Murray Bail’s *Eucalyptus*  
*An Australian Fairy-Tale?*

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The essentially dialogic nature of human language, now widely recognized in the field of cultural studies, was first foregrounded by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In his work,1 which presents all acts of communication as responses to previous ones, meaning is said to be relational, in that it depends upon the social circumstances in which each utterance is produced. In this perspective, each text also occupies a given position within a complex intertextual network, to which it reacts as much as it can be reacted to.

In the postcolonial context, where writers tend to appropriate texts from the European canon in order to challenge the dominant discourses of imperialism, the concept of dialogism takes on a highly political dimension. The third novel by the Australian author Murray Bail, for instance, seems to exemplify this process of overt incorporation and covert interrogation. On the one hand, *Eucalyptus*, which has often been styled a ‘modern’ fairy-tale, is freely inspired by an archetypal “European folk tale”2 in which “a man (usually a king)”3 devises a daunting test that must be passed by any suitor intent on winning his beautiful daughter’s hand; as we shall see, it also intertextually alludes to famous tales by the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault. Conversely, it can be argued that the novel simultaneously undertakes to question the fairy-tale as a classic European literary genre. Even though Bail uses the phrase ‘once upon a time’ twice in

2 Margaret Clunies Ross, untitled review of *Eucalyptus*, *Southerly* 63.1 (2003): 221.
Chapter One, he does so in a near-apologetic or possibly dismissive way, either to convince himself that there is nothing “wrong”\(^4\) with fairy-tales or to declare that they are “interesting for a while but largely irrelevant here” (9). Similarly, after presenting Ellen as the tale’s beautiful heroine, the narrator declares that “the idea that Holland’s daughter was like the princess locked in the tower of a damp castle was of course false” (53). Such logic of paradox baffles the reader, whose expectations are repeatedly violated, but also compels him/her to reconsider the general issue of the novel’s form. Indeed, the strategies of “canonical counter-discourse”\(^5\) leading to the rewriting of European works of fiction involve a broad political agenda that cannot possibly be reduced to a mere ‘dialogue’ with one – or, for that matter, several – classic texts. As Helen Tiffin puts it,

[No] writer is simply ‘writing back’ to [a...] canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds.\(^6\)

In this essay, I will, then, attempt to shed light on the above-mentioned dichotomy between Bail’s self-reflexive denials and his commentators’ propensity for rash labelling, by exploring how a sophisticated use of intertextuality allows the author to converge towards, prior to diverging from, the fairy-tale as a genre in order to create, ultimately, what Stephen Henighan has called “a fictional hybrid.”\(^7\)

To determine the extent to which *Eucalyptus* can be termed a fairy-tale, I shall compare its structure with the compositional pattern underlying the archetypal fairy-tale as delineated by Vladimir Propp. In his pioneering *Morphology of the Folktale*, which – despite a misleading title – focuses on the European (more particularly, Russian) fairy-tale, the great Russian formalist defines the genre as “a story built upon the proper alternation of [...] functions in various forms, with some of them absent from each story and with others repeated.”\(^8\) The notion of function is itself “understood as an act of a character, defined


\(^6\) Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse,” 98.
