

From Wordsworth to Bennett: The Development of Margaret Drabble's Fiction

Nora Foster Stovel, University of Alberta

Contemporary British novelist Margaret Drabble believes that "writing fiction is a search for the future in that you are creating, as you go, the images that you can then pursue. . . . We are trying to imagine the impossible golden world, and into that we have to try to move."¹ But art is Janus-faced, and the artist looks forward to the future by reflecting on the past. Drabble prefaces her study of *The Tradition of Women's Fiction* (1982) by acknowledging the importance of both past and future: "I hope I have done something to make clear my personal sense of debt to the past, my hopes for the future" (*TWF* vii).

Drabble's debt to the past tradition of English literature is particularly great: as editor of the new revised version of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), Drabble is an unusually erudite artist whose creative writing has been powerfully influenced by her critical work. "One tends to use other men's flowers," she explains: "you can't become a primeval writer or a primeval reader—you've eaten of the tree of knowledge, and you know."² A highly allusive author, she acknowledges that "my mind is like a rag-bin of quotations."³ Consequently, her critical work can provide a clear key to her creative writing. She explains the relation between these two aspects of her literary genius in this way: "When I'm writing myself, I'm not critical of it. I just let it grow in the dark and I don't take it to pieces. With one's critical mind, you can let it all be in the daylight."⁴ Although her creative and critical works are different, they are related, like the light and dark sides of the moon. So her daylight critical mind can illuminate the more mysterious aspect of her creative writing, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper.

Drabble's two major studies of individual English writers are her 1966 monograph on Wordsworth and her 1974 critical biography of Arnold Bennett,

¹Margaret Drabble, *The Tradition of Women's Fiction: Lectures in Japan*, ed. Yukako Suga (Tokyo: Oxford University Press, 1982) 91, 116. Subsequent references will be documented with the text as *TWF*.

²"Margaret Drabble in Conversation with Valerie Grosvenor Myer" (London: British Council, 1977) 8. Further references will be documented in the text.

³David Leon Higdon, "An Interview with Margaret Drabble" (1979; unpublished).

⁴Margaret Drabble, interviewed by Marilyn Powell on "Stereo Morning" for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Feb. 22, 1980.

revealing two of her primary influences. This critical division illuminates a creative development, for Drabble's fiction also falls into two distinct stages: the psychological novels of the sixties and the social novels of the seventies. The dichotomy demonstrates a development in both maturity of theme and skillful use of symbolism which reflects the influence of Wordsworth and Bennett in these two decades so clearly that parallels may be drawn between her critical and creative writing that can throw valuable light on her fiction.

Drabble's novels of the sixties—*A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and *The Waterfall* (1969)—reflect her interest in Wordsworth both in the emphasis on the subjective self escaping from oppressive society into communion with nature, and in the use of nature imagery to symbolize the intense inner life of the psyche. Similarly, in her critical study *Wordsworth* (1966), Drabble portrays him as a personal poet who symbolizes the impressions of external experience on the moral sensibilities of the artist through natural imagery of flora and fauna.

Drabble's novels of the seventies—*The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), and *The Middle Ground* (1980)—demonstrate a definite development in both theme and symbol in a manner that clearly reflects her interest in Arnold Bennett. In *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (1974), Drabble celebrates Bennett's personal and professional commitment to society. Like the mature Bennett, the mature Drabble resolves her earlier urge for emancipation in an acknowledgement of the individual's responsibility to the wider community. This sense of social continuity is symbolized by both novelists in architectural images, especially the traditional emblem of the house to embody the concept of continuity of the present with the communities of both past and future. Drabble's creative and critical works of the eighties, her recent novel *The Radiant Way* (1987) and her revised edition of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), both continue the thematic and technical development observed in the seventies under the social and literary influence of Arnold Bennett.

Drabble's study of Wordsworth, published in 1966, marks the exact center of the early phase of her fiction, precisely midway between her first novel, *A Summer Bird-Cage*, published in 1963, and the final novel of this first stage, *The Waterfall*, published in 1969. In fact, Drabble explains that she was writing both *Wordsworth* and *The Millstone* (the middle novel of these first five, published in 1965) while she was expecting the birth of her third child.⁵ Drabble portrays Wordsworth as a psychological poet who explores the impressions of nature on the subjective self. Accordingly, she emphasizes *The Prelude*, subtitled "The Growth of a Poet's Mind," because she believes that *The Prelude* "is

⁵Margaret Drabble, "The Author's Introduction," in *The Millstone*, ed. Michael Marland (Harlow: Longman, 1970) x.

more like a modern psychological novel than a poem."⁶ Like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Drabble's early novels are highly personal and intensely subjective. In fact, they are distinctly autobiographical, for Drabble has acknowledged that "The books are expressions of different aspects of me."⁷ She insists that "books reflect one's life,"⁸ and Joanne Creighton observes that "[Drabble's] protagonists have generally followed the course of her own life."⁹

These first five psychological novels all focus narrowly on one central female protagonist. Like the poet of *The Prelude*, Drabble's autobiographical heroines are all introspective personalities, intent on self-analysis. In *The Millstone*, for example, Rosamund Stacey, a research student writing a doctoral dissertation on the Elizabethan sonnet sequence, is imprisoned in the ivory tower of scholarship. Emma Evans of *The Garrick Year*, like her namesake in Jane Austen's novel, is caught in a web of her own weaving, the victim of her own ironic self-deception. Jane Gray, the poet protagonist of *The Waterfall*, Drabble's most intensely subjective heroine, is solipsistic to the point of paralysis, frozen by solitude into an ice age of inactivity. Drabble has acknowledged that the limitations of the artist's vision in these early novels reflect the limits of her own personal life, and learning to develop within one's limitations is one of the themes of her early fiction.¹⁰

All of Drabble's early heroines are "escape artists" who escape from social reality into an illusory world of artifice. The dramatic development of each novel then centers on the protagonist's struggles to escape from the solipsistic prison of her own psychological paralysis into the real world of human community through the agency of affection. For example, Sarah Bennett of *A Summer Bird-Cage*, Drabble's first heroine, must learn "to live on the level of the heart," to acknowledge that "Blood is thicker than water," and to recognize that love itself is "the real thing."¹¹ Emma Evans of *The Garrick Year*, has to learn to distinguish between illusion and reality, affection and affectation, so that she can live at last in the real world, rather than in the private drama of her own creation. Rosamund Stacey of *The Millstone* is finally delivered from her solitary confinement through childbirth which initiates her into the real world

⁶Margaret Drabble, *Wordsworth* (London: Evans, 1966) 63. Subsequent references to this work will be documented within the text as *W*.

⁷Nancy Hardin, "An Interview with Margaret Drabble," *Contemporary Literature* 14 (1973): 291. Further references will be given in the text.

⁸Nancy Poland, "Margaret Drabble: There Must Be a Lot of People Like Me," *Midwest Quarterly* 16 (1975): 262.

⁹Joanne Creighton, *Margaret Drabble* (London: Methuen, 1985) 14.

¹⁰Barbara Milton, "Margaret Drabble: The Art of Fiction LXX," *The Paris Review* 20 (1978): 49. Further references will be given in the text.

¹¹Margaret Drabble, *A Summer Bird-Cage* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967) 206, 192, 58.

of humanity and affection. Only when she learns to love can she truly understand how literature mirrors life and how the Elizabethan sonnet sequence reflects love. Romantic passion finally melts the frigidity which freezes poet Jane Gray of *The Waterfall*, thawing her congealed blood and making it flow once more, so that the word can at last be made flesh.

Drabble's artistic techniques parallel her psychological themes in both narration and symbolism. The first three of these five earlier novels are all written in the first person—a confessional narrative technique, like Wordsworth's in *The Prelude*, which suits perfectly the soul-searching narrators' self-absorption. In *The Waterfall*, the last novel of the sixties, Drabble experiments with alternating first and third-person narration in a self-reflexive manner that intensifies the obsessive solipsism of her heroine.¹² Drabble's psychological symbolism suits this introspective focus admirably, for she uses symbolism in these early novels as a psychological tool for probing the subjective self. Symbolism assists the soul-searching of the introspective narrators by signifying their individual vision and tracing the emergence of the psyche, as the central characters develop from claustrophobia to community.

Drabble particularly admires "Wordsworth the nature poet" (W 108) and celebrates his use of natural imagery of flora and fauna, earth and water to symbolize the impressions of the external world on the subjective self. She observes in *The Lyrical Ballads* "a whole new set of images and references, dealing with flowers, birds, stars, and the smaller, prettier details of nature" (W 64). Nature represents "the holiness of the heart's affections"¹³ in Drabble's fiction too: she observes that her novels are also full of "imagery of nature, the natural world of species, the flora and fauna" (Milton 51). Drabble frequently uses floral symbols also, for art stores emotion which may be recollected in tranquility, much as the seeds store life through the dark days. Vegetation forms a metaphor for affection in all Drabble's fiction, symbolizing the triumphant deliverance of her heroines from their ivory towers of art into the real world of nature. The agent of Emma Evans's salvation in *The Garrick Year* is her daughter Flora, named for the goddess of flowers. At the end of *The Waterfall*, the lovers discover "Heart's Ease," a floral symbol of their individual salvation through love and the resurrection of their affection. Beginning with the epigraph to her first novel, Drabble frequently employs the Yeatsian image of the tree to symbolize her vision of the fullness of life.

Fauna also fills Drabble's fiction. The bird forms one of her favorite symbols, for she believes that "The spirit of a person is like a bird trapped in his body" (Hardin 291). In *The Garrick Year*, Emma Evans envisions herself as a baby bird about to break out of its shell and take wing, symbolizing her emergence from the repressive chrysalis of marriage into fully fledged adult iden-

¹²See Ellen Cronan Rose, "Feminine Endings—and Beginnings: Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*," *Contemporary Literature* 21 (1980): 81-99.

¹³Drabble uses this phrase from Keats in her Hardin interview (273).

tity. *A Summer Bird-Cage* is filled with "birds" of all feathers, as she uses the central symbol of the bird cage to debate the theme of marriage in this modern parliament of fowls.

Drabble observes "imagery drawn from rivers, lakes, inland waters, seas, brooks, and rills" (W 85) throughout Wordsworth's poetry, and water figures as a central symbol in her early novels, just as it does in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, because she too believes that "water is symbolic" (Hardin 287). In *The Garrick Years*, for example, the River Wye symbolizes the reality of human passions, as it winds like a serpent through the Garrick Festival gardens, threatening to uproot this artificial interloper in its sylvan setting by a flooding of its swollen spring waters, for the theater involves masks, costumes, and role-playing—all the trappings with which the self conceals its true identity. Emma's baptism in reality is symbolized by her immersion in the River Wye, which strips off her affectations in favor of her affection and reveals her true identity as a mother, when she leaps into the flood to rescue Flora. *The Waterfall*, the most intensely subjective and symbolic of Drabble's novels, is positively saturated with images of water symbolizing love, as the heroine, frozen into paralysis by a frigid marriage, melts in a romantic passion symbolized by the two waterfalls that inspired the title of the novel.¹⁴

The Waterfall was as far as Drabble could go or wished to go in the direction of solipsism. She said at that time that "I don't think I shall go on writing subjective novels,"¹⁵ and "I think I might have grown out of having a single female protagonist" (Hardin 294). *The Waterfall*, she declares, is her "farewell to claustrophobia" (Myer 8). She explains the change in her interests from personal to public issues: "I'm not so interested in the issues surrounding marriage now. I have become very offhand about it all and am far more interested in ecology and the decline of Western civilization."¹⁶ She explains, "I'm on better terms with my own interior life. I don't feel the need to write about it. I'm very interested in the way society works."¹⁷ Drabble notes a similar shift of interest in Wordsworth during the course of *The Prelude*, as a result of his visit to revolutionary France: "It was here that he learned, in Pope's phrase, that 'the proper study of mankind is man'" (W 99-101). Drabble argues that this poem is in fact a prelude to a new era of social consciousness on the poet's part. We can observe a parallel development in Drabble's own writing.

If Wordsworth was the major influence on Drabble's psychological fiction of the sixties, the dominant literary influence on her social fiction of the seven-

¹⁴See Margaret Drabble, *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Knopf, 1979) 126.

¹⁵Bolivar Le Franc, "An Interest in Guilt," *Books and Bookmen* 14 (1969): 20.

¹⁶Nicki Household, "Love Story: *The Waterfall*," *Radio Times* 8 Nov. 1980: 25.

¹⁷Mel Gussow, "Margaret Drabble: A Double Life," *New York Times Book Review* 9 Oct. 1977: 7.

ties was Arnold Bennett. The pivotal point between private and public phases in Drabble's career in fiction is precisely 1970, midway between the publication of *The Waterfall* in 1969 and the composition of *The Needle's Eye* in 1971. Drabble's major critical work of the seventies, her biography of Bennett, published in the middle of the decade, reflects the change in the focus of her fiction from private to public issues. Selecting Bennett as a critical focus is itself significant, for Bennett was a preeminently social writer, and in her study of the novelist, Drabble emphasizes Bennett primarily as a social creature, both in his life and literature. The ultimate praise that she can bestow on this literary idol and kindred spirit is to say that "He was a man who wished to live in society and to make sense of it and work through it."¹⁸

Like Bennett's, Drabble's mature fiction focuses on a much broader canvas, both geographically and historically. Her settings and subjects portray a panoramic view of British society in general and London life in particular, and foreign travels and visitors expand an increasingly international focus. Her canvas has extended in time as well as in space, as her characters' conception of community broadens to include the past and future as well as the present, and their sense of identity deepens to embrace continuity as well as independence. Her themes have become much broader as well, to include economic, political, and cultural concerns of contemporary civilization. Accordingly, her techniques have developed to keep pace with this broadening vision. The later novels boast a much larger *DRAMATIS PERSONAE*, with more than one central character, and with both male and female protagonists sharing the central consciousness. Similarly, the narrative technique has complicated to include multiple viewpoints. Her symbolism has also developed into a powerful social tool for painting a panoramic picture of Western civilization and the history of mankind.

Although the influence of Bennett is fully assimilated in Drabble's social studies of the seventies, it is first apparent in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), because Drabble actually began to research her Bennett biography in the mid-sixties. Since she started to write this novel in 1965 when she went to Paris, Bennett's adopted home, on a Society of Authors travel grant to research her biography, *Jerusalem the Golden* and *Arnold Bennett* are inextricably connected: "I should acknowledge at this point my debt to Bennett, in my novel *Jerusalem the Golden*, which was profoundly affected by his attitudes," she explains in her biography, for "my novel is almost as much an appreciation of Bennett as this book is meant to be" (AB 47-48).

The influence of Arnold Bennett makes *Jerusalem the Golden* a transitional novel in both themes and technique. Drabble observes that her heroine, Clara Maugham, like Bennett's first hero, Richard Larch in *A Man from the North*, is "obsessed with escape" (AB 48)—escape from the repressive puritan environment in the industrial north. Clara refuses to accept the obvious moral

¹⁸Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) 342. Further references will be documented in the text as AB.

of her favorite fable, "The Golden Windows"—namely that "one must see the beauty in what one has, and not search for it elsewhere."¹⁹ But Drabble herself knows better, for she recounts in her Bennett biography a similar experience when she went home again to Sheffield, the model for Clara's Northam, to research her novel: "After the flat dull overbuilt sprawl of London, it was Sheffield that looked like Jerusalem" (AB 5). Jerusalem, of course, is always somewhere else.

Clara Maugham is the only Drabble protagonist who fails to liberate herself from her prison of solipsism because she is the only one who persists in her desire to escape from her origins. By evading her "true descent" (JG 197), she also abandons her real identity. But Drabble believes that "We are not free from our past, we are never free of the claims of others and we ought not to wish to be. . . . We are all part of a long inheritance, a human community in which we must play our proper part."²⁰ She is explicit within and without the novel in her moral judgment of Clara's self-centered escapism, as this concluding statement makes manifest: "She had learned nothing, she could not give" (JG 198). Drabble endorses Bennett's view that people "must stay within the confines" and "accept their destiny": "I often think of the phrase which I use in my own novel *Jerusalem the Golden* (which was very closely modeled on Arnold Bennett): 'The apple does not fall far from the tree,' meaning however hard you try to escape your destiny, you will end up where you began" (TWF 72-74).

Although most critics celebrate Clara's so-called emancipation, Drabble makes skillful use of symbolism to portray Clara as a social success but a moral failure. Clara's misinterpretation of "Jerusalem the Golden"—the Christian hymn that generates her private imagery of a celestial paradise radiant with golden light—by viewing Jerusalem as a "terrestrial paradise," rather than as the spiritual ideal that it so clearly signifies, renders the symbolism of this novel highly ironic. This irony, facilitated by Drabble's first use of the objective third-person narrative method, is clarified by the omniscient narrator who points explicitly to the key word: deceived by the ambiguous term "social joys," Clara seeks, not a golden City of God, but a guilt metropolis (JG 32). Brazen to the bitter end, Clara continues to prefer guilt to gold.

In *The Realms of Gold*, Drabble answers the question she posed in *Jerusalem the Golden*. Whereas Clara Maugham attempted to escape her destiny at the expense of her humanity, Frances Wingate returns home to excavate her personal past in the golden age of England. Unlike her early heroines, intent on emancipation, all of Drabble's protagonists, from *The Needle's*

¹⁹Margaret Drabble, *Jerusalem the Golden* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 34. Subsequent references will be documented in the text as JG.

²⁰Margaret Drabble, "The Author Comments," *Dutch quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 5 (1975): 36.

Eye to The Middle Ground, go home again to reestablish their roots in order to tap the riches of the past needed to nourish the future into fruition.

While Wordsworth's influence on Drabble's artistry emerges primarily in the use of natural settings to signify psychological states, Bennett's influence prevails particularly in the use of architectural settings to symbolize social states. Significantly, Drabble's study of *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (1979) discusses the symbolic significance of both natural and architectural settings in English literature. Drabble observes that "Bennett's technique is to describe in loving detail the stability, the solidity of the world in which his characters live" (TWF 68). But Bennett's contemporaries criticized his novels as "a mere catalogue of domestic furniture" (TWF 72)—a sentiment that Virginia Woolf echoes in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Drabble explains, "To Bennett," however, "houses expressed souls. People were not disembodied spirits, and the houses that they built were as much a part of them as their bodies" (AB 31). Critics have disparaged Drabble's fiction for the same reason, complaining that "People are characterized far less by their looks or their talk than by their domestic interiors."²¹ Drabble explains, however, that, like Bennett, "I always feel a need in novels to describe precisely where people live."²² In Drabble's mature fiction, the house becomes an emblem that embodies Drabble's social concept of the continuity of the present with the communities of both past and future.

The Needle's Eye marks the beginning of a more mature phase of Drabble's fiction in which the influence of Bennett's social breadth is fully assimilated, for this novel deals not just with domesticity or romance, but with money and morality in the modern world, as its title so subtly suggests. Rose Vassiliou, the industrialist's heiress, builds her house in Middle Road on the rock of renunciation in order to symbolize in its shabbiness her democratic ideal and her freedom from the guilt of corrupt capitalism.

Drabble extends her scope further still in *The Realms of Gold*, where she excavates a very rich moral, historical, and cultural gold mine, employing archaeology, history, and geology to span the evolution of man from the primal slime to the final cinder. The theme of archaeology generates particularly rich strata of symbolism from the womb of mother Earth, as her archaeologist heroine Frances Wingate delves into the past to excavate the golden treasures of her cultural heritage needed to pave the road into the future. Frances finally unearths her own roots, not in the golden emporium that she excavates in exotic Tizouk, but in the golden age of England that she discovers at home in humble Tockley, where her leaden vision, symbolized by the dour Eel Cottage, is countered by her golden vision, embodied in the enchanting Mays Cottage.

²¹Lorna Sage, "Female Fictions: The Women Novelists," in *The Contemporary English Novel*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1979) 75.

²²Dee Preussner, "Talking with Margaret Drabble," *Modern Fiction Studies* 25 (1979-80): 572.

The Ice Age broadened Drabble's political consciousness and economic interests to national extent, as she takes the temperature of the times by showing Britain waging a cold war with a new ice age. The symbolism of this novel portrays the golden age of England being frozen over by a deadly new frost, as property speculators dissect the land and deface the nation, creating a waste land of England's Eden. The house becomes a political prison, as the perpetrators of an architectural crime against patriotism are punished by being incarcerated in jails as constricting as the dehumanizing structures in which they have imprisoned the people of contemporary Britain. The pinnacle of Drabble's intricate network of architectural imagery, the Englishman's castle, High Rook House, symbolizes a prison as constricting as Len Wincobank's penitentiary, making it logical that Anthony Keating should be incarcerated in a Walachian prison behind the Iron Curtain at the LeCarre conclusion of the novel.

The Middle Ground, written in 1979, is Drabble's most ambitious social document of the decade. In this last novel of the seventies, she explores the full extent of English society in general and the texture of London life in particular through the multiple viewpoints of an impressive mixture of characters. With four central figures, representing the political, social, scientific, and feminist aspects of society, *The Middle Ground* is Drabble's broadest examination of contemporary civilization, and their four harmonizing viewpoints constitute her most polyphonic narrative of the decade. The social tool of her symbolism also extends to new heights and depths in *The Middle Ground*, where it becomes both a muck rake for exposing the cesspool of society and a star scan for exploring the cosmos. Her female protagonist, Kate Armstrong, an alchemist who turns "shit into gold," goes home to find a window on the past in the middle ground—a sewage bank which forms the center of a network of sewers that underlies the city's surface, revealing the dark underbelly of society. Kate's pessimism ultimately transcends this worm's-eye view of social architecture, when a bird's-eye view reveals the design in the carpet in an eloquent echo of Mrs. Dalloway's vision of London: "The city, the kingdom. The aerial view."²³ In the grand finale of *The Middle Ground*, Kate celebrates her beatific vision of divine architecture—"the aerial view of human love where all roads connect"—in a party at her home which forms the nucleus of society, where Kate Armstrong, at the center of her family circle, conducts her own domestic symphony with a harmony that echoes the music of the spheres.

Drabble's only major critical work of the eighties, her revision of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), and *The Radiant Way* (1987), her only novel of the eighties, continue both the thematic and technical development we have observed throughout the seventies under the social influence of Bennett, as well as the interdependence of critical and creative writing that we have noted throughout Drabble's career. The OCEL clearly both reflects and influences the novelist's expanding fictional horizons. On its dustcover, Drabble summarizes her own artistic development thus: "Her early novels deal pri-

²³Margaret Drabble, *The Middle Ground* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980) 218.

marily with the dilemma of the educated young woman caught in the conflicting claims of maternity, sexuality, and intellectual and economic aspiration; her later novels . . . have a broader canvas, a more ironic relationship with traditional narration, and a wider interest in documenting social change."²⁴ *The Radiant Way* reflects the influence of the *OCEL*, as Drabble leads her impressive team of characters through an elaborate social obstacle course beset by numerous literary models and monuments. Margaret Atwood observes that *The Radiant Way* is Drabble's "largest canvas yet."²⁵ Reviewers call her "the chronicler of contemporary Britain, the novelist people will turn to in a hundred years from now to find out what things were, the person who will have done for late twentieth-century London what Dickens did for Victorian London, what Balzac did for Paris."²⁶

The Radiant Way deserves these critical accolades for its impressive social scope, as it traces the intertwined narratives of three women: Liz Headleand, London psychiatrist, Alix Bowen, English teacher at a women's prison, and Esther Bauer, art historian, as well as Liz's sister Shirley Harper, Northam housewife—each representing various facets of intellectual and social life and each trailing elaborate webs of families and friends, pupils and patients, to convey a panoramic portrait of contemporary Britain. *The Radiant Way* is equally comprehensive chronologically, as the narrative chronicles the eighties in Britain, contrasting them with the seventies. Flashbacks return us to the fifties, when the three friends first meet at Cambridge, and follow them through to the present, where they stand on the threshold of the future.

Drabble's social and literary model, Arnold Bennett, continues to be reflected in the social scope of *The Radiant Way*, and, again, we see Bennett's social influence embodied most clearly in Drabble's emphasis on houses in the novel. Drabble could quote her own protagonist Liz Headleand in saying, "Her largest dreams, her most foolish fantasies, had been enacted in bricks and mortar and mantelshelves and tiled floors and plaster ceilings,"²⁷ for, despite her 1982 marriage to literary biographer Michael Holroyd, Drabble has retained her independent home overlooking Hampstead Heath in front and Keats's garden in back, meeting her husband only for weekends in an eminently modern marriage.

Liz symbolizes her personal development and social ascent from her humble home in Northam (modeled on Drabble's home town of Sheffield) to the heady heights of Harley Street in architectural terms: "She had reached too

²⁴Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²⁵Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood Talks to Margaret Drabble," *Chatelaine* April 1987: 73.

²⁶Phyllis Rose, "Our Chronicler of Britain," *New York Times Book Review* 7 Sept. 1980: 1.

²⁷Margaret Drabble, *The Radiant Way* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) 18.

high, travelled too far, from Abercorn Avenue, and the house in which her mother had walled herself up: a semi-detached house, a twenties' house, a frozen house, a house held in a time warp, stuffed with her dead father's suits and shoes, stuffed with ancient magazines and medicine bottles. A pupa, a chrysalis, it had been to her and to Shirley, but to her mother a tomb" (121). It is here, after her mother's death, that Liz—like Clara in the transitional *Jerusalem the Golden* and Frances in *The Realms of Gold*—discovers her "true descent" in the concealed identity and secret suicide of her dead father, whose portrait she and her sister Shirley both carry in silver locket around their necks, like the legendary albatross (or millstone). Liz's desertion by her television mogul husband Charles, executive for Global International Network (familiarily known as "GIN"), is a minor trauma compared to the dislocation represented by the prospect of moving from their Harley Street home to "Menopause Mansions."

Even before *The Radiant Way* was published, Drabble was already at work on the sequel.²⁸ Although the critic cannot predict how the artist will progress, it is certain that Margaret Drabble's fiction will continue to develop in new directions in the next decade as it did in the last, for Drabble believes that "one of the problems with continuing a career as a novelist is that you've got to set yourself new objectives" (Myer 22). Given the influence of Wordsworth in the sixties and Bennett in the seventies, it is certain that Drabble will continue in the eighties and nineties to explore the golden realms of the future with a model from the past tradition of English literature as her guide. And the allusions to *Mrs. Dalloway* in the conclusion of *The Middle Ground* and the opening of *The Radiant Way* suggest that her new model may be Virginia Woolf.²⁹

²⁸Margaret Drabble, in an interview with Nora Stovel, 15 April 1987.

²⁹Margaret Drabble, in *Virginia Woolf: A Personal Debt* (Aloe Editions, 1973), acknowledges discovering Woolf only recently.