

## Parables of Grace in Drabble's *The Needle's Eye*

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Despite the dissolution of Empire, the near collapse of the country's economy, the bleak prospects for peace that have persisted since the end of World War II, the imminent approach of 1984, and other rather obvious hints of impending apocalypse, England has still managed to produce a number of contemporary writers who have concerned themselves with an ancient and apolitical problem: the problem of grace. What is it? Who has it? How is it apportioned, apprehended, measured, weighed? Such questions, by their very nature, cannot be conclusively answered, so various possible views have been advanced. These range from straightforward fictional expositions of traditional Christianity such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) through Graham Greene's studies of the human sinner as religious saint to the dark fictions of William Golding, who, in novels like *Free Fall* (1959) and *Pincher Martin* (1965), shows evil everywhere and the existence of good—and God—definitely in doubt. Standard Christian ideas have also been variously fableized in the fiction of Charles Williams, *All Hallows' Eve* (1948), for example; in the children's stories and the adult science fiction of C. S. Lewis; in J. R. R. Tolkien's popular fantasy trilogy, *Lord of the Rings* (1954). They have even been delicately paganized, and survived the process, in Angus Wilson's *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956).

Even in this fiction, however, "the age [has] demanded an image/Of its accelerated grimace." The positive religious affirmation that Waugh attempts in *Brideshead Revisited* rings less true than does this same author's more negative social satire. Waugh and the reader can both believe in the savagely sardonic vision that informs, say, *A Handful of Dust* (1937) or the later *The Loved One* (1948), for the characters in these novels get pretty much what they deserve. But man's view of man's just deserts is not necessarily God's view, and therein lies the crux of the problem. Furthermore, in an increasingly complex world it becomes increasingly difficult to decide just what literary characters (not to mention real people) even on the social level deserve. Nevertheless, a number of contemporary British writers have employed modern society as mostly the backdrop for a much more problematic matter, the nature of God and the manner in which the incomprehensibility of His workings and judgments might be partly apprehended by fallible men. Man in society becomes the starting point for a leap of faith. The best known practitioner of this technique is, of course, Graham Greene, and the approach itself might be said to begin with his *Brighton Rock* (1938). The deliberate delinquent, Pinkie, has chosen evil and so lives—although, admittedly, disastrously—with a moral dimension that is lacking in the

lives of other characters who are not, by normal standards, evil. The heart of the matter, for Greene, is the recognition that man's rules are not God's nor even what man believes God's rules might be. Indeed, in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) Scobie is redeemed by the very manner in which he commits adultery. Paradoxically, the grace of the sinning saves the sinner. And paradox, one well might say, is the characteristic expression on the visage of much of this fiction. It can be paradox tragically tinged as in Greene's fiction. Or it can be darkly comic, as in Muriel Spark's short story, "The Black Madonna," in which a barren English couple pray to an ancient blackened statue of the Virgin Mary that has been uncovered in a local bog. They ask for a child and are soon rewarded by the birth of a black baby. Or paradox can take the form of religiously determined doubt. The interplay of faith and disbelief in much of this fiction is perfectly summed up at the end of William Golding's *The Spire*. "God knows where God may be," breathes the strangely contemporary dying Dean of a medieval cathedral to himself, after a life in which he tried (successfully) to live according to the doctrine that he tried (unsuccessfully) to believe.<sup>1</sup>

It is against this background that Margaret Drabble's *The Needle's Eye* can best be appreciated. To reduce a complex and multifaceted novel to a single, simple formulation, the book is, as its title implies, a parable—or, more accurately, a series of parables. As I will subsequently demonstrate, these parables have an obvious social and psychological significance. What is not so clear is their religious significance. Thus *The Needle's Eye* can be seen as both an advance and a retreat from the prevailing mode of modern British religious fiction. To start with, the step from obvious paradox to suggestive parable is a step timely taken. Paradox presented too often declines into cliché. The saintly sinner and the believing doubter are by now both tired characters. And with respect to the latter figure, a Samson Agonistes really does require a wrestling opponent more imposing than his own lack of faith. Furthermore, Drabble is willing to suggest that her central character—Rose Vertue Vassiliou, heroically determined to shape her life to fit the values in which Rose herself does not fully believe—may be mostly a neurotic woman who uses religion to hide her own shortcomings from herself. It is a common phenomenon but one not often acknowledged by the more conventional religious writers. As another character in *The Needle's Eye* observes of Rose: "You've no idea. . . how absolutely wicked and selfish people are when they get hold of this idea of being good."<sup>2</sup> In short, the religious issues are, by their very diffuseness, more complicated in this novel than they are in the straightforward religious work of writers like Greene or Williams.

If there is perhaps less to Drabble's heaven than is dreamt of in the philosophies of these other authors, there is certainly more to her earth. The religious implications of the book arise in a definite and believable context. Drabble obviously knows her England. Contemporary British society is so closely observed that, from one perspective, *The Needle's Eye* is a throwback to the great English social novels of the nineteenth century. There is a suggestion of Dickens in the scope of the novel, not to mention the law case that cannot resolve the issue that the law addresses; a touch

of Trollope in the intricate twists and turns of the unfolding action. The novel, however, particularly calls to mind the later works of George Eliot, who also knew how intricately noble spiritual promptings and the necessarily imperfect reality of partly achieved vision intertwined. The imperfection of the achieving, Eliot and Drabble both show, reflects the dreamer and the dream—and the world in which dream and dreamer operate. More to the point, these various reflections illuminate one another. The religious and moral questions with which Drabble is concerned require a realistically rendered social setting. They arise in modern London, not in Lewis's Narnia or Tolkien's Middle Earth.

How then do humans exist physically and metaphysically in the modern city? The novel opens with an episode from London life, a dinner party, that suggests the equivocal answer, "well and badly." The meal is everything that it should be. The setting is a tribute to the taste and affluence of the host and the hostess; "the room . . . glowed diffusely, elegantly inhabitable, fashionably quaint, modern with a modernity that had no hard edges, no offence, no bravura in it" (p. 12). It would seem the best of both worlds, the old and the new. Yet past and present conjoin in a slightly different fashion in the marriage of the host and the hostess, apparently so fortunate in their marriage. As one of the guests muses:

For who could have guessed, watching the pair of them as they circled attentively with drinks and olives, so blending and agreeably harmonising with their choice in colours, their framed pictures by their own three rather talented small children, that this time a year ago they had parted for ever, with the great and customary acrimony that attends such separations? There had been much speculation both about their parting and their reunion: he himself had always had faith that a genuine affection had brought them back together, an affection supported not too ignobly by a reluctance to abandon so much comfortable bourgeois texture. (p. 12)

There are other sides to the social graces presented here, the shining surface of the successful party. Indeed, the party ends with the hostess anxious to be rid of her guests and then, as they prepare to depart, anxious to have them stay. "She could not bear to think of them all going away, their separate ways, and discussing with one another as they went her cooking, her house, her dress, her marital problems" (p. 36). After they are gone, "as she stood there, gazing into the debris of the sink, a wave of panic filled her: so pointless it was, such an evening, such a stupid life she led, such stupid frivolous aspirations" (p. 37). Yet it was a successful party, and at that party one of the guests, whose life seemed to him far more a dead end proposition than the dark musings of the hostess, meets a woman with whom he can fall spiritually in love. Much of the novel charts this process, the way Simon Camish begins to live again.

Simon, one of the main characters in the novel, early considers another matter central to the novel's social and religious focus, the divisions of wealth and class that reflect, on a larger level, the personal disjunctions that we see in the lives of most of the characters. Simon, on his way to the party, had forgotten to equip himself with an appropriate gift. But at a small store conveniently near his hosts' home he can purchase a bottle of wine. The situation is mundane enough but the meaning immediately expands. In front of Simon is another customer, a customer who lives just around the corner but not at all in the same world that Simon's friends inhabit:

The woman was short and broad and she was wearing bedroom slippers. What raffish districts of London his friends inhabited: NW 1, this was, with all its smart contrasts. They depressed him unbearably, the well-arranged gulfs and divisions of life, the frivolity with which his friends took in these contrasts, the pleasure they took in such abrasions. It appalled him, the complacency with which such friends would describe the advantages of living in a mixed area. As though they licensed seedy old ladies and black men to walk their streets, teaching their children of poverty and despair, as their pet hamsters and guinea pigs taught them of sex and death. He thought of these things, sadly. (p. 9)

The matter of manners (and in many ways *The Needle's Eye* is a novel of manners) extends considerably beyond the bottle of wine that propriety requires. At issue here are other customs of the relatively rich—their proclivities for seeking “atmosphere” and economical housing in run-down areas that will soon be “in” precisely because the “in” people are beginning to move in; their convenient blindness to the human dimension of the “gulfs and divisions” that underlie their “well arranged” lives. Obviously, the “seedy old ladies” and “black men” have taught them nothing of poverty and despair or they could not see these same humans as “guinea pigs” who will impart the lessons the parents missed (without even knowing they have missed them) to their children. Simon knows whereof he speaks. He grew up in the world of the seedy old lady. But so did his host who has now, materially, left that world so far behind him that he cannot really “see” it at all even though, physically, he has returned to it. Calculated ironies abound in Drabble's fiction.

The conjunction of these two disparate worlds and Simon's continuing meditation on the difference between them (which, appropriately, occupies him throughout the party that he attends after completing his purchase) brings us back to the title of the novel. *The Needle's Eye* must call to mind the Biblical parable, the injunction that it is as difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The eye of the needle does not allow room for the dodges that the well-to-do require—to acquire their wealth; to keep it; to protect their self-esteem in the face of their self-evident selfishness. That same point is made more clearly at another strained party when Simon and Rose unexpectedly find

themselves guests in her parents' dwelling. Here Simon sees the very rich at home. And hears one too:

Some men, even self-made men like Rose's father, had so picked up the tones of reason that it was hard to believe that it was not the national interest alone that they had at heart. But Mr. Bryanston gave himself away. He spoke of the workers as though he were a mill-owner in a nineteenth-century novel, even delivering himself of the classic view that the fact that he himself had started work collecting scrap metal in a handcart was a perfectly adequate reason why workers deserved no sympathy at all—a view which showed a mental leap so precarious, so ibex-like, from crest of unreason to crest of unreason, that one could not but sit back and admire his magnificent, gravity-defying arrival. (p. 326)

Self-concern has been dedicatedly pursued, "and that perhaps was why he was perched up there on his solitary eminence, his Alpine peak of national interest, on a nasty snowy little rock of illogic" (p. 327).

But again a characteristic irony intrudes. Simon, too, is preoccupied with self; with the meaning of the life he has achieved partly through his mother's sacrifice; partly through his own efforts; and partly through marrying another woman who, like Rose, is the only child of wealthy parents. Yet Simon is not completely lost, and he is not lost precisely because he can recognize that he might be. It is this recognition that draws him to Rose. It is Rose who draws him out of himself and thereby allows him to participate again in his own life as well as in hers. The grace and gracelessness of the opening gathering is a parable that sets forth most of the main issues that are central to the rest of the book. Simon and Rose, like the host and hostess of the "on again, off again" party, must also try to come to terms with their "on again, off again" marriages; they must try to find grace in their public and private lives.

Since the central question is the problem of grace, Margaret Drabble's literary antecedents go back considerably beyond the nineteenth-century novelists. Her earliest English ancestor, theologically speaking, is John Bunyan, whose name is prominently evoked in the latter portions of the novel. *The Needle's Eye*, however, is written by Drabble, not Bunyan, and that is a crucial difference. Christian never asked himself the probing questions that Drabble's characters, almost obsessively, pose to themselves, nor is his journey along the straight and narrow path encumbered by the conflicting and often contradictory claims of spouses, parents, children, friends, employers, society. The allegorical Vanity could be dealt with when encountered; so could Temptation or Despair. Each danger came conveniently labelled and each represented an obvious and monolithic threat. How, though, can one seek grace when to do so will injure the very persons and principles for whom one is sacrificing? "Oh yes, she knew it had been narrow, her conception of grace, it had been solitary, it had admitted no

others, it had been without community" (p. 378). Ends and means. There are no longer self-evident ends, manifestly just means, right answers. Thus the structure of the book, the series of contemporary parables that illuminate the questions that Drabble poses but wisely does not seek conclusively to answer.

Important to the parable form is a kind of narrative technique rare in a contemporary novel. The author is willing to report her reader's innermost feelings; to play the part of the omniscient nineteenth-century-style narrator and comment on the validity of those reported feelings. A brief example is in order. At one point Simon sits listening to a conversation between Rose and Emily, Rose's closest friend, a conversation from which Simon is necessarily excluded:

It poured out of them both, news of any description, books they had read, things they had seen, people they had heard from, things the children had said, twinges in the ankles and premonitions of sudden death, dreams about cabbage plantations, what they had in the morning's post, and all of this punctuated with absurdly prefatory remarks thrown in Simon's direction—"Oh God, how boring for you," or "We're nearly finished, we'll have finished in a minute," they cried from time to time, without the slightest conviction.... A vainer man would have assumed that their animation was in part at least assumed for his benefit, that their jokes were directed largely at him: but a vainer man would have been wrong. For once Simon had got it right. (p. 223)

"But a vainer man would have been wrong." *Wrong*. "For once Simon had got it right." *Right*. No larger matters are resolved but the issues are there. Simon is commended for his present percipience, for his lack of vanity. The passage also suggests that we should note those other times, abundant in the book, when either co-protagonist takes a dubious turn, slips from the uncertain way that they set for themselves—and the reader.

The passage just quoted—a parable of perception—is important in another way, too, which further suggests that the function of the parable is to illuminate those very questions that it does not answer. For example, Simon at this point recognizes, for the first time, the inescapable truth of his feelings for Rose. Those feelings, however, are themselves rather complicated:

Perhaps he found Rose and Emily so agreeable, as a spectacle, because, precisely, he did not find them attractive. It seemed an odd conclusion, especially as he had decided that he loved Rose, in so far as he considered himself capable of love, and that her company was what he most desired. "I love her," he said to himself, to try it out, but the words sounded very strange in his head: not untrue, but strange. (p. 225)

The passage reveals Simon's own mental twistings, the qualifications he insists on placing on his feelings, the secretness of his declamations. Altogether, it is a curious scene, and representative of both Drabble's technique and her purposes. Up to this point, Simon has been portrayed as a dry and joyless misanthrope who especially dislikes his own character. We see others note his undisguised boredom, discuss his obvious antipathy or indifference to all that surrounds him at cocktail parties, dinner parties, and other occasions of the cultured. But in the shabby surroundings of Rose's dilapidated home, he submits to the friends' joy and even participates in it: "Simon listened with indulgence, noted that he was doing so, and took this for a serious sign. Thereafter he listened more carefully, and watched also, wondering what it was in the conversation that he did not dislike" (p. 223). Simon is self-conscious; introspective; not terribly sure of his own feelings, which he carefully hedges. "He did not dislike." The double negative protects, distances, allows him to strike the pose of aloof observer that he prefers to maintain through most of the dealings of his life. Thus the reader is surprised, and not surprised, later in the passage when Simon makes his declaration of love. It is a modest stand, a small commitment, a silent, affirmative statement in this lawyer's world of double-talk and double-think, and it is brought on so simply by the unabashed joy in these women's uninhibited conversation: a touch of grace.

There are numerous such touches. Sometimes a single paragraph will cast its light on the whole novel. Thus Rose, at another dinner party (much of the novel turns on dinner parties), listens with "silent dissent" to a general conversation on the servant problem and particularly the "strange ways" of charladies. Sitting beside her is another woman who quietly observes that she "can't bear" to retain her own servant any longer: "She looks like my own grandmother. She was in service, my grandmother, and when I see this woman on her knees in my kitchen, I feel as though I've put my grandmother down there to scrub my floor" (p. 330). Rose and the other guest share their similar feelings, "meeting in the middle, one who had seen too much domestic employment from the upper side, and one who had seen too much from the lower, and both of them knowing that there was no justice in it and not enough pay" (p. 331).

Or a recorded recognition can call into question a more standard way of seeing. Part of a previously discussed scene, Simon's realization that he loves Rose, is itself a self-contained parable that counters current ideas on the ideal of liberated sex. Simon first suspects that he admires Rose (and Emily) precisely because they are not the women of his dreams:

How agreeable, how extremely agreeable the two women looked. They looked—he found it hard to explain it to himself—they looked complete, they looked like people. So many women, he found, did not look like people at all; they aspired after some image other than the personal. These were the women, though he did not like to think of it, that peopled his fantasies—smooth, shiny,

made-up sexy women, wearing underwear under their clothes, provocative, female, other. He dreamed of such women, and what they would do to him, and he to them, and he disliked them for it, and himself. There is nothing he would have more disliked than the realisation of his fantasies. The very thought of it made him feel quite ill. (pp. 224-25)

The point here seems quite clear. Dream other dreams—and better.

More typically, however, an episode hints at possible meanings that are themselves complex and contradictory. Rose, for example, at one point remembers painfully her unhappy childhood. Her years with Christopher “had been miserable enough” but they had not produced the old “blind horror and despair” she had felt as a child and then as an adolescent. “Never since the age of eighteen, had she woken in the morning and wished to have died. She had wished to die [a quarrel with Christopher once drove her to an attempt at suicide] but that was another matter [the half-hearted attempt was immediately undone]. A state of grace in comparison. Never, since she first met Christopher” (p. 345). At night in her parents’ house again for the first time in some thirteen years, she remembers past nights—before Christopher and after—in a manner that calls both grace and her objections to her former husband into question. The reader should also note that what we might term the parable of the unprodigal daughter reverses in other ways too its Biblical original. Rose was disowned when she married Christopher. *She* is not welcomed back. “And now he had a room there, kept for him, and all her things were gone” (p. 305).

Even the parable that gives the book its title is partly countered in this complex work. If wealth is a burden that precludes the hope of heaven, then can the wealthy, in good conscience, subject others to that danger? It is not entirely a specious question. “Shake down the superfluity” suggests that all will finally have enough. But what of the middlemen through whose too human hands the superfluity must pass? The novel shows us one such middleman. Rose was determined to give away in a good cause the part of her father’s fortune that had already been irrevocably passed onto her. The single largest gift is a check for £20,000 that she contributes to an African in England trying to raise funds for a school to be built for native children in a particularly poor and backward African country. The school was built, but only a month or so after it was completed it was destroyed in a senseless war of attempted secession. The school was built, but the fund-raiser could not entirely resist the temptation of twenty thousand pounds. “He also bought himself a huge great white Mercedes. Out of my money.” Telling the story to Simon, Rose must admit that Christopher may have been correct. “Christopher said I should have expected it, I should have known better, I shouldn’t have trusted that man—and maybe he was right. I didn’t stop to think. I couldn’t have thrown the money away more ineffectively, could I?” (p. 111). The final question is well taken. All Rose can know for certain is that her action did not particularly help any of the Africans in Africa; that it corrupted the African in England trying to help his fellow countrymen. The



way to grace is not clearly marked.

That same point is made in a different fashion with Simon, who is caught in the contradictions of his own marriage and life. The nature of his predicament is summed up in one of his sporadic attempts to come to terms with a series of these contradictions. He notes that it offends him when his wife wants to engage in the standard conspicuous consumption ploy of buying an automobile suitable for their station in life; it pleases him that such purchases can, at least for a time, make her happy; it offends him that it is mostly her money that pays the bill; it offends him that he lacks the conviction to tell her he is offended; it pleases him to drive the car:

And yet, driving it, he knew that this was what he himself would call corruption. With a faint sudden recurring shock of astonishment he would recognize, in his own behavior, an eternal human pattern of corruption. This is it, he would think to himself, this is I, doing what all men do, I am enacting those old and pre-ordained movements of the spirit, those ancient patterns of decay.... And his spirit would struggle feebly within the net that held it.... But there was no action possible that would not involve destruction, violence, treachery, of those to whom he had pledged himself.... He was caught. And his spirit would hunch its feathered bony shoulders, and grip its branch, and fold itself up and shrink within itself, until it could no longer brush against the net, until it could no longer entangle itself, painfully, in that surrounding circumstantial mesh. (p. 134)

The quotation gives us a man at the midpoint of his life lost in the dark wood of the life he has made for himself. Parable, on this large level, verges into allegory, but the allegory is calculatingly restructured, undone, to become a kind of parable again. It should further be noted that a great Protestant allegory balances a great Catholic one and balances it in the same fashion. If Rose is a Bunyanesque pilgrim who does not progress far, then Simon is a contemporary Dante who does not entirely get out of the woods and certainly never reaches the final mystic Rose that his more successful predecessor finally saw. But the question of how far each travels—since Rose goes back to Christopher and Simon remains with Julie—is a particularly difficult one and must be considered in some detail.

Rose, returned to the misery of being married to Christopher, tries to justify the sacrifice of her own previous hard-won happiness: "And now she lived in dispute and squalor, for the sake of charity and of love. She had ruined her own nature against her own judgment, for Christopher's sake, for the children's sake" (p. 378). The rationale rings false. "Dispute and squalor" along with "charity and love" comprise rather strange bedfellows. Furthermore, although she suspects that "she had sold... her own soul," and feels herself "lapsing, surely, slowly from grace" simply because she has done her "duty" for Christopher and "the children" (p. 378), Rose must also

admit that she does not care for Christopher. The children, she further acknowledges, do not profit from what can finally be defended only in their name. She is now irritable, querulous, and well aware of the natural consequences of her natural resentment. "To yell at the children, angrily, I'm doing this for you, you fools, could hardly be good for them" (p. 379). She is even denied the one solace that she would especially appreciate; simply to talk about her present unhappiness to Simon as she had freely talked about her past problems: "But how could she commit such an indiscretion, how could she betray one man to another?" (p. 379). She must be faithful to Christopher, in her fashion, as Simon, in his, was previously faithful to Julie.

The two fashions, of course, are the same, which emphasizes one final time a structural device basic to *The Needle's Eye*. For the whole novel is built on the calculated way in which Drabble links Simon and Rose together; throughout the book these two are contrasts to and counterparts of one another, images of the other in which the other is both reflected and reversed. Thus the central actions portrayed in the novel are their two spiritual quests, their attempts to come to terms with their own lives and, particularly, to understand the role that wealth plays in that life. Neither can find meaning in money or justify their existence (as does Rose's father or Simon's father-in-law) through the pursuit of riches. Yet Rose has had her problem, a large fortune, thrust upon her. She tries through extreme (and extremely unapplauded) actions—giving most of it away—to resolve, as best she can, the problem as she sees it. Simon labors, and continues to labor, to achieve the moderate material success that continues to upset him, that becomes mostly one more measure of his unsatisfying life.

There are other such pairings in the novel. Simon and Christopher, for example, are dissimilarly conjoined. Each was assumed to have married for money and in each case the assumption is wrong. But it is wrong in different ways and for different reasons. Rose, at one point, disguises herself as Julie, wearing, while with Simon, the other woman's scarf and dark glasses. The disguise is unconvincing. Rose will later play Julie in a different fashion and be the wife who cannot properly publicly play the wife but must give vent to the anger and frustrations that her husband occasions. Even then, however, the two women are similar in quite a different fashion and only vaguely reflect the much more fundamental way in which Rose and Simon together mirror and distort the central issues in each other's lives.

It might here be profitable, near the end of the novel, to review some of this imaging. To begin with, one can note how the whole social scope turns on sometimes contrasting, sometimes similar reversals in the lives of the two protagonists. Thus Simon early decides, for reasons that he can never clearly articulate, that it is necessary for him to rise economically in the world. Rose, just as nebulously, determines that she must descend. Even in the opening episode of the novel the pattern of similar contrasts is established. Rose and Simon first meet as the odd woman and the odd man who must balance each other at their mutual friends' party. Each is unattached but in a different fashion. Simon is legally married but is not really connected to Julie in any other sense and is certainly not conjoined to her through their

three children, whom they both largely ignore. Rose is legally divorced. Yet she is still conjoined to Christopher in many senses (her memories of the past; his role in her different spiritual and economic odysseys; her realization that it is against him and his values, even more than her parents, that she still most passionately reacts) and they are particularly tied together through the children that neither of them will or, indeed, can renounce. Even the pasts of these two characters evince the same similarity in difference and difference in similarity. Simon's painful adolescence (painful because of his family's poverty) was presided over and directed by his capable mother while his physically invalid father had no real role in the son's life. Rose's painful adolescence and young adulthood (painful because of her family's riches) was made more so by her father who was ruthlessly capable in business and who determined, but not always in the sense that he intended, much of what the daughter did, while the mother, a psychological cripple, played little role in that same daughter's life.

These parallels from the past still continue at the end of the novel. As previously observed, Rose must now be "fair" to Christopher as Simon was formerly "fair" to Julie. That change reflects their jointly changed marital conditions. Rose and Christopher are again physically living together; the marriage of Simon and Julie is now more than the unhappy physical sharing of the same bed and board that it had formerly been. Rose, as noted, finds that the quality of her emotional and spiritual life has suffered greatly under the new arrangement, which is also, it must be noted, an old order reestablished. In contrast, the "quality of Simon's domestic life" had "improved . . . immensely" (p. 367). He now no longer has to refrain from voicing his judgments against his wife, for he himself has dismissed the charges. But in the past, too, he had, at times, been relatively happy with Julie.

There is, in short, a distinct possibility that the actions of the past will continue, in the same parallel fashion, into the future. The hints that the visions and revisions worked out in the novel will be subsequently reversed, I would argue, are quite clear at the end of *The Needle's Eye*. Simon, for example, congratulates himself on the fact that Julie "had managed to become smart, and generous, and worldly" (p. 367). Other words for the very qualities—vain, indulgent, insensitive—that formerly displeased him most. What has clearly and obviously changed is Simon's emotional perspective: "Julie *seemed* to be becoming what he had *once taken* her to be"; perhaps "he alone, guiltily, had *misinterpreted*" her when he formerly weighed her limitations as a human being (p. 367, emphasis added). Or perhaps he misinterprets now. Perhaps—a sad thought, but one Drabble definitely suggests—Julie remains Julie and Simon Simon. Certainly Rose and Christopher are, at the end, essentially the same characters that they previously were and are as unhappy in their reestablished marriage as they were in the original one.

For Rose the only immediate prospect of any happiness at the end of the novel lies in Christopher's absence. Going about his father-in-law's business occasionally takes him abroad, which is the one gleam of hope in his wife's life: "The relief at the thought of two weeks without him had been overwhelming, shaming, vindicating,

triumphant" (p. 378). The odd conjunction of shame and vindication shadows forth the contradiction in which Rose is still caught. She can use, as she does, her brief respite to "prove" that "she had been right to take him" back (p. 378). In best bad Christian style, she is suffering—sacrificing herself, and doing so, as she also recognizes, to no particular point or purpose. Neither her children's life nor the state of her soul is improved by what she does. She is acting according to (Rose's terms again) "faith-demented ideologies" (p. 379). It is shameful. So if the enduring happiness of Simon is not assured, neither is the continuing sorrow of Rose. The brief remission from suffering looks back to a longer period of relative happiness while legally divorced from Christopher; it might also look forward to a bigger break in the future. Drabble, in another context, has suggested as much: "Probably [Rose] and Christopher would part again in five years because she couldn't take it."<sup>8</sup> Drabble makes the same suggestion in the novel too. Consider the way in which the narrator sums up Rose's juggling attempts at self-justification for self-sacrifice: "At times she tried to persuade herself that her decision to live with Christopher was not only right but also, beneath all her resistance, satisfactory to her: at times she came near to persuading herself that this was so" (p. 378).

Rose here comes dangerously close to violating the first religious illumination of her life. To justify that claim it is necessary to go back in the novel again, back to the episode that gives the book its title. Rose, at one point, tells Simon of a crucial childhood experience that occurred with Noreen, the religious fanatic who was her childhood nurse. They had heard a sermon on the eye of the needle that explained "how Christ hadn't really meant it, and the eye of a needle not being really an eye of a needle but a Hebrew phrase meaning a gate in the walls of Jerusalem, and of course camels could get through it, or small ones anyway, though it was a bit of a squeeze" (pp. 81-82). Noreen sarcastically dismisses such "casuistry" as "soft soap." For the eight-year-old child, however, it is much more: "But to me it was like the Road to Damascus, a horribly heavenly light shone upon me and I knew what life was like, endless prevarication and shuffling and squeezing and self-excusing and trying to cram oneself into grace without losing anything on the way" (p. 82). But can one cram oneself into grace with self-excusing suffering any better than through similarly rationalized riches? "How can one say, excuse me, excuse me, I'm only a small child, if one recognizes the truth in one's bones?" (p. 82), Rose responds to Simon's claim that a woman like Noreen should never have been allowed near a child. A similar question hangs in the air at the end of the novel. How can one say excuse me, I'm only a confused adult (with a taste for suffering), if one recognizes the truth in one's bones? Rose still recognizes the truth. Ironically, she is not completely lost at the end of the novel only because she cannot convince herself that she is not completely saved.

From one perspective, the conclusion of the novel is dark indeed. Simon has achieved a dubiously based domestic happiness that will not likely long endure. Similar in opposition to the very end, Rose has gained just the same variety of sorrow. The two main characters have not, it would seem, traveled far. But pilgrims

without progress, they are pilgrims still. And therein lies their hope for the future. Yet Drabble is, throughout the novel, deliberately equivocal about the conventional import of the religious themes so regularly sounded. Thus Rose, as a child, discovered that Noreen was right. She had once tested the servant's dubious claim that a razor "would cut you as soon as look at you" (p. 339). She was cut. "So, it had all seemed true. Razors cut, Christ was crucified, man was wicked, Hell was open" (p. 341). Occam's razor would cut away three of those conclusions. The simpler proposition is "razors cut," and of course they do. That is what they are made for.

The same dubious affirmations of doubtful faith also continue through to the end of the novel. Simon and Rose make the two trips, the two journeys (model pilgrimages?) that they had promised themselves, and neither turns out as intended. They visit her childhood home to get back the children Christopher had abducted. The outcome of that visit is that, although Simon proposes, he loses Rose to Christopher. And Rose, it should be added, loses Rose too. The second journey provides the book with its brief closing episode. Simon and Rose finally make another long-promised excursion. It is, however, only a trip to a dog show and "a very second-rate dog show" at that (p. 375).

Out of that dog show come the two contrasting visions with which the book ends. Simon and Emily look first at what the dogs have done. Reykjavik (where dogs are illegal) is, for Emily, "the only civilized capital city in the world. 'All dogs should be shot,'" she adds, to make the point even clearer. They then pass to what humans have done, with predictable results:

They stood there, the three adults, on the parapet, and looked at the view, and looked back at the Palace, with its odd shabby Corinthian pillar, its peeling plaster caryatid, its yellow bricks, its ugly Italian parodies, its bathos, its demotic despair, and then looked back at the view, where houses stretched, and tower blocks, and lakes of sewage gleaming to the sky, and gas works, and railway lines, effluence and influence, in every direction, all around, as far as the eye could see. It seemed that Emily was right. They felt the cold chill of her reading, and she said, leaning on the stone by the eroded prefuntory sphinx, "It's not the dogs that should be shot, it's the people. Look at it. Just look." (p. 381)

This "talk of shooting" brings Rose to her first final vision: "They were probably right, she was almost certainly wrong. There was no knowing. I will leap off the ladder blindfolded into eternity, sink or swim, come heaven come hell. Like a rat, swimming through the dirty lake to a distant unknown shore" (p. 381). The savagely ironic reference is made clear in the novel. Rose had previously quoted the appropriate passage from Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. But Bunyan, in his leap, could invoke God: "... sink or swim, come heaven come hell, Lord Jesus, if thou will catch me,

do, if not, I will venture for thy name" (p. 343). Rose can anticipate only the graceless world about which Emily and Simon were "probably right." One falls a "rat" into a "dirty lake," the only hope "a distant unknown shore." Or the lake itself. Part of the shoddy ugliness of the scene are the lions that decorate the exposition hall. They are "crudely cast in a cheap mould" (p. 381). One of them is even broken, a fact which especially pleases Rose. On this note the novel ends: "She liked the lion. She lay her hand on it. It was gritty and cold, a beast of the people. Mass-produced it had been, but it had weathered into identity. And this, she hoped, for every human soul" (p. 382).

This second charitable vision, a hope "for every human soul," is as problematic as the riddle Samson set the Philistines. Does this broken British lion of the people presage an end to other divisive political structures besides the former British Empire, a more egalitarian future? Has "sweetness" of any temporal or eternal variety come forth? Is it significant that the lion achieves "identity" after it is broken ("half of its head was missing") and contains such unlikely yet suggestive items as "a Coca Cola bottle, a beer can, and a few odd straws" (p. 381)? After it is one with the "terrible mess" around it? Is this comic and grotesque setting another version of what Simon earlier termed, in a far more natural and beautiful setting, "some delusive allegory of the soul" (p. 313)? Such questions are not answered. There is no evidence to answer them. Nevertheless, the novel can still end with an affirmation of hope and a parable of grace abounding in a seemingly graceless world. In this sense *The Needle's Eye* is darker and brighter, and far more paradoxical, than the more traditionally religious British fiction of the twentieth century.

## NOTES

1. William Golding, *The Spire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 222.
2. Margaret Drabble, *The Needle's Eye* (1972; rpt. New York: Popular Library, 1977), p. 244. Subsequent references to this readily available paperback edition of the novel will be made parenthetically in the text.
3. "An Interview with Margaret Drabble," *Contemporary Literature*, 14 (1973), 285.

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## Parables of Grace in Drabble's *The Needle's Eye*

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Margaret Drabble, in *The Needle's Eye* (1972), effectively conjoins two major British fictional traditions. On the one hand, she writes in the broadly realized manner of the great nineteenth-century novelists such as Charles Dickens and, even more so, George Eliot. Like these novelists, she concerns herself with the social world, with the manners and mores of different representative characters from different levels of British society. The result is, in part, a composite portrait of late twentieth-century Britain that can be creditably compared to nineteenth-century portrayals like Dickens' *Bleak House* or Eliot's *Middlemarch*. But Drabble also works in a more modern vein. She is a contemporary religious novelist who explores, in a mostly fallen world, the problems of faith and the difficulties of belief. As Graham Greene in particular has demonstrated, these problems can be extreme. But unlike Greene, who relies largely on paradox to set forth his religious themes, Drabble, as her title suggests, employs parable. That parable sometimes verges towards allegory, partly Dantean and partly Bunyanesque, but it more characteristically informs the numerous small episodes in the novel whereby Drabble illuminates her religious implications.

Both the social and the religious themes in *The Needle's Eye* center on the two co-protagonists, Rose Vertue Vassilou and Simon Camish. These two characters are, throughout the novel, partly counterparts and partly contrasts to each other. Each has engaged in a social quest—Simon to rise in the world and Rose to fall. Both must also come to terms with their domestic life. So Simon transfers his unhappy marriage into a not very firmly founded happy one; Rose, however, transforms an unhappy divorce into a dubiously based unhappy remarriage. But most important, these two characters also try to come to terms with the spiritual meaning of their life, with what they have done and what they are doing. Although neither achieves any conclusive success, the attempt still allows for the small victories that demonstrate, for Drabble, both the problematic nature of and the presence of grace. (AED)