

Amanda Rooks

## PARODYING PATRIARCHY: MURRAY BAIL'S *EUCALYPTUS* AND THE "LOGIC" OF DOMINATION

Murray Bail's small yet impressive fictional oeuvre includes the novels *Homesickness*, *Holden's Performance* and *Eucalyptus*, as well as a collection of short stories. His allegorical works unabashedly draw inspiration from a masculinist Australian literary tradition while simultaneously critiquing what A.A. Phillips referred to as the "self-confident Australianism" that has frequently accompanied this tradition (149). Bail's dissidence is often enacted quite explicitly in his novels via frequent self-reflexive narrative digressions. He compels readers to ponder the nature, purpose and power of language and stories and to consider recurrent national uncertainty as he articulates the tension of identity both on national and individual levels. His most recent publication *Eucalyptus*, winner of the 1999 Miles Franklin Award for Australian Literature, is both distinctive and defiant and cements Bail's standing as a great Australian parodist. More specifically, Bail's narrative provides a parodic exposé of a decidedly misogynistic national ethos through its critique of constructions of masculinity and femininity within the Western tradition in general. This is explicated in *Eucalyptus*, in the main, through Bail's castigation of hierarchical dualisms which serve to perpetuate domination, exploitation and oppression. Bail's text highlights the gendered nature of these dualisms whereby the feminine is associated with the interconnected concepts of nature, disorder, the body, passivity and emotion while the masculine is aligned with the concomitant concepts of culture, order, the mind, initiative and reason.

A chief priority of third-wave feminism is to expose the ways in which inferiority is established and subordination is justified by hierarchically organized and gendered value dualisms such as culture/nature, mind/body and reason/emotion. Prominent ecofeminist, Karen Warren, refers to this problematic conceptual framework which informs Western ideologies of gender in her contention that there is a "logic" which condones oppressive behaviours. Her work highlights the "historical and causal links between the dominations of women and nature [which] are located in conceptual structures of domination that construct women and nature in male-biased ways" (Warren 255). More broadly, ecofeminism itself theorises a shared source of oppression in its attempt to expose "the foundations of oppression that support all forms of domination and exploitation, including colonialism, imperialism, sexism, racism and speciesism" (Durack 4). Bail's *Eucalyptus* explores the implications of dualistic

ideologies which sanction oppression and domination in its compelling story of a father (Holland) whose response to his daughter's (Ellen) burgeoning sexuality is to set a condition for her suitors: she will marry the man who is able to correctly identify all of the eucalypts planted on his property. That this work parodies patriarchy via this exploration is clear. Indeed, in a review for the *New York Times*, Michael Upchurch referred to Bail as "a prickly and extravagant comedian" (6).

Perhaps the most conspicuous denunciation of dualistic ideology in *Eucalyptus* is explored through the analogy of women and nature. Ellen is frequently likened to the landscape and is attributed with qualities that connect her to nature. Bail's construction of this analogous relationship seems undeniably calculated and draws upon the tendency to "overpersonify" nature and "underpersonify" women as outlined by Catherine Roach (51). Bail's exposé of the nature-woman connection even goes so far as to attribute a Cider Gum with a "vaginal-slit" into which a gardener "thrust[s] his arm" (72). Interestingly, this literal penetration of nature witnessed by Mr Cave serves as a catalyst in his decision to attempt Holland's challenge and win the much sought-after "prize," Ellen. Mr Cave is not the only male character in *Eucalyptus* who is associated with the metaphorical rape of Ellen. Although it is not made explicit, readers (and Ellen) assume that Holland is responsible for the violent gesture of hammering the "large rusty nail" (p. 90) into Ellen's tree, the *E. maidenii*, a gift from her father. Here, Bail's reference to Ellen's physical beauty and sexuality via a description of nature is easily discernible:

It had grown as she had: slender, straight, pale. It was subtle in its limb-parting beauty; Ellen considered it female. (90)

This "pale tree" (92) suffers further assault later in the narrative as Ellen witnesses Mr Cave and her father symbolically "marking" their territory (Ellen) by urinating on its trunk. Bail has the "lidded eye" of Mr Cave's penis "surveying Ellen" (94) as she hides behind a eucalypt. The theme of imperial ownership is illuminated in this episode as Mr Cave's desire to dominate both the landscape and Ellen is palpable:

Mr Cave fanned out across the landscape like a cone or searchlight, consuming all before him; and before long he would be consuming her. (94)

Anne Summers' persistently influential publication *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975) provides a revealing analysis of the "colonization" of women throughout Australian history. Kay Schaffer's later elaboration of this notion contends that the Australian landscape is "desired within a framework of

imperial and colonial ideologies as an object to be possessed, conquered and tamed" and that "Woman, metaphorically, resides here" (23). Bail's often contrived construction of nature as an uncontained, feminine force is evident as he again "overpersonifies" the characteristics of eucalypts:

The surrounding leaves are almost promiscuous  
in their flaunting of different thicknesses, shapes,  
colours and shine. (34)

*Eucalyptus* certainly provides a number of references to a callous and distinctly masculine colonizing agency which attempts to contend with this impudent, feminized force as Ellen's suitors persistently "trudge" over the landscape, advancing in "trucks, cars, motorcycles, by train or on foot" (90). Michael Upchurch refers to Mr Cave's "bloodless taxonomic imperative" (6). This character's inexorable progress through the eucalypts on Holland's property is particularly noteworthy and reminds one of the workings of a harvester:

This man was steadily advancing, not rushing.  
Nothing would stop him! (87)

As colonizing force, Mr Cave is formidable. Consistently methodical and unremitting in his commitment to emerge victorious from Holland's naming "test," Mr Cave's success in dominating the landscape, and by extension, Ellen, seems assured.

Clearly, the representation of the woman-nature connection in Bail's narrative is consistently associated with sexuality; more specifically, with the subjugation of female sexuality and the assertion of male sexual dominance. Extending upon feminist writer Susan Griffin's 1978 exploration of the pornographic implications of the woman-nature analogy, Marlene Longenecker contends that women and nature have both been "constructed for the satisfaction of masculine desire" (3). This objectification is certainly evident in Bail's construction of the landscape as it relates to Holland:

The father moved to the window and with hands clasped  
behind his back adopted a father's pose of gazing over  
his park-like property ... It included delicate curves, pale  
brown grasses, liquid flow and heat. (68)

Again, the implicit suggestion of Ellen's objectification, that she too is the property of her father, combines with the allusion to her burgeoning sexuality ("delicate curves" and "liquid flow and heat") to render her, like nature, an unpredictable and unruly force which must be subdued and controlled.

Interestingly, the aforementioned symbolic desecration of Ellen (the nail in the *E. maidenii*) occurs at a point in the narrative where Ellen's sexual maturation has become apparent to her father. As a child, Holland rejected his mother after witnessing her sexual transgression with the local mayor. Holland will not make the same mistake as his father who "saw no reason to stop smiling" (28) and who eventually allowed the mayor to replace him. Instead, he sets a seemingly impossible task for would-be suitors and keeps a constant "eye" on his daughter. In this sense, Holland's property is not the only "possession" that he can be found "gazing over"; indeed, the novel is filled with references to both Holland and Mr Cave "looking upon" Ellen, engaging in a vigilant surveillance of her dangerous beauty and recusant sexuality.

Further suggestions of Ellen's connection with nature in the novel can be located in the repeated references to her "speckled beauty" which are always conciliated with descriptions of the speckled gums that surround her. These allusions often suggest an irresistible allure to Ellen's "beauty" which is likened to a "speckled pigeon-egg that far exceeded anything in the district" (130). This beauty is also a source of danger to the male "watcher" as Molloy, an unfortunate young man from the township, discovers. Upon his hurried and distracted departure from secretly watching Ellen bathing in the river, naked and siren-like, he is flung from his motorbike and "met in the face by the barbed wire, which tore off most of his nose" (48). Consequently, Holland is offered further justification for his attempts to control his wayward daughter as he "almost unconsciously ... supervised her movements" which, to him, "felt like the bestowing of protection" (31). Ellen's desirability might make her a valuable possession, but, again, it also makes her one in need of close monitoring. Paradoxically, it is this surveillance that makes her even more attractive to potential suitors: "the slightest suggestion of trapped beauty produces a deeper resonance than plain beauty" (53–54). For the men in Bail's novel intimations of Ellen's threatening potential and of her unattainability only add to her allure and enhance her value as a worthy acquisition.

Ellen cannot seem to escape the Lacanian "male gaze," a term popularised in 1975 by Laura Mulvey in her widely received essay "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema." While Mulvey's findings refer specifically to the objectification of women in *visual* texts, her observations on the threatening sexuality of women are relevant to the current study. Gwendolyn Foster's more recent contribution to this theory refers to the female body as an "object of fetishistic voyeurism" and she contends that the male "watcher" or viewer "derives pleasure from gazing at an objectified female body" (39). The unnamed stranger who attempts to woo Ellen through story-telling communicates his awareness of how women themselves are prone to "seeing" through the male gaze as he relates the story of the young woman obsessed with her own

reflection, always glancing "left and right for any reflective surfaces" (123). Despite his apparent perceptiveness, the stranger, too, subjugates Ellen via his male gaze. As Ellen sways through the trees, feeling "both free and spectacularly vulnerable," the stranger watches and attempts to "steady her, with his eyes at least" (133-144). It seems that Ellen also monitors herself as she can be found continuously looking in the mirror and seems baffled by the stranger's behaviour when he is *not* objectifying her: "When she stole a glance he wasn't even looking in her direction" (103). Even as Ellen lies in her bed, physically ill and emotionally defeated, she is still subject to this "gaze" as her father allows potential suitors into the confines of her bedroom in an attempt to rouse her from her melancholy. The suitors sit beside her bed, a vantage point from which they can "roam with their eyes unhindered all over Ellen's speckled face" (234). The front door through which these men pass to gain access to Ellen represents "victory with all its association of ownership, warmth and entry" (232). Again, Bail's heroine suffers a gross metaphorical violation as these men are permitted entry to the "dark homestead" (232), entry to Ellen.

Catherine Roach contends that the tendency to "merge [women] with nature" renders them "semihuman" (51). Thus far, Ellen's dehumanisation has been examined in light of the novel's exploitation of the patriarchal tendency to "naturalise" women and "feminise" the landscape. What is also clear, however, is Bail's transparent and calculated "animalising" of his female protagonist. Bail attributes Ellen with a neck that is "like a pale swan" (139), a head that moves "like an irritated horse" (112) and has her "almost let out an animal cry of some kind, in despair" (100). Bail's "prickly and extravagant" humour is glaring in Mr Cave's proffering of molasses to the equine "speckled beauty" (appaloosa?), Ellen. Prominent ecofeminist, Val Plumwood, contends that domination, exploitation and subjugation derive "conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial, and ethnic difference as close to the animal and the body — both construed as spheres of inferiority" (187). Coviello and Borgerson seek to explain this inferiority in alluding to the Western inclination to perceive animals as "mechanistic, non-thinking, [and] soulless" (3). The often contrived connection between Ellen and animals, with its implication that she must be tamed and contained, is evidence of Bail's implicit contention that his female protagonist's passivity, inferiority and powerlessness are attributable to the interrelated hierarchical dualisms that serve to sanction patriarchy.

Whether "animalised" or "naturalised," Ellen is perpetually trapped by her physicality, her embodiment. Colleen Mack-Canty analyses third-wave feminism's concern with "the situated and embodied perspectives of different(ing) women" (155). Bail, too, seems to share this concern as Ellen's physical, embodied existence literally prevents her from asserting herself in any substantial fashion; hence, her often frustrating passivity and inaction.

At novel's end, Ellen demonstrates an awareness that her value lies in her physical form when she "slid[es] beneath the blankets, covering herself" so that her love interest, the story-telling stranger, is unable to view her now faded beauty, her "legendary spots" which now seemed "out of harmony with the rest of her face" (242). Ellen's inability to take a stand against this objectification and domination is clear. When she reluctantly concedes to see Mr Cave in her bedroom, Ellen "holds her breasts" (243-4) as her only form of defence. Similarly, Ellen's response to her father's singular plan is confined to the body and is seemingly inconsequential: "All along it had been ridiculous and she began blinking in fury" (241). The objectification of the female body and its concomitant debilitation seems to be part of a family legacy as Ellen's mother, too, is rendered helpless as a result of her embodiment. When imagining Ellen's now-deceased mother, Holland can only recall her "hips, wrists, breasts, mouth with expression, her voice — not that she was one of the world's great talkers" (18). On her death bed, "she just lay there crying ... softly. She couldn't stop. She grew weak with it" (13). Bail's narrative provides an exposé of the feminine connection to the body which sees Woman as weak, irrational, sexual and chaotic; again, an unruly force over which Man must struggle to preside. In the case of Ellen's mother, Holland's ultimate domination is assured through *his* inaction as he allows his wife to slowly bleed to death.

The apparent absence of any substance in Bail's female characters could be a point of contention for some readers who might question whether Bail's novel simply perpetuates the very ideology it seems to attempt to expose and vilify. If she had read *Eucalyptus*, Miriam Dixson may have referred to Ellen as a "Noble Victim," whose purity is debased at the hands of male oppression. For Dixson this claim "conceals a form of condescension toward women and inverted aggrandisement of men worthy of the finest male chauvinist" (244). However, Bail's representation of the (male) consignees of culture, order and reason certainly involves no aggrandisement; it is both cynical and scathing. Indeed, it is perhaps through his renderings of the blundering duo, Holland and Mr Cave, that Bail's skill as a parodist operates at its peak. If Ellen is a "noble victim" at best, who is perpetually silenced and ultimately pathetic, her father and suitor-most-likely are attributed with even fewer redeeming qualities. Bail's focus on his male protagonists' obsessive tendencies, and on their clumsy dealings with Ellen, ultimately exposes them as not only fatuitous, but psychologically disturbed! So while it could appear that Bail simply reinscribes traditional value dualisms, his novel actually questions their very existence. More specifically, Bail's text serves not only to critique the gendered nature of these normative dualisms, but to challenge the privileging of particular elements within these pairings. Certainly, the folly of Bail's male protagonists compels readers to question the value that dominant Western ideology has attributed to the ideals of progress, reason and order.

Both Holland and Mr Cave are conspicuous in their obsession with collecting, naming, ordering and acquiring. Bail's text contains consistent reiterations of Holland's link to progress, culture and reason, of his "instinct for completeness, classification, order; his way of encompassing to all corners a given subject or situation" (30). Mr Cave is also described as having a "methodical mind" (77) and he and his prospective father-in-law can be heard booming across the paddocks, "their voices littered with latinised names, placenames and occasional surnames" (112). Even the numerous failed suitors attempt to woo Ellen without even acknowledging her, "with their backs turned, reciting facts" (63), "all wearing their ridiculous detailed knowledge of trees" (119). Michael Hulse describes *Eucalyptus* as a novel of "high seriousness and higher playfulness" (32). Certainly, Bail's denouncement of knowledge and fact-gathering, and his contention that they are pointless pursuits, are often communicated via a wry mockery and an amusing use of irony. In one of Bail's narrative digressions, a man is drowned by "weighing himself down with German dictionaries and German encyclopaedias" (80). The text's allusion to the hierarchical culture/nature and reason/emotion dichotomies in relation to this denouncement is indubitable:

Really, what sort of man could go and name all the trees?  
... the sheer number of names shifting about in English  
and Latin would occupy vital space in a person, space  
that could be used for other, more natural things (67)

Bail's narrative frequently inverts the traditional hierarchy of these dualisms, rendering the masculine binary elements inferior due to their association with the inane and the insignificant. Furthermore, this inversion serves to debunk the culturally constructed and conventionalised connections between culture, order, the mind, initiative and reason. Interestingly, the only male character in the novel who escapes Bail's tenacious and unforgiving scrutiny is Ellen's love interest, the elusive, story-telling stranger. Of significance is the manner in which Bail distinguishes the stranger from Holland and Mr Cave by connecting him with nature. Readers are given an unusual description of this character upon his entrance to the narrative:

Soft contours of flesh come forward in bush, the trees and  
undergrowth suddenly act as backdrops. It was a man, lying  
in the shade (101)

In stark contrast to Holland and Mr Cave, the stranger's voice "vibrated along with the familiar heat, through the trees" (19). Here, Bail utilizes a different kind of inversion in order to critique the assumed superiority of a masculine culture over a (usually) feminized nature. At novel's end, the stranger trumps Mr Cave, emerging the victor of Holland's "competition," despite never having

legitimately competed in the first place. It would seem that the stranger is complicit with Bail (and with Ellen) in his recognition of Mr Cave and Holland's folly which is symptomatic of their persistent desire to dominate and oppress: "I could throw you over one shoulder and march off into the trees, or something like that" (254). The stranger's jocundity is unmistakable as he, like Bail, presents a parody of male domination.

Bail's exposé of the conceptual structures that sanction domination and subordination is both amusing and earnest. *Eucalyptus* constitutes a revision of the very idea of Australia, its place and its people and, more specifically, illuminates the continuing urgency of representing the expression of marginalised perspectives. While it could be argued that his female protagonist is never truly emancipated from her entrapment in the woman/nature analogy, Bail's text attempts to remove the need for this emancipation by inverting the traditional hierarchy in the culture/nature dualism. Although the effectiveness of this inversion in terms of its capacity to empower the feminine is highly disputable, *Eucalyptus* does present readers with a powerful remonstrance of the so-called "logic" of domination and thereby exposes and vilifies what Plumwood refers to as the 'culture of the master' (187), the ideology that legitimises all forms of oppression. Perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of Bail's text is its failure to provide alternatives to dualistic paradigms, to transcend this dualistic ideology entirely. Nevertheless, in the contemporary struggle to understand and subvert the cultural practices and beliefs that perpetuate injustice on a global scale, Bail's parodic musings on the desire to dominate seem worthy of consideration. More specifically, ecofeminism's contention that all forms of oppression are linked, or are mutually reinforcing, lends potency to Bail's fictional exploration of the patterns of thinking that initiate and sustain these various forms of domination. Perhaps Bail himself hints at the allegorical intention of his text, at the propensity for fictional narratives to contribute to the field of social analysis which seeks to explain oppressive ideologies:

"beware of any man who deliberately tells a story ... it's worth asking, when a man starts concocting a story in front of you. Why is he telling it? What does he want?" (53)

## Works Cited

- Alaimo, S. "Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism." *Feminist Studies*, 20.1 (Spring 1994) 133–52.
- . "The Undomesticated Nature of Feminism: Mary Austin and the Progressive Women Conservationists." *Studies in American Fiction*, 26.1 (Spring 1998) 73–95.
- Bail, M. *Eucalyptus*. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 1998.

- Clark, M. "Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters by Karen J. Warren." *NWSA Journal*, Bloomington, 15.1 (Spring 2003) 193.
- Coviello, J. and J. n.d. Borgerson. "Tracing Parallel Oppressions: A Feminist Ontology of Women and Animals." *Feminista*, 3.4 (1999) 1-8.
- Defrain, D. "Fairytale Uncovers the Roots of Storytelling in a Mythic Eucalyptus Grove." *Antipodes*, 13.1 (June 1999) 46-47.
- Dixon, M. *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788 to Present*. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1976.
- Durack, C. "(Re)Mapping 'Woman' and 'Nature': An Ecofeminist Reading of *Away and Afterimage*." *Library and Archives Canada*, Concordia University, Québec, Canada, February, 2006. 1-55.
- Foster, G. "Looking in the Mirror: A Bibliographic Essay on Women Filmmakers." *Transformations*, Bloomington, 6.1 (March 1995) 39.
- Gelder, K. "Politics and Monomania: The Rarefied World of Contemporary Australian Literary Culture." *Overland*, 184 (2006) 48-56.
- Grbich, J. "The Scent of Colonialism: Mabo, *Eucalyptus* and Excursions within Legal Racism." *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 15 (December 2001) 121-48.
- Hulse, M. "Up a Gum Tree." *The Spectator*, London, 281.8869 (August 1998) 32.
- Longenecker, M. "Women, Ecology, and the Environment: An Introduction." *NWSA Journal* 9.3 (Fall 1997) 1-17.
- Mack-Canty, C. "Third-Wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality." *NWSA Journal* 16.3 (Fall 2004) 154-79.
- McFague, S. "The Loving Eye vs. the Arrogant Eye: Christian Critique of the Western Gaze on Nature and the Third World." *The Ecumenical Review*, Geneva, 49.2 (1997) 185-94.
- McNeer, R. "Happily Ever After: William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*." *Antipodes*, 16.2 (December 2002) 171-76.
- Mellor, M. "New Woman, New Earth — Setting the Agenda." *Organization & Environment* 10.3 (September 1997) 296.
- Mulvey, L. "Looking at the Past from the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s." *Signs*, Chicago, 30.1 (Autumn 2004) 1287.
- . *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, Houndmills, 1989.
- Phillips, A.A. "Barbara Baynton and the Dissidence of the Nineties." *The Australian Nationalists*, Ed. Wallace-Crabbe, C, Melbourne: Oxford UP 1971. 149-58.
- Plumwood, V. "Feminism and the Mastery of Nature." *Canadian Geographer*, Toronto, 40.2 (Summer, 1996) 187.
- . "The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land." *Ethics & The Environment* 11.2 (Fall, 2006) 115-51.
- Roach, C. "Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation." *Hypatia* 6.1 (Spring, 1991) 46-59.
- Ross, R. "Australia." *World Literature Today*, 74.1 (Winter 2000) 233.
- Schaffer, K. *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Somma, M. and Tolleson-Rinehart. "Tracking the Elusive Green Women: Sex,

- Environmentalism, and Feminism in the United States and Europe." *Political Research Quarterly* 50.1 (March 1997) 153–69.
- Summers, A. *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.
- Upchurch, M. "Enchanted Forest: An Australian Novel Ties the Fate of a Young Woman to Eucalyptus Trees." *New York Times Book Review*, Academic Research Library (October 4, 1998) 6.
- Warren, K. and C. Duane. "Feminism and Peace: Seeing Connections." *Hypatia*, 9.2 (Spring 1994) 4.
- Warren, K. "Introduction to Ecofeminism." *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Ed. M. Zimmerman, J. Callicott, G. Sessions, K. Warren and J. Clark. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1993. 253-256.

