

Many Layers of Modern Novels

— A Conversation with Margaret Drabble —

interviewer: Miho Nagamatsu

The interviewer met Margaret Drabble in the morning of September 15th, 2011, at the British Library, and talked with her mainly about her recent novels for about two hours. The day was sunny and their conversation proceeded smoothly. During the conversation Drabble admitted that her way of writing had gradually changed since her younger days.

Nagamatsu: You wrote your first novel in the 1960s, didn't you? I think your way of writing was similar to the style of your other early novels. As for the first three novels, you used first-person narration. In your fourth novel, *Jerusalem the Golden*, you used third-person narration but in the fifth novel, *The Waterfall*, you used first-person and third-person narrative shifting. Did you have any particular reason for using narrative shifting?

Drabble: Yes, I used double narrative because it was a

person who wasn't sure about the truth of her own stories. So she tells one story in the first person and one in the third person. But she's having an argument with herself about what is the truth. So she's discussing the truth with herself and that's a mixture of first person and third person. And lots of people do it now. It was quite unusual then. It was the first time that I had tried it.

N: But when you were young, you were against such experimental novelists as James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. You said, "I *hate* books which are deliberately confusing. I aim to be lucid."¹ I think narrative shifting is some kind of writing technique.

D: I don't think it is very complicated as a technique. I must say I am a great admirer of Virginia Woolf. So it's not that I don't admire her work so much, I was reacting against a different kind of experiment that was going around in the 1960s, not Virginia Woolf's modernism. I reacted against a kind of French experimentation. It wasn't Virginia Woolf I was reacting against, it was much more recent ways of experimental writing.

N: I see. After *The Waterfall*, you wrote *The Needle's Eye* in 1972, didn't you? In *The Needle's Eye* you wrote about a working-class person. In your 60s novels, all the heroines

belonged to the middle class. This is the first time you focused on a working-class person. Then, you published *The Ice Age* in 1977 after *The Realms of Gold*. You wrote about the condition of England in this novel. In your 60s novels, you wrote about the lives of heroines only. They are some kind of *Bildungsroman*, I think. However, your writing themes seem to have gradually changed since your 70s novels. Why did you change your themes?

D: Well, I was always interested in the wider society. When we're very young, it's very hard to write a broad novel. I think most young people write quite small narratives. But as I got older, I felt more confident to be able to explore a larger section of society. So I felt it was a mission of growing older, knowing more people, knowing more people in different parts, different walks of life.

N: Next, I would like to ask you about your recent novels. You wrote four novels after 2000. They are *The Peppered Moth*, *The Seven Sisters*, *The Red Queen* and *The Sea Lady*. *The Peppered Moth* is a story of four generations. You wrote about family, history and heredity. Compared to your earlier novels, these themes are complicated. I've read *The Seven Sisters* many times, and I feel it's such an intricate novel. What do you think?

D: Well, it's . . . yes. It's a simple story about a woman who loses her husband.

N: Yes, it's a simple story from one point of view. But its content is not so simple. It is a computer journal and in the

¹ *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain*, "Margaret Drabble," ed. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1974) 117.

first chapter you used first-person narration. In the second chapter you used third-person narration. If we focus on the content, there is a climax at the end of the second chapter. But the novel doesn't end there and continues. You spared only about thirty or forty pages for the third and fourth chapters. But these two chapters are so condensed. You named the title of the third chapter "Ellen's Version" and you used a different narrator here. Ellen pretended to have written this chapter, but actually the heroine, Candida herself, wrote it. In the final chapter you used both first-person and third-person narration. What's more, Virgil's *Aeneid*, book VI, is present in the background. Its content is very similar to that of his version of Aeneas' visit to the Underworld. You used a lot of techniques when writing it. It seems as if there exists another novel within the novel.

D: Well, I'd forgotten till you reminded me that it has got such a narrative complexity because the actual story is quite simple: the woman leaves her house and goes on a journey with her friends. But I suppose the narrative, the subject, is her discovery of herself as an independent person. And her using different voices is due to trying to find out who she is now that she is alone. And of course all the voices are written by me as a narrative for there are a lot of questions when we write a diary. Do we tell the truth in a diary? Do we lie in a diary? And what is the true story? Or even in a diary, are we trying to make ourselves look good or are we able to tell the truth? I think we can't. And I think even in a diary, we

deceive ourselves. So this was . . . it's an experimental novel. It's about a woman writing for the first time. She's not a writer. She is trying to write. But of course, I am a writer. I know what she is doing.

N: I suppose because it was a diary, you used several techniques. But in your earlier days you said, "I aim to be lucid."² This novel doesn't seem to accord with your former words.

D: We change. We grow older. We change our ambitions and we change our narrative styles. We change our ways of looking at the world. And my early books were very simple, linear. They just followed one line. This, I think, presents . . . I see this presents problems to non-European readers because most European readers know the framework of the story of Troy and Aeneas and that journey they go on, and the idea is familiar to the Italians of course and most English readers. So it is expecting from the readers that kind of background knowledge.

N: As you say, the framework of the novel itself is simple. It is about a middle-aged woman's life before and after getting divorced. But the way of writing is so complicated, I suppose. You used a lot of techniques.

D: Yes. That's very true. It's very difficult, when you are old, to write the simple narrative which you used to write when you were young without repeating yourself. So I

² *The Writer's Place* 117.

suppose with each novel you find new problems for yourself. You create new problems. You find a new way of treating material. I think it's just a natural way or process of growing older. Life becomes more . . . life is many-layered. When you're young, you have just one straight aim. And life seems clear. You have an ambition and an idea. And as you get older, life has many layers of memory and history and I think perhaps my novels have become more difficult because there are so many layers of memories to do with this.

N: By the way, you are on good terms with Doris Lessing, aren't you? She got the Nobel Prize in 2007, in the year she published *The Cleft*. I suppose you know the Irish novelist, Anne Enright. She published *The Gathering* in 2007. These two novels were published in the same year. I think *The Cleft* is totally different from her former novels. She has mainly written about women's lives and social matters. But in this novel she wrote about the beginning of human beings and we are bemused by it. *The Gathering* is also an intricate novel like *The Seven Sisters*. Have you read it?

D: Yeah, I did. It's about a family in Dublin. Sort of tragic family of . . . and there's a lot of memory, lots of going back . . . back in time.

N: Recently, I have been reading *The Gathering* and whenever I read it, I always think of *The Seven Sisters*. They are similar, not in the narration. Both seem to have another novel within the novel.

D: It is very difficult now to write a simple novel because

post-modernism destroyed the simple novel. People started to write in a layered way and it's very hard to go back. It is very hard now to write a simple narrative. When I was young, I didn't worry about narrative techniques, I just wrote. But now even a young writer starting now, a young literary writer, will be confronted with all these difficulties about choices of narrative techniques. The literary novel has become quite self-conscious. We worry about technique and a lot of novelists, most novelists, use multiple viewpoints, multiple narrative systems . . . some of which I find very difficult, some of which I find quite boring. But it's very fashionable now, that kind of narrative layer.

N: You published *The Seven Sisters* in 2002 and Lessing published *The Cleft* in 2007. In that year she got the Nobel Prize and Enright's *The Gathering* got a Booker Prize. I think all of these novels are so intricate. When novelists write novels, I suppose these days they are thinking of writing techniques. When *The Gathering* was nominated for the Booker Prize, Enright said something like "I don't write straight novels."³ Judging from her words, I can assume it is a difficult novel.

D: But I think she also meant to say, "It's not a happy book. It's about a very unhappy subject matter. It's difficult

³ Cf., "Anne Enright, 'I Bring All of Myself to a Book,'" *The Man Booker Prizes*, 8 July 2011 <http://www.themanbookerprize.com/perspective/articles/99>.

and it's unhappy." And I think she was saying, "I can't write a happy simple book, I can't do that."

N: I suppose another reason she writes difficult novels is that James Joyce or John Banville has influenced her. They are Irish so she has to be conscious of them.

D: Well, Joyce had an enormous influence on all Irish writers and he influenced Banville. There's a whole tradition of Irish literary writing but without Joyce, it wouldn't exist. It was Joyce who created that tradition. Any Irish writer is aware of that.

N: Once you said, "I don't want to write an experimental novel to be read by people in fifty years."⁴ But these days your writing style is similar to that of experimentalists. Don't you think so?

D: Yes, yes. I admire James Joyce. I mean, it's not that I don't like his work. I think it's quite a dangerous novel. And I suppose my own work has become more experimental. But . . . yes, there was one branch of experimentalism that I really didn't like, which was the French 1960s and 1970s. But even about that I've slightly changed my mind. I mean, as we grow older, we re-read things, discover different things. You decide something you liked when you were young, you don't like any more, and then discover a new way of writing. So we develop all the time. We go on and on. Even when we're

old, we go on changing. And Doris Lessing is a very good example of somebody who moves through many, many styles, through realism, to science fiction, autobiography, historical fiction. She has written dozens of books. They're in very different styles.

N: I think I now understand a lot more about your present writing style and present writers' difficulties in writing novels. Thank you for explaining it to me.

D: Thank you.

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⁴ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 65.