

Remembering the First World War After 9/11: Pat Barker's *Life Class* and *Toby's Room*

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Pat Barker's most famous novels are those which form her *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995), culminating in the Booker-Prize-winning novel, *The Ghost Road*. Her most recent novels, *Life Class* (2007) and *Toby's Room* (2012), return to the subject of the First World War with a different focus: non-combative personnel in the war. What has changed in a global sense between the publication of the trilogy and the more recent novels is, of course, the occurrence of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. While there has been a great deal of critical focus on the significance of 9/11 for our understanding of another of Barker's late novels, *Double Vision* (2003), its influence on representations of war, trauma, and violence, and in particular, the ways we memorialise and historicise the First World War as it appears in *Life Class* and *Toby's Room* have not been discussed. Extending Fiona Tolan's recognition that 'the role and responsibilities of the artist as chronicler and interpreter of war is central to *Regeneration* and also,

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clearly, to Barker's own experience as writer of historical fiction' (2010, p. 378), this chapter explores how the events of 9/11 may have altered memories and representations of earlier conflict. The First World War has constituted a primary touchstone for Barker throughout her career because, Peter Childs argues, it 'remains in the collective memory as a persistent traumatic experience that has been insufficiently addressed or acknowledged' (2005, p. 62). The *Regeneration* trilogy, in particular, draws on what Catriona Pennell calls the most ready 'shorthand' of 'modern Britons for stupidity, blind obedience, failures of leadership, appalling physical conditions, and deadlock': the trenches (2012, p. 12). And yet, while Barker's earlier novels about World War One perceive the war as it was experienced by British soldiers through a philosophy of shell-shocked victimhood, vulnerability, passivity, and 'social cannibalism' (Monbiot cited in Pennell 2012, p. 12), her post-9/11 narratives dealing with the war are less clear in their moral dichotomy. While the primary interest of these novels lies in the way the work of the war artist emphasises the need for ethical witnessing and remembering in response to trauma and conflict, the refusal of a particular character, Elinor Brooke, to acknowledge the war in either life or art, and the alignment of this belief system with her response to the personal trauma of incest, provokes an investigation of how the motif of guilt and responsibility in contemporary narratives about World War One has changed since, and may be seen as a response to, 9/11 and twenty-first-century war. 'The truth is', Elinor claims, the war's 'been imposed on us from the outside. You would never have chosen it and probably the men in the hospital wouldn't either. It's unchosen, it's passive, and I don't think that's a proper subject for art' (Barker 2007a, p. 176). This chapter will explore the ways in which Barker's representations of World War One in *Life Class* and *Toby's Room* not only trace early twenty-first-century attitudes towards 9/11 in Britain, and what Georgiana Banita calls 'an increasingly globalised theatre of war and sympathy' (2012, p. 207), but more particularly figure these attitudes through a logic of complicity that transforms individual and cultural memories of the earlier war. In this way, narrative depictions of personal and collective trauma constitute an indictment of the hero-enemy dichotomy in war ideology, and complicate a perception of guilt and responsibility from those outside the 'war zone'.

As what is arguably the most defining cultural event of the twenty-first century, what Ulrika Tancke calls 'the collective trauma of

post-millennial humanity' (2009, p. 77), the terrorist acts that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001 have dominated literary texts and literary criticism over the past thirteen years. According to Michael Rothberg, this is because 'literature and other forms of art are important sites of response to terrorism because...they illustrate the interconnectedness of the public and the private and allow us to reconnect our faculties of seeing and feeling, two forms of connection that both terrorism and mass society threaten' (2008, pp. 123–124), and because 'they allow us to imagine alternative responses to the violence of terrorism and the spectacles of mass-mediated culture' (p. 131). And in John Brannigan's terms, 'the images of 9/11...denote not just the events in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania on that day, but an apparently new state of mourning, vulnerability and terror which they ushered in' (2005, p. 153). However, this chapter is not interested in exploring direct representations of 9/11 in literary fiction, or in American reflections on the terrorist attacks, but is concerned instead with how the events of 9/11 have shaped 'outsider' literary responses to previous occurrences of war and trauma. How do we remember or read differently now? This kind of question draws precisely on the logic of the trauma narrative. Trauma, as it is viewed in psychoanalysis and literary criticism, is characterised by our failure to conceive, know, or understand the trauma, to take it in, at the time the traumatic event actually occurs. Instead, we know it only through its compulsive and unbidden return, as the traumatic past insistently and persistently haunts the present. In the terms of Cathy Caruth, perhaps the most prominent philosopher of trauma theory, the traumatic event 'is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor' (1996, p. 4). The only way to rid oneself of this haunting, Sigmund Freud would argue, is to narrativise the trauma. Rothberg's position on the use and popularity of 9/11 art and literature draws on this belief, as do Ann Keniston and Jennifer Follansbee Quinn, who argue that 'the history of literary representations of 9/11 can be characterised by the *transition* from narratives of rupture to narratives of continuity' (2008, p. 3; original emphasis). By positioning the event within a linear narrative, such logic indicates, we are able to remember and mourn the trauma, rather than melancholically encrypt it in a process of refusing to know.

As is typical of the trauma narrative, such an explanation does not, however, tell us the whole story. Indeed, this kind of framework, Roger Luckhurst argues, is influenced primarily by Holocaust studies, and ‘isn’t necessarily helpful when transposed to contemporary events, where the urge to convey the hidden or suppressed consequences of violence in the most literal ways possible can have significant political impetus’ (2012, p. 714). What happens when one feels themselves to be complicit in the trauma, and holds themselves responsible for their own traumatisation, or the traumatisation of others? ‘One effect of 9/11’, Siân Adishesiah and Rupert Hildyard claim, ‘was to shatter the “end of history” thesis. The moral high ground claimed by the West since the fall of Soviet Communism has unquestionably been undermined...turn[ing] toxic the ethical pretensions of neo-liberalism’ (2013, pp. 2–3). Indeed, it is frequently the case that discussions about the causes of 9/11 result in, Werner Bohleber explains, ‘a kind of western-national self-critique or self-inculcation that is accompanied by a corresponding sense of guilt’ (2010, p. 180). The 9/11 memorial in New York City attests to this: the memorial comprises a series of concentrically arranged pools of water which cascade endlessly into a dark chasm at the centre in a relentless rendering of the perpetual cultural wound wrought on the cultural memory by this event. Such responses are not limited to the United States of America or to 9/11 itself. Indeed, the affective shift in Barker’s representation of World War One following the Wars on Terror can be seen to testify to changing global attitudes to war and responsibility and to the ways we write history.

Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy has been extraordinarily influential, not only in terms of literary representations of the First World War, but even more generally for our thinking about war and its traumatic impacts on the psyche (see, for example, Barrett 2012, p. 238). In tracing the experiences of both fictional and non-fictional characters embroiled in the war, Barker emphasises the resentment felt by soldiers towards the non-combatants who ignore their sacrifice. As Rivers observes to Sassoon, then, ‘The point is you hate civilians, don’t you? The “callous”, the “complacent”, the “unimaginative”’ (Barker 1996, p. 14). By focusing the trilogy almost entirely from the perspective of soldiers, rather than civilians, Barker sets up the opposition between the two groups as firmly a question of loyalty and responsibility. Although the soldier may be the one who gets his hands dirty, as it were, it is the wilfully blind civilian who ‘cackl[es] on about “attrition” and “wastage of manpower”

and...“*Lost heavily in that last scrap*” who is suggested to be guilty of the murder of those serving on both sides (p. 14; original emphasis). Under these conditions, art is firmly rejected as a site outside of war, and instead is commandeered as a means of giving voice to the sacrificed soldier masses. Thus, when, early in *Regeneration*, a nervous Wilfred Owen says, ‘I s-suppose I’ve always thought of p-poetry as the opposite of all that. The ugliness...Something to t-take refuge in’, his opinion is squarely countered by the more experienced Siegfried Sassoon: ‘Fair enough...Though it does seem a bit like having a faith that daren’t face the facts’ (p. 78). Post-9/11, however, the debate about the ethical memorialisation and representation of war and violence in Barker’s fiction becomes far more nuanced.

Barker has published four novels since 2001 (*Double Vision*, *Life Class*, *Toby’s Room*, and *Noonday* [2015]),¹ and they are not unlike her earlier work in their concern with trauma and violence. The two most recent novels deal with a group of art students, Elinor Brooke, Kit Neville, and Paul Tarrant, whose education at the Slade School of Art in London, under the tutelage of the real historical figure, Henry Tonks, an artist and surgeon, is cut short by World War One. Kit and Paul initially enlist with the Red Cross, seizing the opportunity to work as war artists, but both are eventually conscripted into the army. Paul suffers an injury to his leg, but Kit’s physical trauma takes the form of serious injury to his face, and he continues to suffer enormous pain and humiliation once he has returned to England. Elinor’s brother, Toby, also enlists in the army, and is killed in suspicious circumstances. Elinor, however, refuses to acknowledge the war, or to play any part in supporting it, through charity work or even through conversation. Instead, she prioritises her art over what she calls the ‘bully’ of war (Barker 2007a, p. 245), something that does not, she thinks, ‘[matter] very much’, something which is not ‘important’ (p. 244). Whereas the primary focus of the *Regeneration* trilogy, which also dealt with some real historical figures (the psychologist WHR Rivers, and the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen), was on the psychological effects of the enforced passivity of soldiers engaged in trench warfare and subject to the orders and management of more senior officers, *Life Class* and *Toby’s Room* are focused on the experiences of war artists, medical staff, and civilians—in other words, the two most recent novels are concerned with those primarily operating on the fringes of battle, rather than directly participating in it. In this interest in outsiders, or those at the margins of violence, *Life Class* and *Toby’s Room*

are quite different from Barker's earlier narratives of war, and indeed, from most other narratives about World War One which, as I have just explained, typically focus on the experience of shell shock, trench warfare, and the exploitation of soldiers (we might list, for example, *The Wars* [1977], *Fly Away, Peter* [1982], and *Birdsong* [1993]). *Life Class* and *Toby's Room* also differ from their immediate precursor, *Double Vision*, which more explicitly deals with the events of 9/11. The protagonist of that novel is Stephen Sharkey, a war correspondent whose photographer partner has been killed on an assignment in the Middle East. The novel analyses the ethics of watching, and of representing violent acts, particularly when such observations are met without response, what Sophie Smith calls the 'immunity' (2013, p. 191) or the 'anaesthetised response to the brutality of war by the newspaper-reading and news channel-watching public who appear to be suffering from a serious bout of "compassion fatigue"' (p. 192). The argument echoes Kate Finzi's expostulation in her First World War memoir:

Have *you* seen faces blown beyond recognition—faces eyeless, noseless, jawless, and heads that were only half heads?...When *you* have seen this... and not before, will you know what modern warfare means. (Finzi cited in Acton and Potter 2012, pp. 79–80; original emphasis)

Life Class and *Toby's Room* do extend that discussion, but they are more interested in the ethics of refusing to acknowledge trauma because of a belief that such acknowledgement also constitutes an acceptance of responsibility.

Elinor is perhaps the most interesting character in this respect. Before the war, Elinor is already a militant figure, and she struggles to make those around her understand her ambitions as an artist. Once war has broken out, her professional goals are perceived as selfishness to an even greater extent. Indeed, when she compares her own ambitions to the excitement of some young nurses she meets, she decides 'that these girls needed the war and she didn't. The freedom they were experiencing on this trip to Belgium she experienced every morning as she walked into the Slade' (Barker 2007a, p. 166). Refusing to accede to the national discourse concerned with contribution and social duty, Elinor explicitly repeats the famous points made by Virginia Woolf in her long essay on the relationship between women and war, *Three Guineas* (1938), arguing that

...it didn't concern me. As a woman, it didn't concern me. To be honest, I was copying something I'd heard Mrs. Woolf say last night after dinner, about how women are outside the political process and therefore the war's got nothing to do with them. (Barker 2012, p. 71; original emphasis)

Elinor's attitude to war art takes on a similar cast. In a repetition of the disagreement between Owen and Sassoon in *Regeneration*, Elinor asserts that art should address what is chosen, rather than what is imposed (p. 176). Arguing with her, Paul says that he paints scenes of war:

'Because it's there. *They're* there, the people, the men. And it's not right their suffering should just be swept out of sight.'

'I'd have thought it was even less right to put it on the wall of a public gallery. Can't you imagine it? People peering at other people's suffering and saying, "Oh my *dear*, how perfectly *dreadful*"—and then moving on to the next picture. It would just be a freak show. An arty freak show.' (pp. 175–176; original emphasis)

Elinor's resistance to the war has less to do with a political or artistic standpoint, as is the case for Owen—she differentiates herself from the Bloomsbury 'conchies', for example—and is instead more clearly a traumatic response: a repression of memory, as opposed to Owen's 'refuge'. In both cases above, moreover, Elinor adopts a position which advocates separation and a refusal to take responsibility, but in no other respects does she engage with the ethics of the war, or of seeing or representing violence.

Compare, moreover, Elinor's response to a group of disabled veterans she encounters at a military hospital with an almost identical event experienced by Sarah Lumb in *The Eye in the Door* (one of the only times, indeed, where the narration of the *Regeneration* trilogy is from a woman's perspective).

[Sarah] backed out, walking away in the sunlight, feeling their eyes on her, thinking that perhaps if she'd been prepared, if she'd managed to smile, to look normal, it might have been better. But no, she thought, there was nothing she could have done that would have made it better. Simply by being there, by being that inconsequential, infinitely powerful creature: *a pretty girl*, she had made everything worse. Her sense of her own helplessness, her being forced to play the role of Medusa when she meant no

harm, merged with the anger she was beginning to feel at their being hidden away like that. If the country demanded that price, then it should bloody well be prepared to look at the result. She strode on through the heat, not caring where she was going, furious with herself, the war... Everything. (Barker 1996, p. 143; original emphasis)

... either I [Elinor] walk quickly with my head down or extra slowly and give them a big cheery smile and say hello. I watch them watching me noticing the missing bits, looking at the empty trouser legs or, equally awful, not looking at them. And I feel ashamed. Just being what I am, a girl they might once have asked to dance, is dreadful. I feel I'm an instrument of mental torture through no fault of my own. And then I'm ashamed of feeling that because after all what do my feelings matter? I think the world's gone completely mad. (Barker 2007a, p. 151)

In the case of the earlier novel, Sarah's affective response is helplessness and anger: her emotions are the same as those felt by the soldiers throughout the trilogy, suggesting that she understands their position, the 'price' they have paid. Similarly, when she first meets Billy Prior, she tells him that her fiancé has been killed in battle, but she does so in language which expresses the terms of value shared by the soldiers: 'Loos, she said. I remember standing by the bar and thinking that words didn't mean anything any more. Patriotism honour courage vomit vomit. Only the names meant anything. Mons, Loos, the Somme, Arras, Verdun, Ypres' (Barker 1996, p. 579). The first-person narration of the passage from *Life Class*, however, emphasises Elinor's focus upon herself and her own emotion (shame), rather than on the experiences of the victims themselves. Moreover, since the logic of shame suggests that one only feels this emotion under the judging gaze of another (see Gilbert 1998, p. 21), Elinor's response indicates an opposition to those who watch her (the soldiers), rather than the affinity with their suffering, as is expressed by Sarah. Thus, whereas Sarah's reactions indicate an ethical understanding of the soldier Other, Elinor's responses figure a self-centred and oppositional approach to the trauma of war. Importantly, Elinor's attitude to the collective trauma figures a repetition of her response to an event of individual trauma, her incestuous relationship with her brother, and in this way provokes an interpretation of her affective response from the perspective of complicity and responsibility.

The affair which occurs between Elinor and Toby is brief, but traumatic. One hot summer's day, trekking away from their home, the two

share an unexpected kiss, which is quickly dismissed. That night, however, Elinor returns to Toby's room. It is only shortly after this that the war begins and Toby is killed. The traumas here are therefore compounded: there is the incest itself, the broken trust between close siblings, Toby's death (which is itself the product not merely of the war, but of his sexual indiscretions), and the aspect in which this chapter is interested, Elinor's complicity in the traumatic relationship. The 'treacherous melting' (Barker 2012, p. 12) which Elinor feels as she kisses her brother might be seen to represent the breaking of what Freud calls the 'incest taboo'. Her participation in the incestuous relationship incites a collapse of civilised order comparable to the state of war—that is, a sense that nothing is certain, that all rules have been broken, and that she exists in a state of chaos.

The ironic perception of European cultures as 'civilised' is particularly brought to the fore in the final narrative of Barker's earlier World War One trilogy, *The Ghost Road*. The frequent use of analepsis to Rivers's pre-war role as an anthropologist enables comparisons between the 'civilised' actions of a nation involved in what is increasingly and explicitly referred to as a 'futile' war, and the so-called 'primitivism' of the Melanesian people whom he had studied years before. The head-hunting between local tribes has been stopped by European missionaries, and the community with whom Rivers lives is suffering as a result, 'everywhere apparent in the listlessness and lethargy of the people's lives. Head-hunting was what they had lived for' (Barker 1996, p. 551). And yet, what ultimately strikes Rivers is that the Melanesians have respect for their enemies: the concept of 'deliberate cruelty' is 'foreign' to them (p. 568), and the 'heads' captured on a raid are preserved with spiritual reverence, not because 'the skull was sacred...in or of itself, but because it had contained the spirit' (p. 569). No such respect is apparent in the broader organisational attitudes to the First World War—skulls are forgotten, embedded in trenches, trampled into the ground—although individual soldiers do express pity for their sacrificial counterparts in the trenches only yards away. The soldiers of Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy are therefore subject to the conflict between the individual and the state which Freud describes in 'Timely Reflections on War and Death' (1915):

In this war the individual member of a people is able to convince himself with horror of what he sometimes found himself thinking even in peacetime, that the state has forbidden the individual to do wrong, not because

it wishes to abolish wrongdoing but because it wishes to monopolise it... The belligerent state permits itself any injustice, any violence that would disgrace the individual. (Freud 2005, p. 173)

If civilisation ‘has been won’, Freud states, ‘by the renunciation of drive-satisfaction’ (p. 176), then when ‘the community ceases to accuse, the suppression of evil desires is also abolished’ (p. 174), and civilisation collapses. The characters of Barker’s earlier novels escape the narrative’s condemnation because they are able to recognise the conflict between the individual’s consistent moral code and the lapsed morals of the nation at war. Indeed, they recognise what Freud describes as the fact that ‘there are disproportionately more individuals hypocritically simulating civilisation than there are truly civilised people’ (p. 179), so that the ‘enemy’ is no longer the German forces, but the ‘civilisation’ that demands this behaviour.

In Barker’s post-9/11 novels about World War One, however, those characters—Elinor, above all—who allow their drives to operate free of any civilising oppression are challenged. Indeed, the art Elinor produces in the wake of war and incest, then, depicts not only the loss of civilisation, but may be read as a condemnation of her own failure to resist the absence of state surveillance of drives and desires.

To be brutally honest, [Paul had] expected nostalgia: scenes from rural life, happy children, impossibly long, golden summer days. Instead, he found himself looking at a series of winter landscapes, empty of people. Well, that was his first impression. When he looked more closely, he realised that every painting contained the shadowy figure of a man, always on the edge of the composition, facing away from the centre, as if he might be about to step outside the frame. (Barker 2012, p. 95)

The characters tend to read these paintings as depicting Toby, suggesting a fairly conventional reading of the way in which trauma and grief remain as haunting figures or scars in the traumatised psyche, or that ‘the ravaged landscape paintings in war act as a metaphor for the mutilation of the human body...[while] drawing a mutilated body reflects the rupturing of landscape and society that war brings’ (Barker 2007b). I suggest, however, that the paintings of the barren landscapes can be seen to represent the loss of civilisation, and that the shadowy figure is not Toby, but Elinor. Her haunting presence would in this way depict the

sense in which she at once refuses, and is always already implicated in, the traumatic landscape. Thus, even though Elinor's stated position to the war, as Tolan argues, 'equates to a rejection of a totalitarian vision of collective action and collective ethics; she opposes the utilitarianism of the coerced submission of the individual to the greater good' (2010, p. 380), her paintings suggest the shameful recognition that she has not acted on those beliefs. As much as Elinor might try to erase her presence and abdicate responsibility, the ghostly figure in the paintings suggests that she must necessarily always occupy some position, make some contribution, and hold some responsibility for failing to keep her drives in check, despite the collapse of civilised order. For this reason, 'the failings and ultimate inefficacy of liberal humanism remain evident in a text that cannot in the end accept [Elinor's] position' (p. 391). The impact of 9/11 on Barker's representations of war is to do with the way in which it makes us memorialise war and responsibility in different ways. Even those who think they remain on the fringe, as outsiders or bystanders, become complicit in the traumatic aftermath of 9/11.

All of Barker's novels, John Brannigan notes, 'construct striking analogies that serve to connect individual experiences of trauma to their social and cultural conditions' (2005, p. 4). While her pre-9/11 novels dealing with World War One are confident in their construction of a hero-enemy dichotomy which condemns civilian demand for the combatants' sacrifice, the more recent novels set in the same context are influenced by a twenty-first-century awareness of participation in the traumatic experience. Elinor's response to both individual and collective trauma in which she is complicit therefore contributes to our broader understanding of marginalised or outsider perspectives on war, as well as our interpretations of the ethical memorialisation of war and violence in a media-saturated world.

NOTES

1. Although the trilogy in which *Life Class* and *Toby's Room* appear has recently been concluded by another novel, *Noonday*, this last work deals with the Second World War rather than the First, and as such addresses a different set of concerns about memory and representation, which are beyond the scope of this chapter.

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