

BOOK REVIEW

Jean-Paul Delamotte, *Un dimanche à Melbourne. Conte franco-australien*, Paris, La Petite Maison, 1998, 240 pp., paperback, 120 French francs.

Tireless in his efforts to promote French-Australian relations, especially in literature, Jean-Paul Delamotte has shown an attachment to this country that has continued to grow since his time spent as a university teacher here. Given the fact that he had already written three works of fiction published by Gallimard and Plon before he came to the Antipodes, it would be surprising not to find Australia looming large in a subsequent novel.

Jean-Paul Delamotte is a man who is multi-talented, widely read and widely travelled. No wonder also that he has a mind brimming with words, ideas, images. In *Un Dimanche à Melbourne* he gives his interests free rein, with the associations he makes further extended by the fact that the book was written in Melbourne in 1976, put onto a computer in 1995 and finally published in 1998. The text is therefore multi-layered, and multi-voiced, with many a rueful aside made with the benefit of hindsight.

Most of the *dimanche à Melbourne* is spent either in the Grand Hotel - obviously the Windsor - or in the National Gallery, where the young couple, David Méjanes and Élisabeth, make very original verbal love in a manner inspired by many paintings which will be familiar to Melbourne readers. Indeed all of the four main characters are very verbal, preferring to joust with words and ideas rather than with other lethal weapons at their disposal. The conflict in which they are involved is a modern-day struggle of David and Goliath, as the author works through the central intriguing question of whether David would win that confrontation in today's world.

David, a young Frenchman who studies ornithology by day and works as a barman at the hotel by night, is short of stature but quick of mind and imagination. He inadvertently gets in the way of Monsieur Goliath, the heavy-weight bodyguard of the two high-level representatives of the multinational EPICEA (*Enterrement Privé, Industriel, Commercial Et Artistique*) and its affiliate FIL (*Front International de la Laideur*) - Philistines all, highly-trained and very smart with it! The pair have come to do secret deals with some of the Australia's bureaucrats, involving putting our deserts to novel funereal use.

David wins over Élisabeth, the young secretary, both of them finally confronting the two redoubtable bosses of EPICEA, the real Goliath, as the bodyguard is relatively easily put out of action. The battle of wits and words that ensues takes the reader through a series of unpredictable twists and turns. Although the book was originally written in 1976, the threat to humanist values posed by the insidious, ruthless operations of EPICEA strikes a very resonant chord today. The increasing power of the multi-nationals and powerlessness of the individual is a common theme at the end of the twentieth century.

Delamotte calls the book a "Voltairean" tale. David does not have the ingenuousness of *Candide* or *l'Ingénu* - he is far too self-consciously literate for that. He does, however, experience the gradual revelation of "*le monde comme il va*", but rather than accept that reality, he decides to fight against it. In good Voltairean fashion, there is much debate along the way, with many a footnote. There are also sections of bi-lingual text with a good deal of wordplay - in fact a plethora of French-Australian cross-cultural references to decipher. Some readers who do not have Delamotte's breadth of culture may sometimes find them slightly heavy going.

It is interesting to see Australia and Melbourne from a contemporary French point of view, as novels in French set in Australia are understandably rare. The short first chapter giving information about the city is almost a parody of the dry descriptions and statistics found in most French books on Australia, ever since they began to appear early last century.

Sous l'invocation conjointe de Maurice Scève, Joachin du Bellay et Jules Verne par 37° 49' de Latitude Sud et 144° 58' de Longitude Est, avec un température moyenne basse et une pluviosité haute, la capitale de l'État de Victoria compte environ deux millions et demi d'habitants, au prix de gros - car, dans le détail, combien de personnes fines, intelligentes et belles s'agitent là-dedans, nul n'en sait rien. (p. 12)

The novel obviously does not take itself too seriously, for like all Voltairean tales, it uses humour and exaggeration, with a touch of the absurd. In *Un dimanche à Melbourne*, Jean-Paul Delamotte does not so much want to argue a particular philosophical point as to work through an intriguing hypothesis in the form of a modern version of David and Goliath set in and around two grand Melbourne establishments he loves and knows so well.

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