Eight: Margaret Drabble and the State of the Nation


It won’t happen again. Sorry. A Natural Curiosity (194)

As it is a rural route, avoiding the great industrial conurbations that straddle the middle of upper England, she is not here provoked into much political thought about the nature of the north and How Britain Votes, and you may be spared her occasional reflections on these themes, for this is not a political novel, and anyway her reflections are repetitive and do not seem to be getting her anywhere very fast. A Natural Curiosity (193)

From the middle ‘seventies onwards, Margaret Drabble became increasingly occupied as a novelist with representing and explaining the state of an increasingly-troubled nation. The novels that resulted are “pathological” in the sense that they might be said to belong to “the science or study of disease; that department of medical science, or of physiology, which treats of the causes and nature of diseases, or abnormal bodily affections or conditions” (OED). In this case the body is the body politic, and the novels are attempts to understand the pathology (“the sum of pathological processes or conditions” – OED) that afflicts late twentieth-century Britain. They also constitute a rigorous test of the traditional novel’s adequacy to the task of portraying and understanding the state of the nation. Beginning with The Ice Age in 1977, Drabble questioned the ability of the past (i.e. history conceived of as a linear chain of cause-and-effect) to explain the present, and she therefore went on in subsequent novels to reject a traditionally linear, plotted narrative as a satisfactory means of representation. The failure of plot in The Ice Age
demanded the creation of non-linear forms, the quest for which led Drabble to appropriate at least some aspects of structuralism and poststructuralism as materials out of which a more adequate fiction might be forged.

**Fish in a frozen River: The ice Age**

Drabble was by no means the first contemporary novelist to thematize frustration at the traditional novel’s embrace of linear time. To take but one example, Annabel in Angela Carter’s *Love* (1971) one day “roused herself sufficiently to go downstairs and put [her husband’s] alarm clock in the dustbin. She said that the tick irritated her.” And Carter’s 1969 *Heroes and Villains*, which is set in what remains of an England devastated by a nuclear blast, opens with a scene in which a young woman — ironically, the daughter of a Professor of History — “watched dispassionately as the hands of [her father’s] clock went round but she never felt that time was passing for time was frozen around her in this secluded place where a pastoral quiet possessed everything and the busy clock carved the hours into sculptures of ice.” After her father’s death, “She took his clock out to a piece of swamp and drowned it. It vanished under the yielding earth, still emitting a faint tick” (15).

Only a few years later, however, the image of Time as frozen into stasis had migrated from Carter’s futuristic fantasy to the realism of Drabble’s *The Ice Age*, where it functioned as a perfectly plausible metaphor for social paralysis:

“A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain, that great and puissant nation, slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river: there they all were in their large

*Michael Harper*
houses and their small houses, with their first mortgages and second mortgages, in their rented flats and council flats and basement bed-sits and their caravans: stuck, congealed, among possessions, in attitudes, in achievements they had hoped next month to shed, and with which they were now condemned to live. The flow had ceased to flow; the ball had stopped rolling; the game of musical chairs was over. *Rien ne va plus*, the croupier had shouted. 121

The apocalyptic event that precipitates Drabble’s “ice age” is not an explosion but an implosion, not the sudden “boom” of the economy of the early 1970’s but its equally sudden contraction when the grossly-inflated and highly-speculative property market collapses, taking the country with it: “England, sliding, sinking, shabby, dirty, lazy, inefficient, dangerous, in its death-throes, worn out, clapped out, occasionally lashing out “ (106).

For the public at large, the pressing problem is to explain the collapse, and the usual suspects are duly rounded up — “the trades unions, the present government, the miners, the car workers, the seamen, the Arabs, the Irish, their own husbands, their own wives, their own idle good-for-nothing offspring, comprehensive education” (71) — but the challenge that Drabble sets herself is a different one: to explain the boom, or more specifically the property-speculation bubble that lay at the heart of it. For it is the premise of *The Ice Age* that “traditional” English values, both middle-class and working-class, have suffered a sea-change, and that the values that have since come to be associated with Mrs. Thatcher were already abroad in the land before she became Prime Minister or even leader of the Conservative Party. Drabble examines this shift in values through a range of representative figures, principally Anthony Keating, Oxbridge-Arts-graduate-
Neither of these characters is simple: Len, for example is not just "a new man, the new businessman of the sixties" (65) but a visionary who passionately believes in his transformations of the built environment — "he loved what he was doing, loved his buildings, believed in them, thought them beautiful" (38) — and the fact that he is in prison owes more to the public's desire for scapegoats in the aftermath of the crash than to the fraud he committed in a last-ditch attempt to save his company — "There had been too many scandals, too much corruption, and Len had served as an easy symbol" (49). Furthermore Drabble (appropriately enough for someone who admires and has written a book on Arnold Bennett) can even sympathize with Len's desire for "the good life" in consumerist terms — "de luxe washing machine, dishwasher, six-ring automatically timed cooker, deep freeze, lights that dimmed on a knob rather than blinked crudely on and off with a switch, under-floor central heating, two bathrooms, shower, remote control color television" (67). After all, what could be more understandable than that a man who had never tasted cream until he was an adult (and who even then surreptitiously preferred the tinned condensed milk that had been the treat of his deprived childhood) should think of paradise as a night in a thick-carpeted, huge-bedded room at the Palmer House hotel in Chicago, watching television while munching on many-layered room-service turkey sandwiches oozing mayonnaise? (97-99).

The focus of the novel, however, is Anthony Keating — "child of the professional middle classes, reared in an anachronism as an anachronism" (25). Anthony is the son of a clergyman who teaches in a cathedral school, and he grows up in an elegant eighteenth-century house in the
cathedral close. His life follows the set pattern of his class — a good public school followed by
Oxbridge — until it is time for him to choose a career. Having rejected Christianity long ago, he
can hardly follow his father into the Church; his degree (significantly, a degree in history) is
nowhere good enough for him to think about becoming an academic, and the tradition of public
service that might once have led a young man of his background into the Civil Service is no
longer a vital one (he rejects the Civil Service because it seems boring and stuffy). Not
everything in his class-inheritance, however, is rejected: having throughout his childhood
“listened to his father and mother speaking slightingly of the lack of culture of businessmen, of
the philistinism and ignorance of their sons, of commercial greed, expense accounts, business
lunches” (23), Anthony remains true to his class in that he never once thinks about a job in
industry:

...so deeply conditioned are some sections of the British nation that some thoughts are deeply
inaccessible to them. Despite the fact that major companies were at that time appealing
urgently for graduates in any field, despite the fact that the national press was full of
seductive offers, Anthony Keating... did not even see the offers: he walked past them daily,
turned over pages daily, with as much indifference as if they had been written in Turkish or
Hungarian. He thought himself superior to that kind of thing: that kind of advertisement was
aimed at bores and sloggers, not at men of vision like Anthony Keating (25).

So Anthony drifts into television — first the BBC, then one of the commercial companies — and
although he is quite successful as a producer, after some years he finds himself increasingly
plagued by a restlessness of spirit:
He would wake up in the middle of the night and think: Is this it? Is what what? In short, he was underemployed, bored, and not at all happy in his relation to his work, his country, or the society he lived in: ripe for conversion, to some new creed. A political creed, but there wasn’t one; a religious creed, but he had had [i.e. had had enough of] God, along with his father and life in the cathedral close. So what would happen to the vacant space in Anthony Keating? What would occupy it? (30-31)

The answer is “entrepreneurship,” specifically property development. Watching the unedited film of an interview with Len Wincobank that he has commissioned for the current affairs programme he produces, he is seduced by Len’s sharpness and vitality, and it comes upon him with the thunderclap of revelation that the attitude to business he has unthinkingly inherited from his parents — “the premise that he and the viewers lived in a society which disapproved of the profit motive and which condemned private enterprise” — was “utterly false” (31).

Anthony’s problem is that he has no sustaining faith, no creed to which he can harness his considerable energies and his capacity for vision, and it is entrepreneurship that moves into this vacuum and offers him the opportunity to employ his talents: “He had never in his life been so fully committed, so deeply engaged, so deeply interested in what he was doing” (36). If Anthony’s choice is one we disapprove of, the fault must be seen not merely as some character flaw but as the fault of the culture which produced him — a culture whose traditional imperatives for one of his class (the Church, a career in public service) are no longer compelling. Anthony is right to reject his class background, with its smugness and snobbery: “Under the massive yellow sandy shadow of the cathedral wall, the Keatings sat safely in their extremely attractive, well-maintained eighteenth-century house (it went with the job) and listened to good
music, and laughed over funny mistakes in Latin proses, and bitched about the clergyman's wife who had a pronounced Lancashire accent and economized in small ways, for they were not well off, and had to appear better off than they were" (24). But although Anthony is perceptive enough to see through the hypocrisies of his father, "a worldly man, who despised the more obvious ways of making money" (23), the vaguely leftish anti-Establishment political views he himself espouses do not appear to offer him a social and political practice that can adequately substitute for the obsolete faith that the cathedral close symbolizes: "He worried about his fellow men, but, like many of his fellow worriers, could find no means of expressing his care" (26). Anthony represents a generation born into the cultural void left by the break-up of traditional norms and not yet filled by any new ones other than the pursuit of power and profit. Although he is very far from being "Thatcherite Man," Anthony finds the only adequate outlet for his energies in the kind of aggressive private enterprise that has come to be associated with the new Conservative Party creed.

The Ice Age is cast very much in the form of the traditional novel, omniscient third-person narrator included, and it constitutes a nuanced and profound meditation on the state of the nation as Drabble perceived it in the middle 1970's. Her use of the representative-figure strategy is a subtle one, avoiding the pitfalls of both conspiracy-theory and scapegoating; for in this analysis Britain's predicament is the result of the convergence of a number of individual ambitions and designs, and these are represented in the novel by characters who are like Anthony Keating in that they do not directly aim to produce the consequences that in fact ensue. The metaphor of the "ice age" connotes not only stasis but also the idea of a period suspended between the death of the old sustaining faiths and the birth of some new beliefs that would make England once again — in the words of Milton's Areopagitica that Drabble employs as one of the novel's
epigraphs — “a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.” Drabble in 1977 clearly shared Milton’s optimism, his belief that England in the midst of civil strife was truly “an eagle muing her mighty youth” and “purging and unsealing her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance,” even though doubters “in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.” What Drabble can hardly be blamed for failing to foresee is that the “year of sects and schisms” would lengthen into decades; that the kind of aggressive entrepreneurship that produced the crash of the middle 1970’s, far from being discredited by the state of affairs it created, would itself become the “new faith” of Mrs. Thatcher’s “Enterprise Britain;” and that an increasingly-unfettered market economy would constitute the new English eagle unsealing its long abused sight at the fountain itself of radiant neo-liberalism.

Yet *The Ice Age* also exhibits the limitations of the representative-figure strategy, even when it is as well-executed as it is here. A relatively minor but telling problem is a distinct clumsiness, a marked sense of strain, in Drabble’s attempts to connect public and private spheres: “The country was growing old. Like herself. The scars on the hillsides [of the Northern English

* Drabble may not have foreseen all this, but there is a hint of prescience in a scene in which Anthony “opened his daily paper and read about North Sea Oil, the black miracle, the Deus Ex Machina. It seemed that Britain might be saved at the last hour” (226). It has been argued that without the temporary relief provided by the income from the oil, Britain’s economy would have foundered hopelessly. Consequently Mrs. Thatcher’s economic policies would have been seen clearly not to have “worked,” even on their own socially-impoverished terms, and the Thatcherite rhetoric of the free market would never have become plausible, let alone hegemonic.

*Michael Harper*
industrial landscape] were the wrinkles around her own eyes: irremovable. How could one learn to grow old? Neither a country nor a person can stay young forever” (188). These, of course, are not Drabble’s thoughts but those of one of her characters, yet the fact that the novel needs this kind of connective tissue is a sure sign that its form is one which is having difficulty forging more cogent links between the state of the individual and the state of the nation.

This strain is indicative of the fundamental limitation, which involves the representation of history in the novel. Many of The Ice Age’s characters find it difficult to discern any meaningful pattern in the events that have determined their lives, and insist on believing that history is a matter of pure accident. “The whole thing had been a ghastly, arbitrary accident,” thinks Anthony of an IRA bomb that killed one of his friends and seriously injured another: “The bomb simply happened to have blown up Max and Kitty, a random target. This past year had been so full of accidents that they had begun to seem almost normal” (14). At the other extreme is the sheer paranoia of Callandar, a former city architect imprisoned for accepting bribes, who believes that “Something has gone wrong with the laws of chance” and “thought it might be something to do with nuclear waste, though he was not sure” (183-5). Between these two extremes stands Anthony’s lover, Alison Murray, who oscillates between history-as-chance and history-as-choice:

“Choice. Bad luck. For years, for ten years, Alison had striven to believe in accidents, in the possibility of bad luck, for that would exonerate herself, her husband, Jane [her daughter], Rosemary [her sister], her parents — they would all be exonerated by such a belief.... But if it were not so? She glimpsed for a moment, in the dark night, a primitive causality so shocking, so uncanny, that she shivered and froze. A world where will was potent, not
impotent: where it made, indeed, bad choices and killed others by them, killed them, deformed them, destroyed them” (110).

_The Ice Age_ flirts with each of these alternatives, which together indicate the problems of the traditional novel in dealing with history. For while the bourgeois novel’s very form, as I have noted earlier, is built around the concept of the protagonist’s fate as being determined by his or her moral choices, the idea that the fate of England in the 1970’s has somehow been willed by individual citizens is indeed “so shocking, so uncanny” that it beggars belief. Yet the very idea that everything is the result of chance, of mere accident, is not only equally repugnant to the mind seeking meaning and coherence, it is altogether subversive of the novel form. “Chance,” in other words, precludes “plot,” and therefore makes a satisfactory state-of-the-nation _novel_ impossible. So “plot” there must be. But if we must reject as unthinkable a “plot” in which the miserable state of the nation is the result of a deliberate conspiracy of malevolence — a conclusion that seems unacceptably paranoid — then the alternative would seem to be a plot in which it is the unforeseen, unintended result of a myriad acts of individual choice, each of which was made for different, individual reasons. And if _that_ is the case, one might well have to agree with the mad Callandar that something has gone wrong with the laws of chance, for otherwise, surely, the millions of individual choices would tend to negate (or at least significantly modify) one another rather than cooperate to produce an apparently monolithic result.

The way out of this apparently intractable problem — a way not available within the terms Drabble has established in _The Ice Age_ — is to refuse both “chance” and “paranoia” as the only available alternatives and to embrace a concept of the “systemic:” to believe that the set of cultural practices and institutions which circumscribe our lives constitute not a random

_Michael Harper_
heterogeneity but a fundamentally coherent system which, on the one hand, limits the apparently free choices we can make and, on the other, structures those choices in such a way that they contribute to a certain overall result. To think in this way is to risk paranoia (certain so-called marxisms come very close) but not necessarily to succumb to it. Nor does it mean abandoning the principle of methodological individualism outlined earlier: as Jon Elster emphasizes, the claim of methodological individualism with regard to the social sciences, for example, “is not that there already exists a social psychology or psychological sociology that has effectuated a complete reduction [of complex social phenomena to the individual choices that are their component parts]. Rather, it is that there is no objection in principle to such a reduction being carried out, even though it may remain impracticable for the foreseeable future” (23). In the meantime, just as the social sciences continue to need the abstract concepts — those “isms” which, in vulgar conceptions, sometimes masquerade as the true agents of history — so the novel that deals with history will need a form capable of representing systemic forces which transcend the microscopic examination of individual experience. As one of Salman Rushdie’s characters in *The Satanic Verses* says: “Economics is destiny. Ideology is destiny.”

Drabble comes to understand this in the course of writing *The Ice Age*, but such are the constraints of the form to which she is committed that she can represent this conception of history only at the level of the individual fate. When Anthony Keating is persuaded by a Foreign Office official to smuggle some papers out of an Iron Curtain country to which he is travelling on personal business, he agrees because, as he recognizes, the imperatives of his class training impel him to do so:
He and his clever friends had been reared as surely, conditioned as firmly, as those like Humphrey Clegg [of the Foreign Office], who had entered the old progression, learned the old rules, played the old games. Oh yes, they had dabbled and trifled and cracked irreverent jokes; they had thrown out the mahogany and bought cheap stripped pine, they had slept with one another's wives, and divorced their own... they had tried to learn new tricks. But where were the new tricks? They had produced no new images, no new style, merely a cheap strained exhausted imitation of the old one. Nothing had changed....

Well, I give in, thought Anthony. There is no point in struggling against the tide of one's time. I will go where Humphrey Clegg pushes me. I might as well accept that I belong to a world that has gone, reared in the shelter of a cathedral built to a faith that I have sometimes wished I could share, educated in ideals of public service which I have sometimes wished I could fulfill, a child of a lost empire, disinherited, gambler, drinker, hypocrite: and who am I to resist an appeal to a chivalric spirit that was condemned as archaic by Cervantes? I will let myself be pushed. I am nothing but weed on the tide of history. (282-283).

*The Ice Age* can achieve a formal resolution only at the level of the individual life, because it is only at this level that traditional realism can apprehend and represent historical forces. So in its third and final section, it leaves the question of the state of the nation to concentrate on Anthony's individual destiny and what brings it about, because a novel— a plot — demands to be resolved, and no resolution of the larger socio-historical question is available within the constraints of the form.

It is this failure to forge an adequate equation of public and private that led Tom Paulin to call the novel a specimen of "a priggish and dithering liberalism," "a smugly puritanical tract for the
times, but Paulin is being rather unfair. The limitations he castigates are the limitations of the traditional novel of individual character, even if it was Drabble's own (and by-no-means contemptible) liberalism that guided her choice of form. The one reason that they appear as starkly as they do is that Drabble pushed this kind of novel to its limits to see how far it is capable of representing a cogent explanation of social phenomena. And it is clear that Drabble herself found it unsatisfactory, for *The Ice Age* contains several subtle indications that its author is coming to view linear time, the necessary time of a plot, as incapable of furnishing an adequate explanation of the events its unfolding discloses. Alison Murray finds the present "all too complicated for her" and thinks it "unkind of history to force a light-weight person like herself... to think of these weighty matters" (189). Eventually she was to evolve a theory of time as bizarre as Tom Callandar's views on the laws of averages: "Time, she came to think, was not consequential: it occurs simultaneously, and distributed through it in meaningless chronology are spots of sorrow, spots of joy" (269). And Time in *The Ice Age* certainly does not obey the moral law that endows a traditional novel's plot with its significance: when an unexpected offer for one of his company's developments bails Anthony out of his financial difficulties, he thinks that "The denouement seemed so uncanny, so undeserved. Such a bad plot.... Defeat would have been more artistic" (235). The plot of the past that has produced the present is as opaque to Anthony as the plot of a John Le Carré novel he is trying to read — "he had made little progress with it, and could not follow the obscure plot" (294), is "still not quite sure what had happened in the course of its plot" when he has finished it (306). When he finds himself behind the Iron Curtain at the end of the novel, he, the history graduate, is forced to confess his haplessness in the face of history itself: "I am an ignorant fool, thought Anthony; here is history, and I can't understand a word anyone is saying, and my only aim is to get out of it as quickly as possible"
Anthony does, symbolically at least, get out of it: imprisoned in Wallacia after being caught up in an abortive coup, he turns to religion as the only way of making sense of his experience: "If God did not appoint this trial for me, then how could it be that I should be asked to endure it, he asks. He cannot bring himself to believe in the random justice of the fates, those three gray sisters" (319).

But there can be no such resolution for England. "Britain will recover," asserts the third-person narrator in the book’s final paragraph, but this is a assertion of Miltonic faith; no plot has emerged from the history explored in the novel that justifies such an assertion, or even suggests the terms on which such a recovery might take place. Once the Whig theory of history, the idea of progress, has been tried in the balance and found wanting, there is nothing to replace it but the image of Time frozen and an unspecified, unspecifiable hope for the future. Time, for Drabble, manifests no purposeful design, only the randomness of chance, which leads her in her next novel to search for meaningful patterns under the aegis not of history but of anthropology; and this in turn means dispensing with "plot" and substituting another kind of structure. There is a slight but significant foreshadowing of this move in The Ice Age, when Anthony despairingly puts down the Le Carré novel with the incomprehensible plot and picks up the Theban plays of Sophocles, only to find that the introduction, written by his old friend Linton Hancox, "inevitably made some interesting anthropological kinship commentary... in terms of endogamy and exogamy; even Linton, old world as he was, had become a reluctant structuralist" (308). By the time she came to write The Middle Ground, so had Drabble.
A Reluctant Structuralism: The Middle Ground

The author of *The Middle Ground* (1980), however, was by no means as reluctant a structuralist as the novel's protagonist, Kate Armstrong: "When Kate was discussing with Hugo the question of why insects were all right out of doors but not so good indoors, he told her she ought to read Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, but she never got round to it." Drabble clearly did get round to it, and many incidental details of *The Middle Ground* — from St. Catherine swallowing "a gob of spit, as a humiliation of the flesh" (136-7) to Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on treacle (230) — are to be found in Douglas' book, whence they were presumably quarried. Her debt, however, goes far beyond details, for the very form of this realistic but far-from-traditional novel is an attempt at a fictional implementation of Douglas' conceptual framework in particular and of the structuralist enterprise in general.

Structuralism, which had its roots in the early-twentieth-century linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, emerged in the 1950's in France to become an enormously influential method of intellectual inquiry in the humanities and what the French call the human sciences. Its most celebrated pioneer was perhaps the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work taught a whole generation to regard culture as being structured like a language. In this structuralist view particular cultural practices — for example, the cooking of food and the disposition of different culinary ingredients in the various courses that make up a meal — were to be seen as meaningful utterances in the complex language of a specific system or code — here, what might be termed the food-system. The system itself, like a natural language such as French or English, consisted not only of the elements to be combined into "statements" but the grammar or set of rules which determined what would count as a well-formed or meaningful utterance (e.g. roast beef with Yorkshire pudding) or an ill-formed, nonsensical one (roast beef with chocolate pudding).
competent members of the culture, the structuralists claimed, knew what the rules were, even though they might be unable to formulate them and, indeed, might be (and usually were) altogether unconscious of their very existence. Furthermore, the individual rules themselves were held to be more than a haphazard collection of individual injunctions and prohibitions; together they comprised a true system or structure, in that they were related to each other as corollaries of higher-level rules which could be expressed as binary oppositions (in the case of the food-system, the governing opposition might be “raw” and “cooked”).

The task of the structuralist was not merely to “decode” cultural utterances (e.g. to “read” a particular meal as an statement through which its preparers and partakers subconsciously “think” their own relation as human beings to nature and culture, to the “raw” and the “cooked”), but to write the grammar of a cultural system — to discover the rules and the governing binary oppositions. What was crucial in structuralism was its insistence that “relations are more real than the things they relate” — the meaning of a component of an “utterance” derived not from any positive qualities it possessed (there’s nothing wrong with chocolate pudding) but from its position in the structure to which it belonged. So the thought of roast beef with chocolate pudding is repugnant not because, in some irreducible and fundamental way, it tastes bad, but because the two components come from categories which, according to the rules, cannot be combined on the same plate — although they can be eaten off different plates, providing that the chocolate pudding comes after the roast beef. How we respond to something depends on the category to which we have provisionally — literally prejudicially — assigned it: “Once I had a bite of a ham sandwich,” says Susanna Mainwaring in The Middle Ground, “and it was all slimy, and I spat it out, I thought it was a piece of nasty slimy jelly fat, you know the kind you get on

Michael Harper
plastic ham, but it wasn’t. It was only cucumber. It tasted fine once I knew it was cucumber.

It’s all in the mind. Like Sartre’s essay on treacle” (230).

In her attempt to make some systematic sense of England in the 1970’s Drabble turned from history – from the unfolding of events in time that the structuralists called the diachronic – to the portrayal of a cross-section of the country at one point in time – a counterpart of the synchronic study that the structuralists espoused. In the manner of structuralism, it is the manifest ambition of The Middle Ground to find the “grammatical” rules, the governing set of binary oppositions, that would account for the apparent Babel of “utterances” that comprised English culture at that particular historical moment. Drabble located them in the oppositional categories “pure” and “impure,” and portrayed a society which felt its identity threatened desperately trying to reject as “rubbish” or “shit” — in short, as impure — anything it perceived as polluting or changing that identity. Drabble’s focus was on the symbolic terms in which people think and construct their world, and in The Middle Ground the language of many of her characters, like the language of the myriad graffiti adorning walls, billboards, buses and trains, is peppered with terms of abuse referring to despised groups as waste matter of one kind or another. It is language, not character, that is representative in this novel; she abandoned the attempt to create “representative” characters, as does her protagonist: “How had she managed to acquire the deadly notion that everything she did or thought had to be exemplary, had to mean something, not only for herself, but also for that vast quaking seething tenuous mass of otherness, for other people?” (229).

She also came close to dispensing with “plot” altogether in order to present a cross-section of English (and specifically London) society at one point in time. There is no real progress in the novel, which begins one day in October and ends before the New Year, and nothing much
happens in these few weeks beyond the vicissitudes of the daily lives of journalist Kate Armstrong and her children, friends and acquaintances. There is, to be sure, one dramatic event — social worker Evelyn Stennett, Kate’s close friend and the wife of one of her ex-lovers, is injured in a violent scene involving one of her “cases” — but the “event” is just that: it happens, and it is literally inconsequential. It changes nothing, like the “one true act of bravery” in the life of another of Kate’s friends, Hugo Mainwaring. Because it had indeed been an act, Hugo’s bravery “had not been random, pointless, purposeless at all,” and it did have consequences in that he lost his arm as a result of it, but “What had it all proved? Nothing much, it is too much to hope that one act will ever resolve us, we have to go on acting till the end” (254). Because there can be no resolution, there can be no plot.

History is not entirely absent from the novel, in that we learn of the biographies, and share the memories, of each of the major characters, but as history — as sequences interrogated in terms of cause-and-effect — they yield no meaning: “the past stretches back too densely, it is too thickly populated,” thinks Hugo Mainwaring (and the narrator appears to endorse his thought) — “No wonder a pattern is slow to emerge from such a thick clutter of cross-references, from such trivia, from such serious but hidden connections. Everything has too much history...” (185).

Kate, quite separately, has come to the same conclusion: “The truth is, [Kate] thought, I no longer trust any of my memories. I’ve lost faith in them. I thought they all made sense, that there was a nice bright straight pattern, a nice conscious clear pattern.... But maybe I’ve got it all wrong. Maybe there’s some other darker pattern, something utterly different. And if so, why can’t I see it? (131).

Michael Harper
The answer, which should be clear to the reader if not to Kate, is that the “darker pattern” is dictated by the imperatives of culture. “How extraordinary people are, that they get themselves into such situations where they go on doing what they dislike doing, and have no need or obligation to do, simply because it seems to be expected.... But expected by whom, of whom?” Ah, if I had the answer to that, thinks Kate, I should really know myself” (86). Not having followed up Hugo’s suggestions that she read Mary Douglas or Lévi-Strauss, Kate discerns no pattern whatsoever: “Enough of patterns, she’d spent enough time looking for patterns and trends. Hugo was right, she’d get nowhere if she spent the rest of her life forcing things into articles and programmes when they didn’t want to be forced. Shapeless diversity, what was wrong with that?” (229-30). Quite a lot was wrong with it, to judge by the way the novel was initially received, for many reviewers thought that the paradox of an apparently traditional novel that eschewed plot and disdained representative characters produced shapeless diversity and nothing more. Perhaps Drabble’s hints concerning structuralism should have been less casual.

Although an understanding of the novel does not depend on a close acquaintance with the structuralists and their theories, Drabble frequently drops clues to the book’s intellectual underpinnings. Some are very slight, like the academic who is “adept at placing things and people with quick dismissive phrases” such as “a little Lévi-Strauss” (74), or the protagonist’s reflection that, in the case of a couple having problems with child-rearing, relations are indeed more significant than the things they relate: “it was the conflict between the two, rather than the policy of either, that proved so ill-fated” (56). Other hints are more substantial: when Kate Armstrong complains to her friend Hugo about the agony of eating a meal at her parents’ house, he “suggested that Kate should try to divert her mind during such ordeals by trying to work out the anthropological or sociological significance of the meal structure,” and his response to her
confession that "her loathing for stewed fruit verged on the pathological" is to advise her to "reflect on the Cooked and the Raw" (124). But finally Lévi-Strauss, whose *The Raw and The Cooked* had been in print in English for more than a decade by the time *The Middle Ground* was published, is a less substantial absent presence in the novel than Mary Douglas and her analysis of cultural notions of hygiene in terms of the opposition between the "pure and the "impure."

Douglas' premise is that the distinction between what counts as "clean" and what counts as "unclean" in a given culture is, on a fundamental level, arbitrary (for there is no reason in nature that insects out of doors are fine while insects indoors are pests to be expunged — insects are insects, after all, indoors or out). Douglas postulates that at the social (as opposed to fundamental or natural) level, however, the distinction is not arbitrary at all but meaningful: "as we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load" because "pollution ideas relate to social life, and some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order" (3).

As an anthropologist, Douglas was chiefly interested in "primitive" societies, but she warned that "we shall not expect to understand other people's ideas of contagion, sacred or secular, until we have confronted our own" (28). The basis of her study was the claim that "dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.... In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (2). Primitive society in particular "is subject to external pressures: that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it.... I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an
inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (4).

Drabble’s examination of the state of the nation in The Ice Age had certainly uncovered “an inherently untidy experience,” and in The Middle Ground she set about looking at it in Mary Douglas’ terms. By that yardstick Britain in 1980 measured up as a primitive patriarchal society, “subject to external pressures” and to internal ones, and it was a society that had reacted to what it perceived as disorder by rigidly adhering to the fundamental binary opposition of “us” and “them” — “them” in The Middle Ground including “Jewish communists” (28), “niggers,” “muslim dogs,” “the black cunts who are ruining our country” (105), “gays” (118), “Ay-rabs” (191), the old (79), “punxs, kids, the Irish, the unions” (228) and, of course, women. These various categories of the marginal and the abject all find themselves treated as — and associated with — waste matter of one kind or another: “sewage,” “dirt,” “muck” and “mess.” Kate’s television documentary on the lives of contemporary women, “Women at the Crossroads,” is abbreviated by the camera crew to “W.C. [the crew’s little joke]” (200); the children of Arblay Street, where Kate grows up, taunt her outcast brother with “nasty little ditties” including one that represents him as eating “A nice thick sandwich / Buttered with shit” (21); and Ted Stennett, whose speech is liberally sprinkled with obscenities, frequently characterizes views other than his own as “rubbish” (180, 211, 236). Language such as this signifies exclusion: “Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained,” claims Mary Douglas, adding that this principle “involves no special distinction between primitives and moderns: we are all subject to the same rules” (40).
The insistence on human waste matter in *The Middle Ground*, in which it pops up in practically every other sentence in one form or another, is partly to be explained by Douglas’ contention that “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system.... We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body” (115). More particularly, the body provides ways of thinking — and reacting to — marginality:

...all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other kinds of margins. (121).

So Douglas argues that

...when rituals express anxiety about the body’s orifices the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group. The Israelites were always in their history a hard-pressed minority. In their beliefs all the bodily issues were polluting, blood, pus, excreta, semen etc. The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body. (124)
What Douglas alleges of the Israelites Drabble applies in *The Middle Ground* to people like Evelyn, who "came from a good solid hard-working middle-class family, and had been reared on notions of thrift, prudence, propriety" (141). Always a numerical minority in England, this class is now threatened by all the anomalous and marginal people — punks, Rastafarians, New Age travellers, gays and lesbians — whose manners, dress and values not only threaten in the streets and subways but have insinuated themselves into the heart of the bourgeois family through its rebellious children. So it comes as no surprise to discover that Evelyn, despite her vocation and her belief that "All we can do is to care for one another, in the society we have" (241), finds it impossible to control her own deeply-ingrained fears of the marginal, fears encoded in her principles of hygiene. She cannot finish eating a sandwich which contains a hair from the "gross, greasy" woman who prepared it (150), and although she is a dedicated social worker and "the mildest of women," she is revolted by the old and frail whom she serves: "Ever since childhood, while talking to the very old, she has been frightened by visions of herself attacking them, hitting them, assaulting them, knocking off their glasses" (61). And what is true of the middle class is true of the white working class, whose sense of integrity threatened by immigrants is expressed in the "National Front stickers and scribbles" that greet Kate on trains, in "the faint red buzzing of hatred from the writing on every wall" (107).

Evelyn’s exhortation to "care" seems powerless against the fact that what counts as anomalous is a matter of cultural, not individual, definition:

> Culture, in the sense of the public, standardized values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And above all, it has authority, since each is
induced to assent because of the assent of others. But its public character makes its
categories more rigid. A private person may revise his pattern of assumptions or not. It is a
private matter. But cultural categories are public matters. They cannot so easily be subject
to revision. (Douglas 38-39).

Douglas explains that “any culture worthy of the name” has developed ways of dealing with
anomalous events, but there is little comfort for the liberal here, since most of these procedures
boil down to avoiding, expelling or killing the anomaly (39). But in the final chapter of Purity
and Danger, Douglas does suggest a way of transcending the problem that clearly impressed
Drabble:

In the course of any imposing of order, whether in the mind or in the external world, the
attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognizably out
of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed
away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of
whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they
are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which
they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and
rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is
gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of
common rubbish.... So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous.... Where there is
no differentiation there is no defilement.... Formlessness is therefore an apt symbol of
beginning and growth as it is of decay.... dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative
formlessness. (160-161)

Michael Harper
"Creative formlessness" is a good description of Kate Armstrong's life — as it is of the surface texture of Drabble's novel about her. Like her vast array of friends and acquaintances, Kate's experiences are so disordered, so miscellaneous that nothing in them can be said to be out of place. Since dirt, as Douglas defines it, is "matter out of place" (40), Kate perceives few things in her life as dirty; there are no anomalies, and she can flourish amidst the "shapeless diversity" that others perceive as a "mess."

This tolerance of the marginal is not the result of an act of will on Kate's part, but it is hard to know how to account for it. If we are tempted to attribute it to her unusual upbringing as the daughter of a sewer worker, to her "past history, some if not all of which must have led her to wherever she now is" (13), we are cautioned by the fact that the same family background, the same enforced early acquaintance with a world of shit and tampons and contraceptives, produced the very opposite results in the case of her brother — a disturbed man who sends her anonymous letters bearing judgments such as "WOMEN LIKE YOU WALK AROUND LOOKING FOR TROUBLE. RAPE IS TOO GOOD FOR YOU" (257). And if we choose to believe that such tolerance is to be expected from women who, as mothers, are used to dealing with various leaks and effusions from their offspring, we have Kate to remind us that "women only have to deal with nice clean yellow milky baby shit, which is perfectly inoffensive, in fact in its own way rather nice" (58). This judgment itself, of course, is an example of Kate's easy acceptance of marginal products, but that such acceptance is not the natural and inevitable consequence of motherhood and nurturing is demonstrated by the case of Evelyn, who remains fastidious. Kate herself ruefully accepts messiness as her nature and contrasts her "corner-shop life" in her converted-fish-and-chip-shop house — "at certain seasons, she claims, it still smells of chips" (88) — with Evelyn's "proper" existence:
She thought of Evelyn. Evelyn worked amongst the very poor, as Kate did not, and never had. Evelyn cared, Evelyn gave herself, Evelyn tried to understand and help the dull, the hopeless, the inadequate, the vicious. Evelyn was a good woman, a woman with a conscience. She went out of her own way, and worked long hours. Whereas I, thought Kate, I merely at random scatter my notions abroad like birdseed, and accept the visitations of people like Mujid and Hunt and all those silly men I get mixed up with, and the children’s awful friends, because I haven’t the strength to say no, haven’t the strength to kick people out, haven’t the guts to defend myself. Evelyn goes home to her white house and shuts the door. Then she gives proper dinner parties with proper food. And she has Ted [her husband], after a fashion. She draws lines, she makes demarcations. She is a proper woman. (114-115).

But Kate is wrong to envy Evelyn, and it is a very good thing indeed that she cannot, by an act of will, become “a proper woman.” For her inability to draw lines, to make demarcations, is not her weakness but her strength and her grace. She is a human maelstrom who is destined to draw into her giddying circle all the flotsam and jetsam that obscure but powerful currents sweep in her direction. Instead of being imprisoned within the binary oppositions that structure her society, categorizing all that she does not understand as “shit,” she transcends them in a tolerance of ambiguity, ambivalence, inconsistency and plain old “mess” that leaves her solidly occupying “the middle ground.”

As a child, Kate loved to walk along the top of the grass-covered sewage bank, that twenty-foot-high “secret thoroughfare” that divided her own neighbourhood of South Romley — with its smelly fish-and-chip shops, its pubs, its tiny front yards “into which passers-by would chuck
newspapers full of fish skin and old chips” (17) — from “the thoroughly suburban district of 1930’s semi-detacheds” (19). On the sewage bank, straddling not only a subterranean river of excrement and condoms and tampons but also the symbolic boundary that marks the imposition of social difference, the young Kate drew strength from the “vegetable, organic smell” of “drains and rosewater,” of human waste now become undifferentiated sewage (116). As a child she recognized that there was “something magical” and “powerful” to be derived from her secret sniffing, her “dangerous” transgression (116), and this magic power is associated with the power of art. For Kate the schoolgirl also learned an art of storytelling that made her popular and admired among the schoolfellows who at first despised her; it “was like a kind of magic, turning shit into gold” (23). As an adult she is still the bearer of magical powers derived from her transgression of boundaries — a magic which can dissolve antinomies. At Kate’s party, with which the novel closes, Marylou Scott — she who was so shocked by the influx of “Ay-rabs” into her hitherto exclusive neighbourhood (191) — happily dances with a Rastaman.

Kate speaks more truth than she knows when she tells Hugo, “saying yes is my special technique for preserving myself. I know it doesn’t sound very logical, but it works” (10), and her party is the living evidence of the wide range of cultural variety she can say yes to:

Kate, issuing her own invitations, felt herself running a little wild, tried to check her exuberance, but failed. She invited at random — Stuart [her ex-husband], and all her ex-in-laws: the Morton girls...: far too many of her idle strike-struck colleagues, Joker James [member of a gay rock group] and his mates, Sam Goldman, Gabriel Denham and his second wife Jessica and his first wife Phillipa and half the crew of *Women at the Crossroads*: Hugo of course, Ted of course, and even some of the ex-suitors. She invited Marylou and an
American woman she met at a bus stop. She invited Hugo’s mother, and the Irish teacher with whom Mujid had become so friendly. She did not invite Hugo’s wife Judith, for benevolence cannot conquer everyone, and she feared a rude refusal. Mujid invited some of his fellow language students, who over the weeks had proved less dull than he had at first feared, and Evelyn suggested Ayesha and her husband, Joan Kingsley and her husband, and her colleague the sad and widowed Mr. Campbell, who was having such trouble with the rehousing of boat people. “Too many people,” groaned Kate three nights before the event.... (251-2).

Kate’s party resembles Drabble’s novel, which would ideally include anybody and everybody in its social embrace. At one point the narrator, updating the reader on events in the lives of her various characters, interrupts herself with the frustrated yet strangely triumphant cry “but one could go on endlessly, and why not, for there seems little point in allowing space to one set of characters rather than another’ (185). Having rejected plot, the novel also does its best to resist the closure or resolution of traditional narrative, and indeed the word “termination” is used at least twice — and pointedly — as a doctor’s euphemism for abortion. “Closure” and “termination,” in their cognate senses of “limit,” “bound,” “confine,” “closed condition,” “cutting short” and “closing off discussion,” are at the heart of the racism, sexism and class prejudice that plague the England of The Middle Ground, and they constitute the moral, social and political problem that Kate Armstrong transcends as if by an act of grace. In terms of literary technique, they also constitute the formal problem that Drabble had to transcend in order to remain true to her conception of her subject.
For even a novel without a “proper” plot has to end somewhere. “Closure” in that sense is inevitable, and Drabble left many of her readers frustrated because the story appears to break off almost arbitrarily (“Let us leave her there,” says the narrator) just as the party is about to begin. But Drabble also provided her readers with a resolution, not of her non-existent plot but of her theme. Having repudiated the meaningless linearity of time, the ignis fatuus of progress — “Why expect results, progress, success, a better society?” thinks Evelyn (241) — the novel resolves itself into the image of a circle with Kate in the middle of it, where she belongs:

...how good that it should end so well, and even as she was thinking this, looking around her family circle, feeling as she sat there a sense of immense calm, strength, centrality, as though she were indeed the centre of a circle, in the most old-fashioned of ways, a moving circle — oh, there is no language left to describe such things, we have called it all so much in question, but imagine a circle even so, a circle and a moving sphere, for this is her house and there she sits, she has everything and nothing, I give her everything and nothing.... (275)

Drabble has given Kate “nothing” in that she has not provided a resolution of any of the doubts, the worries, that troubled her before this magical moment of calm and will trouble her again in a moment. On the other hand, she has given her “everything” in the form of a sustaining circle of family, friends and acquaintances, and an unquenchable thirst for change, for new experiences: “Anything is possible, it is all undecided. Everything or nothing. It is all in the future. Excitement fills her, excitement, joy, anticipation, apprehension. Something will happen. The water glints in the distance. It is unplanned, unpredicted. Nothing binds her, nothing holds her. It is the unknown, and there is no way of stopping it. It waits, unseen, and she will meet it, it
will meet her. There is no way of knowing what it will be. It does not know itself. But it will come into being” (277).

As a loosely structuralist novel embodied in a realistic form, *The Middle Ground* is something of a *tour de force*, and one which offers a new and hopeful way of thinking about the cultural breakdown that was moving into the crucial phase of the “winter of discontent” even as Drabble’s book was being readied for the press. Mary Douglas’ work offered Drabble a way of seeing cultural breakdown as analogous to the breakdown of organic matter, the composting of waste that would produce new life. The transgression of fixed boundaries, the blurring of the fixed lines of demarcation that characterized the inherited culture of the “tight little island,” was perhaps a promise of new and vital growth. At one point in the novel Hugo Mainwaring asks himself whether anyone will “ever again be able to write, with confidence, a book that assumes the significance of one culture only,” and reflects that “Culture dies at the interface, one might reasonably fear” (173). By embodying the interface of cultures in Kate’s chaotic life, her equally chaotic party, and the apparently random eclecticism that marks the lives of her children and their friends, Drabble suggests that it should inspire us with hope rather than fear, should lead us to the faith that the breakdown of a rigid culture is a vital and organic process that creates the soil in which a new humanity will flourish.

“*Inadequate warders and innocent lunatics*”: *The Radiant Way and A Natural Curiosity*

*Curiosity*

Things did not turn out that way, however — at least, not in the next decade. The election of 1979 swept into a power a Conservative Party radically different from the party of Disraeli and

*Michael Harper*
his “one-nation” Toryism, and the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, aggressively pursued policies that destroyed even the illusion of consensus. Demarcations of class and race hardened into battle-lines, and in Drabble’s next novel, *The Radiant Way* (1987), there are few grounds for optimism: “On a more public level 1980 continues. The steel strike continues, a bitter prelude to the miners’ strike that will follow. Class rhetoric flourishes. Long-cherished notions of progress are inspected, exposed, left to die out in the cold. Survival of the fittest seems to be the new-old doctrine.”

“And so it goes on:

“These were the years of inner-city riots, of race riots in Brixton and Toxteth, of rising unemployment and riotless gloom: these were the years of a small war in the Falklands (rather a lot of people dead) and of the Falklands Factor in politics…. A fourth television channel opened, with a powerful and eloquent drama eloquently portraying Britain (at least in the recollection of some) as a mental hospital peopled by malevolent dwarves, ravening pigeons, shit-strewn corpses, geriatric patients, inadequate warders and innocent lunatics.”

(227-228).

In the 1980’s it was difficult to regard the rubbish and mess proliferating “in the streets and front gardens and underpasses and hedgerows of Britain” as a fertile breeding ground for anything hopeful: the only new birth that continuing national decay might augur would surely be a monstrous one.

Such a birth, in fact, had been a symbolic possibility in *The Middle Ground*, a novel built upon Mary Douglas’ premise that the human body represents the body politic. A pregnant Kate, learning that her unborn baby has spina bifida, chooses abortion and sterilization only after much anguishing, tormented by the feeling that saying “no” rather than her usual “yes,” even to a
monstrous new life, is the wrong choice: "For two nights she wrestled with fantasies of keeping
the baby, however damaged it might be. Others coped in such situations, why should not she?...
How could she relinquish those reluctant stirrings of hope that she had so wilfully encouraged?
She had been chosen for the burden, she could not lay it down" (70). When, despite all her
misgivings, she does lay it down, everything in her life seems to go wrong:

"I couldn’t do anything right. Everything I did went wrong, as though some spell were on
me, as though some magic had been taken from me.... And the oddest thing was that I went
on and on feeling bad not about the bad things I’d done, but about the good thing, which was
getting rid of that poor baby. I still have bad dreams.... Would I have been full of the spirit
of life and love and joy and hope if I’d had a wretched baby with no bowel control and a
spine split like a kipper and a head like a pumpkin? Yes, I probably would. Life is rotten,
darling, rotten" (78).

Kate has made what she still believes to have been the rational choice, but the heart has its
reasons that reason knows not, and she cannot rid herself of her instinctual conviction that life in
any form is to be welcomed and cherished. For in the terms established in The Middle Ground,
life is rotten, inescapably: it is nourished by rot and decay, and it is itself a process of rot and
decay, but this is hardly grounds for despair. Such optimism seems to have been difficult to
maintain as the years went by and things went from bad to worse: "So sat Alix Bowen, and
many thousands like her, as the year wore on, as she watched the grim images that filled her
little screen, and heard the righteous voices of unreason in the terminal struggle of warring
factions in her own land. Where was a voice to speak to her, for her, for England? Where was
Margaret Drabble and the State of the Nation 267

Cromwell, where Winstanley? Was the country done for, finished off, struggling and twitching in the last artificially prolonged struggles of old age?” (The Radiant Way 343).

Kate Armstrong may have been able to transcend the imperatives of history and culture through the mysterious magic powers conferred on her by her trafficking with the “impure,” but in The Radiant Way those imperatives are even more deeply entrenched. The relentless pressure of history, of what structuralist jargon called “the diachronic,” could not be so easily dissolved by the “synchronic” methodology of structuralism itself. One of the novel’s minor characters, Claudio, is “an anthropologist of satanic reputation who in the fullness of time turned out to be — indeed, for some time, unrecognized by the British, had been — a structuralist.... His interest in witchcraft was said to be more than scholarly” (100). But this novel does not have the confidence of its predecessor that structuralism can penetrate and dissolve the veil of history, even though it is willing to withhold final judgment on Claudio’s claim to have encountered a werewolf in southern Bulgaria, in a place where people lived “in a primitive style little changed by the turning of the great wheel of time” (251-254). The shocked academic audience to which Claudio recounts this experience is at first scandalized by what seems to be madness, and later chooses to interpret his story as a subtle critique of the historical method in scholarship, as a structuralist’s “deconstructive attack on diachronic methodology” (254). History, however, refuses to be dismissed without a fight: in the form of an ever-flowing, steadily-worsening present, it writes itself as crudely and insistently as “the words CLASS WAR NOW... in large white letters on low suburban walls or high railway bridges” and “less aggressively, more insidiously, more archaically, in the subtext of the tabloid press, in the subtext of the increasingly right-wing respectable press” (235-236).
Perhaps the most imperative of the demands of history — including the chaotic contemporary history whose images flicker across the television screen — is the demand that we make sense of it, that we identify a meaningful pattern and compose a coherent, significant narrative. Unlike *The Middle Ground*, neither *The Radiant Way* nor the sequel that followed hard on its heels, *A Natural Curiosity*, is committed to one particular kind of explanation — there is no single, overarching doctrine embodied in a single protagonist. Instead Drabble gives us the kind of multiple-focus novel that Henry James called a “baggy monster,” and *The Radiant Way*’s three protagonists take different approaches to the task of making sense of events, of finding significant pattern in apparent randomness. Together they represent the three chief perspectives — psychological, socio-historical, and aesthetic — that Drabble wants to put into play, but there is no cut-and-dried division of labour here, for to a greater or lesser extent all three perspectives are indeed in play in each one of them: “But one cannot, really, wholly differentiate these three women,” warns the narrator. “In their mid-forties, after more than half-a-lifetime of association, they share characteristics, impressions, memories, even speech patterns: they have a common stock of knowledge, they have entered, through one another, worlds that they would not otherwise have known” (108).

The three women have maintained close friendships ever since they met at Cambridge, and the narrator — who has been considering Jane Austen’s advice to construct a novel around representative instances, around “three or four families in the Country Village” (84) — comments: “Liz, Alix and Esther... were not beautiful, they were not rich. But they were young, and they had considerable wit. Their fate should, therefore, be in some sense at least exemplary: opportunity was certainly offered to them, they had choices, at eighteen the world opened for them and displayed its riches, the brave new world of Welfare State and County Scholarships, of...
equality for women, they were the elite, the chosen, the garlanded of the great social dream” (88). Now, thirty years later, each of them is trying to understand the vicissitudes of her own life as well as the trajectory of a nation that had once seemed committed to “the radiant way,” the shining path to “a forward-looking, forward-moving, dynamic society, full of opportunity, co-operative, classless” (176). Liz Headleand, now a fashionable and affluent psychotherapist, makes a living out of delving into personal histories, helping patients understand their present problems in terms of past traumas. Alix Bowen, who read English literature at Cambridge and now teaches part-time in a women’s prison, is committed to social change and more interested in sociology than in psychology. Esther Breuer, an art historian, disdains all systematic explanations: “I wish to acquire interesting information. That is all” (85) she declared when she was still an aspiring undergraduate, and as an established freelance scholar she still maintains “I am not ambitious, I do not seek answers to large questions.” Perhaps, however, her aspirations to knowledge are the most ambitious of all, for she seeks nothing less than epiphany: “Sometimes, when accused of eccentricity or indeed perversity of vision, she would claim that all knowledge must always be omnipresent in all things, and that one could startle oneself into seeing the whole by tweaking unexpectedly at a surprised corner of the great mantle” (83).

Drabble’s shift from the single protagonist of *The Middle Ground* to the multiple protagonists of *The Radiant Way* signals a waning confidence in the structuralist reading of English culture informing the earlier novel. By 1987 there were few structuralists left, indeed, for that intellectual movement had been transformed and replaced by poststructuralism, which had subjected the structuralist claims to a cogent critique. Poststructuralists such as the philosopher Jacques Derrida had argued that the fixed codes or *structures* that the structuralists claimed to have identified are chimerical — they exist only as projections of the assumptions and methods
employed by the structuralists to invent them. The failure of structuralism to discover “true”
structures is a necessary failure, because there are none: since all signifying systems, like
language itself, are structurally unstable, there are no systems at all, only textures of constantly-
shifting signification. The never-ending play of signification can never crystallize into anything
as fixed as a coherent system or structure, because the binary oppositions that the structuralists
posited as their structures’ governing terms are themselves unstable, each term constantly
threatening to collapse into its “opposite.” So structuralism yielded to deconstruction, a way of
reading which meticulously pursues and interrogates a text’s language in order to reveal its
instability and to locate the logical impasse that haunts its argument.

The major consequence of these poststructuralist claims is that transcendent “Truth” (to which
not only structuralism but all other intellectual systems aspire) is nothing more — or less — than
the dream of western metaphysics. But it is a necessary dream, because we cannot go beyond
western metaphysics: its assumptions are inscribed within language itself, and hence within the
very structure of our thought. We exist, therefore, in the paradox that although there is no final
“Truth” which we can identify, we cannot even think its absence, for the language in which we
attempt to think it will always smuggle in all the metaphysical baggage we are trying to reject.
So while there is no ultimate truth, we cannot live without “truths”: the best we can do is to
acknowledge that all these “truths” — all the patterns we construct out of texts, out of history,
out of culture — are not perceptions but interpretations, and as interpretations they are
necessarily unstable, incomplete, vulnerable. Since we cannot ever get beyond the dark glass of
interpretation into the clear, radiant light of Truth itself, we should do our best to remain open to
the play of meanings, the provisional quality of our interpretations. To cling obstinately to the
illusion of a monolithic Truth is to embrace a kind of death: the “radiant way” that promises to
lead to that Truth will take us to the murderous monomania of "the secretive Pol Pot, hiding in his lair, at the end of the Shining Path," as Drabble subtly reminds us in *A Natural Curiosity*. By the time she came to write *The Radiant Way*, Drabble had clearly explored poststructuralist thought, and had determined to write a novel that would self-consciously put a variety of points-of-view into play rather than imprison itself within any one of them. Alix Bowen finds herself recalling a line from Shakespeare, "Do not play in wench-like words with that which is most serious," and asks herself whether Shakespeare was turning against his own art, dismissing "all language, all poetry" (267). Significantly, Alix sees the line as a rejection not just of literary language but of *all* language, for all language is implicated in the play of meaning, as the poststructuralists had argued. Drabble is presumably here reminding us that such play as Shakespeare apparently condemns is anything but un-serious, and perhaps she wishes us to recall Derrida's witty deconstruction of the binary opposition "serious/non-serious" in an essay on the work of the Oxford philosopher of language, J. L. Austin. In any case, her novel dedicates itself to exploring the play of meanings, ideas and metaphors involved in the various schemes of explanation on offer in contemporary England, and to celebrating a conception of "play" that would emphasize its connotation of "flexibility". To refuse "play" would be to harden into the inflexibility of fixed opinion: "'Men are a strange lot,' said Esther, meditatively: 'they are so inflexible. So extreme. They have to take sides. Now me, I don't know what I think, on almost any public issue you may happen to name. But men have to have an opinion'" (246). And Alix, acknowledging that she is "in some kind of representative position of representative confusion" about the polarized political issues of the day, realizes that she refuses to make up her mind because "making up one's mind involves internalizing lies" (285). To embrace the play of meaning is to embrace life itself, for the only thing that can finally arrest the play and bring
closure is the ultimate inflexibility of Death: “No, there would never be knowledge, there would only be fear, uncertainty, suspicion. Knowledge would be death” (384), as Liz Headleand reflects when, after her mother’s death, she is leafing through papers and newspaper clippings that may be clues to the secret of her own past, her own origins.

In The Radiant Way (as in its sequel A Natural Curiosity), a multitude of perspectives is brought to bear on a variety of problems, personal and political, and at various times each of the three main characters entertains the kind of explanation initially associated with one of the others. So there is “play” here too: Drabble warns us that “one cannot, really, wholly differentiate these women” because these initial oppositions, like other kinds of oppositions, are never stable. So it is Esther the aesthete who is reading E.H. Carr’s book entitled What is History? (188) and who is troubled by the question: “Maybe the facts will never be established. What is history? What is History? She is haunted by Ranke’s now apparently scorned ideal, to tell things ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’. To tell things as they really are” (195). And it is Alix who, in her attempt to understand the motivation of an unlikely serial murderer whose victims are strewn strategically throughout The Radiant Way, finally settles (in A Natural Curiosity) on a psychological explanation, while psychotherapist Liz is privately sceptical of it:

Alix believes that she has unknotted and unravelled the strands of her murderer, that she has seen into him and known him. She presents Liz and Esther with her version of the murderer, and they have, by and large, accepted it. Yes, they concede, Paul Whitmore has clearly been unhinged by maternal neglect, by maternal hatred, by punitive discrimination in his early years. An abused child. Liz does not like to point out that by Alix’s account, Paul’s father is a perfectly normal, indeed quite kind-hearted chap, and that many children grow up normal
Margaret Drabble and the State of the Nation 273

without any parental kindness at all. At least they do not grow up into mass murderers. She
does not raise this objection as Alix is pleased with her explanation, and anyway, Liz has no
better explanation to offer. She does not claim to understand the pathology of Paul
Whitmore. (A Natural Curiosity 302).

But as the poststructuralists argue, you find what you are looking for, because the terms in which
you ask the question dictate a certain kind of answer. Alix, deep down, is uncomfortably aware
of this: “She frowned. ‘But it is odd, isn’t it?’ she repeats. ‘That Paul should have turned out to
fit so neatly the sort of explanation that I might be expected to have for him? Don’t you think
it’s odd?’” (303). And Alix should be troubled, because as a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl she had
both recognized and been “puzzled at the way a system can provide its own answers, none of
which need have any relation at all to any outside system, none of which could ever be checked”
(A Natural Curiosity 229). Yet she should not be too troubled, for she is not inflexibly
committed to psychology as the ultimate explanatory scheme: she has simply done the best that
any of us can do, which is to make the best sense of things that we can with the tools that seem,
for whatever reason, best suited to the job. Liz thinks “Alix’s version is as good as any, and it is
certainly based on more information than anyone else has yet assembled about the poor Horror”
(302).

There is, however, another explanation, and perhaps it is a better one because it is based upon
slightly more information than Alix has assembled. For the reader of A Natural Curiosity is a
fourth major player in the serious game that Drabble is playing: to read the novel is not only to
consider all the kinds of explanation hazarded by the characters, but to look for significant
patterns in the welter of information provided by the text. And the reader knows everything that
Alix knows, and also something she does not. Just a few pages earlier, the novel has shown us Paul Whitmore — the Horror of Harrow Road who sliced the heads off his victims with a power saw — sitting in his solitary prison cell, where he is drawing a cross-section of a plant: “Paul had always been fascinated by cross-sections. To slice through the meeting-place, the joining-point, the node itself, through the conductor, the connector, the conveyor of current. Through the many coloured wiring of life. If one slices neatly across the current, with Occam’s razor, one will catch the mystery as it flows. This is a pure activity, clean, clinical, inquiring. Thus he will find the source of power” (296-297). The clear implication is that the secret of Paul Whitmore’s murders lies not in some childhood trauma but in his natural curiosity, in the spirit of scientific inquiry inherent in human nature. Instead of being a monster whose abnormal psychology requires scientific explanation, Whitmore would thus appear to personify scientific method and its tendency to destroy the mysteries it probes: the power saw he used on his victims is merely Occam’s razor and all the other tools of logic writ large. “We murder to dissect,” said Wordsworth; “Knowledge would be death,” says Drabble’s Liz Headleand.

Both The Radiant Way and A Natural Curiosity take as one of their themes the distrust of Reason that became a hallmark of so many novels of the 1980’s and 1990’s. Despairing of making sense of things in terms of any of the master narratives — Whig, Marxist, Freudian, Darwinian, Positivist, whatever — that the nineteenth century built on Enlightenment foundations, and emboldened by poststructuralism’s critique of those narratives and the logic they obey, novelists dramatized the limitations of rational explanation while self-consciously exploring avowedly imaginative ways of comprehending experience. Significantly, the visionary poet Blake is a frequent visitor in these novels — he is an important presence in A. N. Wilson’s Daughters of Albion, for instance, and is repeatedly invoked in Clarke’s The Chymical Wedding.
and in Ackroyd's *English Music* — so in *The Radiant Way* it is not surprising to find Alix devoting one of her classes at the prison to two of the *Songs of Experience* because "she had found Blake, on many previous occasions, a useful poet for generating exchange of ideas..." (211).

Poetry, with its insistence on the power of the imagination, is crucial to both *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* in a way that goes far beyond the significance of any particular allusion. In the later novel there is an exchange between Alix and the ageing poet Howard Beaver which begs to be read as a clue to Drabble’s own purposes and methods:

‘A magpie mind, that’s what you need to make poems. A bit here, a bit there. Little nests, little pickings. You don’t want a world view. Just scraps.’

Alix and Beaver smile at each other. They enjoy such discussions. ‘Of course,’ pursues Beaver, provocatively, ‘it’s different if you’re a novelist. Like your [husband] Brian. You need structure if you’re a novelist. Narrative sequence. Solid chronology. All that kind of thing.’ (191)

“Narrative sequence” and “solid chronology,” conventionally thought to be structurally central to the traditional novel, have been a problem for Drabble ever since *The Ice Age* precisely because the linear conception of time inscribed in that structure cannot make sense of the state of affairs she wants to write about. It is not surprising, therefore, to find her here trying to craft novels which aspire to the condition of poetry, articulating her purposes less in plot and sequence than in the multiplicity of kaleidoscopic patterns that the reader is invited to construct out of little scraps and pickings.
Neither novel dispenses with plot and chronology as radically as *The Middle Ground*, but Drabble includes them almost derisively. Chronology is simply public time, the time in which the meaningless violence and absurdity and babble of the so-called “real world” endlessly repeat themselves, and Drabble points up its insignificance in a scene in which Charles Headleand uses the capabilities of a high-tech television to superimpose videotext of “Global News” over a nature programme about wildlife on the River Barle on Exmoor:

Over the flowing river appear newly calculated statistics of crime and violence in the inner cities, and predictable telespeak protestations of imminent action from the Home Secretary. Charles watches this combination with satisfaction. It is artistic. He has made it. It occurs to Charles that we do not really need a Home Secretary any more: we could just programme a machine to issue statements, and another machine to issue equally predictable Opposition statements.

The river is subtle, supple, infinitely varied. No two days in time, no two minutes in time of its long, long history have ever been, will ever be repeated. Its patterns flicker, alter, flow, and each moment is unique. (*A Natural Curiosity* 175).

Meaning does not inhere in the deadening repetition which constitutes the chronological sequence of public events, or in the rational statistical analyses which increasingly shape them. It is rather to be found in art, in the juxtaposition of news and river which is both random and “artistic” and in which Charles’ imagination apprehends a significant pattern. Drabble challenges her reader to emulate Charles, to create his or her own juxtapositions and so make meaningful shapes out of the novels’ accumulation of “little pickings” and “scraps.”
One of her major techniques is a dense *intertextuality*, an important poststructuralist term that Drabble introduces with deceptive casualness in *The Radiant Way*: on "his return flight from Boston, [Stephen found himself] sitting next to a young American academic who was attending a conference in Monte Carlo on intertextuality in the works of James Joyce" (157). Drabble practises intertextuality on many levels. The most obvious one is the many links between *The Radiant Way* and its sequel *A Natural Curiosity*, links which make it impossible — or at least, unproductive — to keep the two novels entirely separate; for in the case of a novel in which chronological sequence is devalued, its successor is not so much a *sequel* as an amplification, a gloss which importantly revises and extends our reading of its predecessor. Drabble herself, in a prefatory "author’s note," says that she wrote *A Natural Curiosity* because "the earlier novel was in some way unfinished," and in the second novel the enigma of Liz’s mother — the "mystery in the front room" (60) that provides much of the "plot" interest of *The Radiant Way* — is resolved quite differently from the way it appeared to have been resolved in the first. It is also the sequel that revises our understanding of the meaning of "the radiant way:"

* Although there are several references to Pol Pot in the first novel, it is only in the second that Drabble explicitly connects him with "the Shining Path" and hence the "radiant way" itself to something much darker than had at first appeared. A second level of intertextuality consists of the glancing references to characters from other Drabble novels — Anthony Keating and Gabriel Denham are mentioned in *The Radiant Way* (202), and in *A Natural Curiosity* Len Wincobank is a guest at Fanny Kettle’s party — and to those novels themselves: Otto Werner’s involvement with the new Social-

* "Shining Path" also translates *Sendero Luminoso*, the name of the murderous maoist guerrilla movement that flourished in Peru in the 1980’s.
Democratic Party is his “discovery of the Middle Ground” (*The Radiant Way* 231), while Shirley in *A Natural Curiosity* notes the “glacial” colours of an insecticide-poisoned landscape and reflects “The Ice Age, the last of England” (127).

The phrase “the last of England” is an example of the third and most important level of intertextuality, the sometimes explicit but often oblique allusion to a work beyond the Drabble *oeuvre*: since Shirley is driving to Dover, presumably we are invited to connect “the last of England” with Ford Madox Brown’s painting of that title showing an emigrant couple as they look back from the boat on which they are departing. Are we also being invited to think of Peter Porter’s poem with the same title, and of Derek Jarman’s savage, angry film? It hardly matters what Drabble’s intentions were, for as the poststructuralists have pointed out, intertextuality is the very condition of writing: no writer can invent a wholly new language (if he or she attempted to do so, the result would not be *language* because it would not be intelligible), and so cannot help echoing the previously-written. In both novels, however, the web of intertextuality appears so dense, the text so interwoven with familiar threads, that the reader’s mind, once nudged in this direction, will hardly be able to stop. So Alix sitting “alone, in a rented house” near the end of the inconclusive *The Radiant Way* (374), may well conjure up T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion,” whose speaker admonishes “We have not reached conclusion, when I / Stiffen in a rented house.”

Given that making sense of Time is one of the novel’s concerns, we may especially call to mind the passage earlier in the poem beginning “History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities.” And prompted by several scenes of almost mystical apprehension that occur in both novels but especially in *A Natural Curiosity*, we may even, on a re-reading, let our minds wander to Eliot’s

*Michael Harper*
Four Quartets, to their exploration of the intersection of Time and Eternity, and in particular to Burnt Norton’s claim that “Only through time time is conquered.”

Similarly, when Charles Headleand in A Natural Curiosity remarks that “There’s no point in looking into these things too closely” (171), it is difficult for the reader who has also read Joseph Conrad’s The Secret Agent not to connect this with the character of Winnie Verloc (for this was her deeply-held and oft-repeated belief) and, by extension, to that novel’s treatment of domestic and political violence as well as to one of its key incidents — a symbolic attempt to destroy Time by detonating a bomb at Greenwich. Furthermore, in the context of some of the speculations in A Natural Curiosity and of the symbolic importance of severed heads, an allusion to Conrad can hardly fail to suggest not only The Secret Agent but also Heart of Darkness, with its vivid glimpse of human heads on stakes, its modernist repudiation of the Enlightenment idea of Progress, and its insistence that “primitive savagery” is not transcended in time but remains latent in all human nature, only waiting to be summoned forth by propitious circumstances. The shuttle of intertextuality flies back and forth across the two novels and across a wide range of other texts, weaving a thematic web that constitutes a very different kind of ordering from the “solid chronology” of the traditional novel’s sequential plot.

As well as these teasing allusions that summon up the ghosts of other texts, there are several references to structuralism and poststructuralism, both overt (Foucault and Lacan in A Natural Curiosity [62]) and covert (in the same book a character’s address in Paris is given as “62 bis, rue de Saussure, 15e” [219]). Both novels embrace and cultivate what the poststructuralists term polysemy, the irreducible and potentially infinite richness of meaning characteristic of all sign-systems. In both cases plot functions as a device to produce symbols, and these symbols are
themselves polysemous: the severed heads of Whitmore's victims are associated with heads of John the Baptist in Renaissance paintings, with Judith and Holofernes, Perseus and Medusa, with psychoanalytic interpretations of the Gorgon's head, with King Charles' Head and Mr. Dick's obsession in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, with "keeping one's head screwed on" and "losing one's head." At every level of her text Drabble seems to want to suggest a multiplicity of possible patternings and meanings without committing her novel to any one of them. The impossible ideal, it seems, would be an apocalyptic pattern that connected them and incorporated them all, an ideal that Charles Headleand imagines as a new master narrative and one he pursues with the aid of several glasses of whisky:

Charles can no longer pay attention to one source of information at a time. He is Modern Man, programmed to take in several story lines, several plots at once. He cannot quite unravel them, but he cannot do without the conflicting impulses, the disparate stimuli. Perhaps he hopes that the alcohol will simplify them, will stick them together and fuse them all into one consecutive narrative. The narrative of his own life, of his own place in the history and geography of the world. (*A Natural Curiosity* 176).

In their insistent intertextuality and polysemy, however, *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* attempt to create an analogue not of Charles' "one consecutive narrative" but of Alix Bowen's "more comprehensive vision". Alix is haunted by the attraction of "the thing itself," a trans-individual Real transcending such novelistic entities as "character" and "event."

She aspired to make connections. She and Liz, over supper together, often spoke of such things. Their own stories had strangely interlocked, and sometimes she had a sense that such interlockings were part of a vaster network, that there was a pattern, if only one could discern

*Michael Harper*
it, a pattern that linked these semi-detached houses of Wanley with those in Leeds and Northam, a pattern that linked Liz’s vast house in Harley Street with the Garfield Centre towards which she now drove. The social structure greatly interested Alix. She had once thought of herself as unique, had been encouraged (in theory at least) by her education and by her reading to believe in the individual self, the individual soul, but as she grew older she increasingly questioned these concepts: seeing people perhaps more as flickering impermanent points of light irradiating stretches, intersections, threads, of a vast web, a vast network, which was humanity itself... the thing itself. We are all but a part of a whole which has its own, its distinct, its other meaning: we are not ourselves, we are crossroads, meeting places, points on a curve, we cannot exist independently for we are nothing but signs, conjunctions, aggregations. *The Radiant Way* (72-3).

For Alix, individualism led to an interest in the social structure, and sociology in its turn yielded to the prospect of a kind of mysticism which would abolish time, a vision of the web of humanity “peopled by the dark, the unlit, the dim spirits, as yet unknown, the past and the future, the dead, the unborn” as well as by the living. Somewhat analogously, the limitations of the traditional novel’s inherent individualism gradually led Drabble to the analysis of the social structure that was *The Middle Ground*, and then to the question of whether there is such a thing as “humanity itself” transcending the limits of realism and the “solid chronology” that grounds it.

Where does this leave History? At first it seems that history as it is conventionally understood is simply abandoned in favour of a private vision, a tentative mysticism that, with hindsight, one may see foreshadowed by Anthony Keating’s fate in *The Ice Age*. In *The Radiant Way* one of
Alix’s pupils at the prison, Jilly Fox, has taken to crime “for a sense of being alive, for a momentary freedom from the tyranny of time. ‘All my childhood,’ Jilly had told Alix, ‘I sat with my eyes on the clock, waiting for things to be over. Waiting for time to pass.’” Alix’s response is “One has to learn to parcel out one’s time. To make shapes of it for oneself...” (278). In its specific context, this is merely a pious platitude, but in the context of the two novels as one whole it assumes a deeper meaning. Jilly eventually shapes Time for herself by embracing a form of the occult in which “The cry of the cockatrice is transformed into the music of the spheres” and “The winter solstice is now and for ever, and never, for the light shines for ever, in eternal glory, and we are consumed and not consumed in everlasting fire” (275): time ceases to be a problem for her when she meets a gruesome death as a complicit victim of the Harrow Road murderer, who leaves her severed head of the seat of Alix’s car.

Other characters, momentarily at least, are able to make more cheerful shapes of time; or it might be more accurate to say that they are granted an experience of wholeness that seems outside Time altogether. In a flat in a condemned building in Stockwell, Alix’s son Nicholas and his girlfriend create a “paradise,” “a Bohemian fairy story,” transforming junk into beauty, into “an ark... floating above the rubble” (238, 241). They have achieved it by art — “we do it all ourselves, we make these things ourselves. By magic, in the dark, dark night” (239) — but their art is “this grace, this gift” (241). An apparently comparable grace is vouchsafed to the three protagonists at the end of the novel, when they picnic in a landscape on “the perfect day” where “an extraordinary primal timeless brightness shimmers in the hot afternoon air” and there is talk of “the sliding fountain that appears, mysteriously, welling up in the green field” only to disappear just as mysteriously, “regardless of rainfall. A secret spring, a hidden source, a sacred fount” (394-395).

Michael Harper
In *A Natural Curiosity* Liz’s sister Shirley finds herself in Paris in “a little French courtyard, ancient, rustic... a corner out of time” (158) closeted with a lover who is “a miracle, an intervention, a salvation” (178) in an erotic dream which “is all magic” (182). But the most sublime transcendence in the novel seems to be Alix’s, and it happens near the end of *A Natural Curiosity*. After escaping from a violent confrontation with Paul Whitmore’s mother (“a mad woman, a fury, a harpy, a Gorgon” [287]), Alix seeks a secluded spot in which to change out of her soiled clothes — “she is covered in dog shit and lumps of Chum [dog food] and decomposing slime” (286) — and to bathe herself in the river:

She struggles out of her soiled garments, and stands there, naked, gazing upstream, her feet sinking into the mud. She sees a vivid flash of blue. A kingfisher. Her heart leaps with delight. She knows she is peculiarly blessed. The bank is spangled with wind flowers, their seven-petalled faces like mystic day-stars. Alder and oak in tiny bud lean over the water.

The water is cold, but she braves it. She splashes, immerses herself limb by limb, cleanses herself. Weeds tumble past her, she thinks she sees a fish. She rises, dripping, newly baptized.... The sacred grove, the sacred pool. It is an old friendly place....

Somebody is waiting for her. An old man leans on the gate, as he has leant for centuries. His face is gnarled and wrinkled. He is dark and small of stature, as his people were and are....

..................................................................................................................................................

Their eyes meet. Her heart overflows. It is one of the most satisfactory, one of the most benign encounters of her life. (288-289).
The scene enacts a reconciliation, a harmony, of opposed elements: Christianity (baptism, the kingfisher and the fish as types of Christ) fuses with paganism (the sacred grove), the remote past engages with the 1980's (ancient Briton's gaze meets the gaze of modern Englishwoman), one race (the Celt, "dark and small of stature") ceremoniously greets another (Alix, descendant of the Celts' usurpers, with "her foreign tongue" and her healthy pink cheeks and freckles). Is this the End of History?

If it is, rejoicing may be premature, for there is a disturbing subtext. The "sacred grove" of Alix's baptism recalls the sacred grove of Celtic ritual, the place in which, according to the poet Lucan, "gods were worshipped... with savage rites, the altars were heaped with hideous offerings and every tree was sprinkled with human gore" (A Natural Curiosity 69). Murderer Paul Whitmore, who takes a keen interest in ancient British history, knows that "One does not worship at close quarters. It is not safe to go too near the sacred grove" (70). An archaeology exhibition at the British Museum displays one result of pagan worship, "the miraculously preserved, multiply wounded, overslaughtered sacrificial corpse" of Lindow Man, "the corpse of a victim who had been bashed on the head, stabbed in the chest and garrotted, whose throat had been cut, and who had been left to lie for two millennia in a boggy pool (58). Nor is it simply paganism that is steeped in blood. As we are frequently reminded in both novels, the iconography of Christian art is replete with severed heads and other limbs and body parts, and Alix herself is startled to learn earlier in the novel that "As the cross is to Christianity, so is the severed head to the Celtic religion" (165). The mystic transcendence of religious ecstasy seems to have its roots in violence: as the contemporary English poet Geoffrey Hill puts it, "By blood we live, the hot, the cold, / To ravage and redeem the world: / There is no bloodless myth will hold."

Michael Harper
In fact Alix’s own experience of harmony, “one of the most benign encounters of her life,” has been won by violence, for she has escaped the wrath of Paul Whitmore’s Gorgon mother by hurling a tin of dog-food at her and striking out with her son’s Swiss Army knife (284-5), and her moment of pure peace in the sacred grove is succeeded by an “insistence upon revenge,” by “the new vindictive note in Alix’s voice, the new glitter in her eye” (289-90). It is perhaps not an insignificant detail that Alix sees the “vivid flash of blue” that is the Kingfisher just as “her feet [are] sinking into the mud.” Unless, like Nicholas and his girlfriend’s ark floating above the rubble, transcendence is earned by the white magic of Art, it seems to be inextricably bound to pain and violence: Shirley’s sexual idyll leaves her “numbly sore, within, from the two nights and one evening of sexual intercourse” (179); “physically she was coming to pieces. Her stomach was upset, she had a strange stinging bloody vaginal discharge, and a painful boil on her left buttock” (219); but “Her physical discomfits are delightful. Her body swims in a bloody flux...” (220-221). The transports of another pair of lovers — transports in which “they are mad for one another, they are possessed, they writhe and moan and cry out” — leave Blake (Blake!) Leith with “his arm around Susie [Enderby’s] bruised and savaged shoulders” (294).

There is a great deal of ancient history in A Natural Curiosity, which is full of references to “the Brigantes and the Iceni and the Silures” who “burned people alive in Wicker cages” and “consulted the gods by inspecting the twisting human entrails of their tortured and sacrificed victims” (3). But the novel suggests that if one constructs a theory of history simply by drawing a straight line between these atrocities and the atrocities of the twentieth century, between Lindow Man and the Horror of Harrow Road, then the result will be not history but a despairing conception of a timeless human nature, the “human condition” so often mentioned by so many of the characters. History will be nothing more than a nightmare of repetition: “The force of
repetition is terrible, terrible,” thinks Liz Headleand — “There is no escape.... And is that all there is to it? All? (249) But as we have seen, the attempt to escape history, to transcend Time by surrendering to the unreason of violence, of sexual passion, or of the debased occultism of a Jilly Fox, is to traffic with dangerous forces. One may get off lightly, as Alix seems to have done, but in other cases the paradoxical result is likely to be not benign transcendence but another iteration of the very nightmare one was trying to escape.

The exercise of Reason, of scientific method, can produce results that kill, as it perhaps does in Paul Whitmore’s case and in other instances (advanced weaponry, ecological disaster) so familiar to us from the news headlines. But what is behind most of the killing is the forces of Unreason, whether it be the unthinking racism that blights contemporary Britain, the class hatred that erupts into picket-line violence in the miners’ strike, or the bloodthirsty nationalism that produced “a small war in the Falklands (rather a lot of people dead).” To kill Time with the weapons of the occult, to force it into heroic shapes through revolutionary or patriotic violence, to substitute Tradition for History and ecstatic Irrationalism for Reason — to do any or all of these things is to take one or more dangerous steps on the road to what may broadly be called fascism, and Drabble suggests that this is an entirely feasible prospect if the nightmare of repetition is not dispelled by some more creative means than either public life or private idyll can presently supply. Near the end of A Natural Curiosity Alix Bowen in the north of England is troubled by “red marks on the front gate” which have been almost but not quite “washed away by a light rain. Red hieroglyphs, written in some red greasy substance — lipstick perhaps? They had been faintly menacing” (250). Some forty pages later Carla Davis, “an animated, hard-drinking, loquacious, vitriolic, dangerous creature” (29) who bears a grudge against Charles Headland, “takes a lipstick from her bag and draws a swastika on Liz’s gate” (299). Since Liz’s

Michael Harper
gate is in London and Carla, as far as we know, has not set foot in Northam, where Alix lives, the “faint” menace represented by the lipsticked swastika is not just a local spite but a more general and widely-diffused threat. It is the signal distinction of *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* that they set forth in numbing detail the case against a linear conception of history while at the same time gesturing at the appalling consequences that may result from our ceasing to have faith in it. “Only through time time is conquered.” And that is presumably why Drabble has insisted on retaining at least some important vestiges of the traditional novel form that embodies that hope, while indicating in the form’s attenuation both the faintness of the faith that is still plausible and the need for it to be renewed and enriched with non-traditional resources.

It is therefore appropriate that *A Natural Curiosity* should end with a scene in which that faith is still alive. Alix’s husband Brian has written a novel which is “a celebration of tradition and change,” of “hope arising out of disaster” (305). Esther Breuer had supposed “that at our age things would be clearer. That life, if you like, would be even more circular than it is. That options would have diminished to nothingness. Instead of opening up. As they do. Odd, isn’t it, the way new prospects continue to offer themselves? One turns the corner, one climbs a little hill, and there is a whole new vista. Or a vista that seems to be new. How can this be?” (306).


But if they laugh, it can only be because they are too old to cry. The novel ends on a note of hope, but that hope is itself irrational: it is not earned by any “new prospect” offering itself as
an alternative to the “clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap” that is the final image of England. Drabble may not want to believe that we have come to the end of history, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that she has exhausted the resources of the sturdy liberalism with which she has attempted to make sense of it. In *The Radiant Way* “Alix sometimes accuses Liz of believing in universal human nature” (107), and *A Natural Curiosity* is the work of a novelist who is at least prepared to explore that notion. History emerges from it as little more than the record of humanity’s recurrent violence and cruelty, and time is a series of costume changes which cannot disguise an essential barbarity manifested in the nightmare repetition of severed heads. The only escape that offers itself is the profoundly personal and fleeting transcendence that takes the form of mystical experience, and — as we have seen — this is so deeply bound up with violence and suffering that it is not so much an escape from “human nature” as a sublime instance of it. It is not that we have come to the end of history, to the final station on the line of Progress — it is rather that history as meaningful change is revealed as nothing more than an Enlightenment fiction. “Maybe, Stephen had said, there is no history. Nobody but God can record how many died. And as there is no God, there is no history” (172).

If there is no history, can there still be novels?

*The most disjunctive, the most disruptive, the most uneasy and incompetent of forms: The Gates of Ivory*

Insofar as *A Natural Curiosity* announces the death of Drabble’s liberalism, the waning of her belief in the significance of time and of individual character, it would suggest that for her kind of novelist at least, the novel too is dead. But when she published *A Natural Curiosity* as a sequel to

*Michael Harper*
The Radiant Way, Drabble announced that she also intended to write “a third but very different volume” involving some of the same characters. And indeed The Gates of Ivory duly appeared in 1991, but in some ways it seems like a wake for the traditional novel rather than a “new prospect.” Although Liz and Alix and Esther all appear in it, Drabble’s subject is no longer England and the state of the nation but human nature, human suffering, and the death of the dream of progress — the egalitarian, socialist dream that might be said to have perished in Cambodia some years before the Berlin Wall was toppled and the End of History was jubilantly announced by a triumphant Right. As in A Natural Curiosity, the focus is human cruelty — in this case the atrocities and mass exterminations that litter history from the Egypt of the Pharaohs to the killing fields of Pol Pot, and in a striking authorial intervention Drabble shows herself painfully aware of the tension between her subject-matter and the form in which she has always worked:

This story could have been... a moving, human-interest story, with a happy ending, a reunion ending, with music. Or it could have been the story of the search for and discovery of Stephen Cox [who has disappeared in Cambodia]. This too could perhaps have had a happy ending: perhaps, even, a wedding? You might well think that either of these two stories, or the two of them interwoven with a conventional plot sequence, would have made a much more satisfactory narrative than this. And you would have been right. Such a narrative would have required a certain amount of trickiness, a certain deployment of not-quite-acceptable coincidences, a certain ruthless tidying-up of the random movements of people and peoples. But it should not be beyond the competence of a certain kind of reasonably experienced novelist. One may force, one may impose one’s will.
But such a narrative will not do. The mismatch between narrative and subject is too great. Why impose the story line of individual fate upon a story which is at least in part to do with numbers? A queasiness, a moral scruple overcomes the writer at the prospect of selecting individuals from the mass of history, from the human soup. Why this one, why not another? Why pause here? Why discriminate? Why seek the comfort of the particular, the anguish of the particular?

Perhaps, for this subject matter, one should seek the most disjunctive, the most disruptive, the most uneasy and incompetent of forms, a form that offers not a grain of comfort or repose. Drabble is in fact practising “a certain amount of trickiness” herself here: her novel does end (or almost end) in a reunion to the accompaniment of music, but the reunion is of two relatively minor characters (one of them rarely glimpsed in Drabble’s novels since she appeared as the protagonist of *The Needle’s Eye* in 1972), and the musical accompaniment is that of a memorial service for protagonist Stephen Cox, who has died (like his egalitarian ideals) in Cambodia. So Drabble does provide some crumbs of comfort for readers who hunger and thirst after human-interest, but *The Gates of Ivory* is primarily a novel of ideas, not character, and it offers no solutions and little repose. The narrative frequently functions as a pretext for ruminations about the human condition (*André Malraux* and *La Condition Humaine* are often mentioned), while the relatively playful intertextuality of the earlier novels in the sequence gives way to the rather grimmer and straightforwardly-didactic citation of a welter of secondary sources.

The mood of this novel is often elegiac, and sometimes it seems that the twentieth century has finally succeeded in destroying all grounds for hope: “Does life thin out now until death, is

Michael Harper
one's best hope now to cease to feel? Must one now give up, at this late stage in the game?...

We got over Copernicus, we got over Galileo, we got over Darwin, we have survived Einstein and the Death of God and the Death of the Family and the Death of the Novel, and what can we now do but laugh? Can the joke save us? Or has it too gone off?” (440-441). But Alix, who is plunged into these dismal thoughts by a boring eulogy at the memorial service, feels her “genial spirits” lift when the oration ceases and is replaced by music, by a human voice which “drifts with pure and unholy and unearthly yearning into the arched empyrean.” Art, it seems, may provide relief if not escape from History, although the fact that the voice in question is that of a counter-tenor — an imitation of the castrato of earlier times — may give us pause: it may remind us that turning aside from the irresolvable complexities of life to embrace the comparative simplicity and order of Art is a kind of self-castration, an exercise of “force” and “will” that ultimately solves nothing.

So The Gates of Ivory commits itself to history, even though it is a history that is leading us to an unknown and perhaps not-very-comfortable place. “But you can’t wind back the clock, can you?” says Charles Headleand, “You can’t make water flow uphill. No, I’m afraid we buggered that one up. Shame, really” (456). Charles is speaking of his marriage to Liz, but what he says is true of the larger historical process whereby consumer capitalism is saturating and transforming the whole world. Stephen in Cambodia seeks “a land where the water flows uphill. I seek simplicity,” but his Thai friend — a village girl who blossomed first into a beauty queen and then into a capitalist entrepreneur — knows that history is not leading us there: “Is no simplicity. Is only way onwards. Is no way back to village. No way back to childhood. Is finished, all finished. All over world, village is finished. English village, Thai village, African village. Is burned, is chopped, is washed away. Is no way backwards. Water find level. Is no
way back” (105). And Stephen himself knows this — knew already in 1951 when he was still a schoolboy that we cannot go back, because the place we really yearn to return to is not somewhere “back there” in history but in what poststructuralism has identified as the impossible dream of metaphysics:

The illusion that simplicity once existed is analogous to the myth of Paradise: it fosters the sense of exclusion and exile. But as for man there is no paradise, so there is no simplicity of emotion; we imagine that we once experienced it, that we once felt directly and received simply the impact of the senses, but we are thereby excluding ourselves from a realm which never existed and which cannot exist. We were not there, for there is no such place; and not by a retrogression to simplicity will we achieve our freedom. For any simplicity is a superimposed blindness, an exclusion of truth, as any Paradise is an exclusion of our one reality of pain. Tempting though it may be to claim that we once possessed innocence, and that all we need to do to be free is to repent and recant, we cannot do it; for if innocence never existed, we cannot reach a state of grace by returning to it, and in the vain attempt we lose courage on what is inevitably the path of corruption and complexity, error and gracelessness” (421).

The dream of simplicity can quickly become the nightmare that haunts the sleep of reason. Pol Pot, dreaming of simplicity, attempted to simplify Cambodia by implementing quite literally the classic marxist injunction to eliminate the bourgeoisie. Stephen goes to Cambodia “to see if he could find out what had happened to the dreams of Pol Pot” (14), to “the greatest reconstruction project of the twentieth century. He [Pol Pot] was going to take Cambodia out of history...” (13).

Michael Harper
But no one can stray from the path of history, and Pol Pot’s dream of a communist paradise led him down history’s path of corruption and error to the nightmare of the killing fields.

"Is this the grand finale? Is this the End of History? Or is it all a Godawful mistake?" (445) asks the narrator who, unlike her characters, has witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, and has read Francis Fukuyama’s claim that history — having reached its goal in the worldwide triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy — has now ended. She clearly does not believe that the millions of gallons of Coca-Cola flooding global markets are sufficient to drown the ticking of history’s clock, although there is little comfort or repose to be derived from her conviction. “Progress” may be a chimera but time is not, and the novel suggests that, even as we read, some rough beast is slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. In the final paragraph one possible future approaching us down history’s path is figured in the image of the guerrilla fighter who “will march on, armed, blooded, bloodied, a rusty Chinese rifle at his back.... He grows and grows, he multiplies. Terribly, he smiles. He is legion. He has not been told that he is living at the end of history. He does not care whether his mother lives or dies. He marches on. He is multitudes” (462).

And he is History. If *The Gates of Ivory* marks Drabble’s turning-aside from the state-of-the-nation novel with which her trilogy began, it is because the “clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap” of England is no longer History’s staging ground, as it seemed to have been for so many centuries. But we should not confuse “The Last of England” with “The End of History:” perhaps one cannot make sense of history in a novel about England because, as one of Salman Rushdie’s characters stammers, “The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means” (*The Satanic Verses* 343).
“History is now and England,” declared T.S. Eliot in *The Four Quartets*, written during the Second World War, but even if that were once true, it is no longer possible to believe it. History, says Drabble in *The Gates of Ivory* in 1991, is now and Elsewhere.

*Michael Harper*