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Politics, clichés and the “lurky country“: Murray Bail’s critique of national mythologies in *Holden’s Performance*

From the outset of his career as a novelist, Murray Bail has been concerned with the perennial issues of Australian identity and the country’s putative destiny. As the progeny of a predominantly white, Victorian settlement on the far rim of the Asia-Pacific region, Australians have been acutely conscious of their belatedness, isolation and reliance on a transplanted culture. These factors, together with continued dependence on powerful allies, have produced Australians’ notorious “cultural cringe“. Australia, too, throughout its relatively brief history of Caucasian settlement, has usually been acted upon, rather than taken decisive steps to shape its own destiny. Like Holden Shadbolt, the main protagonist of Bail’s second novel, *Holden’s Performance*, who is at times “unable to talk“, the country “appeared to need a shove in the right direction. This was always his trouble, the problem” (159). For the first hundred and twenty years it meekly followed the dictates of Whitehall, until granted independent status at Federation in 1901. Thereafter it prided itself on loyalty to the British flag, and remained dependent on London for investment capital, as well as markets for its primary produce. Only the “shove“ provided by Japan’s attempt to extend its empire during the Pacific War moved the loyal Commonwealth member-state from the side of an isolated and encircled Britain to embrace the burgeoning superpower on the other side of the Pacific, the United States. Bail, in his early novels, is concerned with the antipodean nation that emerged victorious after the Second World War, and with national traits and blindness that threatened to rob the Great South Land of the glittering destiny that might have awaited it as a developed Western nation positioned near the rising economic epicentres of the Asia-Pacific region.

Bail's preoccupation with these issues emerges through his principal characters and in numerous colorful incidents. Midway through *Holden's Performance*, for instance, disaster unexpectedly strikes. A boisterous, drunken cinema patron is firmly and expertly removed from his seat by Shadbolt, in his role as bouncer. The rest should be mere routine, and so it is as Holden begins "frogmarching towards the revolving doors a wiry man with a flashy watch, hiccupping and protesting pedantically" (170). Virtual strangulation with his collar and tie assures compliance until they reach the foyer, where the man suddenly goes limp. Holden instinctively relaxes his grip. The proprietor, Alex Screech, true to his name thunders a warning, but too late: "Pitching forward the geography teacher from Broken Hill turned khaki and hiccupped at Shadbolt's feet a broad lava of vomit, and stumbled out into the fresh air" (170). Shock, horror. This seems by any measure a calamity for cinema premises that depend on extending a welcoming interior to would-be patrons—a catastrophic situation which Holden is about to attempt to rectify when his employer restrains him: "The vomit had almost stopped its spread, and as they watched it rapidly settled and adjusted here and there, suddenly accelerating at the edges, a matter of viscosity, of carpet drag, until it reached the final unmistakable shape—Australia" (171). All Holden has to do is remove his massive size-12 shoe from the mess to complete the familiar outline by producing the Gulf of Carpentaria:

As they stared the uneven surface congealed into mountains and river courses, a pre-Cambrian, a vast desert of abandonment, plateaus there and mineral deposits, dun-coloured claypans, such emptiness, the rich wheat belts ragged among the mallee at the southern edges, while to the north, strips of spinach-coloured vegetation and what appeared to be mangroves. Bright red particles located the capital cities with surprising accuracy and many, though not all, major towns (ibid).

Wracked with consternation and indecision, the pair gazes down uncertainly on this disgusting yet fascinating conglomeration, as Bail deftly conjures up analogies. Viewed abstractly, "it sparkled there on the sea-blue [carpet], the jewel in the Pacific" (ibid), recalling colonial panegyrics to the continent's splendid destiny under white management. Aesthetically, too, it is a unique, unrepeatable yet nauseating creation. Even patriots are likely to find it "distasteful" (172), and "already some blow-flies were buzzing around the Northern Territory" (171). Nevertheless, its appearance is perplexing:

(...) rich but empty, an extreme place, still to be civilised. When everybody knew it was the complete opposite: there were plenty of things to like about the place, you only had to look outside at the streets and shops, at the beach and the clear blue sky (172).

Serried clichés jostle with realities until the arrival of “the most fastidious of their regulars”, the Goodloves, puts an end to speculation and indecision. Holden, who triggered this involuntary eruption, now moves quickly to limit its potentially calamitous effects. With a few strides he, like a primordial titan, detaches the glass lid of the confectionary counter and places it over the vomit. At a stroke, readers are told, “a disaster had been turned into a valuable asset” (172).

Enacted here in riotous miniature is a creation myth that raises the recurring questions associated with *terra australis*, or the great south land.<sup>1</sup> Will observers/discoverers find this startling spectacle a marvel or an abomination? Should it be effaced as a terrible mistake, or can a counter-case be made? Does it deserve, in brief, to continue to exist? And if so, what does it signify? What could its ultimate purpose be? In addition, there is the issue of its present state. The narrator’s description is tantalizingly open-ended. Certainly it exhibits many of the standard tokens of development, as well as markers of modernity, but is it civilised in a profounder sense? Have mental horizons ever shifted beyond the mind-dulling sameness of beach and blue sky? Fittingly, it is at this cinema, too, that Screech poses related questions to his captive audience: “Now here’s the crunch . . . Can you pinpoint your position in the larger story? What are you up to? Some people—most people—allow themselves to be simply taken along by events. Are you one of them? Listen” (148-49). Bail’s novel performs a similarly admonitory function, exposing local foibles and parochial indsets, as well as the identity-endangering undertow exerted “by events”.

This concern with national issues emerged first in interviews and non-fiction, then was a catalyst in the author’s shift from short to longer fiction. Born in September 1941, Bail, like many intellectuals of his

<sup>1</sup> On this tradition see Ackland, ‘Whence true authority’ 1993, and Gibson.

generation, recalled the first two post-war 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" (1988 xv). He experienced his hometown Adelaide as overwhelmingly reactionary, Protestant, and fiercely defensive of time-honored 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 that would later fascinate him in communities overseas, or in the tantalizing canvases of Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt, were anathema. Society seemed obsessed with money and practicalities, while its characteristic wedding of small-mindedness with self-important pretensions was pinpointed years later when he noted of *Gulliver's Travels* that Jonathan Swift's precise co-ordinate of 30° 2" south "doesn't exactly match Lilliput on his map—the island is inland, somewhere in South Australia, perilously close to Adelaide" (1987, 1330). A similarly stultifying mind-set 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 (1977).

Boredom and constraint spawned a desire for movement and broader horizons, which were sought abroad and in European literature. During four years spent in London at the beginning of the seventies he encountered the origins of much that he had found most baneful in the antipodes. In particular, he bridled at the English emphasis on empirical, commonsensical and utilitarian approaches, which produced an "urge for classification. Everywhere" (L12), a "glut of words—at office and national level (L17), and "the peculiar ordinariness of the British" (L109).<sup>2</sup> Profound inertia was almost palpable ("Some days the stagnancy of the

<sup>2</sup> L indicates a page reference to *Longhand* (1989), which was reissued in an expanded form in 2005.

British and everything they've left standing resembles one of those chipped enamel tubs raised from the ground by iron paws" [L21]), while he noted how "the good sense and dreary stability of England, which extends into literature, provokes in me an opposing, forceful stance" (L65). Seeking an antidote to the Anglophone obsession with characterisation, he turned to European writers, claiming they "regularly go beyond, extending more readily into speculation, novels of elastic shape and size, to include ideas, comment, over-arching philosophies— invention" (2005, 34). Audacity, speculation and invention became his watchwords. Inspiration was found in authors as diverse as Kafka, White, Tournier, Roussel, Borges, Marquez, Calvino, Grass and Bernhard: all of them writers concerned as much with ideas "as with tracing the usual psychological contours" of protagonists, and with securing for themselves creative elbow room" (2005, 34). Meanwhile in London Bail jotted down 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" (L28), as well as Bacon's assertion that "the peculiar difficulty" faced by art today was to defamiliarise reality boldly and to launch a visceral assault on its audience (L80). Other entries show a similar attraction to statements that envisage art in adversarial, iconoclastic terms.

His first assault on Australian complacency, self-satisfaction and post-war triumphalism came in 1975, when he burst upon the literary scene with *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories*. Many of these works, Bail conceded, are "propositional", in the sense of "proceeding to answer a certain problem or to explore one" (Davidson 265), as well as far more concerned with issues of perception and revelatory incidents than with probing psychological motivation. Frequently the result is technically challenging, multi-layered artifacts. Some stories turn reader expectations on their heads, such as "Heubler", others make the act of imaginative creation as much a point of interest as the protagonists' lives, as in "A B C etc". Tacitly, too, they recognise frustration, incomprehension and distress as hallmarks of local existence. In "Cul-de-Sac" Biv's nearest approach to fulfilment is a lighted bedroom window, seen from afar, which shows a young woman undressing, in "Paradise" it is a prohibited roof-top garden for Hector. For the scrambling participants in "The Partitions" it is precariously glimpsed

from on high, while "The Dog Show" systematically erases the distinguishing traits between man and beast. Some characters virtually abandon the blundering struggle, or comedy, that passes for human interaction, and retreat to what they hope is a safe, though probably still vulnerable distance. Others are caught unawares, with their vacuous, unhappy lives utterly exposed. In a world over which the empirical sciences had promised mastery, Bail repeatedly depicts human beings as unfulfilled and defeated by existence—traits that recur in his early novels.

Ultimately Bail's ambitions, and in particular his desire for a comprehensive reckoning with Australian tradition, arguably dictated his shift from the short story to 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). Eventually he found that what he wanted to present demanded works with greater potential scope. "To me, the complexity of the world is the most interesting thing about it, and I have realized that I can best express my view of the world in the novel" (Sayers). He was also increasingly aware of the role of myth and imagination in shaping his homeland, in the past as well as the present. "Imaginary voyages to Australia", he noted in 1987, "continued long after the European occupation", and he stressed how "the enormous invisibility of the place, once the subject of geological myth", had "become a source for more elaborate literary myths" (1330), as well as the cradle of key local stereotypes that he would dissect in *Holden's Performance*.

Bail's first direct fictional critique of Australian traits and attitudes came in *Homesickness* (1980). Although it focuses on the peregrinations of tourists through diverse overseas museums, real and imagined, and through numerous countries, the fact that the group consists entirely of Australians, means that antipodean preoccupations and secular mythologies constantly intrude into the narrative. Invariably the tourists seek self-confirmation in what reminds them of home, such as the corrugated iron collection, or the red, bibulous nose of a Londoner that

uncannily recalls Uluru. A complementary obtuseness often marks their response to foreign cultures, as when the first African museum merely evokes for the Cathcarts parallels with the junk in their own garage (30). Unobtrusively but devastatingly, *Homesickness* captures a prevalent tendency towards self-deprecation (“We don’t speak very well. Have you noticed how the Americans are so descriptive and confident? Our sentences are shorter. Our thoughts break off. We don’t seem comfortable talking, I don’t know why” [296-97]), as well as patriotic assertions of local achievement, singled out in graffiti, such as “Capt. Cook/Burke and Wills/Crap all over Burton” (137), or “Balls to tennis” and “Australians ace” (72). Also the quest for what is distinctively local is narrowed, in time-honored fashion, to such mesmerizing words as “kangaroo” and “boomerang”, with Bail providing a serried bestiary drawn mainly from European letters:

“Implacable kangaroos of laughter”, wrote young Lautréamont—a fine metaphor. Very fine. Young Alfred Jarry had his supermale box with not one but several kangaroos. You find the noun leaping like a verb from the hallowed pages of Louis Aragon, Malraux in China, and Goncourt’s *Journal*—yes, he reported eating authentic kangaroo meat during the siege of Paris. Another naturalist is Gide (349-50).

This page-long catalogue, sampled briefly here, is as much a testimony to the author’s affinity with indefatigable classifiers and collectors of rare oddments, like his fictional characters Zoellner and Holland, as it is to the perennial fascination exercised by Australia’s “visually surreal” marsupial (349). Yet even exhaustive endeavours to focus on what is quintessentially Australian cannot dispel the wide-spread, confidence-sapping fear, articulated by Violet, that

we come from a country . . . of nothing really, or at least nothing substantial yet . . . Even before we travel we’re wandering in circles”, largely devoid of feelings, understanding, directive ideas or beliefs (393).

These attributes and their putative origins are a key concern of Bail’s next novel, *Holden’s Performance* (1987). A *Bildungsroman* that boldly subverts the genre, it traces its main protagonist’s growth towards an adulthood associated not with insight, self-knowledge and independent decision-making, but with emotional and mental stultification and abject submission. Holden Shadbolt is a mixed creation, with sufficient psychological depth to give him individual status, yet with stereotypical

traits that lend his portrait national, even universal relevance. Characterised by blankness of expression and "know-nothingness" (13), Shadbolt, despite his great strength, endurance and generosity of spirit, remains a deeply flawed and stunted human being. He is, in many respects, an intensely ordinary, predictable figure, a veritable austral everyman, differing from the average only insofar as in him national characteristics, produced by atavism or life on the great south land, are sometimes pushed to extremes.

"Even by the standards of the landscape and a laconic people the drollness of this boy was something else again" (45). This drollness arises largely from his apparent indifference and taciturnity, so that irrespective of what "he saw or said or listened to his face remained as expressionless as his elbow" (45). Blinking is the main sign he gives of mental life, while his bovine passivity and obvious bulk translate into a powerful "impression of reliability" (46). Overall Shadbolt embodies paradoxes and tensions that arguably lurk beneath the gaunt, laconic archetype of the antipodean bushman. Apparently he has very few ideas, but he has a receptive, in Holden's case photographic, memory. He has extraordinary physical capacities, but seems incapable of initiating action, or realizing the vital, energetic alternative he occasionally imagines for himself. He evidently has feelings, yet he fails to show them, much to the frustration of anyone seeking emotional closeness or intimacy with him. The familiar figure, in short, is problematised, its often "impenetrable, invisible side" (69) made the object of protracted analysis.

Though at first sight purely an imaginative tour de force, Shadbolt's portrait is actually part of an ongoing tradition of speculation about the Coming Man, and his putative contribution to antipodean destiny. Climate and geography were once widely believed to impact directly on species, from humans to livestock, and alter their standard characteristics. Why, it was asked, should it be different in Australia? Moreover, if the all-conquering white man had been raised in dank, constricted England on poor vitals and worse weather, what greater racial progeny and feats might be witnessed in the New World, with its vastly expanded opportunities for everyone? Others were less sanguine.



Local conditions were often harsh and taxing beyond belief. In the outback drought and isolation took a terrible toll, physical as well as psychological. Add to these routine, mind-deadening labor and the likely outcome, according to Henry Lawson, was the tall "country lout" depicted in "Middleton's Rouseabout". Presented as the "type of a coming nation", Andy is distinguished by endurance, sound health and intellectual impoverishment: "Hadn't any opinions, /Hadn't any "idears"" (Ackland *Penguin* 1993 263). These attributes eventually enable him to take over his employer's station, after "Liquor and drought prevailed". Adumbrated here is a realm where succession is not necessarily associated with advancement, and where, to borrow Patrick White's resonant words, "the mind is the least of possessions" (558).<sup>3</sup> Shadbolt is Bail's updated version of the Coming Man and, in time-honoured fashion, a strong degree of correlation is assumed between his prospects and those of the nation. His life-story recounts the performance not only of an individual, but of a country seeking to find its way during the transformative years of 1933 to 1972, and affords a devastating satiric commentary on the perennial under-achievement of the land and its people.

Shadbolt is envisaged first and foremost as a product of Australian conditions. These may be conceived of under two broad headings: environmental and the struggle for existence. The first constitutes a primordial stratum, which can at best be built on or subtly directed, and which shapes an individual's physical, moral and intellectual being. It consists of dominant geographical and social conditions, from the ubiquitous harshness and aridity of the world's driest continent to the regimenting, grid-like pattern of Adelaide's streets, which inculcates order and plain thinking:

Whole suburbs displayed maniacal obsessions with Methodism, with lawn manicure and precision hedge-cutting . . . There was a yes and a no, a right and a wrong . . . The real facts and direction of things, look, lay out in front: anyone could see that (3).

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of links between these writers see Thomas, while Dixon provides additional commentary on the national myths dissected in Bail's second novel.

Apart from urban, topographical and climatic factors, the category of environmental influence also embraces such seminal ingredients as national archetypes and informing world-visions, which are imparted by Shadbolt's earliest mentors, Frank "Bloodnut" McBee and Vern Hartnett. They drum into him respectively "the logic of metals and engines" (63), and the primacy of word knowledge and empirical verification. Vern's precepts are straightforward. "Clarity and accuracy—master them" and "Never exceed the facts" (37). "Just by looking you can imagine . . ." from Shadbolt draws the blunt retort: "There's no imagining" (37). From this complete submission demanded before quantifiable, verifiable facts it is only a small step to accepting, years later, the key lesson of Colonel Light to Shadbolt as secret service trainee: "Thinking is only going to throw a spanner in the works" (296). Though allowing for personal "accidents", the "essence" of this upbringing and its results are thoroughly representative, as is underscored on the final page: "he embodies the qualities which have put this country on the map. Very much the local product" (353).

Secondary to the original environmental imprint, but crucial alike to individuals and nations, is the struggle for existence or, in Australian terms, for self-betterment and material well-being. This includes the daily conflict for power and resources, for status and breeding partners, which ensures alike species and national survival. Spurred on by the deprivations of the Great Depression and World War II, Australians post-war joined the other victor nations in the scramble for consumer plenty, and the "lucky country" again revealed its unsavory, complementary aspect as the "lurky country".<sup>4</sup> Selfless Shadbolt stands in stark contrast to a widespread drive for status and self-gratification. Hoadley's electors, for instance, are happy to accept federal munificence in the form of an expensive bridge to virtually nowhere, or a strip of state-of-the-art road that peters out at the edge of town, because it buttresses their inflated

<sup>4</sup> Donald Horne famously described Australia as the 'lucky country' (1971), which his contemporary, Harold Stewart, punningly subverted as the 'lurky country' (Ackland 2001, 194).

sense of self-importance. Similarly, Hoadley surrounds himself with the trappings of power, exudes self-confidence, and beds at every opportunity his female constituents. His capacity to exploit astutely the perks and lurks of each situation is only surpassed by McBee's. In both cases this helps assure their public success. Whereas Screech offers his audience only a "completely black-and-white world" (159) through newsreels, unsweetened by carnal pleasures or public largesse, and ends bankrupt, Hoadley, like McBee, gives the people what they want: "Technicolor and a happy ending" (159)—as well as belief in its imminent realisation. Meanwhile Shadbolt and his unenterprising contemporaries are happy to watch the energy of rest of world from afar, and be entertained by "powerful" narratives that virtually absolve them of the burden of interpretation or action (157). They quickly fall under the sway of the likes of Hoadley who, with his accoutrements of high office, including a government car bearing the Australian flag, personifies a virile nation on the move, and alert for windfalls.

Crucial to the fate of Holden and Australia, and a major component in their existential struggle, is what Bail terms "the pathology of power". In context the phrase refers to the representative traits of would-be autocrats "the world over" (255); however, this pathology is recognizable in the not dissimilar behavior of ordinary individuals and nation states. In both cases it involves a two-sided relationship that consists of autocrat and follower/slave, a role for which Shadbolt is especially suited. From the outset he displays innate respect for authority and seeks to win approval, while he typically projects treasured attributes on a commanding figure, then does his best to defend or otherwise sustain them. His eagerness to be of service, unfailing obedience and utter dependability, in turn, are invaluable to those in power. So is a tendency to inflate their achievements, or read inordinate capacities into a vacant stare. Obsequiousness, hero-worship and an uncritical "hanging-on-every-word" are ego-flattering, potentially inspiring, and at the very least meet one basic need: "the successful autocrat needs multiple listeners, and a few minutes with Shadbolt rejuvenated him" (200). Moreover, these characteristics are shown to extend to the masses and the nation, for they, no less than Shadbolt, gravitate towards the powerful and those with a definite, meaning-

conferring vision of the world, in response to perceived inferiority and vulnerability.

Hence Australia, as the novel underscores, does its best to be on the side of "the irrevocable march of history" (42). Allegiance to Britain, then the United States, is meant to assure this, while their financial and economic colonization of the continent, registered in spreading consumer goods, is regarded as a small price to pay for security. This shift, and its psychological underpinning, are revealed by the local preference in cars, initially for English "models of caution" (12), later for American, chrome-laden projections of affluence. McBee, ever alert to opportunities and epochal changes, is undoubtedly right when he links the dwindling local market share of British automakers to the empire's decline, and reads a new imperial ascendancy in the ever more spectacular, attention-grabbing models issuing from Detroit. Indeed, as *Holden's Performance* shows, so great is the U.S.'s post-war sway that Australia seems awash in status-conferring American products. The daily business of government is carried out with American pens and Dictaphones, and even its devotedly anglophile prime minister, R.G. Amen, uses a Cadillac as his official vehicle. The United States is presumably the main source, too, of the consumer durables that McBee showers on Shadbolt's mother. In waiting-rooms around the nation *Punch* makes way for such American staples as *Reader's Digest* and *Life*, while the success of Hoadley's cinema chain is built around the wish-fulfilling romances and epics of Hollywood. Similarly, American war surplus becomes for McBee the first stepping-stone towards affluence, a GM dealership cements it. Although Amen may cling nostalgically to the mother country ("sitting on a park bench gazing at the British Embassy" [292]), it is U.S. know-how on loan that guards the nation's shores and, in the form of undercover agent Polaroid, senior government figures. Prosperity and protection increasingly mean linking individual and national fates to American goods, ideas and objectives.

This view of the submissive follower state is complemented by acerbic comments on the psychology of the local masses. Repeatedly the public is shown to esteem vivid impressions above substantive content, and to be agog at celebrity performers. McBee knows this from the scrap and

used-car yards. He rapidly makes himself master of the pantomimes of democracy and oratory, producing at will "a majestic surf of words, tossing in figures, and never failing to come up with a sparkling vitriolic phrase or two, which people in Adelaide called "pearls"" (126). The standard techniques of "mug politicians" are identical with those of the huckster salesman. Their evolved counterparts have charisma, based on well-gauged mannerisms and an astutely honed spiel. Hoadley has the unmistakable accoutrements of high office, and in bridges a sure-fire rural vote-winner. McBee in Canberra embraces national transport as well as multiple overlays of identity-conferring props, including a "mulga stick to take the weight off the old war wound, and between his raised fingers the tremendous uncircumcised cigar to attract the eye and torpedo any criticism" (256). Nowhere is a specific ideology or party affiliation mentioned. These are incidental compared with the driving self-interest of the autocrat. And the public succumbs. It is reverential before the powerful, such as Amen (Menzies) and Churchill, and rapturous before heads of state. A visit by an English monarch mesmerizes the gathered masses: "their ecstatic scribbled faces and sticky hands strained forward again", and Shadbolt finds "himself waving frantically too, smiling desperately" (154), as the cheering multitude holds "first borns aloft" or jiggles "miniature Union Jacks" (153). Shadbolt and the crowd are one in their unthinking adulation, in "irrational obedience" (158), while streets in central Sydney named after British dignitaries, and even an insane king, testify to the timelessness of this colonial hysteria, as will Shadbolt's later experiences as a bodyguard.

Overall Bail's verdict on what Harold Stewart caustically dubbed "the lurky country" is grim, but not unrelieved by hope of a brighter, more promising future. Certainly his major characters are often the means of demolishing hallowed, self-flattering Australian myths. If there is one thing, for instance, Australians supposedly cannot abide, it is a braggart or, as McBee stresses, a bullshit artist. Yet that is exactly what McBee is, and this upstart larrikin, who is able to transform a toe lost in a banal domestic shooting accident into a gory memento from "Herr Hitler" (275), is well received everywhere by his gullible fellow citizens. Similarly in Shadbolt, the heroic endurance and self-sacrifice, for which

the legendary Digger is celebrated, are shown to be merely an extension of undemanding life-habits, while his capacity to bear extreme exhaustion, his apparent indifference to pain, are not proof of a stoutly independent spirit, but reflect blunted responses and an unsleeping urge to be accepted by those identified with power and "a clear view of the world" (92). Bail, in *Holden's Performance*, categorically refuses to lend his voice to the usual chorus of national big-noting, whether it concerns the Ozzie battler, the notoriously insubordinate Australian soldier, the allegedly world-famous wit of its longest-serving prime minister, or the locally famed surf of Manly. But beginning on a small scale in "The Seduction of My Sister" (1995),<sup>5</sup> then reiterated in the ensuing novels *Eucalyptus* (1998) and *The Pages* (2009), Bail depicts at long last selected protagonists who are capable of genuine growth and of positively influencing the course of events. His earlier predominantly satiric vision yields to parables of Australian identity in which neglected heritages enjoy a renewed and prolonged existence, and young people move beyond the strictures of empirical knowledge and puritanical codes to embrace nature's rhythms and the regenerative powers of imagination and the human spirit. In the concluding words of *Eucalyptus*, "he felt his story beginning all over again" (255).

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<sup>5</sup> First published in 1995, the story was republished as the second of the two tales that constitute *Camouflage*.

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