

A Piano Made in Australia: Reinventing an Emblem of Cultural Wealth in Murray Bail's

The Voyage

Marie Herbillon

The relationship between self and place is arguably a dominant theme in postcolonial literatures. In particular, the contemporary Australian writer Murray Bail has repeatedly interrogated the connection between, on the one hand, his native country's landscape and, on the other, its cultural identity at large.

In the wake of Patrick White and his seminal essay "The Prodigal Son" (1958), Bail has sought, more specifically, to debunk the so-called myth of "the Great Australian Emptiness" (White 157) and the broader assumptions (or secondary myths) it has extended into, with a view to suggesting that Australia has more to offer than the geographical and cultural barrenness with which it has all too often been associated. After demonstrating, in *Eucalyptus* (1998) and *The Pages* (2008), that Australian literature and philosophy were irreducible to dry realism in the first case and narrow rationalism (let alone an absence) in the second, Bail focuses on yet another cultural production—one that can also be regarded as constitutive of collective identity, namely, music—in his latest novel: in *The Voyage* (2012), a Frank Delage travels to Vienna, "the musical centre of the world" (82), in an attempt "to introduce a revolutionary new piano" (28) of his own making.¹

In this article, I examine the ways in which Bail's protagonist appropriates an emblem of European culture and tradition, as well as how this product of the New World is received in the Old, so as to determine the extent to which cultural wealth can be equated with a reinvention—rather than a dismissal—of legacy.

To some extent, Bail replicates traditional representations of the so-called old and new continents in this novel, thereby allowing for the intrusion of familiar national mythologies. In Vienna, which epitomizes old Europe, what strikes the visitor is “the general oldness of things” (130): in the cluttered, “over-decorated” (34, 73) spaces (both private and public) of the Austrian capital, any object or building seems “older than anything in Sydney” (36). As is generally the case, this oldness is paired with notions of tradition, experience, wealth, authority, power, elegance, and sophistication, as well as a sense of cultural self-confidence sometimes verging on “arrogance” (88). We will see how these notions are reflected in the Viennese characters Delage encounters and his interactions with them. If “only a syllable divides the . . . words [Austria and Australia]” (Craven), the two countries appear to be worlds apart. In “The Prodigal Son,” White notoriously pinpointed “the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions” (157). Bail, in the footsteps of his literary mentor, has relentlessly denounced his country’s spatial emptiness as a colonial myth, along with the cultural and spiritual blankness into which this geographical archetype is often believed to have ramified. However, the author has tended—paradoxically, at first sight—to rely on these clichés in order to reject (or at least qualify) them and develop an alternative national mythology (partly founded on a reconfiguration of the Australian space).

The aforementioned sense of blankness, which has been internalized by the Australian populations of European descent, is, in turn, said to have given rise to specific cultural anxieties. The word *secondarity*, initially coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, was then borrowed by the Australian writer Frank Moorhouse to refer “to ‘the sense of being second, coming second,’ a feeling accompanied by a perception of ‘not being at the centre . . . of being in some other, second place’” (Selles 77). As for the “complex of ‘secondarity’” (Selles 77) that

typically affects the settler subject and goes hand in glove with a felt invisibility in the eyes of (European) Others, it was originally identified by the critic A. A. Phillips and famously defined as “the cultural cringe,” that is, the “assumption that the domestic cultural product will [always] be worse than the imported article” (Phillips 112). In *The Voyage*, Australia is accordingly depicted as a “bare continent” (143), that is, “an unknown desolate country” (120) that is both huge and blank: as the narrator states, Austria and Australia may be “close in product-name but [they are] entirely different, Australia being far beyond the horizon, an invisible country of no consequence” (107). However, it may not be as “unencumbered by tradition” (8) as the narrator feigns to believe at the beginning of the novel. Like the rest of the New World, which has “a history of throwing up new methods, the fresh solutions” (8), it may well have the power to produce new cultural forms and objects, which nevertheless take tradition and historical legacies into consideration.

The Voyage is akin to Bail's previous novels insofar as it encapsulates an allegorical dimension. In several respects, Frank Delage can indeed be deemed representative of his homeland. Like Holden Shadbolt (the protagonist in *Holden's Performance*, Bail's second novel, published in 1987), for example, Delage is characterized by an inner blankness that can be seen to mirror Australia's supposed barrenness. Arguably, his notebooks, which indicate that he perceives himself as shapeless and insubstantial, illustrate his vague sense of self. Early on, we learn that he “carried around a notebook for jotting down things he had read or heard, the way some people pick up cigarette butts, they could end up being useful, one day, not only maxims, although most of them were, unusual phrases, descriptions too, he liked the sound of single words” (10); we also find out that “he had filled many notebooks,” leading the narrator to the following conclusion: “such a need to retain the thoughts of others suggested Frank Delage was

undecided about himself, that he was composed of little more than the thoughts and opinions of others" (11). Like Holden, Delage is also endowed with a mechanical mind (shown, for instance, by his fascination with engines and "mechanical surroundings" of all kinds; 12), which can, similarly, be viewed as reflective of Australian culture and society (often defined as mechanically minded and, therefore, too masculine).

However, unlike Holden, whose endless movement forward allowed for no form of progress or change, Delage's mechanical mentality enables him to gain "mastery" (24) in a specific area of expertise, namely, the piano: "on [this] one subject he had clear and confident thoughts, . . . and whenever he talked about it he never borrowed the words of more articulate, stronger people" (11). Furthermore, Delage differs as well from one of Bail's more recent characters, namely, the pioneering Australian philosopher in *The Pages* (the author's fourth novel, which immediately precedes *The Voyage*). For most of his life, Wesley Antill indeed keeps discarding all forms of knowledge and experience (notably European) in the hope of making a clean start and gaining an impossible sense of clarity. Like *old* Wesley, who finally understands that he needs to capitalize on previously gathered experience to make progress, Delage knows that it is rarely possible (or even desirable) to start from scratch. Instead of attempting to create an entirely new instrument, he thus chooses to reinvent (and remanufacture) the ultimate emblem of European culture and tradition, the "inner workings of . . . [which have remained] unaltered (as if it was the best we could do) over centuries" (24). More than an engineer, a profession for which "he had no training or diploma" (17), or a musician,² Delage is, above all, "an inventor" (17, 28): if his piano, the Delage concert grand, remains for him "a technical object" (115), he also regards it as a "necessary breakthrough" (33). Although he deplores the current "fossilisation of old Europe" (33), which he finds "worn out" (34), he is, in

other words, careful not to reject its most valuable legacies but to try and incorporate them into Australia's cultural baggage—an inclusive horizon toward which Bail's late novels all gesture. Delage's name, by pointing to his complex lineage, appears to emphasize this movement toward inclusion. While Holden was named after the emblematic Australian car, Delage bears the name of his French grandfather (see 25), which also happens to be that of a vehicle manufactured in the 1920s, that is, "the French Rolls-Royce" (25)—hence its "foreignness" (25). As for his first name, Frank, it was chosen by his Australian-born father because it was "plain and practical" (25). It is, then, tempting to imagine that Bail himself selected it to highlight Australia's alleged pragmatism, which also forms part of the protagonist's personality. In brief, it can be argued that Delage's full name, while confirming the character's practical (even mechanical) mind-set, conflates European and Australian influences and points to the need for a combination, not least in creative matters, of modernity and tradition.³

Next to an evocative name, a peculiar shyness was bequeathed to Delage by his father. As a result, he has "developed an oblique way of seeing people and the nearby world" (17). More exactly, he has "formed the habit of glancing away" (18), avoiding people's (and particularly women's) eyes whenever possible. We are quickly made to understand that this "practical eye-shifting alertness" (33) may well partake of a broader cultural complex: although the connection between (dry) place and (empty) self is not as explicitly established in this novel as it is in other texts (where Bail resorts to a literalist process I have termed *geomorphism* in order to problematize this interplay), Delage's "inherited shyness," which is said to be "widespread in Sydney, even more in the rest of Australia" (28), might be seen to derive from the geographical myth of the Great Australian Emptiness and the related sense of inner blankness to which I have referred earlier. It is worth noting that all the time and attention he has devoted to his piano have

failed—before his trip to Europe—to obliterate his global impression of blankness, as the narrator unambiguously declares: “leave out the knowledge of the revolutionary construction of the Delage, its fresh sound appreciated by a few adherents, and his life was mostly blank” (24). As the story unfolds, Delage becomes aware of “his own limitations” (109), seeing himself “more and more . . . as someone without edges, the imprecision, one who easily became indifferent, after a certain distance he tended to fade” (60). He also realizes that he wishes “to expand beyond the mechanics of the piano” (60), which he gradually comes to regard as “a narrow field” (47; see also 109), and “to focus all . . . [his] tremendous energies on people” (58; see also 127) rather than concert grands. We will see to what extent he achieves this necessary change, which alone can help him overcome his pervasive feelings of emptiness.

For most of the narrative, Delage's sense of cultural inferiority nevertheless permeates his behavior and manifests itself in different ways. For example, it influences Delage's language: despite the proverbial “laconic manner” (Bail, *Pages* 78) he usually exhibits, he is suddenly quite talkative in Austria, just as Australians—whose “brevity” is, again, presented as “a national characteristic” in this novel (130)—“like to be chatty” (as if under the effect of embarrassment) once they are “away from home” (9). Delage's complex also affects his self-perception and idea of success. Although he is convinced of his piano's technical “superiority” (29, 33), he describes himself as “a minor manufacturer” (120), who assumes Europe will not be interested in his modern yet “remarkable product” (11) and sees success “not [as] outright rejection, but [as] a pause in the long-established European assumptions” (15). Moreover, this complex takes various shapes according to the individual Delage is facing. If the characters he encounters in Vienna all personify old Europe, they do so to various degrees: we will see that the variety of their reactions to Delage and his piano can be paralleled with their respective approach to modernity (and

tradition), allowing Bail to problematize and complicate the relationship between the Old and the New Worlds.

From the outset, the reception of Delage's instrument is rather disappointing. Upon arrival in Vienna, both the man and the piano are confronted with "indifference" (17), as if confirming Delage's assumptions about Europe. Amalia Marie von Schalla will be the first to take an interest in the Delage concert grand. In many respects, she is the perfect embodiment of old Europe and its most privileged circles. As "an old family, one of the oldest" in Austria (35), the von Schallas (whose other representatives in the novel are Amalia's husband, Konrad, and her daughter, Elisabeth) indeed occupy a "[high] position in Austrian society and Vienna's musical world in particular" (35). Amalia herself, a woman in her sixties, is "the most important patron of music" in the city (95). In this quality, she will introduce Delage to "the upper echelons of Vienna's musical world" (95), including a highly influential music critic and a contemporary composer named Paul Hildebrand. Her "old money" (106) and social class give her power and authority: in the narrator's words, "everybody want[ed] to stand close" to her in Vienna (43), not least artists, who "were inexorably drawn to the old families, such as the Schalla family, wealth and casual influence dazzled them, . . . all those walls waiting to be filled with their canvases, watercolours, sculptures, experimental photographs, their creations secured ahead of all others" (101). Importantly, her wealth is, then, as material as it is cultural: not only does she own (with her husband) luxury "houses in Vienna and Upper Austria," which "were more like warehouses for oil paintings and furniture" (21), as well as a vineyard that "has been in . . . [her] family for generations" (71), but she also has relatives among the local intelligentsia (for instance, "the Wittgensteins are related, on her side"; 79). In the drawing room of the von Schallas' Viennese house, Delage even notices a Steinway grand, which, he is told, is "reputed to be Mahler's

personal piano" (68). Likewise, her "regal" (35, 60) appearance betrays her superior status. Her genuine "elegance" (35) and sophistication are emphasized several times: when Delage meets her for the first time in a music shop, for example, she is wearing "a cream coat splayed at the hips and glossy cream high heels" (19), as well as "a small, very smart round hat with a remnant of a veil, like a piece of delicate graph paper, called in more accurate times a 'fascinator,' something Delage didn't know, which shadowed her forehead" (20) and arguably emerges as a symbolic representation of the latter's fascination for all that Amalia (and, by extension, old Europe) stands for. As for her "refined grey-blond hair" (44; see also 22), which mirrors the fact that the ageing population of Vienna in its entirety seems to be graying or whitening (see 8, 42), it could be construed as symbolizing European experience. By contrast, let us note that Delage, "at forty-six, still . . . [has] plenty of dark hair" (11), possibly emblemizing his nation's vitality and relative youth.

It should not come across as a surprise that Delage's lack of cultural self-confidence expresses itself in the presence of such a woman. For instance, he "wonder[s] what there was about him that could possibly interest her" (27) and fears that this "unusual" (23) interest may only be "apparent" (26). As the narrator suggests, "the attention she paid to his ambitions may have merely been the habit of aristocracy which made her 'come down' to a conversation" (27). Similarly, the narrator, probably mimicking Delage's own cringing thoughts, comically imagines that Amalia sees Delage as "a tall open-faced man who looked as if he should be missing a front tooth" (31), whereas we later learn that she actually finds him "clever," which "wasn't how Delage saw himself" (59). His "awkwardness" (37, 41) is clearly strengthened by his visit, with Amalia, to the warehouse where his piano is stored: "crowded out to one side by the regimented black of the European concert grands, the Delage was revealed as nicotine-brown, the colour of

bantam rooster, and stood out accordingly. It was like his cousins from the sticks the year they'd gate-crashed a family wedding in Sydney, wearing loud neckties" (37). Through the narrator's voice, Delage silently blames the demonstration model (made from "pale [Australian] timber" and sent to Europe by mistake; 39) for "lack[ing] the necessary depth [of feeling]" (39; supposedly represented by the color black), judging that "there was enough prejudice against the interloper without colour becoming a factor" (37–38). On this one occasion, Delage's embarrassment—he is "looking down at his shoes" (38)—even "produce[s] in Amalia a strange feeling of pity" (39). Despite an occasionally distant or "over-casual manner of giving time to someone, Frank Delage, she would normally not be bothering with" (21–22) because of her status, Amalia has attractive "human" qualities, such as her "kindness, attentiveness, sympathy" (85) and "well-known generosity" (131), to which Delage is not indifferent.

Significantly, Amalia is also characterized by her modernity, which is illustrated by the private space she has created for herself inside the Viennese house. Her "apartments," which consist of "a white room, unexpectedly sparse, just a few paintings, cubist and geometric abstract, one entirely black, and a bookshelf in two stages painted red and black," "two chrome-legged reclining chairs," and "a low green sofa," starkly contrast with "the over-decorated rest of the house and the over-decorated city outside" (73). This "uncluttered" (80), "near-empty room" (73) and its "austere stylish furniture" (88) appear to be in line with her "aesthetic principles" (73) and personality, emerging as "a statement by Amalia von Schalla on being clear, unencumbered, modern" (78) and thereby "demonstrating . . . an alternative" (109). If this "insistently modern" (139) room "happen[s] to match or be in tune with the new sound of [Delage's] piano" (109), it is perhaps Amalia's subtle *combination* of tradition and modernity, which recalls his own (as well as his instrument's), that most appeals to Delage. The sexual

tension between Amalia and Delage, which underpins the narrative (but cannot be elaborated on in detail here), clearly shows that Delage's attraction is mutual, as if Amalia equally recognized something of herself in her Australian visitor. However, Amalia's sexual ambiguity never materializes into full acceptance, perhaps precluded by her awareness of a growing "familiarity" (117) between Delage and her daughter, Elisabeth—I will return to this.

On the spectrum ranging from tradition to modernity, the "much feared" (25) music critic's position appears to be more intermediate than Amalia's was at first sight. As a matter of fact, he seems to share many of his ideas with both Delage and Amalia, who—against all odds—also happens to find them "very apt" (71). When the critic delivers his talk at the musical evening where Delage first hears him, he points to Europe's (and Vienna's) "spiritual and artistic exhaustion" (45). If, to him, "the future is in other places," he notably equates artistic "renewal" (46) with a necessary reinvention of tradition. This reinvention can take the form of "improvements to old instruments" (46), which loudly echoes Delage's conception of "progress in art and piano-manufacturing" as "advances in [the instruments'] original design" (74). However, it subsequently turns out that the critic fails to put his theoretical views into practice. When his house is burnt down to the ground in a fire that destroys "everything he own[s]" (including "musical scores, programme notes, his record collection, . . . [and] all his books on music"; 71), he regards the event—which is simultaneous with the aforementioned musical evening—as the opportunity for "a fresh beginning" (93), thereby betraying his belief in the possibility of starting from scratch and, therefore, a very different take on the nature of newness. Later on, when he finally gets to hear the sound of the Delage piano, he dismisses it as being "too pure" (99), adding that "the classical composers have written for the European blurry tone" (100). His verdict is thus conditioned by a static (and purely Western) vision of art: instead of

attempting to imagine the new forms of art that a fresh sound could help fashion, he is aiming—perhaps unconsciously—for the old blurry tone that will merely confirm his prior judgments and preconceived ideas. In other words, although he publicly advocates the renewal of tradition, he hopelessly keeps polarizing the old and the new, as indicated by his underlying faith in clean starts (or “pure” newness) on the one hand and his traditional expectations on the other. Finally, it is a conversation about Australia that exposes the sense of cultural superiority of the “ridiculously over-confident” (53) “Bertolt Brecht lookalike” (48; see also 94) and opposes it to Delage’s own lack of self-confidence (exemplified, in the first place, by “his surprise” at being asked about his native country; 92). In fact, the critic is more interested in Australia’s natural stereotypes than in its architectural icons, which implies that, in his view, nature easily outweighs culture on the antipodean continent: “he only wanted to know about the dangerous spiders and sharks that infested Australia, and the snakes, how lethal were they really” (92); for him, the Sydney Opera House, which Delage’s personal complex of secondarity leads him to consider “provincial” (70), is simply “typical of the New World[’s]” preference for “appearance over substance” (92), while Delage is, for his part, tempted to think that it is precisely his piano’s “appearance . . . [that] had shifted attention from the technical improvements hidden beneath the lid” (148).

The case of Konrad von Schalla is less complex: he is obviously the most conservative character in the novel. Amalia’s husband is a businessman who made a fortune in chemicals, cement, and hotels, expanding the family’s considerable wealth even further. At almost seventy, he is “a man of experience” (154), as symbolized by his “silver hair” (108; see also 67). His regal attitude, which is reminiscent of his wife’s, is indicative of his undeniable social power: since “visitors to Konrad von Schalla invariably wanted something, it was only to be expected he

would remain in the one spot and for them to step forward” (67). Behind his desk, “a vast gold-framed mirror [even] forced Frank Delage and any other visitor to be conscious of their distant positions” (24). His cultural authority is beyond doubt as well, even if his artistic tastes are mostly shaped by old Europe. For example, his collection of erotica—a kind of collection that was “common in . . . nineteenth century [Europe]”—was “one of the finest in private hands” (125). Although he professes his theoretical “respect for inventors” (whom he nevertheless sees as “a sub-species”; 105), his position on invention is crystal clear: he firmly believes “most things had long been invented and were running like clockwork” (106), at least in Europe, which renders newness (whether conceived as reinvention or as “pure” creation) difficult, if not impossible. His initial “condescension” (68) toward the “visiting-inventor from the Southern Hemisphere, a practical man” (106), is hardly suspended by the fact that the latter “save[s] his life” (88; see also 83, 86) by preventing him from choking on a fish bone as they are having dinner at the von Schallas’. Von Schalla’s gratitude indeed expresses itself in a very patronizing manner: declaring that he is “happy to be generous” “on occasion,” he thanks Delage for his gesture with a drawing by Egon Schiele (calling the Austrian artist “our Schiele” (87) and disclosing in passing his own nationalistic pride). By contrast, Delage’s sense of cultural inferiority is, once again, revealed by a conversation they have about Australia: asked what his country has “given the world,” he replies that “[its] contribution . . . has been in small areas, such as being relaxed, swimming . . . [and] grow[ing] strong teeth” (83), and he finds himself unable, on the spur of the moment, to mention any local product, let alone the name of any composer, painter, or novelist (see 83). Von Schalla’s subsequent laughter epitomizes his cultural conservatism, which is made even more obvious by the fact that the whole business of marketing Delage’s piano in Europe is “by his standards a minor matter” (125), in which he only takes part

“to keep his wife”—rather than “*her* guest” (68; emphasis added)—“happy” (125). After successively bursting in on his wife and daughter, whom he finds involved in their own kind of fishy business with Delage in their respective rooms, he sheds his mask at last, before asking his visitor to leave his house: “only a fool would get it into their head,” he says, “to begin over again, and remanufacture an instrument that has already been manufactured, centuries ago, then expect Europe, which is stuffed full of pianos, where the piano was invented, to welcome your new piano with wide-open arms. I am sorry, it is not possible” (137). By buying Delage’s piano to please his wife further, von Schalla nonetheless affirms his cultural superiority once and for all.

As for the contemporary composer Paul Hildebrand, with whom Amalia also arranges a meeting for Delage’s benefit, he should be located at the opposite end of the spectrum. His absolute faith in modernity indeed induces a radical rejection of tradition, which is suggested by the fact that in the course of another dinner at the von Schallas’, he throws his silver fork down when he learns it was held by Richard Strauss (who once ate at the same table; see 119).⁴ He nevertheless accepts to make use of Delage’s reinvented piano, thereby appearing to bear out the critic’s verdict, according to which “the only hope” for the instrument was “in contemporary music” (100). However, at the very end of Delage’s thirty-three-day-long ship journey back to Australia, he finds out in a local newspaper that his piano was “smashed into little pieces . . . [during] the premiere performance of what was an avant-garde work by the Austrian composer, Paul Hildebrand” (153–54). Although this ending sounds pessimistic, the final destruction of “the only Delage concert grand in Europe” (153) might not be as disastrous as it seems, insofar as it is carried out by a musical extremist whose stance in the struggle between the Ancient and the Modern is highly questionable.

Even if this destruction does not amount to a complete European dismissal of Australia's cultural propositions, Delage is inevitably disappointed. On his way back to Australia, he comes to regard "his foray against the ramparts of old Europe" (9) as a failure, "at least in a business sense" (84), and Europe itself as "a piano left smouldering" (59).⁵ He also comes to the conclusion that this "fiasco" (50) was, to some extent, predictable. Europe (and Vienna, in particular) being "resistant to change," it was probably "the worst possible place to introduce an improvement to something as long-established as the grand piano" (102). However, Delage's European stay arguably allows him to achieve a different form of success. We have seen that at the beginning of the novel, his need for change was palpable: he felt that "the piano . . . [was] getting too narrow" for him (109), and he "decided to concentrate more on persons" (127). As he leaves Europe on a container ship, the hoped-for transformation seems to have occurred. As the narrator points out, "introducing his piano to Europe had not been a waste of time, or a difficult financial loss, on the contrary something had come out of it, nothing is ever wasted, not entirely. It had left Delage an altered person" (113). This thorough metamorphosis has undoubtedly been made possible by his interactions with Amalia and, in particular, Elisabeth, who unexpectedly joins Delage on the ship with a view to prolonging the romance they have started in Vienna. Although we understand that Delage was even more drawn to Amalia's well-balanced blend of tradition and modernity than to her thirty-six-year-old daughter's "instinctive modernity" (126), the latter (who embodies the last generation of "the von Schalla dynasty" (87) and is, on this account, also the inheritor of European tradition) plays an important part in turning Delage's literal journey into a figurative voyage resulting in inner change and self-discovery. The unexpected name of the container ship on which they are traveling, the *Romance*, aptly reflects these two characters' unexpected love affair, which contributes to suggesting that the novel

engages with a form of renewal that is not limited to the reinvention of cultural objects but concerns—as a reviewer perceptively underlined⁶—a larger openness to novelty as well as the consequences of the “encounter with fresh knowledge” that informs many of Bail’s writings and is called, in this text, “the poetic unexpected” (53).

By way of conclusion, it can be argued that Bail’s optimism may also lie at a metafictional level. Between the lines of a novel that has been likened to a piece of music,⁷ the author indeed seems to validate his protagonist’s view of creation as a reinvention of legacy since he chooses, for the first time, to rewrite a literary score that is closely linked with early-twentieth-century Europe, namely, the stream of consciousness. A number of commentators emphasized the “Joycean” quality of the text: in Stella Clarke’s view, for example, Bail, whose novel is deemed “nostalgic for literary modernism,” “deploys the structural integrity of the journey, such as Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, to allow the disordered encroachment of the past on the present, and to permit a slippery, subjective treatment of time.” However, several reviewers also identified the mid-twentieth-century Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard as one of Bail’s main literary influences, both in thematic and stylistic terms. For Peter Craven, *The Voyage* is indeed “very much a fictional excursion in the territory of Thomas Bernhard, the greatest Austrian writer since the author of *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil.” According to Eileen Battersby, Bail’s “concise in scale” but “vastly thought-provoking novel” contains “some inspired nods to the great Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard’s final [*sic*] novel, *Woodcutters*” (1984), which offers an über-critical portrayal of a “cannibalistic city” seemingly graced with a propensity for dragging the higher reaches of its “appalling society” (Bernhard 34) into what Bernhard describes as an insufferable “social hell” (4)—thereby subverting the values of this cultural elite from within since he was, up to a certain point,

part of the same “artistic coterie” (Bernhard 84).⁸ As for James Ley, he observed that Bail’s style in *The Voyage* “is in some respects unlike that of his previous work,” contending that “Bail has developed a clean fluent prose that, like Thomas Bernhard’s or Jose Saramago’s, largely dispenses with paragraph breaks” (15). Like “the great Austrian eccentric” (Riemer) to whom Bail is paying a tribute, Bernhard’s Australian counterpart harshly criticizes—in a characteristically uninterrupted, vitriolic, and hilarious prose—Vienna’s (and more generally Europe’s) cultured societies as well as the cultural circles he belongs to (which are one and the same in Bernhard’s case, though not in Bail’s). In this sense, the novel can be read as depicting “the perennial dilemma of the postcolonial artist, who feels compelled to supplicate himself before the Old World’s centres of cultural authority, which continue to regard him with indifference,” but “whose belief that Vienna is”—like the West as a whole—“a hub of cultural influence is out of date” (Ley 16). In short, the Australian creator’s own ongoing subservience to Western standards (despite Europe’s enduringly paternalistic and misplaced assumptions of cultural superiority) is presented as his or her predicament. Yet the fact that the text takes its cue from both modernism and Bernhard’s fiction suggests not only that Bail finds this plural cultural inheritance worthwhile but also that he may be striving to transform, particularize, and, ultimately, renew it in order to inscribe it more fully into an Australian literary tradition. In Craven’s words, Bail, although he seeks to “honour the tradition of modernism and its strenuous record of experimentation with whatever homespun equipment is available,” is still “committed to doing something different with the form of the novel,” that is, to make it, literally, *novel* again.

While *The Pages* displayed a fairly rigid alternation between two time frames, *The Voyage* oscillates far more fluidly between Delage’s experiences on the ship and his memories of Vienna. The transitions from the ones to the others can be swift and unexpected, sometimes

occurring “within sentences” (McCrystal; see also *Lamoglie's Blog*)—which creates a strange form of suspense (see 119, 129). Told in the third person and in the past tense, as if these life-changing yet already past moments concerned “a slightly different person” (155), this rhythmic, chapter-free, brief, but deceptively simple narrative seems to imitate the movements of the waves the ship is sailing on,⁹ which can be as unpredictable as life itself. A few fleeting yet potentially self-reflexive comments appear to thematize this possibility. The waves, which “never stop” (71) and are indeed said to indicate “the way the wind change[s]: constantly, rapidly” (98), can be related to what Bail calls “the general flow [of life]” (90), which is endlessly interrupted by “many unexpected things” (86; see also 129). Like a “strong ship . . . moving forward” while “the liquid surface resisted” (131), his narrative-in-motion might attempt to reproduce—despite the resistance opposed by language—the ongoing flux of crucial yet elusive life experiences. More than “an invention (in the sense that Bach and his contemporaries used the term for some of their compositions)” (Riemer), the novel resembles a “variation” (Craven) on a well-known form, which is careful to thematize and textualize its own concerns. In this sense as well, it resolutely transcends the dichotomies traditionally pitting wealth against paucity and the old against the new.

¹ The novel as a whole is loosely based on an autobiographical text titled “Voyage South”: penned in 1999 and published a year later, this text takes the shape of a diary relating a sea journey from London to Fremantle.

² As the narrator further explains, “music was something he didn’t know a lot about, not in the fine details” (47), and he has “carpenter’s hands” (26), which only allow for the most “rudimentary” playing (97).

³ In this context, it is worth noting that the French phrase *prendre de l’âge* means “to get older” in English.

⁴ The name Paul Hildebrand may well echo that of the German avant-garde composer Paul Hindemith (1895–1963), whose idiosyncratic music and style (based on mechanical rhythms and thus deliberately reminiscent of the industrial era) are respectively designated as *Gebrauchsmusik* (i.e., utilitarian music) and *Motorik* (or motorism). Hindemith was a contemporary of the more traditional German composer Richard Strauss (1864–1949), who was long preserved from musical modernity by an artistically conservative father.

⁵ Along the same lines, the metaphor of a piano with “[its] lid . . . closed” (109) is also used.

⁶ On the *Whispering Gums* blog, an anonymous blogger indeed remarked that “the novel is not simply about Old World meets New World. It’s about ‘being open to the new,’ in all fields of endeavour, whether this be piano manufacture, writing, the arts in general, or even the self.”

⁷ In this regard, Ivor Indyk has referred to a “fugue-like narrative.”

Published in: *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature* 31.2
(December 2017): pp. 361-373.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

⁸ In another review of *The Voyage* delineating Bail's novel as an "homage to . . . Thomas Bernhard," M. A. Orthofer explicitly points to the latter's love-hate relationship with Austria (and Vienna in particular), indicating that the Austrian writer was "a passionate critic of his homeland yet someone also entirely devoted to it."

⁹ In this context, Lisa Hill notes that "the long, discursive paragraphs are like the rhythm of waves lapping against the sides of the ship."

Published in: *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature* 31.2 (December 2017): pp. 361-373.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

Works Cited

Bail, Murray. *Eucalyptus*. 1998. London: Harvill, 1999. Print.

———. *Holden's Performance*. 1987. London: Harvill, 2000. Print.

———. *The Pages*. London: Harvill Secker, 2008. Print.

———. *The Voyage*. London: MacLehose, 2012. Print.

———. "Voyage South." *Granta* 70 (2000): 305–29. Print.

Battersby, Eileen. "Piano Man's Journey Is a Virtuoso Performance." *Irish Times* 2 Feb. 2013.

Web. 25 Apr. 2016. <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/piano-man-s-journey-is-a-virtuoso-performance-1.1253924>.

Bernhard, Thomas. *Woodcutters*. 1984. Trans. David McLintock. London: Faber and Faber, 1987. Print.

Clarke, Stella. Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *Australian* 22 Sept. 2012. Web. 17 Mar.

2014. <http://wgrlc.wheelers.co/title/9781921961212/epub>,
<http://textpublishing.com.au/books-and-authors/book/the-voyage>, <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/bailm/voyage.htm>.

Craven, Peter. "Between Worlds." Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *Sydney Morning*

Herald 22 Sept. 2012. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.
<http://smh.com.au/action/printArticle?id=3653863>.

Hill, Lisa. Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *ANZ LitLovers LitBlog* 7 Nov. 2012. Web. 17

Mar. 2014. <http://anzlitlovers.com/2012/11/07/the-voyage-by-murray-bail/>.

Indyk, Ivor. "The Provincial and the Princess." Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *Sydney*

Review of Books 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 17 Mar. 2014. <http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/the-provincial-and-the-princess/>.

Published in: *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature* 31.2 (December 2017): pp. 361-373.

Status: Postprint (Author's version)

Lamoglie's Blog. Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. 19 June 2013. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

<http://lamoglie.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/review-the-voyage-by-murray-bail/>.

Ley, James. "Delage Abroad." Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *Australian Book Review*

345 (Oct. 2012): 15–16. Print.

McCrystal, John. Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *New Zealand Herald* 15 Nov. 2012.

Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=10846851.

Orthofer, M. A. Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *Complete Review* 10 Feb. 2013. Web.

17 Mar. 2014. <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/bailm/voyage.htm>.

Phillips, A. A. *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture*. Melbourne: Cheshire,

1958. Print.

Riemer, Andrew. "The Grand Scheme." Review of *The Voyage*, by Murray Bail. *Age* 22 Sept.

2012. Web. 17 Mar. 2014. <http://www.theage.com.au/action/printArticle?id=3649015>.

Selles, Colette. "Language and Secularity in Murray Bail's *Holden's Performance*."

Commonwealth 20.1 (1997): 77–85. Print.

Whispering Gums (blog). "Murray Bail, *The Voyage* (Review)." 17 Oct. 2013. Web. 17 Mar.

2014. <http://whisperinggums.com/2013/10/17/murray-bail-the-voyage-review/>.

White, Patrick. "The Prodigal Son." *The Vital Decade: Ten Years of Australian Art and Letters*.

Ed. Geoffrey Dutton. 1958. Melbourne: Sun, 1968. 156–58. Print.