ANDREW TAYLOR: David Malouf, Remembering Babylon

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David Malouf's most recent novel will undoubtedly remind readers of his second, An Imaginary Life. Remembering Babylon, as its title suggests, shares the earlier novel's preoccupation with language, and both explore what happens when a stranger, reared in totally other cultural circumstances, is introduced into a small, beleaguered community held together largely by a common fear of all that surrounds it. An Imaginary Life is one of the treasures of Australian literature. The limpidity of its prose is exemplary. And when I taught it at the University of Tübingen last year, my German students not only immediately recognised it as a parable of colonial relationships with a direct bearing on Australia's post-colonial situation; they also read it as a paradigm of how language might relate not only to power, but also to reality and - since they were German - even to Truth. The relationship of language to truth - except in the sense of whether a character is telling lies or not - is not something much Australian fiction explores. Malouf's does. Whether it be Ovid's Latin or the language of the Getae, or that other speech beyond words that he learns as he approaches his death; or the names of the birds that Jim inscribes in The Book in Fly Away Peter; or the works of the Great Writer in Child's Play; or the language of colour and form in Harland's Half Acre; or simply the mere names of his fellow soldiers on the Burma Railway recalled by Digger at the end of The Great World: language and its relation to truth are central to Malouf's work.

It was all there in his first novel, Johnno, in the harrowing self-revelation of Johnno's final letter, which said everything, and also revealed how "everything" could be unsaid, and would always remain outside language.

Except in Child's Play, Malouf doesn't play any of the once-fashionable post-modern tricks, such as highlighting his own text's textuality, his own fiction's fictionality. But all of his fiction hovers around some of postmodernism's central preoccupations: the relation of language and system to such things as chaos, power, reality and truth. In his novels, what remains central is not how characters communicate to others, but how they communicate to themselves, and how what they know might relate to what is not themselves. His continual worrying of Kantian certainties makes Malouf not only post-modern; it also gives him access to a Romantic vocabulary of great power and subtlety.

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Remembering Babylon's title remains an enigma until its final chapter. Thebulk of the novel is set in a tiny settlement of Scots immigrants in Queensland north of Bowen in the middle of last century. They are surrounded - and threatened - by rainforest inhabited by hostile Aboriginals. Everything about them is creepy, and at night they sleep as close to their guns as they do to their spouses.

And then, in a page of breathless, seemingly endless prose which it would be murder to condense, something balances on that crucial dividing fence at the edge of the rainforest, balances there for a moment, confronted by a white child with a stick aimed like a rifle, and tumbles out of the terrifying unknown into the white settlement.

Gemmy Fairley is a London slum child who survived the appalling conditions of the Industrial Revolution by becoming the "boy" (we are left to imagine some of his duties) of a London rat catcher. Escaping to sea, he is thrown overboard near the Queensland shore and lives for ten years with an Aboriginal tribe. He can neither read nor write, and can barely speak any English, but is induced to tell his story to the local parson and schoolmaster who, to his fascination, write it down.
Taken in and cared for by the family of the child who "discovered" Gemmy, he is given work, taught again to speak English, and partially integrated into the community. This is helped along by two strange women who have built a real house - as distinct from the crude shacks of the Scots - and who establish a kind of genteel "salon" which includes not only the young school teacher and some of his pupils, but also Gemmy.

It all falls apart. Fear grows - and violence with it - that Gemmy might be an infiltrator and spy for hostile Aboriginals. He disappears, taking with him a handful of the children's school exercises which, being illiterate, he thinks is his appalling life as it was written down by the teacher on his arrival. And the novel leaps, for its final chapter, fifty years or so.

This is where the novel's title makes sense: Remembering Babylon. Gemmy Fairley was another language injected into the settlers' world: he was once Cockney, he was more particularly Aboriginal, above all else he was Threat. Having proved that he could exist there, he came out of Nowhere and, therefore, demonstrated that others could too. He divided the unanimity of the settlement, made them argue amongst themselves. He set tongue against tongue, and created Babel. And remembering? One of the children who encountered Gemmy that day was a girl who became a nun. The boy with the stick, her cousin (like Gemmy, an orphan, but a luckier one), became a member of State Parliament. His career is compromised, during the Great War, by the revelation that his cousin has been corresponding with a German. The topic? How bees communicate, a subject that she has been researching in her convent. The authorities think she may be dealing in code.

The sudden leap in time near the book's conclusion is only one of its audacities. Some may find it unsettling; I found it utterly compelling. Another is the actual conclusion, as positive and as Mahlerian as anything in modern fiction in English. But then Malouf has never been afraid of the grand statement so few of his contemporaries would dare. He can do it gently, subtly, with the force of a revelation rather than a pronouncement.

Malouf's reputation is so secure nowadays that he might almost get away with anything. The real reason why he can get away with what he does is because he gets it right. Remembering Babylon is yet another demonstration of how right he gets it. Truth and language do not fit so well as Kant hoped they would. But in a language of great subtlety and beauty, Malouf suggests that there may be another way of bridging the gap between our minds and what we are trying to understand, so that the world can be "in touch now with its other life". Of discovering, in other words, the truth about itself.