

Knowing the Name of Things: Inscribing the Tourist Gaze in Murray Bail's *Homesickness*

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Abstract: In his postmodern novel *Homesickness* (1980), Australian novelist Murray Bail depicts a group of Australian tourists on a package tour through diverse countries—including an unnamed African country, the UK and Ecuador—and cities of London, New York and Moscow. In addressing the archetype of the tourist, for which the mobile Australian is judged suitably representative, Bail explores the various perspectives of his diverse group in their picaresque encounters with unfamiliar, Other landscapes and people. In particular he focusses on the nature of their descriptions of such encounters in an increasingly virtual or curated world of global tourism (its museums, guides, exhibitions). This is seen in the dialogic, arguably appropriating, acts of naming, identifying, epistolary accounts (notably in postcards) and also photography, including by the group's tellingly blind photographer. From a postcolonial perspective, Bail's tourist group can be considered akin to the settler, albeit in a global situation in which places visited and their people are viewed as Other. This article primarily addresses Bail's examination of the nature of human apprehension of unfamiliar and familiar worlds through the binaries of distance/closeness, as well as through ratiocinative, visual, classifying, collecting impulses as distinct from a more chaotic, random indeterminate acceptance. A central anchoring, comparative reference point is the familiar (the Australian home, landscape, vegetation and its various stereotypes including in unfamiliar places) and the alternative counter viewpoints of non-travellers. Consideration is given to themes concerning consciousness and the visual, including perspectives of philosopher Maurice Blanchot and postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan.

Keywords: travel; naming; ratiocinative; colonising; Other; indeterminacy; home;

In beginning this essay on Murray Bail's early postmodern novel *Homesickness* (1980), I draw attention to a pivotal text from the first pages of this narrative about an Australian group of tourists arriving in an unidentified, perhaps fictional, country in Africa:

'A baobab tree,' see, over there.' 'The Traveller's Friend,' someone told them. 'You find tons of them up in our north.'

A bit of the old wattle there. Fancy I would never have thought.

'Acacia,' a man told them. *There is always one who knows the name of things.* (Bail 5, my emphasis)

This early passage establishes the pattern of interplay unfolding between an often interrupting narrator, seen commenting here on the thematics of a ratiocinative "knowing the name" (italicised in the cited text), and the light dialogue of its as yet unnamed tourist characters who play an important part in developing Bail's satiric dialectic. It introduces, but subverts, themes of identity and authenticity (such as the names of migratory Australian vegetation), and also philosophical concepts associated with apprehension (looking and seeing), cognition and consciousness and associated forms of representation—nomenclature, classification and description. The latter are the particular focus of this article.

Critic Michael Ackland has observed that Bail's satiric novel represents a "post-modern assault on received sources of knowledge and assurance" (39) evident in the experiences of Bail's Australian tourist group on a world tour, in which he observes the symptoms of "existential bafflement" (42) despite repeated attempts to make sense in their various encounters with a global Other. As a starting point the tourist can, to some degree, be compared with the settler of postcolonial theory (see Ashcroft et al. 2002) This article asks how such tourist observations relate to postcolonial and also postmodern critical perspectives on travel and naming (or classifying, a strong interest of Bail), including issues of distance and closeness, or familiarity and its opposite. The spatial theorist Paul Carter has identified the difficulty for early European-born writers finding themselves in the alien landscape of early colonial Australia ("Spatial History" 333-335). He describes how nineteenth-century English-born writer Barron Field found Australia "indescribable" and its nature "indifferent" (Carter, "Naming Place" 351). Travel and translation theorist Michael Cronin identifies the binaries of a more superficial "horizontal" travel, which he defines as a "linear progression from place to place" (19), as opposed to a more profound "vertical" perspective of one travelling "down into the particulars of place" (Cronin 19). Postmodern writing and theory play with the trope of authenticity important in earlier travel writing: what initially seem to be essentialising elements in the tourists' evolving discourse in this Australian work of fiction are seen to be constantly subverted. I try to press further into Bail's persistent if ambivalent enquiry into approaches to knowledge represented through the dialectic of his tourist characters. The critic John Attridge's focus on Bail's "photographic poetics," inspired by Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot, offers useful insights into the giving of value, if not transcendent meaning, to the condition of bafflement experienced by Bail's twentieth-century tourist *flâneur*, with its focus on a light, largely visual, witnessing of the random moments of human experience and encounter (life being lived). Blanchot links consciousness with the reign of "objects ... along with the concern for results, the desire to have ... the need for security and stability, the tendency to know in order to be sure, the tendency to take account" (*The Space of Literature* 137). The work of postmodern critic Ihab Hassan helps clarify the importance of the group's verbal (spoken and declarative) interactions, notably the "quip," defined as "a humorous and witty remark," (Cambridge English Dictionary) as an important supplement to visual engagement. I also touch upon, though do not fully investigate, the persona of Bail's tourist as the contemporary intuitive, playful, curious, sentient, rather than solely existential, being, now suddenly a figure confined from her former freedom to dislocate.

Museums

Bail's fiction follows the adventures of a group of thirteen Australian tourists on a package tour through Africa, London, Quito, and New York, concluding in an unnamed, cosmopolitan-seeming location. It is not an Australian settler encounter with the indigenous but rather with the global Other, in which the tourist continues to represent a Western elite. While the tour involves important encounters with what Attridge calls the random "interstices" (87) of tourist travel (streets, hotels, landscape, transport, meetings), there are significant encounters with the more than twenty museums, exhibits or places the tourists visit. Their experiences increasingly subvert normal expectations or stereotypes, thus satirising tourism's "promise of authenticity" (Attridge 72). The tourists are the object of envy of some of those at whom they gaze, notably the young African boy who, in response to a question, declares he wants to be a tourist when he grows up (Bail 63). Conversely, they are attacked in Ecuador for cultural insensitivity associated with Kaddok's photographing the locals (Bail 234). In Africa, the Handicraft Museum surprisingly exhibits not local artisans but contemporary Western everyday objects, such as lawnmowers or false teeth. In London's National Portrait Gallery they view oil paintings of famous photographers. Another museum has a collection of actual railway stations.

The unexpected Museum of Corrugated Iron, in an ongoing Australianist sub-text, features the “antipodean drumming of rain” (Bail 151). To all these encounters the tourist bring their “classifying mania” (Bail 145). Increasingly, the museums expose the preconceptions of these privileged Western visitors. Both museums and their “interstices” are sites for the individuals to reveal their personality (whether cosmopolitan, cynical, provincial, sensitive or naïve), develop relationships and voice different perspectives on Bail’s thematic dialectic. New York is not just the site for visiting the Statue of Liberty (the site of one failed seduction) but also an inverted night safari in Central Park for viewing local human wildlife in action (Bail 299-300). Moscow is the site for visiting the tomb of Lenin but also the Centre of Gravity Museum in which the tourists not only slither across slippery floors but are blamed for illicit, gravity-inspired graffiti which reads “Down with Communism”, a recurring motif of, arguably, antipodean subversion. Twists in representing these well-known tourist sites work to topple a number of master narratives. Thus Bail’s postmodern fictional voyage unfolds as increasingly satirical, belonging to the tradition of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travel* in its third book “Voyage to Laputa,” or of Menippus (Ackland 38). However, rather than reflecting on contemporary political affairs it focuses on the cultural, psychological and existential condition of the tourist living in and responding to an unfamiliar world.

Australian Tourists

The thirteen¹ Australians in Bail’s transnational tourist group, with their varying degrees of travel experience, or, to use Ashcroft’s term, “propensity to travel” (2), can be considered as representative of the modern tourist *persona*. James Borelli’s uncle in London sets the tone describing Australia as a “Cocky overfed country [producing] lantern jaws and generalisations. ... Tourists are a natural follow on” (Bail 131). Agostinelli, the curator of and guide at the Museo de Pernes, the Leg Museum in Quito (Bail 215), describes Australians as “a nation of travellers” (223), as is confirmed later in a fast-moving New York where the group finds “the city full of Australian travellers, including a complete archery team” (247), to the irritation of its locals who have inscribed “Go home Aussies” in the Statue of Liberty (252). Arguably one of Bail’s mouthpieces, the Quito museum guide Agostinelli, expatiates on tourism and the tourist *persona* as someone who is “aware of his time’s limits” (Bail 232), one who “keeps going one leg after the other,” and who “embodies the human condition” rather than purely national characteristics (Bail 232).

Picking up on this more universal dimension, Attridge sees Bail’s tourists as contemporary variants of a Baudelairean existential *flâneur* (71). Tourist as *flâneur* matches what Michael Cronin describes as “horizontal” travel, described as “linear progression from place to place” (19) and opposes to a more profound “vertical” perspectives. Bail signals early on his interest in human nature in the novel’s epigraph, a citation from Stendhal imagining Sicily: “... human nature there is as distinctive and curious to see as the nature of plants and stones” (Bail i). Bail’s tourist characters are all different in personality, if somewhat caricatured, though some display what might be considered representative of an earlier stereotype from the 1950s of Australians as materialistic, narrow-minded and uncultivated. As tourists they are actively perceiving beings, observing and commenting on unfamiliar sights and surfaces. But the places visited are mostly outside their known terrain, and subject to a transnational gaze, which Simon During describes as “attempts to produce our knowledge and testimony across political and cultural borders which are not complicit with these gazes and attentions” (25). The limits to knowledge and consciousness are thus already implicit.

¹ Or possibly fourteen, if the frequent appearances of the Australian tourist Frank Hammersly are counted.

Bail's interest in his tourists' responses, and their varying nature, is foreshadowed at the beginning while they are still arriving from the airport: "Out there lay the beginnings of the foreign country known only by hearsay (*heresy*) or photography, its name and persistent shape on the map. There was plenty to see, any minute now. Yet each felt unable or reluctant to grasp the first impressions" (Bail 2, original emphasis). The words "hearsay," "photography" and "map" and, on the other hand, "impressions" set up the central dialogue between received empirical knowledge or representations of consciousness, and a more immediate, human response to different environments and people, arguably an authorial dialectic between the binaries of knowing and being. In this sense Bail's novel is clearly one of ideas.

Empirical Knowledge

To a large degree Bail's characters can be seen as acting out or representing authorial musings on the question of "knowledge or lack of it" (Grealy 21). It is clear that several of Bail's characters fall in the first camp of empirical knowledge. Leon Kaddok is the most obvious example: he "knows a great deal," as his wife Gwen volunteers (Bail 184). Ironically, this blind photographer is probably the one naming the acacias in the first passage, as well as giving an unending commentary on history, geography, natural science, "scraps of well-established facts [accumulated] like barnacles" from memory, and from observations relayed by his wife (Bail 321). A figure of parody, this blind man volunteers as the group spokesman in the interview by the visiting French film crew, proffering a catalogue of travel clichés and stereotypes about Africa: "Interesting country. Thorn trees, spoor and so on. The tall animals such as the giraffe. A colourful dark people. The women in their brightly coloured costumes ... Naked kiddies. Africa" (Bail 14). His inveterate photography also suggests an authoritative or colonising drive to record and describe though, given his blindness, his untargeted, random shots are comic, spontaneous and arguably innocent. The unnamed "dun-coloured" African landscape (Bail 6) with its uncanny resemblance to their homeland, raises questions within the group about geographical authenticity.

Some individuals within the group are well-travelled and knowledgeable: the bookish, rather negative Gerald Whitehead and the abusive dentist Ken Hoffmann display their knowledge about art though they are dismissive about much else. Gerald's friend, the cultivated and philosophical James Borelli, probably one of Bail's mouthpieces, is articulate and responds to the immediate environment and language, "attentive to all he sees, assigning interest without reference to the life/museum hierarchy" (Attridge 71). Another ready classifier is Philip North, a retired zoologist and lover of maps. He is accused by Sasha, the young woman he befriends, of liking "to educate" (Bail 411). Like Borelli, North can be philosophical on the condition of the assertive or proprietorial (tourist) consciousness: "collecting appears to be a central human characteristic." Injecting an Australian zoological touch, he adds: "We are ... part Bower Bird" (Bail 88). These characters contribute to the novels' dialogue on the value of empirical knowledge. The short interrupting narratorial passage on hemispheres in Chapter 4 continues this dialogue proffering a hypothetical geographical and cultural profile of the northern hemisphere, the central space of Western civilisation, with its tendency to fill the "emptiness" of the less populated south (Bail 243). The north thus becomes associated with what Bail depicts as the Western condition of consciousness: "With its museums and plethora of laws and words the Centre of Gravity lies in the Northern or Upper Hemisphere. It preserves" (Bail 243). Arguably, the south might be compared with its psychological counterpart, a location of untidy indeterminacy. Hemisphere has been a potent trope in colonial, postcolonial and spatial literature and theory, the southern or "south" component subject to recent theoretical re-evaluation, as in Russell West-Pavlov's *The Global South and Literature* (2018). In

Homesickness, the motif of hemisphere is somewhat oblique in that Bail's implied author-cum-narrator slips quickly away from a Furphyesque essentialism about regions to a similar pondering about psychological types (e.g. the left/right hemispheres of the brain). While *Homesickness* was written 12 years before the landmark High Court judgment recognising traditional land ownership on Murray Island (the so called Mabo decision) and ruling against the inherited concept of *terra nullius*, the sense of irony implicit in the narrator's reference to a southern "emptiness" should not escape any post-Mabo reader.

At the other end of the scale some of the less travelled, more provincial group members, such as the older conservative couple the Cathcarts and the boorish Garry Atlas, seem susceptible to simplifications, preconceptions, and suspicions. This can be seen in Doug Cathcart's comment on arrival in Africa: "We've been told ... not to drink the ice here" (Bail 14). They are less eloquent in their recognition and description of foreign places and cultures. However, like Kaddok, they can respond to better-known stereotypes, as in the comment ascribed to the bus collective: "Look, women washing by a river. That's straight out of *National Geographic*" (Bail 189). Strait-laced Mrs Cathcart records her visit in simple terms in postcards, the traditional tool of tourist communication: "... usually the same sentence to one and all, just to let them know" (Bail 41). By the end of the tour the young woman Sasha belongs at the naïve/sensitive end of the scale with the older well-travelled, though similarly naïve, country woman Sheila Standish, also a postcard writer, and the sensitive Louisa Hoffmann. Self-effacing, Sheila appreciates the unexpected, seems more interested in tour members than in tourist sites: "I am with an interesting and rather nice group of people" (Bail 16). Many of the characters' responses can be seen as mediated by accumulated empirical knowledge (Ackland 48), though there is resistance to such ordering. This is seen, for example, in Sasha's pronouncement: "Everywhere's a museum," a comment with which the omniscient narrator concurs (Bail 328).

Tourists as Sentient Beings

On the back cover blurb of *Homesickness*, Patrick White describes Murray Bail as a "visual writer with great understanding of sensual man." Bail's tourists are seeing, perceiving, commenting, emotional and amorous beings. This tourist condition, evident in their first descriptions, is addressed directly in Chapter 6 in the voice of the narrator: "being in a foreign country rejuvenates the powers of observation and sense of wonder" (Bail 366). Continuing with the motif raised by Agostinelli, the curator of the Museum of Legs, Bail's omniscient narrator observes that "due to the constant state of heightened awareness ... travelling makes us tired" (Bail 369). Thus, in the second half the novel's mood shifts from mental stimulus and excitement to exhaustion and an attendant doubt, with focus on the existential condition facing the tourist. Sasha is "sick of travelling" and wants to go home (Bail 336). Doug and Mrs Cathcart return to the group after "a pig of a day" (356). The philosophical Borelli puts it more eloquently: "It's somehow senseless all this. ... Going to places like this" (252). He voices "a feeling of futility" (252). The melancholy of homesickness is felt among the group, which Attridge associates with the eighteenth-century condition of the spleen (71). Later in the novel the narrator associates such exhaustion, seen in the casualness of Borelli's face, with illness: he looks "as if he had only just woken up or had recently been ill" (Bail 182). While Attridge compares Borelli to a Baudelairean "painter of modern life ... impartially attentive to everything he sees," he accepts that in Bail's ironic writing the possibility of Borelli reaching the sense of "correspondence" (connective meaning) sought by the French poet is limited to "playful, elevating coincidences and puns" (Attridge 71).

Travelling might also impede observation, as foreshadowed in the warning of Borelli's uncle in London: "If you people stayed in one place you would see more, a million times more" (Bail 131). Such comment foreshadows a variant viewpoint against travel, as in Cronin's "vertical" perspective (19), also seen in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), a more recent novel on migration, an alternative form of travel: Like Borelli's uncle in London, Hamid's mute maid in Morocco prefers not to travel away from her emptying village "where she was at least known" (Hamid 223), which is contrasted to the perspective of her daughter and other would-be migrants or refugees.

Under a prevailing mood of uncertainty the more philosophical of the characters start to reflect on the subject of Bail's over-riding theme, representation (as seen in the tourists' descriptive and naming impulses), the default state of the Western empirically-trained consciousness. Drawing on Blanchot, Attridge argues that "consciousness is our destiny: we cannot leave it; and in it we are ... in the *vis-à-vis* of representation" (76). In *Homesickness*, such classifying gaze offers a distinctive twenty-first century leisure activity variation on the earlier terrestrial colonisation of the Other. Notwithstanding a proclivity for gazing, naming, and describing the world they visit, the tourists of Bail's group are not as articulate as they first seem. This is suggested in the narrator's description of a typical exchange: "Half-listening the other person would respond by nodding and then going off on a tangent with some piece of knowledge, an anecdote just remembered, unrelated but from his own experience; ... It was the talk of nomads" (Bail 191).

Borelli attempts to address what is partly but not exclusively an Australian condition: "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. ... [H]ave you noticed we make quips, even when asking the time?" (Bail 296-97). Borelli later shifts the function of articulate engagement, even of quipping, from a national context into a broader postcolonial existential dilemma. I agree with Ackland that the ratiocinative, if absurd, tourist is increasingly seen as everyman (43): "Our time is spent cataloguing the description of objects and animals, and explaining, even though they solidly exist in the first place. ... I find that increasingly odd. We like to classify and describe. We want to understand; ... But it only adds to the nature of things, it doesn't alter" (Bail 340). At best, conversations are categorised by Bail's narrator as "desultory," or as "fragments" (Bail 356). The tourist experience is clearly that of latecomers, the converse of any prelapsarian scenario in which Adam or any early explorer might set out to name a new world. In this heavily represented and curated late twentieth-century world, questions about the nature of reality are down-valued. Gerald quips how the "Ayers Rock nose" impersonation viewed in the English village of Buxton might be "better than the real thing," which leads him to conclude: "There's no reason to see anything then. We've all seen pictures" (Bail 336). While Gerard's comment suggests that world-weariness, a sense of aporia and failure to find authenticity, constitute the most likely response to incessant exposure to new sights and experiences, this is not necessarily the only possible reaction.

In this subversive postmodern novel in which meaning is slippery, it is not easy to see the direction of Bail's dialectic—whether towards a vision of futility, confusion or just uncertainty. Understanding reflected in articulate consciousness seems suspect. Ackland is inclined to read a "lack of meaningful orientation" (82) but I suspect Bail is less negative than that and more aligned to uncertainty than futility. Towards the novel's end many of his apparent spokespeople seem to be the less assertive, softer-spoken women. These include the instinctive Sasha, and the humble postcard-writing Sheila (Bail 353). Borelli's derided tourist anecdote or quip at

least “keeps [them] going” (Bail 277). Sensitive, hesitant Louisa offers towards the end some faltering intimation as to what might seem not only an Australian but a universal contemporary human condition of indeterminacy:

We come from a country ... of nothing really, or at least nothing substantial yet. We can appear quite heartless really. I don't know why. We sometimes don't know any better. ... even before we travel we're travelling in circles. There isn't much we understand. ... there isn't much we believe in. We have rather empty feelings. I think we find love difficult. And when we travel we demand even the confusions to be simple. (Bail 393)

In *Homesickness*, the tourist's trajectory thus seems to run from confident, “self-satisfied” knowing (Ackland 44) as they set out, through passages of confusion, to uncertainty or a sense of life's indeterminacy at the end. Louisa's description of this human condition moves towards what the postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan describes as the zone where “the figurative state of silence ... reigns [moving] through self-parody and self-subversion, radical irony to the edges of speech” (75).

Consciousness and Postmodernism

On the question of naming, Dennis Haskell has argued more generally that it can be seen as “a form of control” (124), an impulse which is questioned and undermined in Bail's novel. In an interview in 1980 after the novel was first published, the author admitted that his novel was about “knowledge or lack of it” as well as about “states of mind” (Grealy 21). Ackland argues that *Homesickness* conforms with “postmodernism's assault on received sources of knowledge and assurance. ... Far from being the sovereign namer and ordainer of his world, [the individual] has been redefined as internally riven and as an imperfect claimant to knowledge or mastery of language” (39). Ackland ascribes to the novel a sense of “existential bafflement” (42), perhaps taking cue from Borelli's prognosis of a sense of futility, at least in the tourist's task of description. Nonetheless Ackland acknowledges what is suggested in Louisa's passage on indeterminacy, the tourists' admission of arriving at a “state of unknowing” (Bail 82). Inarticulacy may be the appropriate means for recognising such a state. It is a condition which suggests the immanentist mode which Ihab Hassan sees as the ground of many postmodern texts (76), akin to Keats' negative capability: “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without irritably reaching after fact and reason” (Hassan 72).²

Attridge (77) touches upon Borelli's trouble in “matching words to sensation, especially when travelling” (Bail 136). He compares it, and Bail's own dialogue with knowledge, with Blanchot's attempts, inspired by Jacques Derrida, to overthrow “consciousness” as the ground for philosophy (Attridge 76). In his study *The Dark Gaze*, Kevin Hart describes Blanchot's philosophy as envisioning a universe of discontinuity and the strange in which the controlling, seeing impulse (“the optical exigency”) holds little sway (Hart 8). Attridge notes how Bail's novel gives greater attention to what Blanchot calls the random “unique instants” (*The Infinite Conversation* 34) of experience (Attridge 78). He argues that *Homesickness* succeeds in capturing such moments, including Bail's “photographic poetics” (Attridge 71), drawing on the randomness and “casual perfection ... of the innocent encounter” (Attridge 88) of the photograph, or image, in contrast to deliberative descriptive articulations. Thus, Attridge argues, “the style of *Homesickness* essays presentation rather than description [representation]”

² Hassan refers here to Keats' negative capability described in the poet's letter of 21 December 1817 to his brothers.

(Attridge 87). This is apparent in the “antic diversity” within the novel’s “interstices,” the patches during and between museum visits, assembled paratactically through the narrative (Attridge 87). Ackland is perhaps rightly suspicious of “human lives dominated merely by images, wish-projections and little else” (39).

I would like to draw attention at this point to the verbal element of the tourist characters’ activity and encounter as seen in their dialogue, the supposedly inadequate traveller anecdotes, their stumbling relationships, their humble postcard inscriptions, the subversive motifs of graffiti throughout what Ackland calls a “fragmented, mixed-mode narrative” (38). While Borelli observes towards the end of the novel, after yet another museum visit, how “everything continues without descriptions and yet description is all that we are doing” (Bail 341), the behaviour of description (representation) is not dismissed. Borelli’s comment on the quip, mentioned in the earlier conversation about national verbal proclivities, is presented as a humbler Australian witty/ironic habit, arguably Hassan’s “disjunctive wit” (78), distinct from the American’s greater powers of descriptiveness: “Quips keep us going. Being so far removed and relatively alone” (Bail 297). The psychological need links here with the motif of a southern isolation but is clearly also universal. Thus, the tourists’ postmodern “existential bafflement” (Ackland 42) is actually post-existential, alleviated by the virtuosity of lived experience and encounter. These are evident in Bail’s visual “photographic poetics” (Attridge 71) but also, I argue, in the serendipity of humbler engagements in verbal play, including Borelli’s and others’ quips (Bail 297). *Homesickness* thus matches Michel Benanou’s outline of postmodernism’s “reliance on play rather than a hierarchy of symbolic meaning, the joyous acceptance of absence rather than a morose and negative theology” (483). Paradoxically, Bail’s narrative, relating to the normally undermining quip, shows the author not only as witty or satirical but also at his most tender and profound, offering what Ackland calls “empowering insights” (44). Such “language as play, as joy” (Benanou 483) may be a predecessor to the readily shareable ‘meme’ of contemporary social media, though, it might be added that, like the ‘meme,’ the quip and, undoubtedly, the anecdote, are arrayed somewhat too profusely throughout Bail’s tour—“inventiveness for its own sake” (Ackland 37).

Conclusion

While the novel’s overriding gaze tends to be sardonic and reductive, its accumulating effect works towards questioning what lies beneath a contemporary impetus to travel—restlessness, hedonism, diversion, uncertainty, seeking knowledge (of self and reality) as well as an understanding about what constitutes home. As Rodney Hall has commented in his review of the novel, it is difficult, though tempting, to look for an authorial spokesperson in an oblique postmodern narrative (20). The philosophical Borelli, Attridge’s “pre-eminent *flâneur*” (71), seems important for his accumulating perspectives on the challenges of language, description and what constitutes knowledge. Bail’s naive Sheila Standish, the middle-aged countrywoman, “dispenser of social balm” (Ackland 84) in her instinctive respect for the Other, is another humble candidate. An inveterate traveller as well as writer of postcards, she thrives on the unexpected, remaining enthusiastic to the end when the others seem defeated: “I could keep travelling. ... Everyday of my life. There is so much to see. ... We’ve seen things you couldn’t have imagined. I think everything’s interesting” (Bail 353). Not fazed by an insult from one of the nastier members of the group, she confides what is both ordinary and profound about the group’s transformation: “When a group gets to know each other. People start telling the truth” (Bail 354). I suspect she shares traces of Miss Hare from *The Riders in the Chariot*, one of Patrick White’s “visionaries adept at denial” (Ashcroft, “Globalisation” 34). While such a comparison may place too great a strain on Bail’s short postmodern novel, the author writes in full knowledge of the Australian literary canon. One of the early narratorial quips concerning

a “dun-coloured realism” (Bail 6) suggests that Bail shares or pays homage to Patrick White’s view that the Australian novel need not be the “dreary, dun-coloured offspring of a journalistic realism” (White 15.) In *Homesickness*, Bail travels in the same direction as the earlier transnational Australian writer Shirley Hazzard in challenging “commonplace empiricism” (Jones 69) though an atavistic drive to classify, to dialogue, to conjecture, to sally, still lurks in the cells of Bail’s assembled cast, giving tension, interest and humour to the narrative.

Michael Ackland likens the novel’s narrative to a puzzle or labyrinth, positing, if not necessarily agreeing with, Alexander Pope’s “mighty maze, but not without a plan” (Ackland 42). In Bail’s “existential maze,” Ackland denotes confusion evident in “bumping” and “stumbling,” “at times indistinguishably from blind Kaddok” (61). In medieval architecture the maze was a substitute for a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands: it also represented an initiation into sanctity, a trial which might be won (Cirlot 175). In postmodern times it is neither certain nor expected that the characters will emerge enlightened. In *Homesickness*, Bail loses his assortment of Australian tourists into the different space of a de-centered globe in which some at least encounter and unravel stereotypes about the Other, their own country and eventually themselves. The novel is less about geographic identities or prescriptions than an ongoing unconcluding dialectic about alternative approaches to being between description and presentation, and more broadly the human see-saw between attitudes of knowing and being, looking and the unconscious, certainty and doubt, articulacy and its opposite.

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