

Spatial Linearity and Post-Colonial Parody in Murray Bail's Holden's Performance

Marie Herbillon (Aspirant du FNRS, University of Liège, Belgium)

0. Introduction

If we are to consider how heterogeneous populations 'share places' in post-colonial cultures, we might start from a literal interpretation of the conference theme and examine the ways in which space is effectively organised and occupied in a given national context.

Insofar as such an analysis can be undertaken through the prism of fiction, it can be argued that the Australian writer Murray Bail's work lends itself remarkably well to this purpose. Since the 1970s, Bail has indeed been much concerned with the exploration of the space--time complex in general, and with the history and geography of his native country in particular. It is probably in Holden's Performance¹ that the author's dual vision of space most blatantly emerges, leading him to distinguish between, on the one hand, a typically Australian natural space and, on the other hand, a cultural space where most great urban centres prove infected by a ubiquitous and clearly Western sense of linearity.

In this essay, I will dwell on the European origins of the trope of linearity and on the role it plays in connection with the geographical dichotomy mentioned above, focusing all along on Bail's parody of the straight line and on the ontological implications thereof.

1. The Western origins of spatial linearity

The straight line, as Euclid and his antique school of Greek mathematicians' contribution to the history of geometry, instantly betrays its Western origins. From the third century before Christ and until the industrial revolution, the straight line has reigned over Europe. If we except the Middle Ages, which marked a return to obscurantism and to "labyrinthine thought,"² the hegemony of linearity thus lasted for an entire millennium and reached its climax in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment -- a period that is referred to as the age of Reason par excellence and the end of which coincides with the European colonisation of Australia --, the straight line has dominated absolutely all areas of European thought

¹Murray Bail, Holden's Performance (Australia: Penguin, 1988; repr. London: Harvill, 2000). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text as HP.

²Penelope Reed Dobb in Jacques Attali, The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom, tr. Joseph Rowe (Chemins de sagesse: Traité du labyrinthe; Paris: Fayard, 1996; tr. Berkeley CA: North Atlantic, 1999): 34.

and knowledge, from the field of art and architecture, where the newly discovered laws of perspective were put into practice, to that of philosophy, where the notion of linearity became synonymous with ideas of rationality, clarity, order, rectitude, predictability, transparency and simplicity: the straight line, like other products of human design, is hailed as the symbol of modernity. Given the long presence of linearity in the dominant European discourse, it is no wonder that Western civilisations have come to regard the non-linear as heretic and to reject associated concepts such as irrationality, confusion, disorder, indiscipline, random, chaos and any kind of meandering complexity.

Logically enough, the history of European town planning mirrors these evolutions. As soon as man opted for a settled way of life, he endeavoured to domesticate space but it is not until the Antiquity that this taming gesture begins to bear the marks of the straight line and related geometric forms like “the Golden Rectangle”:³ the legendary city of Athens, for instance, was characterised by its monumental and symmetrical buildings, although these succeed in striking a balance with the surrounding natural -- and untidier -- landscape; as to Roman cities, they were made of assembled rectangular blocks, which was very much in line with the military spirit that prevailed at the time. By the same token, “the rectangle is [also] the geometric figure that symbolises the city as a whole.”⁴ Bail himself goes even further than that when he states, at the beginning of *Eucalyptus*,⁵ that “the rectangle is a sign of civilisation” because it represents “Europe from the air”;⁶ therefore, he establishes an explicit link between this specific shape and the so-called old continent, although the immediate repetition of the word ‘civilisation’ followed by a tongue-in-cheek quotation mark obviously indicates that we should not necessarily regard that substantive as the third term of the equation.⁷ Subsequently, medieval town planning -- like other disciplines -- broke with these linear principles. In the Middle Ages, “spectacular demographic growth”⁸ compelled cities to develop rapidly and in a disorganised manner: heterogeneity and diversity were the salient features of an urban environment where various architectural styles coexisted and where streets were allowed to meander. In the Renaissance, the superiority of linearity was unsurprisingly reasserted and “a new urban order”⁹ was established, in which geometry took pride of place, thus privileging unity, coherence, symmetry, perspective and a sense of proportion. This can be viewed as the onset of “a

³Murray Bail, *Homesickness* (South Melbourne & London: Macmillan, 1980; repr. London: Harvill, 1999): 24, 244.

⁴Yves--Henri Bonello, *La Ville* (Paris: PU de France, 1996; repr. 1998): 9 (my translation; original text: “Le rectangle est [...] la figure géométrique qui symbolise la ville dans son ensemble”).

⁵Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 1998; repr. London: Harvill, 1999).

⁶Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*, 34.

⁷The equation I am thinking of is the following: rectangle = Europe = civilisation?

⁸Yves--Henri Bonello, *La Ville*, 16 (my translation; original text: “l'accroissement spectaculaire de la population [dans la ville médiévale]”).

⁹Yves--Henri Bonello, *La Ville*, 23 (my translation; original text: “[De la désagrégation de la ville médiévale, va naître...] un nouvel ordre urbain”).

geography of lines [that] signifies modernity”¹⁰ and which will be favoured by town planners for several centuries (in fact, until the industrial era, when cities were normalised, and even later, witness French architect Le Corbusier, who declared that “the right angle [was] legitimate [, even...] obligatory.”)¹¹ Next to these developments, experts in the field will identify two types of towns: those growing at random and those resulting from human will and design. In reality, however, a city’s growth is never totally anarchic, with the exception of a few medieval towns and of some colonised cities (eg, old Boston) that were built without preconceived plan; when there is one, it can rarely be adhered to, for a city is a living entity that resists ideal and theoretical attempts at “criss-crossing [its] social phenomen[a].”¹² In *Bail*, we will see that, in spite of appearances, cities never belong to the first category but always to the second: although they are permeated by linearity in various ways, I will try to demonstrate that the most seemingly irregular one was, to some extent, drawn by the hand of European man.

2. In the cultural space

a. Spatial configuration of three Australian cities: Adelaide, Sydney and Canberra

Even though -- or perhaps precisely because -- they are reduced to their geometric dimension, cities are never relegated to the status of ‘mere background’ in *Bail*’s fiction, on the contrary: as they are presented as abstractions, or, as Gelder and Salzman put it, “collapse[d] [...] back into their map grids,”¹³ they achieve the condition of subject and become giant geometric monsters that have the power to act on their inhabitants in ways that I will describe in a moment. In *Holden’s Performance*, three cities, which correspond with the central protagonist’s stopovers in the course of his peregrinations across Australia, are put in the foreground: Adelaide, Sydney and Canberra.

The physical configuration of Adelaide, Holden Shadbolt’s native city, is remarkable: this perfectly “rectilinear city” (*HP*, 135, 365), which -- *Bail* claims -- would have pleased the Dutch painter Mondrian because of its absence of curves or crescents and its near-absence of diagonals, is “based on the original grid pattern laid down by the first surveyor, a[n English] colonel [...] incongruously named Light---Colonel William Light” (*HP*, 2, my italics), whose “regimented folly” (*HP*, 2) denotes the absurdity of excessive order. This linear design imagined by Light, who turns out to be the real founder of the city -- the plan of which he drew up in the 1830s -- and who anachronistically reappears in the fourth (and last) section of the novel as a man once familiar with surveying activities but reconverted into the bodyguarding business (Holden’s line of work), is

¹⁰Hervé Le Bras in Yves--Henri Bonello, *La Ville*, 44 (my translation; original text: “[Le passage... à] une géographie de lignes signifie la modernité.”)

¹¹Le Corbusier in Jacques Attali, *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*, 59.

¹²Yves--Henri Bonello, *La Ville*, 79 (my translation; original text: “[la ville... est à l’opposé d’un plan théorique et idéal que l’on projetterait pour] quadriller un phénomène social.”)

¹³Ken Gelder & Paul Salzman, *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970-88* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1989): 94.

further reinforced by another “great net” (HP, 1) imposing an “industrial paraphernalia of lines [...] on the mind’s eye” (HP, 1), that is the network of tramlines. Although Bail alludes to the removal of the tramlines in the 1950s, he makes no direct mention of subsequent historical episodes such as the fact that from this decade onwards, the city was extensively rebuilt: just as Light’s rigid plan had been largely complied with, “many recent developments have been carefully thought out,”¹⁴ so that the old city and the new testify to the same propensity for order and regularity.

As the reader follows Holden to Sydney, the water--city, and Manly, a “beachside suburb in the north of metropolitan Sydney,”¹⁵ (s)he discovers a very different urban landscape, vaguely resembling the European medieval city and owing its “irregular lines” (HP, 258) to the omnipresence of the harbour, “a heavy mass [which] narrow[ed] the main road into an isthmus [...] and...] shortened the side streets into dead ends” (HP, 157). Although in this case, neither the ubiquity of the straight line nor its imported nature stares the common observer in the face, the attentive reader will notice that the boarding house where Holden chooses to stay (in Manly) offers “an attempt at clarity. A block-and-a-half back from the beach it had... superimposed on the stucco of seagull-white a mock-Tudor facade [sic], as if a diagram of the ideal street plan had been hammered onto the walls” (HP, 144, my italics).

As for “the sacred geometry of [Canberra]” (HP, 297), it consists of a “pattern of orbs and semicircles [which] was repeated in smaller scale in suburbs [, providing] no relief from the crescents, doglegs, returning boomerangs, cul-de-sacs uncompleted” (HP, 226). Yet, once again, an initially unnoticed linearity is quickly exposed when Bail hints at “the artificiality of the capital, its superimposition of circles and horizontal white” (HP, 232, my italics). Furthermore, Canberra is underscored by extra straight lines which take the shape of “wide avenues” (HP, 225); the numerous orbs from which they radiate are “set in concrete” (HP, 225), as is the city’s (presumably circular) velodrome (see HP, 226). Petrified as they are, these orbs manifestly negate the very idea of movement and pervert their own naturally dynamic nature, contributing to “superimposing order over the naturalness” (HP, 226). As the night falls on Canberra, even electricity yields to the irresistible influence of linearity when “rectangles [of light] fold out as resistance from the ledges, corners and culverts of the city” (HP, 360).

b. Geomorphism, or the exercise of power upon the inhabitants of the cultural space

In recent years, a number of critics -- among whom the authors of The Empire Writes Back --,¹⁶ have contended that “a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with [...] the

¹⁴Richard & Barbara Appleton, The Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Places (Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1992): 2.

¹⁵Richard & Barbara Appleton, The Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Places, 184.

¹⁶Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (London: Routledge, 1989; repr. 2002).

development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.”¹⁷ In this sense, Bail, who has been concentrating on the typically post-colonial crisis of identity experienced by white Australians, can be viewed as a paradigmatic post-colonial writer, but one who would nonetheless merit distinction by virtue of his willingness to “laugh at [previously] enshrined post-colonial orthodoxies.”¹⁸ Throughout his fiction, Bail has indeed sought to demystify the problematic matter of national identity. To this end, he has notably invented an original literary strategy which relies on a form of literalism: I have coined the term ‘geomorphism’ (on the pattern of anthropomorphism) to define this stylistic device which symbolically (and often hilariously) subjects individuals to the physical or psychic influence of either their natural or their cultural (ie, urban) environment.

In the cultural space where they are condensed after the fashion of non-fictional Australian populations, Bail’s characters undergo an array of (generally) playful effects triggered by the three cities mentioned above. Although Bail’s post-colonial parody cannot be limited to an interrogation of linearity, I would like to emphasise the political significance that can be ascribed to this culture of the straight line, which serves as a fertile breeding ground for the germination of strategies meant to gain “mastery over [one’s] physical environment.”¹⁹

It is certainly in Adelaide that the incongruous effects of linearity are most visibly exemplified. As a matter of fact, the city’s exceptionally linear pattern “entered the souls of generations” (HP, 1) “inflicting all kinds of untold damage” (HP, 1), that is inducing an unusual degree of mental linearity.

“Ruled by inner grooves” (HP, 1), Adelaideans seem to indulge both in an abnormal normality and in a no less abnormal rationality:²⁰ not only do they fail to display any sign of uncertainty, subtlety, complication, deviation or talent (see HP, 3) whatsoever, they also favour a binary logic (“There was a yes and a no, a right and a wrong.” (HP, 3)) that Bail names “the overwhelming logic of plain thinking” (HP, 2). The city’s linearity is thus responsible for nurturing a twofold illusion: it introduces “an illusion of order” (see HP, 364), which creates a false impression of rationality; this first mirage in turn triggers further illusions about the possibility to achieve Truth since the trams, “travelling away in [...] absolute straight line[s]” (HP, 1), “always seemed to be [...] opening up a clear path to the distant goal of Truth” (HP, 2--3, my italics). What is more, this linearity is so pervasive that it precludes any genuine possibility of change: “with the removal of the trams in the

¹⁷Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 8. See also Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, ed. Introduction to Part XII ‘Place’ in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995): 392.

¹⁸Marc Delrez, “Literature and Reconciliation in Australia” (unpublished): 25.

¹⁹Schaff in Alan J. Bishop, “Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism,” *Race and Class* 32.2 (1990); repr. (excerpt) in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, 74--75.

²⁰In this sense, they prove unable to resist the first value that -- Alan J. Bishop declares -- is generally brought about by mathematical imperialism.

1950s [...] a spaciousness returned to the city and the thoughts of people; but it was too late” (HP, 3). To compensate for the disappearance of the trams, “people in houses without fences instinctively began erecting them” (HP, 185): this compulsive need to subdivide space clearly partakes of the hunger for order that was artificially generated by “the network of dark wires over the city” (HP, 185). As the helpless victims of this unaccustomed geomorphic process, several characters come under the author’s ferociously parodic scrutiny -- among them, Reg Shadbolt, Holden’s father. Although this “conscientious conductor on the trams” (HP, 7) remains -- bizarrely enough -- physically unaffected²¹ by the “psycho-geometric town plan” (HP, 224), which leaves his face “strangely unlined” (HP, 7), he is stricken with a less visible but more pernicious form of linearity: “the straight and narrow of Adelaide” (HP, 4 -- see also 7) “had [indeed] entered his metabolism” (HP, 7), contradicting “the human instinct [which] is evidently to meander” (HP, 7). Similarly, “the geometry of trams [runs] in [the] blood” (HP, 108) of Les Flies, also a tram--driver and a friend of Holden’s uncle Vern: even when he is driving a car, he cannot help “fitt[ing] the tyres in the polished grooves of his city” (HP, 101), which confirms that his psyche is definitely conditioned by linearity. These singular mental dispositions quickly transmit to some of his passengers: among them, Holden himself, in whom several types of linearity are conflated, “felt [Flies’s] ingrained habits entering his own system” (HP, 101). In the spatial realm, Holden’s linearity manifests itself in a twofold way: firstly, Holden’s global physical verticality (he and his sister Karen, both unnaturally tall, are portrayed as “gargantuan” (HP, 7)), which matches the couple of isolated “lines of memory-retrieval” (HP, 275) on his forehead, is expressed through similes comparing him to “a telegraph pole” (his mother, the usherette and the narrator’s assertions, HP, 50, 134, 161 respectively), to a “totem pole” (HP, 305) and even to “a gum tree” (HP, 161), which posits him -- among other elements tackled below -- as an emblem of his country. Secondly, Holden’s childhood and adolescence spent in Adelaide largely contribute to fashioning “his horizontalism” (HP, 275). Although the term may also refer to Holden’s inner linearity, his “blankness” (HP, 355 – see also HP, 95, 107), it undoubtedly emphasises the horizontal nature of his mechanical movement forward. In my view, it is crucial to take this notion of directionality in space into serious consideration, if only because Bail, acknowledging his appropriation of an anonymous aphorism²²

²¹By contrast, the face of the city’s longest-serving tram--driver is depicted as being “criss-crossed with lines” (HP, 99).

²²Although he does not make himself clear on this point, Bail is probably alluding to Heraclitos (550-480 BC), who “argued that the essential feature of phenomena is that they are always in flux, always moving and changing” (Alan J. Bishop, “Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism,” 74). In ancient Greece, his theories were challenged by Democritus (460-370 BC) and the Pythagoreans: their world--view, based on atoms rather than movement, “eventually was to prevail and develop within Western mathematics and science.” (Alan J. Bishop, “Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism,” 74)

in Homesickness, defines movement as “the basic characteristic of reality.”²³ Through both its static and dynamic consequences, the spatial configuration of Adelaide, where Holden becomes “indoctrinated by the mathematics of the streets” (HP, 114), will thus determine his entire life, allowing no reprieve from the ultimate triumph of linearity. The following account briefly summarises our “large horizontally moving figure” (HP, 305)’s linear itinerary and unchanging frame of mind. On his twenty-first birthday, Holden leaves the “air-cooled” (HP, 157) “city of churchyards, wine vineyards [... and...] light” (HP, 191) for the water--city and its suburbs: in Sydney and Manly, where “the irrational town plan [... supposedly...] encouraged disorders of the mind” (HP, 144), Holden remains perfectly sane and reasonable. Conditioned by his Adelaidean “upbringing of straight lines” (HP, 205), he stays in a boarding house that he “might unconsciously have chosen for its associations of order” (HP, 144). Afterwards, he keeps going “in a straight course” (HP, 135) until he reaches his following destination: Canberra. At first, “the centrifugal forces of [the nation’s capital]” (HP, 225), where language itself is subjected to a geomorphic process and becomes as “circular” (HP, 225, 227) (ie, “self-centered” (HP, 227)) as the city’s name, “enter[... Holden’s] metabolism” (HP, 225). Despite the fact that “it took a superhuman effort to follow another course” (HP, 227), Holden nonetheless manages to offer a momentary -- but no less heroic -- resistance to “the torque [that is] generated by the inner circles of Canberra [and will eventually] spin[...] him right out of Australia altogether” (HP, 360): “looking ahead” (HP, 360, my italics), he sticks to his perfectly straight trajectory and “ke[eps] going, automatically” (HP, 360, my italics), until his final departure for the United States of America.

c. Linearity versus deviance in the cultural space

Yet, it is worth noting that some characters do nevertheless elude the overwhelmingly linear impact of Adelaide: these rare exceptions to the rule, who are either physically or psychologically ‘spared’ (occasionally both, which suggests that these two types of linearity may go hand in glove), include disabled individuals (see HP, 17), “men who couldn’t run, think or see straight” (HP, 17, my italics), as well as some women, which could point to an unexplored feminist strand in Bail’s work. The first signs of Holden’s sexual awakening occurred around the age of nineteen, when his curiosity towards girls, women and -- more generally -- towards a “less definable world of softness and imprecision” (HP, 118) started to develop. In the teenager that he then was, women already generated contradictory feelings from which Holden never departed in later years, ranging from sheer confusion (see HP, 212)²⁴ to attraction, bewilderment and “an inordinate, irrational respect for

²³Murray Bail, Homesickness, 401.

²⁴Vern attributes the difficulty to understand women to a mere sexual difference, namely to the fact that unlike men, who have “something solid” “between [their] legs,” women disclose “nothing on the surface” except a “powerful [Tasmania-shaped] tangle which nevertheless revealed little of itself” (HP, 120, my italics).

women, all women, everywhere” (HP, 121). It is Vern’s neighbour, a red-haired usherette at a picture theatre in Adelaide, who will take it upon herself to visually and technically initiate Holden to “the facts of life” (HP, 118) and ignite a “wonderment which [...] will] eventually le[a]d him to Harriet” (HP, 354). Although the usherette’s inscrutable personality leaves Holden perplexed (when he “thought about [this impenetrable mystery] he drew a blank” (HP, 134)), he cannot help being fascinated by her feminine body and breasts, these “twin softnesses” (HP, 133) under her dress.

Holden’s subsequent relationship with Harriet, whom he first catches a glimpse of at the occasion of the 1956 Royal Visit in Sydney, reproduces and intensifies this pattern. As opposed to Michel de Certeau’s ideal city, the geometric city is characterised by “a rejection of everything that [...] constitutes the ‘waste products’ of a functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.).”²⁵ It is thus no wonder that a character like Harriet Chandler should be found outside “the rigid lines of [Adelaide]” (HP, 112). Several signs of marginality coalesce into her: she is both a woman -- a disabled one at that -- and a poster artist at the Epic Theatre, a Manly picture theatre where she will re-encounter Holden, who works there as a bouncer. The shape of her “polio-twisted” (HP, 162) body, “all flow and curve” (HP, 174), harshly contrasts with Holden’s straight lines but matches the form of her own face, which seems to be made up of “a series of interlocking quadrants” (HP, 161, my italics). However, the obvious opposition between the “sharp curvature” (HP, 171) of Harriet’s crippled body and Holden’s physical linearity does not preclude the two protagonists’ complementarity: in moments of intimacy, “her muscular curves fought against the rigidity of his lines, opposed and yet merging with them” (HP, 316). Furthermore, Harriet is as physically frail as Holden is powerful and as mentally strong²⁶ as Holden is weak. If he were more articulate in the field of psychology, Holden himself would probably not deny his complementary connection with Harriet and outsiders in general. Whether consciously or not he tends to use his tremendous physical power to preserve the weakest. His first epic performance in the novel, which is carried out in reaction to the unbearable pressure exerted by the massive crowd waiting to attend the Queen’s Royal Visit in Sydney, clearly testifies to this: “planting his legs apart he forced the flow to pass either side” (HP, 161), lifting disabled Harriet against her will and protecting “other castaways [who] had accumulated on his elbows” (HP, 161). Later in the narrative, the narrator identifies Holden as a “comforter to cripples” (HP, 297) and at some point, Harriet herself asks her lover if he “always make[s] a practice of saving unfortunate people” (HP, 171). Even Light, in an epiphanic moment of insight, declares that Holden is drawn “to cripples and to power-maniacs”

²⁵Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall; repr. in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (“Marches dans la ville,” *L’Invention du quotidien: Arts de faire*, 1974; tr. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984; repr. London: Routledge, 1993): 155.

²⁶This mesh of fragility and strength in Harriet is alluded to several times (see HP, 205, 212, 316).

(HP, 292). Significantly, Harriet is also defined by her kinetic paradox: even though her disability makes her less mobile than others, she is far from being completely deprived of her capacity to move. Yet, her movement in space, which verges on a sort of dynamic fragmentation, widely differs from Holden's in that it dissolves all traces of linearity or containment. This phenomenon could be illustrated by the following passage, which depicts their first common experience of sexual intercourse:

Lifted onto his knee she slid all over him. Parts of her dismantled. She came to pieces. Whole areas fell away and merged again. She was many places at once. Unstrapped, the metal on her leg suddenly fell away. Her irrational curves redoubled, her head tilted back, snapped forward. Curled up and crouching she guided him like a dog, shuddering cries which resembled distraught laughter; it happened, amazing him. (HP, 195)

As with the usherette, this delighted amazement, which occasionally develops into "strange upsurge[s] of respect" (HP, 173) or even outward desire for Harriet, the "twisted attraction" (HP, 206), regularly alternates with feelings of baffled confusion when Holden is confronted with Harriet's unreadable personality: "to him, everything about her was confusing" (HP, 174), "he could never understand her" (HP, 316). Harriet is so good at resisting clear-cut definitions that she even symbolically swaps roles with Holden: "with her it was he who felt like the invalid" (HP, 348), "he was the helpless one, a log" (HP, 205). Her resistance to, and reversal of, traditional gender-roles manifests itself down to her choice of clothes: she is indeed used to wearing "men's trousers" (HP, 278 – see also 161), which blur the boundary lines between genders and thus jar with the surrounding drive for clarity. Although Holden proves unable to see through Harriet, it must be noted that she positively complicates his life: "never had his life been more complex" (HP, 211) than with her. Even when she appears under the guise of an optical illusion -- in front of Holden's eyes as he lies in bed --, she offers "a difficult comfort" (HP, 342) and prevents him from "think[ing] straight" (HP, 342, my italics). Unfortunately, she represents nothing but "trouble" (HP, 264, 302, 347) to Light, who regards all "females [... as] a blasted nuisance" (HP, 347) anyway, precisely because "they introduce confusion [and] divide loyalties" (HP, 347). Advising a break-up, Holden's last boss in the novel will experience no difficulties to make himself heard. Docile as ever, Holden will comply with his ultimatum without the least reluctance: despite a last fit of uncertainty, he will "ke[ep] going" (HP, 359), ignoring Harriet's subsequent attempts to interrupt his absurdly mechanical race.

Before concluding this section devoted to linearity and deviance in the cultural space, I would like to draw attention to the similes that are used by Bail with respect to Harriet: the fact that she is likened to "a snake" (HP, 194), then to "a fish, an electric eel" (HP, 205) seems of particular

relevance insofar as the reference to these specific living creatures encompasses the double idea of non-linearity and fluid motion, as well as that of naturalness, which stems from Harriet's animal dimension. By the same token, her "extreme naturalness" (HP, 205) is explicitly insisted upon, as is the usherette's recurring nakedness²⁷ (for her real or remembered naked apparitions, see HP, 119--21, 137--38, 156--57, 355), which can be seen as a form of naturalness. If the shape of these two deviant women, ie, the usherette's feminine curves and Harriet's "arching crescents" (HP, 278), can be associated with their respective naturalness, conclusions can probably be drawn about the unnaturalness of Holden's -- and, by extension, of other "mechanical men's" -- straight lines. There is a short step from these observations to Bail's post-colonial parody: through the exemplary character of Holden, whose unnatural linearity conceals its imported nature, the author may be satirising a whole society that is perceived to be both linear and "too manly" (HP, 258). In such a masculine and mechanically-minded society, where men of European descent represent the dominant social type and where car--culture -- judging from the space Bail devotes to it in the novel -- constitutes a genuine social phenomenon (see for instance HP, 80--82), women (or at least some of them), redeemed as they are by their breaking away from linearity (cf their natural curves, their softness and the confused blur that they generate in 'linear men'), are shown to stand for an interesting ontological alternative, despite the marginal social position that they occupy.

As remarked above, not all women are granted access to the superior realm of marginality. Raised in Adelaide like her brother Holden, Karen fails to escape the malignant influence of her native city: her growth, which "paralleled" "the spread of new suburbs" (HP, 109) endowed her with endless legs. This geomorphically acquired long-leggedness combines with an atavistic tallness (see HP, 123) which seems to run in the Shadbolt family to emphasise her physical linearity, locating her miles away from the idea of femininity as meandering.²⁸ Despite her verticality (see HP, 206) and "symmetrical statistics" (HP, 195), she will be mistaken for an "archetypal beauty" (HP, 197) and win the Miss Australia beauty contest. However, it is crystal clear that her external characteristics -- unlike Harriet's, which turn her into the epitome of deviance --, along with a very clumsy approach to marginality as such (in the course of the Miss Australia show, she is asked a question relating to spastic children and can only answer that "they look [...] awful" (HP, 196)), preclude her from being "thought of as [a] 'character'" (HP, 3). As a protagonist, she thus acts as a subtle reminder of the inadequacy of all attempts at generalisation.

3. In the natural space

²⁷Harriet's nudity is also made textually visible in HP, 249.

²⁸See Jacques Attali, *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*, 71--72.

Although I do not mean to reduce Bail's work to oppositional dichotomies, which would go against its very grain and play into the hands of a simplistic colonial discourse opposing the linear to the non-linear, settler to indigenous populations and centre to margin, I wish to argue that an antidote to urban linearity can possibly be found in Australia's natural space. Just like the cultural environment, local Nature, in Bail's fiction, has the ability to shape the protagonists' looks and identity in an extremely literal manner, giving rise to playful instances of geomorphism.

a. Geomorphism in the natural space

For example, Holden himself owes his size and some of his physical characteristics to his huge native island²⁹ (Nature has generously bestowed an "Easter Island head" (HP, 47) upon his "Mount Lofty"-shaped (HP, 21, 338) body), and the colour of his eyes to the fact that the khaki landscape once rubbed off on his pupils as he took a ride with his stepfather on the latter's motorbike ("flecks of khaki from the passing landscape [...] entered Holden's pupils and remained: wind-conditioned eyes, marbled khaki" (HP, 61)); Miss Tasmania, one of the candidates for the Miss Australia contest won by Karen, has got a "tapering torso [which] duplicates the pubic shape of the island" (HP, 195); Hoadley, "the Senator [...] and] Minister of Commerce, Home Affairs and the Interior" (HP, 185) has "small veins on his cheeks [which] mapped the deplorable state of the roads [...] in the interior, which came under [his] responsibility" (HP, 202); Colonel Light is the owner of a "lean Cape York nose" (HP, 257) while uncle Vern's looks like "Moreton Bay" (HP, 314). The list is nearly endless. However, Bail sometimes elaborates more seriously (though never entirely so) upon some natural cases of psycho-geometry. For example, he is careful to counterbalance the linear impact of Adelaide by a combined and more oblique geomorphic process involving the creeping influence of the country, which subtly "penetrated the city" (HP, 40) and "trespassed on [its] geometry" (HP, 40). The countryside, which refers to "[a] ragged edge of naturalness" (HP, 40) "a band of open space" (HP, 40) surrounding the city centre in accordance with Light's decision, actually "spoke of the desolate interior" (HP, 41) due to its colourlessness and can thus be viewed as metonymic for the country as a whole. The effect it exerts on people is twofold: on the one hand, it affects them physically, so that "the faces of the most optimistic [Adelaideans] eventually resembled the country itself: ravined, curiously wheat-coloured" (HP, 41); on the other hand, it also "entered the mind" (HP, 40) of the city--dwellers, giving rise to a "persistent melancholia" (HP, 41) which coincides with the geographical desolation of central Australia. By stressing the part played

²⁹a nice case of 'insular gigantism' in literature. In reality, an opposite phenomenon called 'insular dwarfism' is now known to exist, as suggested by recent paleontological findings concerning mammoths as well as one of our prehistoric ancestors (*Homo floresiensis*): both these species had to literally shrink to adjust to a new and smaller-sized environment, whereas only an enlarged creature like Holden seemed fit to match the immensity of Australian space. Whether he really believed in the possible eventuation of such an incredible fact or simply meant to present a non-realistic textual element in a realist manner, Bail successfully blurs -- once more -- the boundaries between fiction and reality.

by Nature against Culture in the battle over people's minds, Bail succeeds in reaffirming the importance of the natural space against an all-too-linear urban environment as well as in capturing the complexity of constructing a coherent identity in a "place of extremes" (HP, 365) where one is constantly subjected to (and torn between) contradictory influences.

b. Physical configuration of the natural space: forays into the interior

Moreover, it should be noted that the further Bail moves away from urban linearity, the more he shifts away from literal geomorphism and parody. This phenomenon is epitomised by the narrative's sparse (but more poetic than caustic) incursions into the untamed interior. Unlike the cities and their well-defined contours, the interior is "open to any definition" (HP, 218). Yet, contrary to traditional representations, only "parts of it [are] barren" (HP, 219, my italics): beyond the apparent blankness, one can "count on rivers and the sought-after complexities" (HP, 219, my italics). Those who bother "to go below the surface" (HP, 219) can also be "surprised by [its] variety" (HP, 219, my italics): one individual landscape is not the other, "each version represent[ing] the whole and [being] part of an unfolding endlessness" (HP, 219). In other words, the Australian natural landscape, because it is neither uniformly desolate nor entirely monolithic, cannot possibly be reduced to a necessarily partial caricature of itself: rather, it should be considered as a harmonious -- if kaleidoscopic -- whole, each fragment (ie, each distinct natural landscape) of which stands for Nature itself. If linearity manifests itself in this natural space, it is solely in the form of "lines of chance [which] intersect[...] from immense distances, unhindered" (HP, 365, my italics). As distances expand, linearity of the type encountered in the urban environment thus dissolves into thin air and boundary lines disappear along with their predictable intersections. On one occasion, Holden, his uncle Vern and the latter's two best friends Gordon Wheelright and Les Flies take a car-ride into the interior: "with Adelaide behind them" (HP, 101), they are struck by "the apparent endlessness of the rest of the world" (HP, 101, my italics). As they take notice "on either side of the road [of] eroded channels radiat[ing] as ancient vertebrae" (HP, 101--102), they become aware of the antiquity of the land, which is no longer obscured here by a fabricated urban modernity. A river shimmering "like shattered crystal" (HP, 102) also provides comparative complexity (see HP, 219). In the face of these sights, the little group experiences "a reluctance to leave" (HP, 102). More importantly, this natural site is infused with Aboriginal presence since "the occasional rocky outcrop and tessellations of red ochre stretched into the faces of aboriginal forefathers, shrubbery for eyebrows" (HP, 101). This occurs another time in the novel, namely when Holden is invited out to Light's place on Black Mountain: "from a distance, [the place in question is said to look like] the breast of a woman lying on her back, cast in a bedroom shadow of undergrowth, or a young Aboriginal woman resting, not yet speared by the ornate transmission

tower” (HP, 318). Of course, the fact that portions of land are equated with bodies or body parts echoes the Aborigines’ traditional “conceptions of the universe [as] essentially animistic.”³⁰ According to these spiritual traditions, the world existed only as “a formless mass”³¹ until it was “shaped [into] the known landscape”³² by the Ancestral Beings, who also created a number of ethnic groups respectively belonging to a portion of territory. During this period remembered as the ‘Dreaming’ or ‘Dreamtime,’ the Spirit Beings, who were “modelled in part on the attributes of [the] humans”³³ that they subsequently fashioned, are believed to have left physical imprints of themselves onto the land (eg, rocks, rivers, vegetation, mountains), which became “imbued with their power.”³⁴ The spiritual anthropomorphism apparent in the two above-mentioned passages (and that amounts to nothing else than inverted geomorphism) could thus be interpreted as a compensation for the previous and following instances of (normal) geomorphism, ie, as the author’s way of reminding us that the land was shaped by Aboriginal Spirits and occupied by Aboriginal populations long before modelling the national identity of white Australian population. With fictional means, Bail thus effects a symbolic territorial restitution to Aborigines, which matches their own imaginary possession of their ancestral motherland, but sharply -- and painfully -- contrasts with Holden’s impression that “no one else had been [on Black Mountain] before” (HP, 318) and with the fact that the place is actually “owned by the government” (HP, 318, my italics). Furthermore, the geometric nature of the body parts referred to in the excerpts is also of particular significance, for an eyebrow is to the face what a breast is to the female body: a soft curve which has nothing in common with the hard lines of the cities. As he stares in the dark at the naked usherette, Holden himself marvels at the “intangible softness” (HP, 119) of women’s breasts. So, whereas some have unsuccessfully tried to demonstrate the etymological connection between the word Canberra and the phrase women’s breasts (“the name ‘Canberra’ is said to be Aboriginal in origin, but no such word has been recorded in any Aboriginal language.”³⁵), Bail chooses -- playfully or not -- to locate the breast in question outside the urban space, suggesting that real roundness can only be found in a natural space suffused with Aboriginal Spirits.

In brief, the two passages that I have just commented on fulfil a double function: as ‘pantheistic celebrations,’ they enable Bail, on the one hand, to debunk the myth of Terra Nullius and to subtly acknowledge Aboriginal beliefs, which, on the other hand, are definitely dissociated from any idea of linearity. Aside from these extracts, Aborigines are practically absent from Bail’s narrative: in

³⁰Susan Bambrick, ed. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Australia (Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1994; repr. 1996): 75.

³¹Susan Bambrick, ed. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Australia, 73.

³²Susan Bambrick, ed. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Australia, 73.

³³Susan Bambrick, ed. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Australia, 75.

³⁴Susan Bambrick, ed. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Australia, 76.

³⁵Richard & Barbara Appleton, The Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Places, 55.

Holden's Performance, the only Aboriginal character is one of Holden's colleagues, "a half-blood from the Territory" (HP, 301) called Jimmy Carbon, who is portrayed as "a master at making himself scarce" (HP, 301). Yet, it seems to me that Jimmy and the Aborigines' near-invisibility in the novel is precisely part of the author's point: in order to denounce a neo-colonial society in which they are still largely ignored, Bail literally -- and deliberately -- locates them between the lines. However, it is probably not coincidental that Holden should feel "contented" (HP, 346) when he finds himself on Black Mountain in the company of Light and Jimmy, so much so that for a moment "he wondered whether he shouldn't live like the Colonel, out in the open in the bush" (HP, 346). Although his archetypal indecisiveness ultimately prevents him from taking any action in that direction, his instinctive desire undoubtedly pleads for an emancipation from an all-too-linear Western heritage and for a rapprochement with Aboriginal nature.

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