of Australian letters, for instance, Bail did not present the familiar litany of the daunting impediments faced by would-be as well as established local authors. Instead, he lamented that it was so easy nowadays for so many writers to find publishers, while his pronouncements on modern art have been coloured by the concern "rightly or wrongly that my own work would be corroded

if I wasn't strict on everything else I saw, even paintings" (Davidson 268).<sup>1</sup> Bail has refused to truckle to either publishers' or readers' demands. His third novel, *Eucalyptus* (1998), was crowned with both the Miles Franklin and the Commonwealth Literary Prizes. But Bail, unconcerned with building on this *succès d'estime*, continued to heed his own inner promptings and high self-imposed standards. There was no opportunistic sequel, and the ensuing decade of authorial silence between *Eucalyptus* and his most recent novel, *The Pages* (2009), has only deepened the mystery that surrounds the man and his dazzling but idiosyncratic work.

### FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Bail and his compositions have been indelibly stamped by his homeland. Repeatedly he has speculated on the putative influence of a harsh, empty continent on its white invader-settlers: on how it has seared and lined their faces, dried their wit, and encouraged "horizontal" narratives "unhindered or uncorrected by the obstacles of subtlety, depth or world knowledge" (Bail, Introduction xiii). The child of a later age, he was shaped even more by cultural than environmental factors. Bail was born in Adelaide on 22 September 1941, just over two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor launched the Pacific War and with it, Australia's search for new alliances and greater self-reliance. Over ensuing decades, the nation and the future writer sought to reach beyond Australia's Anglo-Celtic heritage to develop a unique identity—or more precisely, in Bail's case, to discover wherein his own originality lay. For both Australia and Bail, the 1970s proved a watershed decade. Late in 1972 the Labour Party, after decades in opposition, swept to power pledging to "turn on the lights" and promoting a program that included realigning Australia with its region and reconnecting it with what was most vigorous and promising in global culture. Many formerly disenfranchised expatriates, among them Bail, decided to give their native land another chance and set about redrawing radically the boundaries of what was conceivable within Australian fiction. A "new confidence" spread, as Bail put it, like "a kind

of literary myxomatosis, reducing any remaining dun-coloured realism to a few pockets” (Bail, Introduction xvii). But the loose associations that generated the New Writing were short lived, its exponents destined to follow diverging trajectories (Gelder and Salzman 1–25; Bennett 179–182). For Bail this involved a shift from short fiction—which he had come to see as technically exhilarating but limiting—to ingenious, multilayered novels that tease and test even the most attentive reader.

This uncompromising attitude towards his audience is, in part, a product of Bail’s upbringing in a society with narrow intellectual and behavioural codes. His childhood and adolescent years, which form the backdrop to his second novel, *Holden’s Performance* (1987), coincided with unprecedented improvements in local living standards, burgeoning complacency, and the longest serving federal government in Australian history. As industry redirected its energies from producing war materials to manufacturing consumer durables, the deprivations of the Great Depression and wartime rationing were banished from the majority of households. Australian homes began to accumulate labour-saving appliances, its roads chrome-laden automobiles. The main clouds threatening these brilliant bourgeois vistas were communism and the escalating Cold War—and their consequences feature prominently in the latter part of *Holden’s Performance*. By the mid-1950s communist forces had rampaged through China, Hungary, and the Korean peninsula, while the Soviet Union’s rapid acquisition of atomic and missile technology fuelled fears of spying and subversion. The United States was gripped by an unprecedented wave of anti-communist hysteria. Defamatory slurs and political witchhunts threatened to paralyse dissent, at home and abroad. In Australia the Labour Party split disastrously in 1954 over the issue of communist infiltration, opening the way for a Liberal–Country Party coalition to hold power in Canberra from 1949 to 1972. For much of this time the coalition’s leader was Sir Robert Menzies. Regally bestriding the Australian political stage, he took credit for national affluence, encouraged parochialism, and waged a successful series of “khaki” elections, which stressed the need for patriotic vigilance and armed deterrence of the Red menace. In *Holden’s Performance* this



extraordinarily able conservative appears as the fatuous Prime Minister R.G. Amen, notable chiefly for prominent eyebrows, stupefying oratory, puerile adulation of the British royal family, and overweening vanity.

Bail, like many intellectuals of his generation, recalled these decades with disdain and scarcely concealed loathing. It was, he has stated, “a drought time of conservatism, conformity and censorship, the R.G. Menzies era” (Bail, Introduction xv). He experienced his hometown as overwhelmingly reactionary, Protestant, and fiercely defensive of time-honoured English standards: in short, “it was ... so closed and strict” and philistine. “If I’d stayed in Adelaide, I couldn’t have completed these things [his early books]” (Grealy). There, conduct was firmly regulated; judgments were starkly black and white. Shades of grey or of black, which would later fascinate Bail in communities overseas or in the tantalising canvases of Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, were anathema. Society seemed obsessed with money and practicalities. Bail pinpointed its characteristic wedding of small-mindedness with self-important pretensions years later when he noted of *Gulliver’s Travels* that Swift’s precise coordinate of 30°2” south “doesn’t exactly match Lilliput on his map—the island is inland, somewhere in South Australia, perilously close to Adelaide” (“Imagining” 1330). A similarly stultifying mindset held sway in other state capitals and was a hallmark, according to Bail, of this “time of boredom and emptiness—of almost deafening emptiness” (Lysenko 38). The corollary of a land and people intellectually parched, culturally bereft was a literature “somehow affected by a desert wind. I find most of it dry, curiously empty, akin to journalism,” and in need of energetic overhaul (Bail, “Questionnaire on Fiction” 188).

Nor did home life provide compensating enrichment or buoyancy, so that allegedly Bail became “actually quite warped, like a dwarf” (Grealy 21). This bitter simile was inspired by an education system with which he failed to engage and by a dull, circumscribed existence with three siblings in the modest bungalow sprawl of Tranmere. At Norwood Technical High School he was “quite a flop—I didn’t take it seriously”; Bail’s

strength lay not in rote learning but in “imaginative recall” (Grealy 21). Long afterwards he remembered his father, a clerk in the Metropolitan Tramways, “with tired eyes: unsmiling melancholy” (L 21). Though his parent had often imbibed Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, “everything I know about him suggests it was to fuel his scepticism” (L 24). Even less edifying were memories of a grandfather who, after overseas service with the Light Horse Brigade, “ended up in South Africa in the police, burning down villages” (Davidson 271). Traits of both men are refracted in Bail’s second novel, as is his grim experience of materialistic, suburban Adelaide. Bail rebelled, too, against the prevalent indoctrination of youth with stories demonstrating Australian valour and white superiority. Unthinking patriotism he later derided as “Gallipolisation” (Davidson 270), and he has sweepingly asserted, “I loathe nationalism of any kind” (Lysenko 44).

This hostility would fuel much of Bail’s early fiction, including short stories not selected for inclusion in later books. Predominantly naturalistic narratives, these works do not accord with the experimental, transgressive modalities of *Contemporaries Portraits and Other Stories* or *Holden’s Performance*. Conceptually, however, they reveal Bail’s abiding disdain for the monotony, mediocrity, and constraints of his youth. Usually these tales focus on a male protagonist *in extremis*. The causes of his aggravated distress can be physical, such as a car breakdown and impending death in the Australian desert, or the less tangible threat of an existence warped by intellectual and emotional withering. Parker, the owner of a Queensland house in Brisbane, is Bail’s typical suburbanite, bearing an expression variously dubbed blank, wooden, or simple, and who “seemed merely to continue, passing through the house and time. It was a life” (“Home Ownership” 96). Parallels between Parker’s existence and his increasingly rundown dwelling are numerous. Once their sparks of individuality and vitality—represented in a neglected wife and red front step—are snuffed out, the slide into dullness and tropical dilapidation is relentless. Other protagonists have been similarly “white-anted” (or eaten out from within by ants) by oppressive local circumstances. These doom Ian Milne to artistic mediocrity and perhaps worse: “The tragedy occurred

within the walls of his [Greek] house ... [but] began among the hedges of a Melbourne suburb somewhere, with a sister or two, heavy ticking clock, his father and Sunday lunch" ("Still Life" 17). Like Wesley Antill in Bail's later *The Pages*, Milne confuses "ability for hard work with talent" ("Still Life" 21). In default and in denial, Milne sees his life become a series of elaborately staged set pieces in locations meant to inspire him—from the Greek islands to London. And the narrator's summary judgment on Milne fits the would-be philosopher Antill, as well: "He was not necessarily an artist, but he believed he was: he had invested so much stubbornness" (21).

Tellingly, too, the uncollected stories contain precursors of Bail's later empiricists. These men combine problematic eyesight with excessive zeal and blindness to defunct relationships. They range from an aging fire spotter isolated in a watchtower to a young thesis writer whose interest in local measurement has been narrowed to the standard yard. The first man, obsessed with creating neatness and order, is last seen weeding "the whole forest [convinced] it will soon be tidy, almost like my painted tower" ("I Spend" 7). His younger counterpart, Rodney, has gone to a race course to examine an official representation of the yard, kept in a glass case attached to a wall of the grandstand. While savvy locals flee during torrential rain, Rodney drinks, sleeps, then finds himself alone in the grandstand, cut off from the outside world by rising floodwaters. "Bad at reading elementary signs" ("Rough" 9), he has faith in measurement as a way of managing reality. Impotently, Rodney counts the grandstand's remaining dry steps and passing bottles, or tries to imagine Annie's "'location' as wife" (11)—little dreaming of her serial adultery with "the Lecturer in Logic" (10). Rodney is an ardent believer in "putting things into perspective—one of the great achievements of man" (10)—which in practice means he believes illogically that actions like cleaning up the grandstand increase his chance of rescue (11). The community shares his belief. Its media cover the flood from the air, beam images of it nationwide, send out various search parties, but miss the tragedy of Rodney's plight. Both the glass specimen case and Rodney's carefully constructed existence have hung by a nail or a thread that now gives way. Rodney, like the fire spotter, is out of step with

his times and doomed. According to the prejudiced lecturer, Rodney is “too boring by half. No *panache*. He’s in another world ... too factual for this country and you” (16). Nevertheless, Rodney’s opening hypothesis, that the unit of measurement “adopted” by society “infiltrates its culture” (10), prefigures a central thesis of *Holden’s Performance* about the baneful effects of transplanted methodologies.

These motifs, repeated obsessively in Bail’s major fiction, conjecturally highlight not only revolt against the Australia of his youth but also anxiety about entrapment, discernible in “Albie” (1969). A rare coming-of-age story in the author’s *oeuvre*, it depicts crucial life lessons that Bail, unlike the narrator Maurice, has obviously taken to heart. The tale contrasts the adult world of staid, conventional parents—that is, Albie Fewster and his ample wife—with that of the impressionable Trevor and Maurice, who visit the Fewsters’ home to learn to dance and gradually learn much more. Albie represents Australian male behaviour in all its seductiveness and limitations. His familiarity and unfeigned friendliness are immediately attractive. He flatteringly treats the boys as fellow men knowledgeable in the ways of women and the world. Maurice finds everything about Albie engaging, from his nonchalance in exhaling cigarette smoke or letting a match burn down almost to his fingertips to his effortless dancing, good nature, and easy casualness. In comparison, Maurice’s father—remembered in terms of his job “in a square cave of an office”—is far less alluring: merely one of the anonymous “grey-skinned honest men worrying about figures, what’s in the IN-basket, and pencils signed for by the Chief Clerk” (“Albie” 6). Yet it is the apparently superior man who has a grotesquely fat wife, an equally undesirable home, and no prospects: he is passed over for a promotion that Maurice’s father receives. “Albie seemed to be unfairly anchored to darkness, unimportance, the brown rooms of his squashed rented house” (7). A warm admirer of Albie, Maurice is therefore stunned, when sent to console the suddenly widowed Mrs Fewster, by her buoyant spirits and shocking revelation: “It was him who had me messed up ... He was the trouble ... You’ve no idea, you boys, he sometimes hit me. This place ... *I hate it*” (9).

Although Maurice at the end is left “pushing through all the half dark” (“Albie” 9), the tale’s import is crystal clear. The quotidian realm of local manhood is characterised professionally as grey, routine, subordinate, and focused on trivial calculations. Socially, its attainments scarcely rise above the rites of a friendly smoke. Its typically laidback, genial behaviour is a recipe for drabness, inertia, and insignificance. Its darker by-products are intellectual penury, emotional warping, and superficial (at times dysfunctional) relationships—a verdict reiterated two decades later in “The Seduction of My Sister,” in which the narrator happily inherits these very traits, which have been faithfully replicated by his father. Unquestionably, Albie’s achievements and talents are nugatory. But they represent a pervasive local model and a potential undertow that Bail had to escape lest he become another Ian Milne, devoid of inspiration and the courage to be different. Milne’s was indeed, to quote that story’s title, a “Still Life with Lemons.” Bail was determined not to drink the same bitter dregs, not to have his existence measured out by the ticking metronomes of social conventions and family rituals, not to live the creativity-sapping life of a mental troglodyte. He was resolved that it would not be said of him, as Bail himself said of Rodney Templeton, that here was another “classic example of opportunity passing him by” (“Rough” 14).

Boredom and this conjectured dread spawned a desire for movement and wider horizons. A self-professed late developer, Bail was drawn initially to racing cars and motorbikes rather than set curricula (Grealy). For a time he attended art school in the evening; painting would remain a consuming interest, though he was “morbidly—pessimistically—fascinated by photography” (Lysenko 45). By the time he reached his midtwenties, he had compromised with local realities, married, and embarked on what would be a thirteen-year career in advertising, which, with journalism, he later caustically branded one of the twin “Australian Hollywoods” that threatened to sap genuine creative energy (Davidson 274). From peddling copy on a bicycle, he eventually graduated to copywriting and composing short stories in Melbourne, but the move from Adelaide brought only limited mental reprieve. Modernism had arrived late in

the Antipodes and been vociferously opposed; its acceptance remained patchy (Ackland, *Damaged* 29–82; Haese). Whereas avant-garde music, such as Stravinsky's, was often available at the flick of switch, other art forms were less fortunate. Australia, with its long tradition of centralist paternalism, had routinely banned controversial novels like *Ulysses*. Also groundbreaking movements in the visual arts were stunningly under-represented; Bail has lamented that "there just aren't any cubist paintings in Australia. Not one. So we've been deprived of the third great modern experience" (Davidson 276). Although Picasso had ushered in a new world pictorially with *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907, in Bail's Australia the gum trees of Hans Heysen and Albert Namatjira still held popular sway—a hegemony subtly called into question decades later in *Eucalyptus*. Certainly it was no longer the 1950s, "when the country was at its most reactionary, actually corroded by contempt and philistinism" (Chisholm 41), but the energising impulses Bail craved were not to be found in R.G. Amen's "lucky country" (Horne).

Six years spent abroad (1968–1974) brought a flood of liberating, thought-provoking impressions and laid the groundwork for Bail's career as a full-time writer. The period conforms at once to the typical maturity-conferring Australian rite of passage, played out overseas, and to the more traditional model of achieving mastery in a craft, which called for a lengthy apprenticeship followed by *Wanderjahre*, years of traveling and working as an itinerant journeyman before assuming a permanent place in a professional guild. Bail garnered material aplenty, first during two years based in Bombay and then during four in London, from where Europe and the United States were appreciably closer. The Indian subcontinent is credited with answering his need for "grey," or complexity, and significant life experience (Bail, "Indian Notebooks" 13–25). Correcting the proofs of his early tale "Life of the Party" in Bombay brought home its quintessentially bourgeois, ephemeral content, whereas "there's not much that's trivial going on in poor countries," or so it "seemed to [Bail]" (Davidson 269). Everywhere, too, he worked hard to overcome unproductive habits, from pedantry to purely formalistic ways

of perception (*L* 2,7), as well as to achieve a heightened awareness of his surroundings and their creative potential. “Burton’s tomb (behind the Catholic church): the force exerted by a tent made of paradoxical material—concrete. A cross fitted absurdly above the Moslem crescent. Elsewhere weeds and rust” (*L* 72), for instance, would resonate in Bail’s mind until it served in *Homesickness* (1980) as a metonym for noble human endeavours checkmated by mutability. As he later stated: “There is no doubt that India, Europe and America did open me up” (Grealy 21).

More complexly, England—apart from providing enlarged cultural vistas—also afforded a repeated sense of encountering the origins of much that Bail had found most baneful in the Antipodes and thus fanned his subversive instinct. Profound inertia was almost palpable—“Some days the stagnancy of the British and everything they’ve left standing resembles one of those chipped enamel tubs raised from the ground by iron paws” (*L* 21)—and he noted that “the good sense and dreary stability of England, which extends into literature, provokes in me an opposing, forceful stance” (*L* 65). Initially, Bail was much impressed by London as a “flat maze [that] ... closed in behind,” with “no ‘heart,’ no centre” (*L* 1). Later, he noted “this urge for classification” (*L* 12), a ubiquitous “glut of words—at office and national level” (*L* 17), and “the peculiar ordinariness of the British” (*L* 109). Admittedly, England’s common-sense, empirical approach to existence had produced major philosophical and technical advances, as well as enviably stable and inclusive forms of government. But it also set a premium on practical, utilitarian outcomes and encouraged a predominantly realist tradition in fiction—attributes that Bail identified with mainstream Australian writing. Bail himself, however, was seeking more and was bent on transgression. Although limited financial means undoubtedly dictated his choice of a basement dwelling, its surrounding bins and street life observable from below (“I can see the ankles of English people pass”; *L* 3) suited his drive for detachment and difference, “adding to the illusion—[of] not being British, not part of all this” (*L* 1), of “not belonging here”; “I am against the majority” (*L* 3). From this subterranean cell Bail would graduate years later to various minimalist, white work-

spaces in Sydney, each signalling dedication and a need for unimpeded mental space beyond trivia and daily conventions.

Valuable insights into Bail's thinking during this formative period are provided by *Longhand: A Writer's Notebook* (1989). Based primarily on seven notebooks from his years in London, this slim volume is presumably selected and edited to show an embryonic authorial mind at work. How does Bail choose to present himself? Essentially, he appears as a man determined to examine his responses—and the life and cultural riches laid out before him—with the utmost rigour, determined to mull over the conceptual core of potential compositions. Pages bristle with ideas for stories, many of which were subsequently realised. “The Partitions. Mad illogical race (boredom?) over the office partitions, through glass and weak walls. Women, slipped stockings. Climbing, pushing. Style is droll” (L 68) is only the beginning of an unusually long and detailed entry. Mostly Bail records little more than the germ of an idea: “Arakawa's ambitious subject: Portrait of a Thought that By-passes Everything” (the inspiration, perhaps, for Bail's “Portrait of Electricity”), or “couples who tour museums real and imagined” (L 115, 123), as in *Homesickness*. Other entries seem to have inspired disparate episodes in that novel, from the work of an Australian graffitist in Florence (L 112) to evidence in Moscow of “Lenin's living reputation” (L 129) and a woman whose crippled leg “pulls down one side of her mouth as she walks” (L 131). These notes would prove to be a rich creative resource and aid to imaginative recall.

Equally striking in *Longhand* is the disproportionate space devoted to the visual arts. Though Flaubert, Proust, and Tournier, as well as Goethe and Thomas Mann, all rate important entries, not only the gallerygoer's but also the diarist's pen engages with a seemingly endless list of painters, offering authoritative observations on major figures from the Italian High Renaissance to American Abstract Expressionism. “All kinds of painting have interested me for a long time,” Bail has remarked, defending his predilection with the example of France and Italy—“more passionate” than cold Anglo-Saxon countries—where “the tradition is quite strong



for writers to be connected to painting” (Davidson 267). His resulting expertise is attested by a specialist monograph on Ian Fairweather and by Bail’s having served on the council of the National Gallery of Australia from 1976 to 1981. He also enjoys the company of artists and has had his portrait painted by a close friend who revolutionised local landscape depiction, Fred Williams. The impact of modern art on Bail’s sensibilities began early, when as a teenager in Adelaide he stood spellbound before Russell Drysdale’s *Woman in a Landscape*—“I’ll never forget it” (Chisholm 42). Later acknowledged influences included Magritte, Arakawa, and Conceptual artists; references to Malevich and Mondrian, founding figures of abstract art, recur in his novels. By the time Bail reported having happily parted with “hundreds of art books” (1989), the damage, in the form of abiding habits, had been done. Bail could separate himself painlessly from these “accidents” of modern art because he had so thoroughly internalised the movement’s history and lessons.

Not only was Bail’s interest in painting comprehensive, but his everyday observations were informed by an artist’s temperament, especially during his early career as a writer. In London a door that was slammed in his face triggered an illusory epiphany and constituted evidence of what he was seeking: “I am confronted with the grain and texture of wood, and bits of paint, a few inches away” (*L* 5). For a moment this seemed an encounter with the authentic, with “what is ‘real,’” and the threshold to a “new meaning of art—it should possess such a compelling force” (*L* 5). Both the quest for new artistic meaning and its “compelling” embodiment would exert a strong influence on Bail’s short fiction. Elsewhere a weeping, anguished face assumed for him aspects of a cubist composition, as did “mud villages imbedded in bare hills [that] slide across the mind and into cubism” (*L* 89). Indeed, so prevalent was this painterly mode of perception that, like the great art historian Erwin Panofsky, whom he quotes, Bail had to warn himself against comprehending humans as “nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and

volumes, which constitute my world of vision” (L 7). Visual impressions, too, and how they might be conveyed, fascinated him:

Pressing my thumbs on my closed eyes I sometimes see a pattern of blurred grey squares and receding lines on a caramel wash, a strange harmony of perspective and space *I have never seen anywhere else*. If I were a painter—and even though I am not—it would be worthwhile, important even, to re-create that. But how to get the exact colours etc? As I try to study it, gradually it begins to alter, then suddenly, goes. (L 23)

These interests swirl through the pages of *Homesickness*, as do sporadic allusions and analytical descriptions inspired by cubism and its antecedents; Bail has acknowledged that studying perspective in Australian landscape art and “[the artists’] way ... of painting objects within space, made me write things more visually” (Chisholm 42). Painting, then, has been for Bail a dynamic source of inspiration, suggesting new angles of vision and firing his creative imagination: “Strolling from one picture to another in art galleries, even commercial ones, I am assailed by literary ideas which beg to be resolved” (L 47).

During his *Wanderjahre* Bail honed his eye, pen, and knowledge and broke decisively with antipodean cultural models. Before leaving Melbourne he had already written one-third of the pieces that would become *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories*. Overseas he added to them and in London wrote a novel on an unknown subject. A notebook entry from his twenty-ninth birthday shows him full of purpose and intensely self-critical: “By 30, complete six stories, tighten entire novel (all over again). There is not enough reason for it at the moment (the novel)” (L 10). Despite compositional setbacks and occasional impasses, he increasingly recognised a “feeling of being ‘chosen’” (L 24). Although in dreams he still might figure as alienated and rudderless in a coldly implacable environment (L 66), during waking reveries, Bail confessed, “Often I see myself walking towards myself (even when I’m

not walking)” (*L* 74). At last Bail was firmly set on the path to discovering and realising his true talents; now writing and Australia beckoned.

### TOWARDS A DAUNTING CREDO

Long before *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* brought him sudden fame in 1975, Bail had envisaged his art in adversarial, iconoclastic terms. In his notebook he attributes the maxim “the practice of art is antichrist” to William Blake (*L* 107) without further comment. In an earlier entry, however, he quotes the artist Francis Bacon’s dictum that “the image must be twisted if it is to make a renewed assault on the nervous system” and notes that, after a visit to a Bacon retrospective in the Grand Palais in Paris, “the streets, traffic and trees of the bright-aired everyday world... seemed less ‘real’” (*L* 80). Here was proof of art’s radical potential, ample reason for heeding Flaubert’s admonition, at the time dubbed “premature advice”: “Be regular and ordinary in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you can be violent and original in your books” (*L* 28). These mutually reinforcing adages reveal the notetaker’s preoccupation and intention. According to Bacon, the need to defamiliarise reality boldly and to launch a visceral assault on audience complacency constituted “the peculiar difficulty of art today” (*L* 80). The Australian, who maintained that “Bacon manages to say things ... that are beyond most writers on art,” concurred (Bail, “Unpacking” 13).

Bail’s target was the “wall of ordinary realism” (Bail, Introduction xvii) that constrained antipodean writing; his inspiration was realism’s most vocal opponent, Patrick White (1912–1990). The points of intersection between the two authors were many (Thomas). Famously, in 1958 the recently returned expatriate White had denounced “the Great Australian Emptiness,” together with a society “in which the mind is the least of possessions” (White 558), and announced his determination “to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism” (559). Decades later this ringing declaration, enti-

tled "The Prodigal Son," still spoke to the heart of the local dilemma as Bail conceived it, the realist tradition. "It's the great curse in Australian literature. It's part of that Anglo-Saxon pragmatic, prosaic, empirical heritage we got from England" (Sayers 26). Moreover, his precursor's novels, which continued to appear until 1986, demonstrated heroically what was possible. "Above all this stands the prose works of Patrick White. To my mind he continues to take alarming risks for which we should all be grateful" ("Questionnaire on Fiction" 188). And Bail, in his writing, has signalled continuities and accord with White's manifesto by echoing its key terms, "dun-coloured" and "prodigal son." Both men, too, were deeply influenced by contemporary art; White even acknowledged in himself "always something of a frustrated artist" (White 559). Contemporary art fired a willingness to experiment boldly, though the older man had undoubtedly faced a far more intolerant and hostile society in the 1950s than Bail did after him. The treatment meted out then, according to Bail, was "deplorable. Patrick White really deserves the Victoria Cross, not just the Nobel Prize [awarded in 1973], for what he went through" (Chisholm 41). Finally, Bail also sought ways to overcome a perceived "thinness on the ground" and social intercourse that was "cripplingly laconic." White had "got around" this "by imposing his own deep thinking upon his characters"; Bail looked to other models (Davidson 271–272).

In particular, he turned his gaze towards European literature and philosophy. Whereas Bail viewed American and English letters as "saddled with the good sense of Protestant empiricism" and—in spite of occasional pyrotechnics—as imbued with a "stubborn underlying realism," across the Channel writers had developed exciting alternatives to character-centred fiction (Bail, "Continental" 34). Here he encountered works preoccupied with concepts, myths, and theoretical issues, like his own first novel, *Homesickness*. When asked to name authors whose writing he endeavoured to stay abreast of, Bail cited principally French and Latin American authors, including Rozelle, Tournier, Borges, and Marquez. He added the Italian Calvino, as well as Grass and Bernhard from German-speaking central Europe, before finally including Pynchon and, of course, Patrick

White. These are all writers “concerned as much with invention and speculation as with tracing the usual psychological contours” of protagonists, concerned with securing for themselves creative elbow room (“Continental” 34). In brief, the fabulous worlds and mental travelling made available through translations were potent antidotes to a land and literature “so dry and dusty and flat, it was just like the Nullarbor Plain.” Their local shortage Bail adjudged an inadmissible denial of “normal knowledge of the world,” even a McCarthy-like constraint on intellectual freedom (Davidson 274–275).

In addition, Kafka and Proust have been singled out by Bail as providing crucial insights into the potential scope of fiction. Whereas White, in his drive “to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people” (White 559), depicts the hidden depths of common, unprepossessing protagonists, Kafka reveals in *The Metamorphosis* a less exalted version of the extraordinary in the midst of daily routine: a young man awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a monstrous bug. Here terror and the irrational invade the domestic haven to create a situation that is grotesquely fantastic and deeply disturbing. To young Bail, surrounded by trite local fiction of a dun-coloured era, *The Metamorphosis* “was terribly impressive because [Kafka] showed what could be done, and the strange way he did it had a great naturalness about it and so much more power and clarity” (Davidson 274). An alternative to the spare prose of Kafka or Hemingway (both early influences) was afforded by Bail’s postponed encounter with Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, which offered not the dreaded “river of prose but a flood plain of sensations: alertness and beauty from all directions, and all depths. A marvellous curiosity transmitted. Ideas, laughter. Amazed at my complacency: to think I hadn’t begun reading this most complete novel [Proust], even a day earlier” (L 96). A second reading followed; a third was resolved on, and a fourth was a possibility “in my twilight years” (“Unpacking”). The lessons of *Remembrance* went home, and even Bail’s densely packed, cerebral novels admit bursts of sensation and beauty:

They parted a furrow through a corridor of waist-high grasses which swayed and rippled in the turbulence [of the motorcycle]. When the road shifted a few points towards the setting sun the bleached paddocks, the low hills to the right, and even the trunks of occasional gum trees were over-run by a lava of blinding orange. All this Holden saw with his head to one side. (*HP* 55)

Similarly auspicious was Bail's discovery that same year, 1973, of the intricately woven fiction of Michel Tournier. Uncannily, the attributes registered by Bail prefigured his own major works: "With little warning I read a novel of commanding force, intelligence. *The Erl King*. Through his thoughts the author himself [Tournier] almost becomes the most interesting character" (*L* 91). Bail devoured the book in a single sitting. Subsequently, Tournier earned accolades for engaging with and creating the resonances of myth, for tackling such important issues as humanity's "relationship to time and history" and for "all kinds of speculation": "He's a novelist of ideas. And he exhibits a very strong narrative drive, takes risks, superb risks, and he doesn't muck around with the local, telling us what it's like to be a Frenchman" (Davidson 275). Here was further encouragement to stretch the boundaries of fiction, but this was not a model for imitation. Instead, when Bail later needed a few pages of inspirational reading to set himself up for a day's writing, it was to Kafka or to White's epochal *Riders in the Chariots* that he acknowledged turning ("Unpacking" 13).

From the outset, then, Bail aspired to be a novelist of ideas rather than of characters. Pronouncing himself "prepared to break all the rules," he put a premium on "force and individuality" (Chisholm 42)—determined that his work should never display "that peculiar tell-tale thinness of the second hand" (*IF* 149). Far better "the bold assertion coming in at an unexpected angle ... that throws off an infectious energy" (Bail, "Continental" 34) than decorum and plainness. He had, he claimed, "a supremely high regard for literature," and a firm persuasion of the "high seriousness" of his calling (Chisholm 42). Setting himself stern standards, Bail entered

into composition as an arduous, meticulous process that yielded at best two hundred words a day. The labour of countless drafts was immense, the stakes high. In opposition to engrained pragmatism and stolid realism, he focused on “situations, propositions, speculation” (Bail, “Questionnaire on Fiction” 188), setting supreme store by the richness and ambiguity of “language, discussion, imagination, all the dreaming that goes with it ... [and distinguishes] the species” (Chisholm 42). Audacity, invention, and experiment became Bail’s watchwords, and his first book—a collection of short fiction that focused on concepts—was their vindication.

### **CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITS AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION**

*Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975) marked a stark break with dun-coloured realism and much modernist fiction. An avid and conscientious reader, Bail is familiar with towering precursors such as Joyce, Musil, and Proust; nevertheless, hallmarks of their revolutionary work—stream of consciousness, exploration of time and memory—are largely absent from his work. Similarly, despite alleged interest in portraying states of mind, Bail is seldom concerned with individual consciousness as a means of bringing protagonists to life or with tracing their psychological development in the manner of Flaubert, the great Russian novelists, or White—authors whose examples he has praised. Instead, Bail is intent on how individuals perceive and react to the world during a revelatory incident, like a host who hides from his guests or a rabbit trapper who finds intolerable the fortnightly intrusion of a work-mate on his silence. Many of his early stories are “propositional” in the sense of “proceeding to answer a certain problem or to explore one” (Davidson 265). Moreover, realists rarely foreground the authorial contrivances that foster an impression of verisimilitude and lend coherence to their accounts, whereas Bail repeatedly disrupts his audience’s willing suspension of disbelief by underscoring the status of his tales as artefacts. Although these insistent acts of alienation could be used, as in

the work of Brecht, to create a socially responsible art, in Bail's writing they are primarily the corollary of a distinctive aesthetic.

Exemplary of the uses and ends of alienation in Bail's fiction is his often anthologised story "A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z." Its very title draws attention not to a potential storyline but to the building blocks of fiction, to their essentially neutral nature, and to the fact that meaning depends on their arbitrary or, more usually, manipulated conjunction—points underscored from the outset:

I select from these letters, pressing my fingers down. The letter (or an image of it) appears on the sheet of paper. It signifies little or nothing, I have to add more. Other letters are placed alongside until a "word" is formed. And it is not always the word WORD.

The word matches either my memory of its appearance, or a picture of the object the word denotes. TREE: I see the shape of a tree at mid-distance, and green.

I am writing a story.

Here, the trouble begins. ("A B C" 173)

The opening offers a series of affronts to the realist tradition and its informing empirical assumptions. These presuppose an objectively knowable reality, language commensurate to its depiction, and usually a one-to-one relationship between signifier and the object or property signified. The "trouble" mentioned intriguingly here is identified first with William James's proposition that "the word 'dog'... does not bite" and then with the evocation of "philosophers other than myself [who] have dismissed the inadequacy of words" ("A B C" 174). For Bail's speaker, words are inherently neutral, but readers' understanding of them is highly personal. That understanding is likely to invoke a visual image that reflects the reader's subjective conception and cumulative experiences rather than any unalterable universal, whether the signifier be "tree" or the starting point here, "a weeping woman". Thus instead of a conventional short story dealing with an unhappy protagonist, Bail produces fiction that is multilayered,



grappling with the roles of language, writing, and subjective perception—and provides an enquiry into what produced the woman's condition.

The initial suggestion of interconnectedness of the written and pictorial realms is diversely reiterated as the tale unfolds, and individuals are distinguished by their responses to this relationship. Kathy, a librarian in the British embassy in Karachi, and her eventual lover, the Pakistani Syed Masood—"Perhaps he is our best painter [but] ... I have my doubts" ("A B C" 176)—are linked respectively with books and art and, significantly, with unconventionality. For them traditional values and their signifiers have become unstable. "When Kathy thought of London she often saw 'London'—the six letters arranged in recognizable order. Then parts of an endless construction appeared, much of it badly blurred. There was the thick stone" (175). With an effort she can recall other details, some of them "strangely dead," whereas half-conscious awareness of the dependence of this reality on her subjective perceptions encourages the feeling that "it [London] existed only when she was there" (175). To her, Karachi "stands for something else" (175)—an open-ended formulation rich in subjective connotations. Masood represents the antithesis of bourgeois valuations of life and art, and of univocal comprehension. On one occasion he wilfully destroys one of his own prized canvases; on another he states, "You can spell my name four different ways" (179). Then, having mockingly demanded that Kathy look up "in one of your English dictionaries" a word that to them has distinctly personal significance, he challenges her to think of him as "an exclamation mark! It amounts to the same thing. I would see you, I think, as a colour. Yes, I think more than likely pink, or something soft like yellow" (179). Englishness and its clear, authoritative definitions—represented by the approved lifestyles of embassy staff or standard reference works—are played off against a view of reality as constituted by variable, interchangeable, and intensely personal codes. Undoubtedly, Masood's is a radically imaginative and painterly conception, but is it less valid or satisfactory than a so-called objective, circumscribed approach to events?

Bail's story offers diverging answers to this conundrum. At one stage the compelling narrative of Kathy and Masood is brusquely interrupted by the narrator's recollection of "an incident from last Thursday, the 12th. This is an intrusion, but from 'real life.' The words in the following paragraph reconstruct the event as remembered. As accurately as possible, of course" (178). Then follows the tale of a beggar who shows casual drinkers in a bar dog-eared photos of random burials before putting out his hand. Presumably, this usually garners a coin to ward off both the beggar and the fate evoked by his *memento mori*. Without the human interest supplied by this surmise, however, the episode is inconsequential, virtually meaningless, and far less engrossing than the lovers' drama, irrespective of the speaker's insistence on meticulous accuracy and empirical "truth." Moreover, the description of the incident breaks off midsentence ("The barman spoke: 'Odd way to earn a living. He's been doing that for'"; 179), signifying at least that existence has no closure outside the realms of fiction—despite so-called objective, neatly framed accounts of it. "Real life," then, fades before and seems secondary to its imaginative variant and becomes, in any case, "events as remembered." Yet there are realities and univocal readings that cannot be ignored. Embassy officials insist on a master or imperial code of behaviour: one form of dress, precise temporal observances, duty as well as decency. Flagrant breeches cost Kathy her job, leaving her at the story's end in London, which (like its governing values) has never ceased to exist or to exert a very real sway.

Fittingly, "A B C" concludes with countervailing evidence of the power of artistic depictions. A disgraced Kathy in London unexpectedly receives Masood's self-portrait ("quite a striking resemblance") in the mail:

His face, leaning against the tea-pot, stares across at Kathy weeping.

She cannot help thinking of him; of his appearance.

Words. These marks on paper, and so on. ("A B C" 183)

Authoritarian codes undoubtedly have the capacity to bite—hence Kathy's dismissal—yet so, too, do imaginative ones, as her tears attest through

their unquantifiable reverberations. Certainly mere “marks on paper” have neither absolute nor transcendental meaning, but neither have the most conscientious records of “real life,” which depend ultimately on fallible memory or methods of recording that almost inevitably involve a subjective dimension. The story, in brief, affirms multiple ways of knowing and exerting influence on the world, and officialdom serves as a surrogate for those stable, common-sense traditions against which Bail has railed in interviews. Their shortcomings are shown to be a limited response to emotional needs and complexities, as well as a failure to encourage what is most spontaneous and inventive in existence, including art itself.

More generally, this radical narrative and the collection as a whole read like a belated response to the seminal aesthetic crisis of the twentieth century. The crisis’s primary arena was that of the visual arts, which in terms of innovation and diversification far outstripped writing during this period. Developments in photography throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century had both challenged artists’ time-honoured *raison d’être* of accurate representation and provided them an opportunity to seek new subjects, approaches, and media. Suprematism, Fauvism, futurism, and cubism, as well as a multitude of other movements and manifestos, signalled a liberation that was well underway by the outbreak of the First World War. As the century unfolded, this aesthetic revolution accelerated until, by the time Bail was composing his stories, it could be stated as “self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist” (Adorno 1). Art, as Adorno’s synopsis continues, had achieved autonomy, replacing a dominant approach with infinite possibilities, and severing itself from “the categorical determination stamped on it by the empirical world” (6). Nevertheless, the spell cast by empirical reality, Bail’s *bête noire*, remained strong; therefore artists needed to stress the “artificial element” of their work—“These marks on paper, and so on” (“A B C” 183)—their independence had to “be constantly renewed” (Adorno 7). Modern art, as its historians tirelessly stress, had become unapologetically intent on presenting the individual artist’s response to reality, in

much the same way that it had moved from smooth, flawless paintings in which any trace of a brushstroke was effaced to avant-garde works that underscored their own materiality, whether through clotted, dripping paint or through a boldly slashed canvas.

Bail, having immersed himself in the major modernists and their doctrines, had comprehensive knowledge of these developments. In England he records going “backwards and forwards” mentally as well as physically before individual works, or “ogling art” to the point of making a spectacle of himself—but never naively: “the silence and serenity offered by Rothko and Nicholson . . . is not all that reassuring” (*L* 26). This familiarity extended to their private musings and correspondence—Cézanne and Van Gogh are quoted, for example, on the absence of absolute black in nature (*L* 31–32)—and to watershed moments: “The *Red Interior* of Matisse is jammed with confidence” (*L* 46). Not acknowledged (but presumably appreciated), the canvas marks a highpoint in the shift of modern art away from objectively rendered matter, for the putative interior is painted entirely in vibrant red and filled with Matisse’s earlier works. Artistic perception and its individual evolution provide a sufficient and all-important subject, which the painter boldly embraces (“jammed with confidence”), raising cognate issues for a would-be writer and arguably encouraging a shift from the allegedly objective to its subjective observation and formulation. Little wonder, then, that during each gallery stroll Bail was “assailed by literary ideas which beg to be resolved” (*L* 47).

Evidence of the kind of ideas that presumably assailed him is prominent in “Huebler.”<sup>2</sup> Though the two seem unrelated, both “Huebler” and “A B C”—the collection’s first and last stories, respectively—play on modern dilemmas of representation and draw attention to the presence of cognate material in the collection. Appropriately, “Huebler” focuses on photography, the form of reproduction that ignited the seminal aesthetic revolution. The story subtly underscores the new medium’s limitations by depicting characteristics that would escape a camera’s purview, as well as the hubris of its practitioners in Huebler’s stated intent to

“photographically document . . . the existence of everyone alive” (3). The merits of a rival form of portraiture are implicitly presented through the ensuing accounts “of twenty-three people or ‘types,’” accompanied by the provocative comment: “I offer them to Huebler, helping him, one artist to another, whether he likes it or not” (4). Two centuries earlier Blake’s narrator in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* had promised readers his “Bible of Hell: which the world shall have whether they will or no” (Erdman 43). The parallel is apposite, for both speakers are committed to a radical enterprise that involves subverting conventions and anticipated responses. Blake’s composition is profoundly antinomian, reading black where the majority see only white and embracing, through the voice of the devil, antithetical codes that privilege energy over constraint, imagination over reason, and infinite over finite potential—an evaluation dear to the Australian writer. Bail’s aims, though cast in a less tendentious and morally confronting key, are similar, inverting straightforward univocal meaning in favour of inventive, ludic readings—thereby setting in motion a project that culminates in the narrative challenges posed by “A B C.”

The keynotes of these twenty-three “portraits” are reversal of expectations and a privileging of diverse forms (rather than a single one) of presentation and narration. For instance, “1. At least one person who always has to have the last word” turns out to be a character who, to overcome fear of his own mortality, is determined to contribute the last entry to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. First he produces coinages like “zynopic”, “zythm”, and “zyvatiatē” (“Huebler” 5). Then he contrives to have them appear in print, so that they may qualify for inclusion in this standard compendium of the English language. Even the empirical gathering of data is open to manipulation; subjectivity apparently will not be denied. The next portrait, “2. At least one person who would rather be almost anyone else,” depicts an architect doomed to minor commissions by the distrust he awakens in clients. And he cannot bear his own characteristics reflected in the face of his son. Reproduction and duplication, as this vignette shows, can assume many forms, while the fact that recognition of family similarities is emphatically subjective and that the boy’s face is

said to function “like a camera” (70) constitutes an unsettling commentary on photography and the way viewers respond to its end products.

These varied portraits also blur the supposedly definite categories of fact and fiction. Bail’s Huebler is clearly based on the American Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler (1924–1997). Huebler’s excellent eye was first revealed through his spotting, from the air, camouflaged enemy positions in the Pacific theatre during World War II—camouflage is a Bail leitmotif—and postwar, Huebler made headlines by announcing his intention to “photographically document ... the existence of everyone alive.” Bail’s story appropriates and tweaks historical fact in order to indicate the limitations and blindness of this encyclopedic undertaking. Still playing with facts, the next “portrait” is nothing more than a bald summary of personal details: “Age: 54/ Date of Birth: September 22, 1920/ Status: married” (“Huebler” 8). But is it any less a portrait and, if so, do readers expect something more than the merely factual? The data hardly rise above what might be included on an official questionnaire, and this portrait is adjudged “a bit woolly” either because of its dubious bearing on the type portrayed or because the bare facts fall short of constituting an adequate portrait (“Huebler” 8). Ensuing heterogeneous matter challenges conventional notions of what is permissible within fiction. The title of “15,” for instance, breaks off midsentence and is followed by two blank pages, whereas “13” is set apart by distinctive typeface and the claim that “I tore this out of the London *Times* on June 16, 1973. It can be reprinted here without changing a word” (23). Such strategies broaden the range of potential narrative modes much as the modern artist, no longer limited to oils or watercolours, might include collage, words, and found objects on his canvas.

Fittingly, critical awareness about fiction and its motives, one of Bail’s unambiguous objectives, is foregrounded in the last portrait: “23. At least one person for whom reality is richer than the artist’s fantasies.” Huebler is this person, and again paradoxes abound. In one sense the statement is true, in that the real-life Huebler is “richer” than Bail’s briefly sketched

figure; in another sense it is false, for Huebler is an artist's fantasy, and this immediately renders his so-called reality fictive—in a sly dig at the imbrication of objectivity and subjectivity. Serried questions evoke both the creative process itself and the infinite variety of responses possible before this last vignette concludes with a call for self-consciousness in the form of a question that is relevant also to subsequent stories: "Why are you doing this? I have been thinking, Huebler. I think we all have been" (39).

Instead of aspiring to offer a faithful representation of known reality, ensuing tales privilege invention in order to create challenging, multilayered fictions. The second story, "Life of the Party," moves in quick succession, for instance, from pointed acknowledgment of the audience's role in the creation of meaning ("Please picture a pink gum-tree in the corner of a backyard"; 43), to playful foregrounding of the work's artificiality, such as a spouse associated with the letter "z": "It was Zelda who owned the street's zaniest laugh, had zealous opinions on the best-sellers, and always said zero instead of the more normal nought or nothing" (44). This reiteration recalls the venture of the person determined to have the last word, and is followed by a veiled invocation of White's precursor program, when a neighbour "looked up and down, waiting for mail, visitors, his Prodigal Son, news of some description" ("Life of the Party" 45). Texts at their best ripple with wordplays, and resonate with allusions, as the ludic principle trumps definition and grounded knowledge is shown to be wanting. A doctrinaire empiricist, like Zoellner, may wonder why people "bother arranging these words" in myth and fiction ("Zoellner's Definition" 67) or why they stand stumped before murals supposed to reveal "the foundations of knowledge" (67). At most, such murals adumbrate or conjure up what is quintessentially elusive or inexpressible rather than "the essential nature of a thing" (65). Efforts to transfix that nature are in vain, as Zoellner learns, and the accumulation of concise formulations, reinforced by memorabilia, comes no closer to reduplicating a single human being than words alone could come to conveying a "Portrait of Electricity."

In a complementary demonstration of the fallibility of mere measurement and empirical principles, Biv, Zoellner's future companion in *Home-sickness*, founders in his attempt to find a cul-de-sac, allegedly located two minutes away. The very title of the story, "Cul-de-Sac (Uncompleted)," foreshadows this outcome by bringing together incongruent elements—that which by definition is circumscribed, terminal, and knowable and its opposite. This manoeuvre is replicated by the story's numbered segments, which start at 78 and finish—or rather, break off—at 108 with Biv's chief still admonishing and gesticulating. Aligned with engraving, a cartographer's compass, and the belief that "our popular maps are perfectly true" ("Cul-de-Sac" 139), Biv encounters a reality that fails to conform or stand still. Empty prams bombard him mysteriously, a suburban square, although conforming to the rules of town planning, contains a tree whose shadow proves so tangible that he can lift it from the ground (141), and repeatedly disconcerting "scenery" appears, beyond quantification and therefore outside his reach.

Beyond the realm of precise calculation, too, is personality. Biv's accords ill with his profession: he is not methodical ("Cul-de-Sac" 140) and is subject to unruly impulses that draw him off course to peep into the bedroom of Mr Grey's daughter as she undresses. Similarly, he is supposed to subscribe to the virtues of geometry, concrete facts, and topography. But whereas his chief maintains that "truth is measurable," that "our lines ... trace concrete facts" (144), or that "'country,' or crust, is nothing more than an undulating base into which are screwed factories and other artificial protuberances" (151), Biv feels inexplicably drawn to a counter-vailing dictum: "The feeling of space or the intuition of space is the most basic force of the mind" (143). If this posited nexus holds true, then reality can never be depicted definitively and the cul-de-sac, as putative metonym for empirical conceptions, is not only a dead end but also as fabulous and unnatural as the chimera—and as elusive. A concluding segment shows Biv as a modern-day pilgrim floundering near a swamp of soggy words and floating statements, all pretence to mastery through precise definition and delineation gone. Alone indisputable, in terms of this story, is



the adage of a protosurrealist and futurist, “the great Giorgio de Chirico”: “There are many more enigmas in the shadow of a man who walks in the sun than all the religions of the past, present and future” (150).

The essentials of Bail’s argument remain unchanged, though the variables by which it is expressed mutate imaginatively. Silence, in the eponymous story, trumps words. Mere imitation or reproduction through pantomime and synecdoche fails lamentably to capture or bring to life an individual in “Portrait of Electricity,” whereas promised panaceas—from extraordinarily high-yielding ore to man-made nirvanas—prove equally delusive to their intellectually limited questers. For simple Hector, for instance, paradise often seems within concrete reach, beginning with the ordered view and routine provided to him as a bus driver: “The distance to Paradise, with the great screen framing all kinds of life, gave him this gentle advice: move, slow down, stop, let them get on, move, see, Paradise. The world was beautiful. It was plainly visible” (“Paradise” 117). Yet reality repeatedly proves to be more complex, exceeding the superimposed frame of reference—in this instance, through collision with a green van. Eventually, in a parodic foreshadowing of “A B C,” Hector finds himself before a telephone and switchboard that enable him to provide up-to-the-minute forecasts on an external display for the people below. The opposite of keyboard creativity, his office is “high in the dead part of the building” (121), his job a straightforward registering of half-hourly phone directions until, on the final page, he ignores messages and formulates his own prediction. The concluding ringing phone represents the outside world, as vigilant and ready as Kathy’s embassy to call subjective transgressors to strict and immediate account—examples not without relevance to a writer determined to exceed norms, shock, and do violence to traditional reader expectations.

Finally, running through these stories is a tacit recognition of discontent and distress that are rarely vocalised, even more rarely addressed. Bail has acknowledged a pronounced streak of pessimism in himself and in his progenitor, a pessimism that finds expression in the vacuous, unhappy

existences of his early protagonists. Biv's nearest approach to fulfilment is a lighted bedroom window seen from afar, Hector's a prohibited rooftop garden. For the scrambling participants in "The Partitions" fulfilment is precariously glimpsed from on high, and "The Dog Show" systematically erases the distinguishing traits between human beings and beasts. Some protagonists virtually abandon the blundering struggle or comedy that passes for human interaction and retreat to what they hope sanguinely is a safe distance (though actuality still threatens). Others are caught unawares; even their lives are put at risk. In a world over which the empirical sciences had promised mastery, Bail repeatedly depicts human beings as unfulfilled and defeated by existence.

This cumulative frustration and incomprehension is perhaps most apparent in "The Drover's Wife," in which Bail takes aim at both the Australian realist tradition and enduring local myths of rural plenty and contentment. The story is prefixed by a black-and-white reproduction of Russell Drysdale's iconic canvas of the same name, a title shared by an equally famous story by Henry Lawson. The latter is evoked in Bail's work through traits shared by the respective protagonists, from phlegmatic, long-suffering patience to courageous independence, exhibited in both stories when the woman chops wood or kills a snake. Moreover, the two precursory works are sternly realistic, providing blunt depictions of harsh, trying conditions for human beings. Predictably, Bail turns this on its head, forcing his speaker to recognise that even this realist "picture gives little way" ("Drover's Wife" 57) and demonstrating through the man's fumbling reading-cum-confession the extent to which perception of situations, items, or art works depends on empathic projection. In addition, the woman is no longer a drover's but a dentist's wife who absconds to prospects in the outback that "defied logic" (60). Though art may have turned its back on the referential object, modern dentistry definitely has not, nor has it rejected the belief that pain and decay have traceable, ameliorable causes. Yet this dentist, in his private life at least, has failed to detect symptoms and head off disaster. Again an empirical mindset is tacitly convicted of emotional shortcomings: "'Hello, missus!' I used to

say, entering the kitchen. Not perfect perhaps, especially by today's standards, but that is my way of showing affection. I think Hazel understood. Sometimes I could see she was touched" (59–60). Although he may accuse the painter of "altering the truth for the sake of a pretty picture, or 'composition'" (60)—omitting, for example, the inevitable and maddening "bush flies"—the speaker himself has been guilty of far greater omissions and manipulation of detail or perspective. Consequently, vital existence has passed him by and the values and professional attitudes he embodies are found wanting by art's as well as by today's standards, as the collection as a whole demonstrates.

### ENTER THE NOVELIST

*Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* was a bold yet ultimately unsatisfying first step for a writer with high ambitions. By completing it Bail had provided a fictional response to many of the key dilemmas that had preoccupied artists throughout the century—those painting-inspired "literary ideas which," he reported in London, "beg to be resolved" (*L* 61). The issue of art's relationship to the world, however, remained to be grappled with. Was art for art's sake still a viable and sufficient rationale? Or did self-conscious local art need to bear in mind White's audacious program, his call to help "people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding" (White 560)? These, or similar considerations, were apparently a decisive factor in Bail's eventual abandonment of the short story in favour of the novel. In 1980 he distinguished these fictional forms in terms respectively of compression and complexity. "By definition a short story should be a compression of something, a single facet or point of view, prejudices—or character assassinations, if you like—in which everything is carefully composed, a deliberate assembly of traits" (Sayers 26). Eventually, Bail found that what he wanted to present demanded works of greater scope. "To me, the complexity of the world is the most interesting thing about it, and I have realised that I can best express my view of the world in the novel ... that because of its

complexity the novel is a far more important literary form than the short story, although I used to hold the short story very high” (Sayers 26).

But Bail was not finished with painting. Whereas initially it made him intensely aware of cognitive and creative issues that are explored in his early fiction, later he discerned conditions relevant to his own career and prospects in two life studies that he authored of idiosyncratic antipodean artists. At the same time as he was effecting this crucial transition to the novel with *Homesickness*, written with the aid of three-year-long writer’s grant from the Australia Council, Bail was also working on his first published study of a painter, the reclusive Ian Fairweather. In some respects this was a strange choice—and an interesting conjunction. Why burden himself with additional labour when his first novel was already proving so demanding? Why single out a painter of English extraction and with a decidedly international outlook when Australia was much more preoccupied with its landscape artists and the radical figurative and representational innovations of painters such as Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, John Percival, and Albert Tucker? Unlike these loosely associated Melbourne-based individualists, Fairweather was a pronounced loner, known for subtle, at times almost monochrome abstractions infused with the lessons of cubism.<sup>3</sup> According to Bail, on returning to Australia he had “thought that given the renaissance in art publishing, there was bound to be a full treatment of Fairweather. To my dismay there was nothing” (Davidson 268). It was patently long overdue. Fairweather “was the great artist, a painter’s painter—ask the painters,” as the novelist obviously had (268). Making good this shortfall enabled him to render homage where it was manifestly due and to explore a life that “morbidly fascinated” him (268). Bail also forestalled the charge of having foolishly divided his own creative energies by presenting his biographical efforts as virtual leisure-time activities. Weekdays were set aside for the hard labour of composing fiction; evenings and weekends allowed him limited opportunities to research and work on a substantial nonfiction monograph. Gradually, “a mountain of material” was accumulated. Bringing it to paper took five months. “It wrote itself, it was like a holiday” (Chisholm 42).

Thereafter, allegedly, artists' lives and their work would no longer engross him; instead, Bail was free to devote himself entirely to his own elected course.

The Fairweather project, however, was complementary to Bail's fictional endeavours in unspecified ways: namely, in focusing Bail's thoughts on seminal issues of modern art that were relevant to his novel and on what a dedicated, creative career might entail. Artistic individuality, as he knew well, "is not spontaneous. It is a search" (*IF* 118) often carried out in solitude and Spartan conditions. Fairweather, from early on, had "the sure knowledge that I am not going to paint as though through the lens of a camera. What I wanted to express was the effect the scene had on me" (*IF* 118). This led away from conventional representation to compositions that were "fragmented, moving, regrouping, the outlines fluid and changing as they settled into the picture that conveyed my thoughts" (*IF* 15). Similarly, in *Homesickness* people and objects are often on the verge of dissolving under the impact of a "painter's eye for shapes and colours" (*IF* 50): "The surface [of the pool] tilted with the shifting dining room fixtures and candles, fluid lights, and the board floated, an interesting twisted rectangle" (*H* 22). Fairweather's subject is repeatedly identified as the "regrouping of shapes and feelings" (*IF* 204), and Bail's account of a key canvas could also serve as a description of the conclusion of *Homesickness*: "Fragments of armpits, buttocks, breasts, ankle and elbow advance/retreat: now you see me: now you don't" (*IF* 128). Not *prima facie* proof of nihilism, such a scene may well project subjective perception or point, as in the case of Fairweather, to "the eternal mystery of the world" and hint at "its comprehensibility" (*IF* 128). Congruence is evident also in the two artists' responses to creative issues. Fairweather's paintings, for example, are read as "visual equivalents which present ideas in a new and original way, often quite ravishing in its unity and clarity" (*IF* 206), and to him are attributed the thoughts "there was nothing new here (Fairweather's constant phrase)" and "our ways of seeing are infinitely more complicated" (*IF* 114)—both of which recall Bail's quest for a "new meaning of art" (*L* 5) and forms of expression commensurate to life's

complexity. Here was a biography, then, with numerous personal analogies and that confirmed its author's chosen path of Cézanne-like seclusion in quest of ultimate artistic mastery.

Two decades later, at another apparent turning point in his career, the writer focused on a different artist's life story. For the first time Bail's fiction, *Eucalyptus* (2001), was built around a romance storyline and offered a more character-centred narration, leading to the claim that "the homemade modernist" had at last displayed more benign feelings. (Craven, "Murray Bail" 75). Was a new Murray Bail emerging? As if in answer, he published the intriguingly entitled "I Am" (2003), an eleven-page essay on the New Zealander painter Colin McCahon, drawing on a projected monograph that had "run aground on the dangerous rocks of New Zealand parochialism" (Tillers 102). Although this title is shared by one of McCahon's best known works, the many parallels between the painter and novelist lend this essay an autobiographical resonance. Both men had made similar life choices, turning away from suburban emptiness and constraint to exploit a rich inner world and produce works of stubborn singularity that combined a certain awkwardness with a selfish, histrionic call for attention. They were doggedly individualistic yet creatively had much in common: "All my painting is autobiography," McCahon has explained. "In different ways that applies to every artist" (Bail, "I Am" 262). For thirteen years, too, the novelist reported having lived with a McCahon painting entitled *Small Landscape with Domed Hill* (1966), a work "about the size of a man's handkerchief" (272) placed near his writing desk. Contact was daily and linked to his primary occupation: "it leaks into the corner of my eye whether I like it or not" (272). In addition to highlighting the artist's distinctive traits, this work exhibits a peculiarly primordial quality, in this instance "a man's version of a hill, his idea of it" (272), recognised by a writer who had recently published, to acclaim, his own version of the primordial local tree. As Fairweather's *Gethsemane* was right for its owner, Patrick White, both of whom had recast the heritage of high modernism to suit their own individual visions, so Bail

recognised an affinity verging on identity with this New Zealand loner and his demanding *oeuvre*, and he signalled it arguably in his essay's title.

Although the points of contact, the veiled analogies between subject and author are many, perhaps the most revelatory concern the origin and ends of serious imaginative endeavour. Both men experienced imaginatively "an immediate freedom" and "release" once abroad, and both were impressed by work of the international avant-garde but "not overwhelmed by it" (Bail, "I Am" 265). As usual Bail has little time for mere imitation. "That was left to others. Throughout the '60s and '70s large areas of the Southern Hemisphere became systematically wallpapered by stains and splashes and gestures, and the rectangle of flat colour. There were many look-alikes" (265–266)—whereas the Australian shared McCahon's trajectory overseas, becoming "more certain of the distinctiveness of his own individuality" (266). This paradigm, observable already in Fairweather's case, implied that "art will always be a rendition of the self" (267), by which Bail means a "reflection" of "what is within," done "without bluster or pretence, with no compromise, whatever the cost" (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" (266). Further, in a work of such brief compass as this essay, in which to highlight attributes or a single incident is a matter of serious calculation, the repeated assertion that the New Zealander, through his work, "wanted to change people" (267, 269) arguably points to a shared agenda. Yet both men's strenuous efforts seem destined to win neither plaudits nor monetary ease. Instead, the true or "serious artist 'chooses' art over the everyday life, and suffers the consequences"—frequent slights (or worse) and an existence that amounts to "solitary confinement" (264–265).

Within this recurrent paradigm, the artist as great loner and individualist is condemned to misunderstanding, and Bail's comments on critical reception are uniformly negative. The denigration of Fairweather as

a mere decorator, a portrayer of golliwogs better suited to the applied arts, drew this response: "So Fairweather was introduced to informed opinion in Australian art" (*IF* 96). Of one local review that claimed *Homesickness* reduced travel to "a bowel movement," Bail observed: "It does summarize the deplorable standards of criticism and newspaper writing in our poor (undernourished) country" (Lysenko 43). McCahon fared worse: "Landlords wouldn't rent to an artist; people whispered and pointed to him in buses; at every opportunity the press and politicians ridiculed his paintings" (Bail, "I Am" 271). The cuts inflicted by malicious or obtuse commentary are presumably never entirely assuaged by numerous awards and prestigious short-listings, though Bail's preferred self-image seems to demand public acrimony and incomprehension.<sup>4</sup> Small wonder, then, that when he came to reorganise and reprioritise his library, the accompanying culling reflected these convictions. Bail dispensed with most of his commentaries on art, threw out "whole shelves of dry Australian novels, story collections, stolid histories and biographies" and could find no better location for a handful of works on literary criticism than, in a return to the cloacal regions favoured by Alexander Pope, beside the sewerage pipes (Bail, "Unpacking" 13). Their quibbles and pontifications would not deflect him from his chosen path. Rather, his credo accorded with Stendhal's, cited in the McCahon study: "real superiority ... admits no eccentricity" (Bail, "I Am" 271)—an adage that his novels, from the outset with *Homesickness*, insistently embodied.



## ENDNOTES

1. Bail, personal communication with the author, Monash University, September 1990.
2. In the first edition this character's name was spelt *Heubler*, but in all subsequent reprintings it has been changed to *Huebler*, the spelling I use here.
3. According to Bail, cubism supplied the painter with "depth and the necessary complexity" and allowed him "to rely on line without ending up with decorative flatness" (*IF* 149, 218).
4. Bail's response to the undeniable success of *Homesickness*, for example, almost suggested its undesirability, which led the interviewer to ask, "Could success and recognition never be constructive?" (Chisholm 41). The question received an evasive answer.