

Real and Not Real: Naomi Mitchison's Philosophy of the Historical Novel

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*In a long and varied career as a writer and activist, Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) wrote novels, poetry, and memoirs; helped establish the first birth control clinics in London; toured the Soviet Union with Doris Lessing; proofread *The Fellowship of the Ring*; and was adopted as the member of an African tribe. But it was as a historical novelist that she established her reputation in the 1920s and 30s. Focusing on *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, her 1931 novel set in the world of Hellenistic Greece, this essay explores Mitchison's concept of the historical novel as a vehicle for promoting social change.*

We get in the creation of the artist something that appeals to us far more vividly than the reasoning of the philosopher.

— Richard Burdon Haldane, *The Pathway to Reality* (186)

It's the second half of the third century BCE. In the kingdom of Marob, on the shore of the Black Sea, Tarrik and Erif Der, the Corn King and the Spring Queen, lead the rituals that ensure the fertility of the soil, the growth of the crops, and a plentiful harvest. But the rhythms of Marob's communal life are threatened both by internal strife—Erif Der's father is plotting to kill Tarrik and make himself Chief—and by the arrival in Marob of Sphaeros, the former tutor of King Kleomenes III of Sparta, whose Stoic philosophy causes Tarrik to question the basis of his own semi-divine powers.

This is the conflict that Naomi Mitchison sets up in the first part of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, her sprawling historical novel that dramatizes the ideas of James Frazer and the Cambridge

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Ritualists against the historical backdrop of Hellenistic Greece. When the novel was first published in 1931, reviewer Mary Butts, herself a writer of historical fiction, called it "a book of the greatest importance," and the novelist Winifred Holtby praised it as being "of the calibre of which Nobel prize-winners are made" (qtd. in Maslen). *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* was the seventh of the more than seventy books she wrote over nearly seventy years, and one that cemented her reputation as one of the most popular British novelists of the 1920s and 30s. Although that reputation has diminished somewhat over the years, her work has continued to find enthusiastic readers and, in the words of Marina Warner, she now "seems ripe for Bloomsbury-style fandom" (9).

Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) had a long and varied career as a writer and activist. Born into an aristocratic Scottish family, she established her reputation in the 1920s as a writer of historical novels. At the same time, she helped found the first birth control clinics in London, became active in socialist circles, and formed close friendships with a diverse group of writers that included W.H. Auden, Richard Hughes, J.R.R. Tolkien, Doris Lessing, and the molecular biologist James Watson. In her sixties, after years of involvement in local Scottish politics, she struck out in a new direction, and began to make frequent visits to Bechuanaland (Botswana), where she was adopted as a tribal mother of the Bagkatla tribe. And she wrote—more than seventy books that included historical novels, science fiction, fantasy, travel writing, children's books, essays, memoirs, and poetry.

Elsewhere I have discussed how *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* reflects ideas about the evolution of self-conscious individualism in society that Mitchison absorbed through her reading of Jane Ellen Harrison and her friendship with the philosopher Gerald Heard. I also discussed how Mitchison mythologizes her own childhood and maturation to explore issues of gender in her writing (Hardy). In this essay, I would like to turn to Mitchison's treatment of Stoicism in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, and to her philosophy of the historical novel.

Throughout her life, Mitchison was fascinated with the relationship of the "real" and the "not real"—of history and fantasy, science and magic, reality and fiction. The second chapter of her memoir, *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973), is titled "Real and Not Real," and that dualism runs throughout her life and work. She was the daughter of a prominent scientist, and at eighteen co-authored one of the first articles in English on Mendelian genetics, but at the same time she had a powerful imagination that set her apart from the rest of her scientific family. Her childhood belief in fairies and fear of ghosts developed into a strong sense of the fantastic that weaves its way through her writing.

In her early historical novels, set in the world of classical antiquity, magic is associated with barbarians and women who have to draw on occult sources of power in the imperialistic, rationalistic, and male-dominated societies of Greece and Rome. In *Gendering Classicism*, her study of the ancient world in twentieth century women's historical fiction, Ruth Hoberman writes that, in order to reinscribe women into a history from which they are largely absent, historical novelists like Naomi Mitchison have to "walk a narrow line between the pressure of plausibility—which require that they reinforce their readers' assumptions about the past—and subversion" (4). Mitchison sticks close to her historical sources, but she subverts them with the presence of women and barbarians to whom those sources give no voice. Those marginalized groups import magic into the historical account.

The first section of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* receives its title, "Kataleptikē Phantasia," from the Stoic doctrine of the "cataleptic impression" (καταληπτική φαντασία), an impression on the senses which the mind assents to as real and accepts as the basis of moral action (Hankinson 60-65). Through the use of reason, the Stoic believes he can filter out false impressions, and distinguish between real and not real. In the novel, Erif Der, the Scythian witch, finds that her magic is powerless against the rationalism of Sphaeros. Tarrik is initially drawn to the teachings of Sphaeros, but eventually finds that Greek rationalism has a "disintegrating" effect, and puts him "out of harmony" with the community whose well-being depends on the rituals he performs as the Corn King (*Corn King*, 286). He develops a more acute self-consciousness that sets him apart from the communal consciousness of his people.

The aim of Stoicism is to cultivate individual self-sufficiency, something that cannot be sustained in the entirely interdependent society of Marob. To the Stoics, self-sufficiency meant a radical detachment from the things of this world, including other individuals. Ironically, Tarrik, in pursuing Stoicism, becomes aware of his own hostages to fortune, his own attachment to other individuals, and for the first time has a sense of his own vulnerability. This attempt to embrace rationalism provokes an existential crisis.

Rationalism is powerful and disruptive, but it also has its limits. Throughout the novel, Sphaeros insists that through the use of reason a mind well-trained in Stoic philosophy can distinguish between real and not real, and will unflinchingly choose the real as the basis of action. But when we last encounter Sphaeros in the novel, this assumption is called into question. Now a tutor to Arsinoë, the sister of King Ptolemy of Egypt, Sphaeros is offered a basket of pomegranates. He takes one of the pomegranates and cuts into it, and discovers that it's made of painted wax. Arsinoë laughs at him and says, "You can't even tell whether a pomegranate's real or not. You and your kataleptikē phantasia!" To which Sphaeros replies, "Perhaps I meant to take a wax one" (*Corn King*, 640). Perhaps it's possible, after all, to assent to the unreal, to choose the fantasy—the work of art—and invest it with value and meaning.

There is an interesting echo of this episode in Mitchison's *Small Talk*, when she remembers the curios in her parents' house, which, over time, were dispersed to various museums: the Pitt Rivers, the Ashmolean, the British Museum. She tells of offering a large scarab, "the pride of their Egyptian collection," to the British Museum, and being asked skeptically about its provenance. "Knowing when my grandfather went on the Grand Tour (a letter from Lord Cockburn in 1854 dates this)," she says, "I told them. They were delighted; it was the earliest forgery they had ever met!" (15-16). The scarab, like the pomegranate, is a fake—an Egyptian fake, no less—but the hand still reaches out for it and it still provokes delight. Like one of Mitchison's historical novels, it's a well-documented fiction.

In an epilogue to *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, we learn that artistic depictions of the life of King Kleomenes have kept alive the King's revolutionary ideals, which his successor King Nabis has revived in a new generation of Spartans.

Mitchison heads the epilogue with a quotation attributed to Hegel: "Dem Begriff nach, einmal ist allemal." Translated literally: "According to the Concept, once is always." In other words, through the use of reason, the mind comprehends the universal in the particular. This is perfectly consistent with Hegelian philosophy. The problem is that Mitchison's epigram is a misquotation. Two similar

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formulations appear in Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion—"Einmal" ist im Begriff "allemal" and "einmal ist allemal—an sich, dem Begriff nach—but nowhere does he use the exact wording found in Mitchison's epigram (Hegel, *Vorlesungen* II, 115; III, 69).

The exact wording is, in fact, found not in Hegel, but in the 1903-1904 Gifford Lectures delivered by Richard Burdon Haldane and published as *The Pathway to Reality* (12). Viscount Haldane (1856-1928) was a philosopher and Liberal politician who served as Secretary of State for War (1905-1912) and as Lord Chancellor (1912-1915; 1924). But to Naomi Mitchison, he was Uncle Richard, her father's brother, whom she remembered from her childhood as serving up a boiled sheep's head after church on Sunday and teasing her by offering her an eye.

In the passages that Haldane misquotes, Hegel is discussing the Christian concept of the Incarnation: the Incarnation occurs once (*einmal*), but allows humans to share in the divine for all time (*allemal*). Mitchison depicts a very different situation in the primitive society of Marob. Tarrik, the Corn King, is what James Frazer calls an "incarnate human god" (91-106)—divine power flows through him that connects his people to the fertility of the earth and the cycle of the seasons. He is powerful, but ultimately replaceable: when he begins to lose his effectiveness, a new Corn King will take his place. The function is important, the individual is not. For this reason, Tarrik's dawning self-consciousness is a threat: in recognizing himself as a separate mortal individual, he finds himself cut off from the community for whom he is a conduit of divine power. Self-consciousness is a short circuit in the system that connects the human to the divine.

How can that connection be restored after the development of self-consciousness? In his Gifford Lectures, Haldane argues that "the real is always singular, unique, having nothing else like it. It is always a 'this'" (12). Each self-conscious individual experiences everyday reality as particulars, but through the use of reason the human mind can comprehend an ultimate reality that transcends particulars, and is universal. In this process, art plays a crucial role. Haldane regards art as occupying a middle ground between the "finite actualities" of nature and the universals comprehended by reason. Art is *more real* than ordinary reality, because it represents the action of the mind upon everyday appearances. It embodies the universal in an individual form. Through a contemplation of a particular work of art, Haldane argues, we become engrossed in the eternal, and thus are taken out of ourselves. He writes that art lifts us "towards a view of the world from the platform of those who are spectators of all time and all existence" (184). Finally, Haldane connects art to religion, arguing that both "show us, even in our human lives, those deeper aspects of reality, which are in their nature ultimate, as forming the very basis of our finite existence" (207). Both art and religion connect us, as individuals, to the universal and divine.

In *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, the artistic representation of his life transforms the slain King Kleomenes into a Christ-like figure, an individual who continues to live through the collective life of his followers. Art transforms *einmal*—the life of the individual—into *allemal*, something universal and eternally present. Art restores the connection between the human and the divine, and through aesthetic experience shapes a new collective consciousness. Mitchison depicts the Sparta of King Kleomenes as a socialist society, attempting to recreate through political and economic reforms the collective experience lost through the development of self-consciousness and the rise of individualism. The artistic depiction of Kleomenes' life inspires others to follow his example: art embodies ideas that can in turn become the basis of action. This was an important consideration for

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Naomi Mitchison as a politically-engaged writer who sought to address issues relevant to the contemporary world through the medium of the historical novel. She wants not only to recreate the past, but also to imagine a future shaped by the ideas she represents in her art.

In her review of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, Winifred Holtby praised Mitchison for her ability to make things real. "One simply knows that this is a real world," Holtby wrote; "that real people lived in it; that this is how they lived." Mitchison achieved this verisimilitude through "concrete and intimate details," and conveys her philosophical ideas "through individual human beings." The result, for Holtby, is that "even now, thinking that I can judge the book dispassionately and critically, I can be shaken by it to sudden tears" (Holtby). Her emotional response is stronger than her critical response.

Stoics, like Sphaeros in Mitchison's novel, were suspicious of literature—of poetry and tragedy—precisely because they appealed to the emotions, and the emotions were considered sources of false judgments—the "not real" (Nussbaum *Poetic Justice* 56-57). It's bad enough, according to the Stoics, to feel an emotional attachment to one's own family, and to have hostages to fortune who prevent us from achieving perfect self-sufficiency. Literature encourages us to cultivate an emotional attachment to individuals who aren't even real. In her critique of the Stoic view of literature and the emotions, Martha Nussbaum argues that the emotions, and the empathy that they help to cultivate, are necessary for participation in society, which is held together by the bonds between individuals, and which requires to a certain extent the ability to see ourselves in other people. The experience of reading a novel, although it place the individual reader alone with his book, is profoundly social. "The very form [of the novel]," Nussbaum says, "constructs compassion in readers, positioning them as people who care immensely about the sufferings and bad luck of others, and who identify with them in ways that show possibilities for themselves" (*Poetic Justice* 66).

Mitchison doesn't reject Stoic epistemology. It's still important to be able to identify and assent to the good. But in a modern consumer society, it's difficult to identify the good because—as Mitchison recognized even in 1938, when she wrote *The Moral Basis of Politics*—marketing and popular culture provide so many false images of the good. For Mitchison, imagination is needed to see beyond these false images, these "objects unobtained but wanted" that are marketed as the good (*Moral Basis*, 315). Social change, she writes, "can only be imagined by those who can manage to see outside themselves,...who can shift the focus and hold it through an act of imagination." She concludes that "those who are able to imagine change are usually found to have their minds unencumbered with objects" (*Moral Basis*, 314-315). Art is one of the things that stimulate the imagination and allows people to imagine change.

Change requires an imaginative assent to the unreal, to a situation that doesn't yet exist. Apprehending the good isn't enough. We need to be able actively to want the good for others, and this requires imagination and empathy. Through the novel and the emotional response it elicits, the experience of the individual becomes available to others. For Naomi Mitchison, the expanded sympathy that comes with the the aesthetic experience of otherness has in it the seeds of social change. Engaging us in the sufferings of the defeated Spartans, the colonized Gauls, the women and slaves of the ancient world, Mitchison invites us to imagine better possibilities for our own world—more compassion, more justice, more solidarity. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, "the artistic form makes its spectator perceive, for a time, the invisible people of their world—at least a beginning of

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social justice" (*Cultivating Humanity* 94). Contrary to the teachings of the Stoics, the imaginative assent to the "not real" can become the basis of moral action in the real world.

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