

Fiction, History and Philosophy: The Work of Margaret Drabble

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In a recent collection of essays, Margaret Drabble's sister, A.S. Byatt, has written of what used to be called the "historical novel", and its contemporary avatars.¹ One of her main points is that there is a way in which history can be incorporated into fiction that bypasses the usual conventions of time, place and dress. As Byatt remarks:

The renaissance of the historical novel has coincided with a complex selfconsciousness about the writing of history itself.... [There is] a refusal of narrative by contemporary historians, who are sensitive to the selective, ideological shapes produced by the narrator, the narrator's designs and beliefs.²

If history now appears much shakier, then the historical novel, Byatt notes, partakes of some of this unsettled atmosphere. But Byatt goes on to claim that there is such a thing as a contemporary historical novel – it simply does not bear much resemblance to what fell under that rubric in the past.

Interestingly enough, Byatt does not see Drabble as an author of such works, but part of my argument in this paper will be that, in many ways, Drabble's works about contemporary (or recently past) Britain are exemplars of the sort of historically-oriented fiction with which Byatt is concerned.³ Works such as *The Ice Age* and *The Waterfall* are very much like Byatt's chosen specimens by Anthony Powell and Elizabeth Bowen in that they are designed to evoke a time and place. What may be most disorienting, however, is that for

1. A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Drabble that time may be no more than one or two decades in the past. Here I shall be concerned largely with Drabble's *The Ice Age*, about a post-70's Britain responding to another turn in the boom and bust cycle. Part of my argument will be that history is profoundly important in the work of Margaret Drabble.

If postmodern historiography has the effect of leaving the reader somewhat disoriented, the new historical novel may also be somewhat less than stabilising. Although all sorts of theories and theorisings are now falling under the overused rubric "postmodern", most commentators agree that postmodernism - in history, the arts, or almost any other area of endeavour - signals the fragmentation and loss of narrative induced at least partly by hyperindustrialisation. What passes for postmodern commentary has now so entirely affected and altered a number of areas of academic inquiry that it is difficult to conceive of any sort of project that has not been affected by it. As Lois McNay writes in an analysis of how feminism and feminist theory has been catalysed by the writings of Foucault:

[O]ne of the central issues is whether it is possible and desirable to formulate and justify strategies of social action and change with reference to universal notions of rationality and morality. In other words, the debate centers around the extent to which Enlightenment metanarratives of rationality and justice are valid in respect to the justification of action in the contemporary society.⁴

The questions revolve, of course, not only around justice and rationality, but around the very notions of a meaningful historical narrative, particularly since another "post" - postcolonial theory - has made it very difficult to valorise any of the standard Eurocentric worldviews.

4. Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992, p. 119.

Into this hodgepodge comes the historical novel, or any novel with any pretensions toward providing an overview of the past. As we have seen, Byatt has already noted that there is a “refusal of narrative”⁵ among both historians and novelists, and the general fragmentation of all sorts of narratives or attempts at narrative seems to accelerate. But within this melange some writers have tried to produce works that weave through the various fragments and at least achieve something palatable. My suggestion here will be that Drabble’s take on historical events through the shifting lenses of a variety of characters from class-broken backgrounds yields something like an overview, even if a rather kaleidoscopic one.

II

In an astute study of three contemporary women writers, Eleanor Skoller has characterised Drabble as relinquishing the “authorial stance and interrogat[ing] herself and the world in the process”.⁶ Although many have failed to see much of a distinction between Drabble’s writing and, as Skoller admits, more conventional nineteenth-century efforts, part of Skoller’s thesis is that there is a remarkable sense in which the work of Margaret Drabble is postmodern.⁷

Whatever can be said about wordplay in Drabble – and for Skoller this is an important point – there is no question that she is on to something when she writes of Drabble’s inventiveness with respect to history and characters. Although other writers might be said to be concerned with time in a way that is most straightforwardly philosophical (one thinks, for example, of Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*), Drabble alters our conceptions of what it might mean to give an historical overview by continually shifting

5. Byatt, *Histories*, pp. 9-10.

6. Eleanor Honig Skoller, *The In-Between of Writing: Experience and Experiment in Drabble, Duran and Arendt*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 38.

7. Skoller forwards this view throughout a sturdy chapter on Drabble that examines *The Waterfall*, *The Needle’s Eye*, *Realms of Gold* and *The Ice Age*.

the points of view between and among various characters from a wide variety of backgrounds. In *The Ice Age*, Anthony Keating, Alison Murray, Len Wincobank and Maureen Kirby each provide a focal point for a look at the post-boom Britain about to embark upon an economic and psychological ice age. Since the characters come from different social classes (in one scene, Drabble makes it apparent that Len and Maureen have apparently never stayed in a first-rate hotel in their lives), their responses to worsening economic conditions in Britain cast into doubt the efficacy, or even the possibility, of weaving a coherent historical narrative.

A number of commentators have seen Foucault's work as paradigmatic of the new views of history, and although there is now a tendency on the part of some to eschew the use of the term "poststructuralist", Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies clearly do a great deal to disrupt standard views of history. As Thomas Flynn has written, "In an interview with a group of historians, Foucault [maintains] ... his vigorous advocacy of epistemic shifts in *The Order of Things* ..." ⁸ And, of course, it is these epistemic shifts - shifts in underlying conceptualisation patterns - that go a long way toward constituting our view of history as such.

The Ice Age is remarkable for Drabble's refusal to acknowledge any one view of any class of Britons as paramount. Rather, she moves from class to class and individual to individual to give us an account of how history is created by its participants. In a passage that weaves together the various observations of Alison, Anthony, Len, Maureen and others on the general state of things, Drabble writes:

Not everybody in Britain on that night in November was alone, incapacitated or in jail. Nevertheless, over the country depression lay like fog, which was just about all that was missing to lower spirits even further, and there was even a little of that in East Anglia. All over the nation, families who had listened

8. Thomas Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History", in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 33.

to the news looked at one another and said, "Goodness me", or "Whatever next", or "I give up", or "Well, fuck that", before embarking on an evening's viewing of colour television, or a large hot meal, or a trip to the pub, or a choral society evening.⁹

It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to guess that the families who went to the choral society evening are probably not the same families who greeted further news of Britain's decline with "Well, fuck that".

III

In a recent lengthy study of Foucault, Beatrice Han has noted that "Foucault shows himself to be antimetaphysical in the sense that truth is not for him atemporal, lacking any historicity or a birth within history".¹⁰

If we may make the claim that Drabble is a novelist with a postmodern sense of history (or even, as Skoller claims, a postmodern sense of wordplay), then one of the ways in which she shows the relativisation of truth and the messiness of histories is through her development of each individual character. Not only does the sheer variety of characterisations signal a change in the structure of British society, and its overview of itself, but the development – and self-reflection – of each character pushes along the same path. Anthony Keating, for one, moves from a standard sort of comfortable middle-class University-bound existence to a risk-taking financial path that ultimately sees him close to financial ruin (but much less middle-class). During a visit from old friends who remind Anthony of his early days, he reflects on how little they now have in common:

It grew late, and Giles and Pamela and the chauffeur
finished the bottle: Anthony, sober, watched the level

9. Drabble, *The Ice Age*, New York: New American Library, 1977, p. 59.

10. Beatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 8.

drop, and began to hope that it would drop so far that his guests would not notice the deficiencies of their accommodation. For, he now realised, he did not think he had any extra sheets ... He himself had not made his bed in weeks.¹¹

Anthony feels himself to have moved gradually somewhere between a state of classlessness and just plain acquisitiveness. His newfound love of moneymaking, short-lived though it may be, is completely at variance with the genteel styling of his upbringing and those who were brought up in the same milieu. Incredibly enough, as Anthony reflects, all of these changes had happened to Britain and her citizens within the course of a very short period of time.

Len Wincobank, from lower middle-class origins and reared with a different attitude toward money, finds himself having a parallel set of reflections, albeit of a somewhat different nature. While in prison for his various fraud schemes, Len makes a surprisingly strong adjustment, but notices, in others, signs of a sort of prescient nuttiness. His prison comrade Callander opines that "Something has gone wrong with the laws of chance".¹² As he listens to his friend's line of thought, it occurs to Len that, in a very genuine sense, his somewhat dotty older companion is right. Unaccountably, a number of statistically very rare incidents have happened to him and to those of his acquaintance in an extremely short period of time. What, as Len might say, are the odds of that?

After returning from a forced trip to the Eastern bloc nation of Wallacia, where she comes to find that she really has little interest in helping her arrested older daughter, despite ties of blood, Alison returns hopefully to England and then discovers that the North of England has turned into an environmentally unsound cluster of new developments that, taken as a whole, are "monstrous, inhuman, ludicrous".¹³

11. Drabble, *Ice Age*, p. 78.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

There is a very real and genuine sense in which she would rather have stayed in Wallacia. It was cleaner, and on the whole less offensive. She comes to wonder why she ever wanted to return to Britain in the first place.

Non-master narratives and individual histories with surprising twists and turns abound in *The Ice Age*, where Drabble uses to full effect the declining meaning of class in Britain and the general Americanisation of the marketplace to produce a sense of bewilderment and shock. Her characters feel as if they are permanently adrift: the United Kingdom of their childhood and adolescent years seems irretrievably lost, to have been replaced by a new moneymaking nation that, unfortunately, isn't really very efficient at making money. No one is quite at ease: the former upper middle-class feels outdated and bereft, and the newly emergent entrepreneurs, from whatever background, have to face the obvious fact that not all schemes are equally successful, and some are, at bottom, illegal. In Foucaultian terms, tracing the genealogies of some concepts here would yield surprising twists and turns. It is part of Drabble's gift that, as her reviewers contend, "one comes to care deeply" about her characters.¹⁴

IV

Just as Drabble shows us history across social class and within lives, she also give us a more standard view, perhaps, with a synchronous account of two nations nominally European: Great Britain and Wallacia.

Wallacia seems to be a generic East or Central European country with an abundance of socialist and/or Marxist planning, and comparatively little to show for it. Although Alison Murray thinks of herself as an artist and an actress, she is in for a rude shock when she discovers how few of the ordinary amenities of life are available for purchase in Wallacia, and how displeased and discomfited she is by this finding. In a powerful metaphor, Alison has recurring

14. Blurp from back cover of New American Library edition, originally taken from *Publishers Weekly*.

difficulties with her menstrual cycle throughout the book, and the inability of Wallacian shops to carry such common Western products as those associated with feminine hygiene becomes a powerful trope. Drabble writes:

Even the greengrocers and the butchers seemed to have caught the prevailing aesthetic apathy: the fruit and vegetables were plentiful, but arranged to look meagre and dull and as unattractive as possible ... No, this was not a country for the window shopper ... She had been obliged, on one occasion, to look for a drugstore to buy herself some Tampax, but the word Tampax, which she thought as universal as Coca-Cola, produced no response at all from the shop assistant, and she had been obliged to walk out empty handed.¹⁵

It is perhaps no surprise that it is Wallacia, with its prisons, miserable shops, and lack of saleable articles that prompts the final showdown between Alison and her older daughter, Jane. The general collapse of enterprise in that nation seems paralleled by the collapse of the mother/daughter relationship. Just as the storeowners cannot be bothered to attempt to dress the windows properly, Alison can no longer feign motherly concern. Instead, ill will that has been built up over the years spills out, severing, at least for the time being, a parental relationship.

Time, history and construction of such are both internal and external in *The Ice Age*, and are both a product of our memories and the histories and works of others. As Drabble writes, with respect to Krusograd in Wallacia (when Anthony goes to assist Jane): "At night, however, one could hear shooting. He had never heard shooting before. And the horizon had a faint red glow."¹⁶ Matters of everyday life in Wallacia are so far from Anthony's experience that he does not know how to gauge them: he would not know shooting if he heard it. And yet, in Wallacia, life goes on.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

V

I have argued that what is standardly viewed as a poststructuralist take on history and matters historical informs the work of Margaret Drabble, and that in a sense – although Byatt scarcely cites her – her novels can be seen as historical.

More important, perhaps, is that a critic such as Eleanor Skoller also sees Drabble's work as falling under the rubric of the "postmodern." Skoller is more concerned with wordplay and the use of tropes in a flamboyant fashion, but her general line of commentary is of assistance to us here. Margaret Drabble, as Skoller indicates, is frequently seen as an "old-fashioned" novelist whose work does not merit the attention given to authors such as Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie.¹⁷ But, as Skoller indicates, there has been "little apprehension of the irony that pervades her form and language".¹⁸

Drabble is a witness to Britain's history and a keen observer of how that history is constructed. The former British history was, as Anthony Keating knows, more or less a history of members of his class and those above them. The newer British history is a potpourri and hodgepodge of classes, races, genders, and creeds. Drabble captures all of this in *The Ice Age*. Because she refuses to settle for easy answers, and because she pushes the boundaries of our conception of history, it is not mistaken to think of her as an historical novelist.

17. Skoller, *The In-Between*, pp. 43-44.

18. *Ibid.*