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Margaret Drabble: Natality, Labour, Work and Action

In the previous chapter, the fiction of Elizabeth Taylor was read through the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, whose work provides a recurrent point of reference for this study. In this chapter, I want to connect the novels of Margaret Drabble to some extent with Irigaray, but more particularly with the profound and controversial philosophy of Hannah Arendt (1906–75). Seyla Benhabib has described Arendt as the thinker who has ‘countered Western philosophy’s love affair with death’ with her concept of natality,¹ and I would suggest that there are several aspects of Arendt’s work which can powerfully illuminate the concerns of Drabble’s fiction. Arendt is referred to in The Gates of Ivory (1991), and this reference would seem to confirm, not a determining influence from Arendt, but a congruence between her concerns and those of Drabble.²

There are three aspects of Arendt’s work which are particularly relevant for a consideration of Drabble. The concept of natality was mentioned in the previous chapter with reference to Christine Battersby’s appropriation of the term, but I wish here to distinguish between Battersby’s emphasis and Arendt’s original discussion. Defining natality as ‘the conceptual link between the paradigm “woman” and the body that births’,³ Battersby’s focus is very much on female subjectivity and the development of a feminist metaphysics, whereas Arendt does not focus on one sex/gender but sees natality as ‘inherent in all human activities’.⁴ In The Human Condition (1958), she defines natality in the following way:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in
other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether. (p. 247)

Natality for Arendt represents the human capacity to generate the new and the unforeseen, the innovative and the astonishing, in this world. As the sardonic reference to the Greeks suggests, Arendt dissents from Platonic (or any other) ‘two-world’ metaphysics which seeks to understand the human condition in the light of a principle which grounds or precedes the world of appearance. In her view, to be human is to act and speak with others within the world of appearance: to be is to be present to others. Hence her emphasis on ‘the new beginning inherent in birth’, which marks the possibility of development and change within the human world of plurality. This plural world of interaction with others is the only one in which we can intervene or create, the initiative aspect of birth being echoed or repeated through the initiation of action in later life.

As noted above, Arendt does not foreground gender in her discussion of natality, but as Benhabib and others have pointed out, there is a profound gender subtext in her work: it is surely no coincidence that the philosopher of natality should be a woman. This gender subtext is still more evident in the distinctions she makes in The Human Condition between the categories of labour, work and action. These categories each correspond to ‘one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man’ (p. 7). Labour is the activity necessitated by the biological processes of the human body, the life of which must be renewed, sustained and nurtured. As Benhabib puts it, ‘procuring daily nourishment, cleaning and grooming the body and the space that humans inhabit, tending to the wear and tear of the everyday things around one, of the world of objects that humans need, all belong under the category of labor’. Work corresponds to the ‘unnaturalness’ of human existence, and provides an artificial world of things distinct from our natural surroundings. Through work, we create a world of objects which have a certain permanence, ‘housing’ us but also outlasting us and leaving a record of our existence. Action is the category most highly valued by Arendt: it is, she writes in The Human Condition, ‘the only activity that goes on directly between men