DAVID BROOKS: David Malouf, Fly Away Peter and Child's Play

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Journal: WESTERLY


In 1982 David Malouf published two short novels, *Child's Play* and *Fly Away Peter*, the former perhaps best briefly described as a study of the mind and method of an Italian terrorist, the latter a significant contribution to that tradition of Australian novels of the Great War which includes such pieces as Roger McDonald’s *1915* and Frederick Manning’s masterpiece, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (once *Her Privates We*). Although a far shorter and, in many respects, a slighter piece, *Fly Away Peter* will perhaps remind its readers more of the Manning than the McDonald, not only because it deals with the experience of an Australian on the Western Front, but also for its lyricism and its clear attempt both to locate the events it describes on the scale of mankind’s spiritual experience and to make of itself an image of that scale.

This latter, of course, is a Dantescan undertaking. Comparison of the trenches with the *bolges* of the *Inferno* has always been available to those who write or read of the Great War, and Malouf may be said to go even further in hinting of a *Paradiso* in the Queensland bird sanctuary from which his heroes come. And yet, in its movement from their isolation in that sanctuary to the cruel community of Flanders in 1917, *Fly Away Peter* resembles at last not so much a set of metaphors for diverse states of the human spirit as a tour of the human mind, collective and individual: we feel that it is not alternatives that are set before us in the book’s dramatically contrasting settings, but complementary and interdependent parts, the author bringing them to us more concerned for a fullness, a roundness of vision, than for the comfort of those who receive it.

Unlike Dante, that is to say, Malouf is - or *seems* - more concerned to get the vision than the instructions right, as if the one might naturally predicate the other: there is in this book, as in *An Imaginary Life* and *Child's Play*, an intense calm that is more the concentration of the artist (the photographer?) than the conviction of the dogmatist or the catalepsy of the shellshocked soldier. At one point, a party working on new fortifications discover the skeleton of a mammoth and the trenches become for a moment an archaeological dig; at another the trench network seems the ruins of that great city from which several of its muddy ditches have drawn their names (Hyde Park Corner, Piccadilly, the Strand): Malouf, it would appear, is less interested in the war as such than he is in the metaphor with which it can provide him, less concerned to present the horror of that experience than he is to identify its place amongst human experiences, and the effect is ultimately less Dantescan than reminiscent of such poems of Thomas Hardy as "At Castle Boterel," where one man's condition is placed in perspective by the landscape and the vast chronicle of prehistory that can be read therein. If the nature of the experience of the naive colonial going to that European war limits greatly the possibilities open to those who would write about it - if the plot and many of the incidents of Malouf's book resemble, sometimes uncomfortably, those of *1915*, the movie *Gallipoli*, and poems of Owen and Rosenberg - it is this calm, this roundness, this sense that the war itself, for all its horror, is somehow accommodated in a wider vision of time and human experience, that gives to *Fly Away Peter* its distinctive character.

In *Child's Play*, a very different, very similar novel the mastery of which ensures that it dramatically eclipses the short stories ("Eustace" and "The Prowler") with which it is bound, a terrorist studies with what might seem a disproportionate fascination the life and work of the man he is to kill: one could say, with some attention to one of the underlying metaphors, that he devours him. The man who will become his victim is a famous author, "a rare national treasure and the last great figure of the age, a surviving witness to its many splendidors and the long procession of its woes." We are presented with précés of some of his
most famous works: the moving account, in his first published story, of a visitation received at the time of his brother's death at the front; the gist of his book on the Roman drains, a response to an invitation in the 'thirties "to contribute to the birthday honours of the regime's favourite historian"; a poignant summary of his "Letter to a Son," written a year after that boy's tragic death. *Child's Play* is narrated by the terrorist himself, and throughout it there is, therefore, an important question in the reader's mind as to the extent of the narrator's self-knowledge, as to his *reliability* as narrator, no small part of which must concern the objectivity of his choice and account of the great author's works. How much do the works chosen reflect the terrorist's own preoccupations? The question, once admitted, prefaces further and more important questions as to the nature of the text itself. How reliable, for example, is our impression that the book - the set of books within the book becomes an arrangement of self-reflecting devices, of metaphors for itself, and so a remarkable instance of what is currently termed metafiction? How intentional, on Malouf's part, is the ultimate solipsism of this kind of construction? Is the in-volved nature of the book itself an ironic mirror to the isolation of its two principals - the terrorist, studying all day in silence in a secret workshop of the organization and returning at night to his cell-like room in a dark, labyrinthine palazzo, and the author, four hundred kilometers away, writing all day his famous labyrinthine sentences in the same room in which he sleeps, divorced almost entirely from commerce with the world?

Is *Child's Play* really a book about books, about texts and the interaction within them of authors and readers, the reader here the terrorist, the author the author really, and the eventual assassination in some way an assassination of the writer? Or is it, on the other hand, and despite the possibly unreliable terrorist/narrator's warning against such simplistic psychology, an obliquely-Freudian enactment of the son's need to assassinate the father? Are such constructions ultimately combined at some deeper level in a modern vegetation-rite, the assassination of an Adonis/corn-god/tribal chieftain in an attempt to ensure continued fertility, abundance of crops? Is Malouf writing, in fact, of society's need, in the interest of its own health, to embody and even to nurture the forces of its own annihilation? The Great Author himself speaks often enough of his own "anti-works," and is not something very similar implied in the large, governing metaphors of *Fly Away Peter*, in which civilization, figured early in the book as the "monstrous cage" of a flying machine, "crossed and criss-crossed with piano wire," attempts to imitate the flight of birds, and in which the vast and infernal labyrinth of the Western Front is seen as a dark modern negative of a picture from the hero's childhood, of ant-like labourers swarming over and about great blocks of stone, forced to relinquish life and freedom in the construction of the pyramids?

All of these things are present in *Child's Play*; a number of them are present in *Fly Away Peter*, and were latent in *An Imaginary Life*: these are not simple books, and yet, significantly, they are written with a disarming simplicity; their language and their force are poetic, their narratives aiming at once to represent clearly and tangibly the objects it moves amongst, and to turn them - as symbols, as metaphors - to wider purposes, a use that is both direct and ironic, that has both great presence and a strong yearning to be or to evoke something else. As Malouf seeks in his works and their characters a wholeness of life, so he seeks a wholeness in the language, in the voice which expresses it. It is an aim I find succinctly expressed in two lines from a poem by Czeslaw Milosz:

> My voice always lacked fullness, I would
> like to render a different thanksgiving.
> And generously, without irony which is
> the glory of slaves.
> ("Not This Way")

David Malouf seeks fullness of voice; not totally without irony, which is one of his tools, but with a knowledge that it is irony, and, at a time when its use by those who would speak their minds is optional rather than mandatory, *only* irony, only one of the tools.

To the unsuspecting, such a statement might seem to make too much of what is, after all, but one aspect of the writer's technique. But Malouf, as does Milosz, asks his readers to see it as something more, a process of abstraction at once necessary and threatening to all our negotiations with ourselves, with others, and with
the earth which sustains us. It is, I would suggest, far more than coincidence that the Ovid of An Imaginary Life should have been exiled, as Peter Pierce has already remarked, for the uses to which he turned his sense of irony, and that the Great Author of Child's Play should have earned his status as victim through "a lifetime's devotion" to the same. If irony is the glory of slaves, then the necessity of irony might be taken to register a condition of slavery, and the ability to write what one wishes without irony to correspond to a condition of liberty. In a state where others are saying openly what the ironist is saying through irony, it could be argued that the irony itself is not necessitated. It might even be suggested that, persisting in circumstances that do not necessitate it, the unquestioned habit of irony unwittingly creates one of the preconditions for oppression or weakens a society's ability to resist its onset. Although Child's Play offers no clear and final reasons for the Author's assassination, it may be that in the terrorist's mind it is culpable that, given the opportunity of open criticism of Mussolini's regime, he should have resorted to the Roman drains - culpable that, in recording the history and moral dilemmas of over half a century, his style should have always been one that "takes account of the contradictions and holds them in precarious balance," extending thus a tacit tolerance toward the evils of the period. It is as if his habit of irony, like his face, contains subtle signs "of a secret complicity with the forces of disintegration," runs the risk "of a special sort of corruption, corruption of the moral."

It may be, in any case, that beneath such notions, as beneath my own use of the lines from Milosz, there are several others, about atrophy (a characteristic constriction of the throat rendering less likely the full-voiced shout when it is needed), about the interdependence of habits of language and habits of perception, about The Boy Who Cried "Wolf."

This, all this, is not to say that the persistence of irony where it is not necessitated is unequivocably undesirable. In An Imaginary Life a skein of ironies of which he may have been unaware has given Ovid unsuspected foreknowledge of those subtle, yet astonishing transformations which come upon him at the end of the book, and it might be argued that a sense of irony has in this case served his evolution. It might, in a different vein, be argued that the maintenance of a tradition of irony through a period of comparative liberty the better prepares a society to withstand or guard against a condition of slavery. Arguments for and against irony in several of its forms may be woven from and about Malouf's books, and although, to judge from his plots alone, he would seem, like his terrorist, to make irony his mark, and to argue, in his preoccupation with events (the realization, at the conclusion of Child's Play, of an assassination ironically foretold in one of the author's works; the communion, at the conclusion of An Imaginary Life, with the Child who had hitherto been only a product of Ovid's imagination) and with the naming of things (of birds in the sanctuary at the opening of Fly Away Peter; of men at its conclusion in the trenches), for a dramatic and non-ironic rapprochment of language and the world, he is ultimately less concerned with a condemnation of irony and a return to a speech, to paraphrase John Synge, as crisp as a ripe apple, than he is to examine the nature and rhythms of their interaction.

Treating irony, at last, as but one symptom of a wider problem, Malouf's books evince a concern for the reintegration of a world of which the mind and body have somehow become estranged - a world in the human perception of which intellectual faculties have hypertrophied and there has come about a kind of dissociation of sensibilities. Man's knowledge of the world has become - like that, perhaps, of the Great Author himself - abstracted, has gone too long untested by and in those things it is a knowledge of, and to maintain their strength its users must, like Antaeus, touch ground. While it is, I would argue, no less in their shape and in the remarkable limpidity of a style that eschews abstractions, that seeks instead to ground its ideas in objects and actions, than it is in their subject matter, in each of his new novels, as in An Imaginary Life, Malouf attempts this kind of testing, writes with such a respect and care for things as might, if more widely practised, pave the way for a more general fullness of voice, a wider reinheritance of the world.

These books are important; there is far more to be said of them than I have touched upon, and I have no reservations in saying that each in its own way matches the achievement of their extraordinary predecessor. Concerned for the state of man, not merely of Australians, for the state of language as such, and not merely of the author's own, it may be that they signal a further stage in the maturation of Australian fiction, and, influential as I think they may become, will soon be indispensable to one's understanding of it.

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