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Catherine Bernard, Liliane Campos and Michelle Ryan-Sautour

Recent British Fiction (Part 3)

Concluding panel of the 2014 SÉAC conference

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Recent British Fiction (Part 3)

Concluding panel of the 2014 SÉAC conference

Resisting Diagnosis: Margaret Drabble's *The Pure Gold Baby*

1 **Liliane Campos**

2 As the 'medical' category continues to grow in popular fiction, diagnosis has become a familiar starting-point, or turning-point, in the contemporary novel. An act both of recognition and prediction, diagnosis opens up a determined narrative whose boundaries constrain the character. The medical expert acts like a modern oracle, although at times a somewhat 'imperfect speaker': much like the witches in *Macbeth*, her declaration forms a narrative path, a modern prophesy which may hide as much as it reveals.

3 Margaret Drabble's latest novel, *The Pure Gold Baby*, is a striking counter-example which I suggest we read as *anti-medical* fiction. Although the main character's fate seems to be determined by a genetic anomaly, her condition is never clearly identified. Drabble works against the grain of medical fiction, foregoing the narrative potential of diagnosis explored by Ian McEwan (*Saturday*) or Will Self (*Umbrella*, see Marc Porée's article in this issue), who both use it as a dramatic shift in relations between doctor and patient. While McEwan and Self highlight the power structures underlying the speech act of diagnosis, Drabble preempts this potential by silencing the medical voice. I will argue however that diagnosis is also a sociological and narratological issue, and that its invalidation raises questions about narrative determinism.

4 *The Pure Gold Baby* follows the bio-sociological vein that Drabble began exploring in *The Radiant Way* (1987) and *A Natural Curiosity* (1989), and formulated most explicitly in *The Peppered Moth* (2001). A great admirer of George Eliot's 'scientific precision,' she has often drawn parallels between narrative and scientific observation, either highlighting the pathologies of the social body under scrutiny, or wondering about its determinisms. Yet science is not a central theme in *The Pure Gold Baby*, as it is in *The Peppered Moth* or *The Sea Lady* (2006). The narrative follows several decades in the life of an anthropologist, Jess, whose daughter Anna turns out to be an unusual child, in need of lifelong care. Although her confrontations with doctors are difficult, fearful occasions, these are only brief episodes in a novel chiefly concerned with the web of relations linking Jess and Anna to their neighbourhood and to the social fabric of British society. The narrator is a concerned neighbour, and it is care itself which emerges as the central theme of the novel. Responding perhaps to the Conservative model of the Big Society, Drabble looks back to the 60s, 70s and 80s as a time of mutual support between young families in a semi-bohemian neighbourhood of North London. She traces changes in the social web, as well as successive experiments in institutionalized care, as her characters visit the former lunatic asylum Colney Hatch or R. D. Laing's Kingsley Hall, and discuss anthropological comparisons of attitudes towards mental incapacity.

5 The narrator's historical perspective is foregrounded by her frequent indulgence in prolepsis. Rhetorical prolepsis is a familiar trait in Drabble's narration, which constantly questions its own assumptions and assertions, anticipating objections to its own hypotheses. But her ageing narrator also brings a double awareness to the novel, confronting 'then' and 'now,' and frequently introducing structural prolepsis. Looking back, past ignorance becomes lost innocence: 'we did not then consider ourselves held in the genetic trap' (26). While the predictive act of medical diagnosis remains vague and unfocused, other forms of foreknowledge shape the narrative from its very first lines, which relate Jess's 'proleptic' encounter with a group of Central African children affected by Lobster-Claw syndrome, later perceived by Jess herself as a sign of her future life as a carer.

6 Such insistence on prolepsis brings questions of determinism, whether biological or narrative, into sharp focus. Fascinated by Edward Steichen's 1955 *Family of Man* photography

exhibition, the narrator dwells on a picture of a newborn baby whose ‘testes are large and contain, already, the germs and genes of the future. The treasury of Nature’s germens’ (118). A little later this image returns when she accompanies Jess on a trip to a private care home, on the invitation of patron Bob Germen, and ponders again on the ‘trick’ played by ‘nature’s germens’ (158). Drabble is pointedly echoing Macbeth and his appeal to the witches in Act 4, ‘though the treasure / of nature’s germens tumble all together.’ Macbeth is indeed a victim of diagnosis: when he first encounters these ‘imperfect speakers,’ they hail him as king, performing both a recognition and a setting apart, a literal dia-gnosis (from the Greek *dia*, ‘apart’, and *gignoskein*, ‘to recognize, to know’). Yet for Anna, the setting apart of diagnosis does not give any knowledge of the future, since she turns out to be ‘one of a kind, allotted her own genus and species’ (25). By weakening the key hermeneutic act of medical recognition, Drabble shields her characters from the self-enforcing trap of foreknowledge.

7 Diagnosis is thus equally problematic in the taxonomical sense of the word, as the characterization of a genus or a species. The impaired diagnosis carried out in *The Pure Gold Baby* is not just an avoidance of prolepsis, but also a refusal to classify. When considered in this light, the novel draws our attention to a long-lasting concern about classification in Drabble’s fiction, which has always tended to present characters as social and psychological types, albeit in increasingly reluctant taxonomies. They function as synecdoches, not only of social classes—leading some reviewers to complain of their reduction to ‘class classified’ (Wood)—but also of psychological categories. In *The Pure Gold Baby*, we encounter recognizable academic and middle-class types, such as Anna’s father ‘the Professor,’ but also Jungian archetypes such as the Wounded Healer. In this wider sense, Drabble’s narrative voice has a love-hate relation to diagnosis, relying on it yet distrusting it, both as classification and as a hermeneutic act.

8 If satire is, as Ezra Pound suggests, diagnosis (Pound 45), then state-of-the-nation writing can hardly avoid it. Drabble’s narrator casts an ironic eye over many changes in British life, and one of her targets is the business that care has become. Yet she invalidates judgement as soon as it arises, first satirizing the private institution visited by her characters where ‘Everyone spoke a little too cheerfully, a little too heartily’ (168), and then having Jess ponder ‘the mysteries of diagnosis’ (177) and the uselessness of blame:

Jess, standing there feeling slightly overwhelmed by the summer heat, cast her mind back over all these blame games. Blaming parents for their children’s misbehaviour, blaming schools and teachers, blaming genes and illnesses, blaming doctors and politicians, blaming the ideologies of others, blaming fate, blaming God. See where the scarlet silken poppies flame in the borders, behind the purple-blue delphiniums. Blame the tall poppies. Blame the lawns, blame the courtyard, blame private philanthropy, blame private greed and public malice. Blame the sixties, blame the seventies, blame the eighties. Blame the Beatles, blame Mrs Thatcher. Blame the institutions, then blame the closing of the institutions. Blame R. D. Laing, blame Mary Warnock. Blame modernism, blame Brutalism, blame Tesco, blame Prince Charles. The banner of blame flies high. (178)

9 As it simultaneously searches for and disowns causal judgement, the novel seems at times to lose its narrative footing, condemning the narrative voice to frequent repetition and self-rebuttal. Yet these produce fertile tensions: although Drabble’s characters inevitably think in categories, their uncomfortable relation to diagnosis is framed by historical relativism, emphasizing the ephemerality of each generation’s blame games. *The Pure Gold Baby* is the last in a series of novels in which Drabble examines biological determinism both figuratively, as a metaphor for social determinism, and literally, as a locus for intergenerational questions. It is also the first to switch from the neutral viewpoint of natural science to the historicized one of anthropology. Jess’s inaugural encounter with the Lobster-Claw children defines the book’s fascination for the beauty of the different child, and it includes many accounts of anthropological narrative, from Livingstone to Levi-Strauss. Yet these are framed in turn by the narrator’s reminders of the time-bound nature of such discourse, contrasting for instance her own fascination for Steichen’s *Family of Man* exhibition with the racist and sexist overtones later discovered in it.

10 Anthropology is thus presented as a discourse always open to reinterpretation, and whose object resists the reading eye: ‘However hard we stare at Lévi-Strauss’s photographs of

the Nambikwara, we can never read them' (46). In its unreadability, the anthropological photograph becomes a counter-model for the medical gaze, defeating diagnosis:

We stare at them . . . , as Jess as a mother stares at the photographs in Lionel Penrose's classic books on Mental Defect. She gazes at the High-Grade Feeble-Minded Girl, so demure and pretty with her dark dress and wide lace collar, at the physically less appealing Laurence-Moon syndrome man with retinitis pigmentosa and six toes on his right foot. But you can never penetrate the photograph. (46)

- 11 These two hermeneutic metaphors structure the hesitations at work in *The Pure Gold Baby*. On the one hand the medical, taxonomical act of diagnosis, reading symptoms and pathologies; on the other the anthropological gaze, self-consciously framing reality. Somewhere between the two, Drabble points to the treasure of nature's germens, luring us on.

John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012): Fiction and Crisis

12 Catherine Bernard

- 13 John Lanchester is the author of four novels, his first one, *The Debt to Pleasure*, having won the John Whitbread Prize in 1996. Both a journalist and a novelist, Lanchester could be argued to reactivate the long tradition of the reporter-novelist. His non-fiction work focuses on our late-capitalist turn (*Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone One and No One Can Pay* [2010], and his recent *How to Speak Money* [2014]), as well as material culture and everydaylife: *What We Talk About When We Talk about the Tube: the District Line* (2013) which is characteristic of the current interest in transports as a metaphor for our ultra-modern condition (see Lauren Elkin's article in the present issue).

- 14 With *Capital*, his fourth novel, Lanchester fuels his novelistic vision with the data gathered for his essays on the contemporary market economy and our changes in lifestyles. As Claire Tomalin has noted, quoting Walter Bagehot on Dickens, his intention is to follow in the steps of the great 19th century novelists and write 'like a special correspondent for posterity' (Tomalin) Deeply steeped in the economic and social reality of contemporary London, *Capital* should be read as an unavowed manifesto defending a form of self-reflexive realism. In that sense, Lanchester belongs to the vibrant tradition of contemporary English novelists who are all aware they write after the wake, yet who practice a form of enlightened realism that is neither truly parodic, nor blind to its aesthetic determinisms (see Christian Gutleben's article in this issue).

- 15 Like its title, Lanchester's novel constantly looks both to the material conditions of the present: the capital city—London—in which the action takes place, and to the economic forces that run through the present—capital—, the constant flow of capital that runs through the veins of the capital city of capital: London.

- 16 Lanchester admits that his initial intention was to 'write a Big Fat London Novel' (Tomalin) Like McEwan's *Saturday*, Amis's great London novels—including *Lionel Asbo*—, or Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* or *NW*, *Capital* is deeply aware of its debt to the great English writers, from Defoe to Thackeray, from Dickens to Forster or Woolf who turned to the complex body politics of a city whose organicity has been the very stuff novels are made of.

- 17 What is most striking about *Capital* is its multiple access quality. A good read, like most London 'baggy monsters,' it immerses us in a complex mesh of entwined stories in which everything connects. As a subtle echo-chamber, it also functions like a repository of writing strategies which remain this side of stylisation, yet are too programmatic not to be also indirectly self-reflexive. As such, *Capital* is also characteristic of the nuanced realism analysed by David James in his article 'A Renaissance for the Crystalline Novel?' or James Gunning, a realism that does not flaunt its playfulness as the neo-victorian fiction of the likes of Sarah Waters would do. Lanchester shares a belief in the potential of realist fiction, with McEwan or Zadie Smith. In the face of accelerated mutations, the baggy monster can still hold its own and provide the relevant framework to make sense of a present that proliferates more than it develops linearly. Symmetrically, it can only do so by using a form of second degree realism, in which the characteristics of realist fiction are both intensified and crystallised. In 2012, the

same year as Lanchester was publishing *Capital*, David James was also wondering whether the crystalline novel might not be going through a renaissance, turning to Barnes, Zadie Smith—he was of course resorting to Iris Murdoch’s distinction between the crystalline and the journalistic novel in her 1961 essay ‘Against Dryness.’

18 The sense of subtle balance between realism and self-reflexiveness has been one of the distinguishing traits of contemporary British fiction. So what is different about Lanchester’s *Capital*? I would like to suggest first that Lanchester’s own realism also looks back to the great tradition of satire that runs through English fiction, from Defoe to Thackeray or Dickens. Like his forefathers in the art of satire, the necessary element of excess inherent to satire goes with a form of stylisation which differentiates his vision from that of, let’s say, Martin Amis or Will Self.

19 That element of stylisation has to do with two basic principles or constraints: the fact that the whole diegesis revolves around the life of one street in London; the fact that, symmetrically, the metonymic structure proliferates and ramifies into a choral story involving the entwined lives of the characters cohabiting in that one street.

20 The symmetrical constraints are well-known to any reader of the 19th– and early 20th–century novel. From Jane Austen to Dickens, from Maria Edgeworth to Ford Madox Ford, the house, the street, the village have all functioned as metonymies encapsulating a whole, complex society. The fantasy Clapham street in which most of the action takes place has become a form of second degree memory site which allows Lanchester to inhabit the tradition of realist fiction from within. The very name of the street—Pepys Road, a name no doubt chosen for its intertextual potential—points to the literary topography that lines the actual urban topography.

21 Yet, *Capital* is as remote as may be from the psychogeography of a Peter Ackroyd or an Iain Sinclair. His take on literary topography is far more indirect than Zadie Smith’s in *On Beauty* and has more to do with Alan Hollinghurst’s *Line of Beauty* with its palimpsestuous references to the circuitousness of influence. There is however something also deeply echoic about *Capital*. But the echoic nature of the text has little to do with the melancholy haunting that characterizes psychogeography. *Capital* is a choral novel, which displays the whole spectrum of English contemporary society as it is embodied itself in half a dozen families or characters each standing for a specific facet of the social mechanism. The debt is here obvious to Dickens once more, but also to the social eye of Thomas Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861), in which the emphasis is also on the uncanny cohabitation of social extremes.

22 Topographical and intertextual collocation or co-habitation allows Lanchester to reflect on the economic and social mutations of late-capitalist England, a world of excess and deregulation. This explains why Walter Bagehot’s description of Dickens as writing as a correspondent for posterity seems so apt. Written in the phase that directly preceded the 2008 crisis, the novel has today acquired the eerie quality of a novel of anticipation. It is revealing of the current acceleration of time that anticipation in this case does not look ahead by a century or even a few decades, but a few months. When we read *Capital* today, we have the no less uncanny impression of a future past that returns to haunt our diseased present and speaks to us in the anxious voice of a world on the brink of a disaster it both engineered and denied.

23 At this stage, I need to underline the fact that this has also become a form of literary topos to be found not only in Bret Easton Ellis’s novels or Robert Harris’s *The Fear Index*, but also, in France in Eric Reinhardt’s 2007 *Cendrillon*, Michel Houellebecq’s 2010 *La Carte et le territoire* or, also in 2012, Aurélien Bellanger’s *La théorie de l’information*.

24 More than these other choral novels, *Capital* posits itself also as a world-novel, to be read against the rich background of world-literature as promoted by the English literary industry. Although *Capital* is not as ‘international’ as Rushdie’s master-London novel *The Satanic Verses*, its choral structure allows it to delve into the mechanisms of multiculturalism and of migration. Among the characters dancing on the brink of the 2008 credit crunch volcano, we find a trader and his family whose ultra-liberal hubris gives the novel its moral edge, a Polish plumber and a Hungarian nanny, both come to London to experience the rags to riches fantasy of the London dream, a Zimbabwean illegal immigrant, a Pakistani family running the shop around the corner, an old lady and her artist-provocateur grand-son, taking both after Damien

Hirst and Bansky and a promising Senegalese football player and his father plunged in the heart of the international football industry.

- 25 Far from being schematic types, they function both as literary echoes and as metonymies crystallizing the complex and entwined material of our everyday ultra-connected reality. To conclude, I would like even to argue that they manage to reinvent the logic of realism for our ultra-connected knowledge society. Capturing the future past of a world seduced by its own entropic dance, Lanchester writes as a materialist and a moralist, as a chronicler and a storyteller convinced, like Alberto Manguel in *The City of Words* (2007) that ‘There is here’ and that the here is the stuff of visionary fiction.

***Shire and How To Be Both* by Ali Smith**

- 26 **Michelle Ryan-Sautour**

“For great poets do not die; they are continuing presences;
they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh”
Epigraph to *Shire*

“Who Shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart
when caught and tangled in a woman’s body”
‘The Commission’ (*Shire*)

- 27 Virginia Woolf clearly haunts the pages of *Shire*. This collection of what have been labelled as short stories, is genre-bending in many ways, drawing the reader into tales that, as is characteristic of Ali Smith’s engagement with the short story genre, waver on the edges of fiction and nonfiction, poetry and prose, memoir, biography, and essay. Katy Guest (*The Independent*) uses quotation marks to suggest the liminal dimension of Smith’s ‘stories.’ Other critics such as Emily Rhodes (*The Spectator*) speak of the presence of ‘loosely fictionalised biographies’ and Carl Wilkinson (*The Financial Times*) comments on how the ‘stories in *Shire* are not simply classifiable as fiction or fact. They are four highly polished pieces of writing that blend myth, biography, autobiography and poetry.’

- 28 The four stories in the collection are meditative and one senses a strong tie with Woolf’s famous essay, *A Room of One’s Own* and a recuperation of a similar liminal modes of semi-fictionalized, speculative play with genre and gender. The essay comes to life as story in Smith’s work, where 21st-century readers, used to reading beyond boundaries, are led to negotiate varying modes of storytelling.

- 29 The four stories are loosely grouped, and tied together by surprising links. ‘The Beholder,’ ‘The Poet,’ ‘The Commission’ and ‘The Wound’. The two central stories serve as the heart of the collection.

- 30 The first story ‘The Beholder’ tells of a woman who has difficulty breathing, and soon after consulting a doctor discovers she has a rose bush growing out of her chest. The story, in a mode that could be described as speculative magical realism, explores the difficulties of accommodating this new, very inconvenient growth, as the narrator juggles between cardigans and V-necks, and must resort to forms of contortionist movements to simply answer the phone: ‘My phone went off in my pocket and as I reached in, took it out, pressed Answer, arched my arm past the worst of the thorns and got the phone to ear pretty much unscratched, the whole rich tangled mass of me swung and shifted and shivered every serrated edge of its hundreds and hundreds of perfect green new leaves’ (26). This growth is intertwined with a reflection on the present and the past, in addition to thoughts about language and naming. The narrator identifies the rose bush as a Lycidas, apparently named after a hero in Milton’s elegy about the shepherd ‘who’s a tremendous musician but who gets drowned at sea at a tragically young age’ (27). The narrator emerges from a darker, distanced world of medical advice and antidepressant prescriptions to take pleasure in watching herself grow buds: ‘Every rose opens into a layering of itself, a dense-packed grandeur that holds until it spills. On days that are still I can trace, if I want, exactly where I’ve been just by doubling back on myself and following the trail I’ve left’ (34).

31 The story, in playing with the frontier between past and present, brings memory to bear upon her current flowering. Her father on his death bed, a remembered ballad, a car ride, are brought to mingle with her present blossoming, and there is a distinct reflection on layering, similar to that found in Smith's 2014 novel *How to Be Both*.

32 Voices are disembodied, as is often the case in Smith's stories, echoing in playful, often distanced spaces within the short story narrative. And puns abound, as Smith's fascination with the play of language is evident in all of her fiction, and increasingly foregrounded as she progresses in her career. Consider for example, the word 'Shire,' that makes up the collection, a reference to geographical space as well as to the name of a woman who edited the poems of Olive Fraser: 'Inverness-shire, Nairnshire, Aberdeenshire, Cambridgeshire, and all the shires traversed between them from north to south and north again. We met only five times in all and she treated me like family' (106). There is indeed a navigation within the collection between Smith's native land of Scotland, and the world of Cambridge. The stories move between the two spaces, through the mediation of the Scottish poet Olive Fraser, who lived in the same town as Smith, and the figure of Helena Shire, the critic who gave Smith her first commission. The two central stories in the collection 'The Poet' and 'The Commission' reflect openly upon Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* while weaving in aspects of biography that connect the Scottish poet Fraser and English critic Helena. The work is also meditatively autobiographical, integrating fragments from Smith's own movement between the spaces of Cambridge, where she once studied, and now lives, and the childhood spaces of her childhood. The work, also borders more boldly on the political, raising questions of feminine fictions and the idea of power (or lack of) in reference to female historical, fictional and literary figures, thus echoing in Smith's distinctive style and contemporary form, the preoccupations expressed by Woolf. The stories are at the same time intimately biographical and autobiographical and openly set forth as general reflection. Smith has certainly explored questions of gender in much of her writing, often through the lens of myth, as in *Girl Meets Boy*, but there appears to be a stronger shift in this collection, and in the following novel towards a stronger statement about writing 'as a woman.'

33 In 'The Poet,' the story begins with a poet as a young girl throwing a book against the wall and watching the pages open as it nearly breaks. The book story is interspersed with imagined moments of Olive Fraser's childhood in the north of Scotland, and it turns out is a Fraser book, with an imagined interior:

And the book had broken right open and that's when she'd seen there was a music inside it, one nobody knew about, one you could never have guessed at, that was part of the way that the book had been made: 'And the book had broken right open and that's when she'd seen there was a music inside it, one nobody knew about, one you could never have guessed at, that was part of the way that the book had been made.' (44)

34 The idea of layers, of hidden images or ideas, appears again, and we see it later reappear in *How to Be Both* in discussions of Renaissance paintings, and the manner in which they were gradually revealed, whereas they had been hidden under layers of paint. Here, Smith explores the hidden contours of Fraser's poetry and life.

35 In 'The Commission' Smith deals with the autobiographical detail of receiving a surprising check from a certain Helena Shire. The piece proposes an intimate intertwining of Smith's career and that of Shire, expressing a sense of gratitude that interconnected with reflections about women in academia, and the very material conditions necessary to be a writer.

36 'The Wound' ends the collection with a short sketch portraying the image of a character in a poem from the 1500's by Alexander Montgomerie. The character borrows Cupid's arrow and wounds himself. The wound burns and becomes a force in a process of transformation, or becoming. It closes the collection in a strange echo of the budding tree in the first story: 'It glowed and warmed until it embered him. Flowers closest to where he lay started to wilt in the heat of it. But inside the man, the heat changed into something else. The first thing he felt it become was courage and the next thing desire. They went through him, but with a roughness he'd never known. Then instead of in pain he was thirsty, but with a thirst he'd never known. The heat and the glow and the thirst combined and melted the man into someone he'd never

been. He heard a noise. It was the roar of water. Up he got off the ground to go and sort himself out' (120–121).

37 This idea of 'sorting the self out' reappears in Smith's 2014 novel, *How to Be Both*, which was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize 2014. In this novel Smith allows game-playing and punning to mingle with reflections on art, accompanied by broad ranges of affect in relation to grief. The novel contains two sections, one of which deals with the internal life of a young teenager named George(ia). George has recently lost her mother to a surprising allergic reaction to medication, and her narrative ranges between the present of her coping with grief, making a new friend and potential lover, Helena Fisker, and memories of moments spent with her mother. Helena Fisker is a slightly rebellious young woman who accompanies George through a period of her life where past and present place her in an in-between space of time. The 'both' of Smith's book refers to a doubling that is enacted on many levels, on that of temporality, and the commingling of past and present, on the level of allegory, in that the work openly points to the allegorical dimension of art, on the level of appearances, where paintings are shown to have had two layers, one of the initial painting, and that of the paint that covered them for a certain period of history. The work is very much about the idea of revelation, and piercing mysteries, and it is very much about art. It is a tightly wrought reflection about what art can do, and how art is connected to identity. It is also about perspective. There is a recurrent reflection about being watched and watching. The section concerning George is preceded by the image of a surveillance camera, as the teenager suspects her mother was being watched because of her subversive political activities. George is also fascinated by a young girl she finds in a pornographic video online, feeling obliged to watch the video over and over again to remind herself of the girl's plight. There are also numerous references to digital devices and play with new technologies of communication in relation to these games of surveillance. The mother, for example, disseminates 'subverts' on the web, proposing the appearance of subversive images in pop up form, much like that of advertisements.

38 The second part of the novel is told from the perspective of a famous Italian Renaissance painter that George has seen with her mother at the Palazza Shifanoia in Ferrera, Italy: Francesco Del Cossa, who is revealed in an imagined biography, told through the painter's eyes, to be a woman. Her father realized she would not be able to realize her artistic potential if she were to paint as a woman. There is an underlying reflection on femininity and sexual identity that resonates in relation to Smith's recent engagement with the work of Woolf. Androgyny, and the blurred lines of gender emerge in a manner that highlights the haunting presence of Woolf's narratives. The narrative in the Del Cossa section functions in a more opaque manner than George's narrative, in a modernist vein that plays with perspective, point of view, and proposes surprising shifts in discourse. The reader also finds word games and narrative play with the representation of consciousness at different ages of the character. Like in Ali Smith's short story collections, the two sections are intended to function as distinct unities, while also resonating in relation to each other. The most interesting part of this narrative game is that according to the volume purchased by the reader, the novel proposes the two parts in a different order. Half of the books published present George's narrative first, the other half propose Del Cossa's narrative first, and both chapters are labelled as chapter 1, resulting in a different reading experience for each half of those who have read the novel. The experiment with the publishing format emphasizes the playfulness that informs much of Smith's narrative, also evident in George's punning and clever play with words in English and Latin in her narrative. Shades of emotion color reflections about art, about life, and are intertwined with an overall consciousness of the arbitrary and hidden aspects of language that emerge when used in play. The novel also, as is characteristic of Smith, reflects upon the idea of 'making things up' when it comes to characters, whether they be real, fictional, or historical figures. There is a strong sense that we are all making up fictions as we go along, and Smith renders the resulting complexity in fictional levels and degrees in increasingly subtle ways.

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Abstracts

This round table is a new installment in the series of round tables devoted by the Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines to recent British literature and follows in the steps of the SÉAC 2013 symposium on contemporary British literature (*Ebc* 45) and of a first round table (2013, *Ebc* 47). The present round table focuses on recent titles that offer different insights into fiction's relation to the present, in direct link with the central topic of the present issue.

Cette table ronde poursuit le travail amorcé lors du symposium de 2013 consacré par la SÉAC aux évolutions récentes de la littérature Britannique (*Ebc* 45) et la table ronde qui conclut le colloque d'automne de la SÉAC en 2013 (*Ebc* 47). Cette présente table ronde présente des textes en lien direct avec le sujet de ce numéro, qui revisitent les liens de la littérature avec son présent.

Index terms

Mots-clés : fiction britannique contemporaine, John Lanchester, Margaret Drabble, Ali Smith

Keywords : British contemporary fiction, John Lanchester, Margaret Drabble, Ali Smith