

MICHAEL SZCZEKALLA, Greifswald

The War Novels of Pat Barker: Towards a 'Poetics of Cruelty'

The Regeneration Trilogy (1991-95) established Pat Barker as Britain's leading writer of war fiction. Her portrait of Siegfried Sassoon, who dominates the first volume of the Trilogy, offers a clue to a moral dilemma that besets all war literature including her own. Though Barker has rightly been dubbed her country's "foremost excavator of the human cost of war" (Miller 2003), she too faces the difficulty of having to avoid the writer's complicity with the perpetrators as she must thrive on what they have done. An *écriture féminine* exposing the male propensity to violence offers no real solution to this dilemma. It is only by means of a highly developed literary consciousness as shown in the Trilogy, but also in *Another World* (1998) and in *Life Class* (2007), two further books about the Great War, or in *Double Vision* (2003), whose protagonist is a war photographer returning from Afghanistan, that she has come to grips with the challenges of writing about human carnage.

This essay assesses the extent to which the result may be described as a contribution to the feminization of literature. Unlike many male predecessors, who tried to alter our perception of warfare, Barker has attempted something much more ambitious. Her meticulously researched and beautifully crafted novels are studies in the fragility of our civilisation – past and present.

Though *Border Crossing* (2001), which contains the story of a child murderer, marks a (temporary) return to civil life, there is no denying that the First World War lends itself particularly well to such an undertaking. Like no other war it has found its echo in literature. With pardonable hyperbole, critics have even spoken of its 'literariness.' Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) may still be the most thorough-going analysis of this phenomenon. Yet in his afterword to the 25th anniversary edition, the author makes an astonishing admission: not only has he too heavily relied on Northrop Frye's cycle of literary forms, but he has also vastly overrated the importance of English literature (Fussell 2000, 341-342). By suggesting a cyclical pattern of development ranging from Myth and Romance via High and Low Mimesis to Irony, the once fashionable Canadian critic had provided Fussell with a conceptual apparatus that allowed him to describe the First World War as a cultural watershed and make what may well be his boldest claim, namely, that irony is a form of cognition that stemmed largely from this war. As 1914/18 "was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century," no war before or since was more ironic than this one (Fussell 2000, 8, cf. 35). His own reservations notwithstanding, Fussell's historical take on irony is corroborated by more recent studies on the impact of the First World War on the collective memory of the British nation (Erl 2003; Szczekalla 2003).

Do Barker's war novels share the ironic stance manifested in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy (1924-28) or Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929)? And if so, what does that spell for the 'meliorist' agenda of feminism ostensibly endorsed in Barker's earlier novels like *The Century's Daughter* (1986)?

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With the notable exceptions of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) or the poetry of May Wedderburn Cannan and Elizabeth Daryush, contemporary literature on 1914/18 was by and large a male domain, no matter whether we focus on diarial, memorial or fictionalised accounts of the war or distinguish between patriotic outpourings and critical views of the British war effort. This did not change dramatically when younger generations of authors took over. Women writers did not necessarily adopt a female perspective. Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* and Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* are two outstanding novels of the early 1970s that merely reflect major preoccupations of their decade when they address the issues of class and nationalism rather than gender.

I. *The Regeneration Trilogy*

Thus Barker's *Regeneration* Trilogy seems to mark a genuine caesura. For the first time, it may be argued, an English novelist has written on the First World War in ways that transcend the male perspective, attracting wide popular and critical acclaim: "Do you know what happened on August 4th 1914?," a munitions worker asks her friend. "I tell you what happened. *Peace* broke out" (*Regeneration*, 99; emphasis in original). After her husband had enlisted there was an end to domestic violence. Barker also has a keen eye for the deeper ironies produced by this war. If not motivated by either patriotism or poverty, those early volunteers who filled the ranks of the British Expeditionary Force may have been looking forward to the "Great Adventure." The conditions of trench warfare, however, which for long stretches of time completely immobilised the soldiers, soon shattered their illusions. "The war that had promised so much in the way of 'manly' activity had actually delivered 'feminine' passivity and on a scale their mothers and sisters had scarcely known," William Halse Rivers muses after a long and arduous day spent in the care of convalescent soldiers. "No wonder they broke down" (*Regeneration*, 98).

Rivers, a historical figure, is an army psychologist, widely travelled ethnologist, and author of *The Todas* (1906), who works at Craiglockhart war hospital near Edinburgh where he treats officers afflicted by shell-shock. He is the 'medical hero' of the Trilogy. His most famous patient is Siegfried Sassoon, whose "A Soldier's Declaration" against the continuation of the war was read in the House of Commons. The soldier poet's protest is conveniently diagnosed as the symptom of a severe neurosis, and the highly decorated officer, who has thrown his MC into the Mersey, is sent to Craiglockhart.

With her focus on Rivers, Sassoon, and Owen, however, Barker can hardly be said to explore uncharted territory. Has she really gleaned any fresh insights from the lives and works of the war poets leading to a new perspective on 1914/18? What twist has she given to her narrative to justify the claim that her Trilogy constitutes a caesura?

Seeing the Great War through the eyes of poets and memoirists who had participated in it has long since become a 'national pastime,' albeit one that has not met with unanimous approval. Though popular monographs like Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* (1998), whose very title constitutes an allusion to Owen's "Strange Meeting," seem to suggest that historians concur with the poets and novelists in their judgment of 1914/18, this is hardly the case. Edward Thomas's lines: "This is no case of petty right or wrong / That politicians or philosophers / Can judge [...]" (in Motion 2004, 25, ll. 1-3)

contain an appropriate warning. Little does the speaker of this war poem care for what historians can "rake out of the ashes" (25, l. 18). Such criticism has not remained without a reply. Especially military historians have gone to some lengths to reject the charge of incompetence made by Sassoon and others against the British High Command:

'[g]ood morning, good morning!' the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of them dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine. (in Motion 2004, 96, ll. 1-4)

Though it is probably incorrect to say that these poets questioned the entire war effort because they were convinced of the futility of the human sacrifice it already had demanded, they are widely perceived to have been of that opinion. Against such a perception, Brian Bond insists that the British fought "a necessary and successful war," which was "an outstanding achievement for a democratic nation in arms" bent upon preventing "German dominion over Europe" (Bond 2007, 1). The point this military historian makes against the poets and their heirs among contemporary novelists – he expressly mentions Sebastian Faulks and Barker (76-77) – is that if you approach this (or any other?) war through literature or other cultural artefacts you are bound to lose the sense of perspective that transcends individual lives.

Should Bond really want the British to erase Sassoon's "The Death Bed" or Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" from their cultural memory, he would become vulnerable to the charge of callousness. It can be shown, however, that, rather than merely echoing the war poets, Barker has in fact attempted nothing less than a "fruitful integration" (Eksteins 2002) of the literary and historical imagination, something Bond and others, among them even those whose judgment has been more favourable, simply failed to notice.

Apart from a vast panoramic view of Britain at war that can hardly be done justice to here, her Trilogy offers an impressive panoply of major and minor characters. It is the subtle portrait of Rivers and the equally engrossing one of a purely fictional character, a subaltern officer with a working-class background named Billy Prior, which deserve our attention because they may facilitate an appreciation of the synthesis Barker has achieved. It is a synthesis which insists on attending to a plurality of voices and hence does not offer a final resolution to the conflict between the advocates of war and those of peace.

There is no denying, however, that Barker's reimagining of the Great War focuses on the damage that has been done. Hence a war hospital is the Trilogy's primary imaginative locale. It is a distinctive feature of Rivers's treatment that he wants his patients to acknowledge their fear, a treatment so innovative at the time that he has to defend it against the majority of his colleagues, some of whom do not even believe in shell-shock. Thus there is Huntley, a eugenicist whose pet subject is 'racial degeneration.' And there is Yealland, the brutal star of his profession, who believes in electro-shock treatment. When Rivers meets him at London's National Hospital, Yealland is about to treat the deformed soldier Callan, a private who suffers from mutism, in one session. This is his standard procedure. Afterwards Rivers, who has got a speech impediment himself, is haunted by images of the atrocious treatment – "a grotesque parody of Adam naming created things" (*Regeneration*, 206-207) – and even relives the experience in a nightmare, in which, however, he assumes Yealland's

place trying to apply a pharyngeal electrode to the already grievously mutilated body of the patient.

There is a simple explanation for this dream-induced change of roles. The medical officer, be he ever so gentle in the choice of his methods, is subjected to a conflict of loyalties, which he cannot resolve but can merely try to survive with honesty and good-humour. "You seem to have a very powerful *anti-war* neurosis," Rivers tells Sassoon at their first encounter. "You realize, don't you, that it is my duty to ... to try to change that? I can't pretend to be neutral" (*Regeneration*, 16; emphasis in original). The cured soldier has to return to the front. Yet Rivers's authority remains uncontested. The young officers, who tend to feel guilty about their break-down, acknowledge him as a "father confessor" (*Regeneration*, 129), as Sassoon half-jokingly puts it.

Prior, though, is different. Once he has recovered his ability to speak and is no longer forced to communicate with paper and pencil, suffering the indignity of his poor formal education being exposed, he begins to challenge the authority of Rivers:

"What did you do before the war?"

"I was a clerk in a shipping office."

"Did you like it?"

"No it was *boring*." [...] "What did *you* do?"

Rivers hesitated. "Research, teaching."

"Did *you* like it?"

"Yes, very much. Research more than teaching probably, but ..." He shrugged. "I enjoy teaching."

I noticed. "Two l's in physically, Mr. Prior."

"What an insufferable thing to say." (*Regeneration*, 45-46; emphasis in original)

Rivers's life story is richer in achievements and, perhaps, also in neurotic potential than those of his much younger patients. In the Trilogy, it begins with how he emancipated himself from his father, who was a parson and a hobby elocutionist who believed he could cure a stammer, but failed to heal his own son. Much later it takes a new turn with a discovery he made as an ethnologist on one of his visits to the Solomon Islands. Eager to improve his understanding of kinship structures and the economic arrangements based on them, he confronted the islanders with two simple questions: "[w]hat would you do if you earned or found a guinea?" and "[w]ith whom would you share it?" The natives, however, managed to turn the tables on Rivers by addressing the same questions to him. They burst into laughter when the bachelor had to admit that he would be under no compulsion to share the money with anybody, so bizarre did they find his answer. How could a man live like that? Rivers was taught a lesson – or two – about his own culture: "[a]nd suddenly I saw not only that we weren't the measure of all things, but that *there was no measure*" (*Regeneration*, 212; emphasis in original).

Ethnology seems to offer a privileged access to truths which can be truly liberating. In a society labouring under the constraints of war, however, its relativism is not likely to be much appreciated. This would make Rivers a lonely figure if it were not for Prior, who dominates the two remaining volumes of the Trilogy.

Prior is intelligent, articulate, and highly class-conscious. Yet there is a sadistic streak in his character and killing elates him. He can also be quite savage in his indignation, no matter whether justified or not. He once admired the "Charge of the Light Brigade," but now calls it rubbish as Tennyson's famous poem was inspired by a newspaper article. (Soldiers who have seen action detest the vulgar patriotism of the

mass media.) The experience that unsettled him was finding the eye of a comrade as the only physical remnant that had been left after the explosion of a shell. Now a soldier on convalescent leave, he falls in love with Sarah, who works in a munitions factory and whose skin has turned yellow from exposure to chemicals. According to him, she may not know much about the war, "but what she [does] know she face[s] honestly" (*Regeneration*, 145). This shared propensity may explain the instant rapport between them. Lack of illusion is clearly also something that distinguishes Prior from his brother officers who are gentlemen:

[...] *their* England was a pastoral place: fields, streams, wooded valleys, medieval churches surrounded by ancient elms. They couldn't grasp that for him, and for the vast majority of the men, the Front, with its mechanization, its reduction of the individual to a cog in a machine, its blasted landscape, was not a contrast with the life they'd known at home, in Birmingham or Manchester or Glasgow, or the Welsh pit villages, but a nightmarish culmination. (*The Eye in the Door*, 307; emphasis in original)

Whereas *The Eye in the Door* explores the contradictions of Prior's existence, *The Ghost Road*, which concludes the Trilogy, centres around the antagonism between Rivers and Prior. The latter increasingly suffers from memory lapses called 'fugue states.' The former is more and more given to reminiscing about the past, his work as an ethnologist, especially his encounter with a Melanesian priest named Njiru, a powerful cripple, who has told him everything about kinship, headhunting and funeral customs. Rivers seems to be so saturated in these memories that a shrine-like portrait of a deceased soldier he chances upon at a London boarding house reminds him of the skull houses of Pa Na Gundu. There are ghost roads in both cultures. In fact there are ghost roads everywhere. (In one of the Trilogy's unromantic sex scenes, Prior goes to a brothel on the day before his departure to the front and is unpleasantly made aware of his predecessors, many of whom may no longer be alive. Like Owen, he will die in the week before the Armistice.) Near the end of the war, a general listlessness pervades everything. Rivers thinks of how the ban on head-hunting had deprived the inhabitants of the Solomon Islands of their zest for life. Both cultures do not seem very good at containing violence. Barker refers to such reflections as "cross-cultural recognition" (*The Ghost Road*, 498). For Rivers, they are a way of coming to grips with war atrocities.

On the final pages, Prior's assertiveness is justified. A kind of parity is achieved between doctor and patient because we are allowed to read the latter's diary. He appears matured in a more meaningful sense than that of having mastered his spelling problems. We may glimpse at his likes and dislikes, pry into his musings on sexual mores in times of war filtered through the experience of his own bisexuality, which critics have either found fault with or referred to as one of the novel's "productive anachronisms" (cf. Rawlinson 2010, 68). His reflections seem to possess a depth similar to Rivers's. Sometimes they ring a note of despair: "[w]e are Craiglockhart's success stories. *Look at us*. We don't remember, we don't feel, we don't think – at least not beyond the confines of what is needed to do the job" (*The Ghost Road*, 545; emphasis in original).

Yet when, still in London, Prior had met Robert Ross and his circle, a precarious haven of sanity and deviance, he was able to appreciate the comfortable atmosphere engendered by soldiers "who aren't militarists" and pacifists "who aren't prigs" (*The Ghost Road*, 494). This judgment could hardly be more revealing. It is simply a

mistake to assume that Barker wants us to think of these subaltern officers as "conforming" (Rawlinson 2010, 81-82). At least we have to avoid the derogatory connotations of such a judgment. Only then will it become possible to see how Barker has managed to blend the literary and the historical imagination, balancing "[t]he pity of war, the pity war distilled" (Owen in Motion 2004, 107) with the need to transcend individual perspectives.

II. *Life Class*

Barker seems committed to the view that such transcendence belongs to the province of art – provided the artist has solved the problem of how to represent acts of carnage and depravity. Her entire work is rich in metafictional reflections circling around this very issue. Two of her more recent novels, *Double Vision* and *Life Class*, expressly deal with the relationship between art and violence, groping for what might be called a 'poetics of cruelty.' It is this 'poetics,' implied and inchoate though it may appear at least in the earlier novels, that constitutes her most important innovation.

In *Life Class*, Paul Tarrant uses the money he has inherited from his aunt to study at the Slade School of Art. There he meets Christopher Neville and Elinor Brooke, and Teresa, with whom he falls in love. His teacher Henry Tonks belongs to the historical figures that people this work of fiction whereas Paul reminds one of Prior, whose working-class background he shares. Because he is not fit enough to enlist, Paul volunteers as an orderly and goes to a Belgian war hospital. Thus *Life Class* divides into two parts thereby offering a disturbing contrast between the pre-war lives of its young protagonists and the multiple ways in which these have been shattered or at least brought into disarray by the war. As in the Trilogy, Barker produces 'thick descriptions' that impinge on every aspect of English life. Yet class, gender, *and* art seem to be her main concerns.

Edwardian England is revealed as a class-ridden society. Paul would have stood no chance of entering the prestigious academy had not his aunt accumulated a small fortune through rack-renting whereas Christopher and Elinor have been raised in affluence. Paul is also the one who appears to be the least assured of his talent whereas his friends exhibit all the egotism of budding artists. It is the war that puts this egotism to the ultimate test. Elinor ranks her art above everything else, but still finds the time to visit Paul in Belgium where she becomes witness to the shelling of Ypres and sees the famous cloth tower encircled by fires. Christopher has already volunteered as an ambulance-driver before Paul makes up his mind to do the same. Rejected by Elinor, the former has become an embittered person, though he does not really have anything to be bitter about, but seems to be "[c]hoking on his golden spoon" (*Life Class*, 46).

Gender stereotypes are exploded, though not quite. Teresa, who works as a model at the Slade, is a battered wife pursued by her husband, who intimidates her but in the end beats up his rival Paul. Elinor is "serious about painting" like "a nun setting sail for God" (79). At the home of the Brookes, they still maintain the custom of ladies withdrawing after dinner, which infuriates the daughter. Female patriotism can be quite fierce and unforgiving, witness the shaming of mothers whose sons have not (yet) enlisted and the distribution of white feathers to young men not wearing a uniform. Suffragettes supported the war effort and were capable of strident

militarism (cf. Howard 2003, 70). Elinor, who is exchanging letters with Paul, visits him under the guise of a nurse after she has pulled wires and faked a letter of recommendation. On the boat to the French coast she becomes aware of what distinguishes her from other women who are real nurses. Not having been to an art school, they experience freedom by going to the front and helping the wounded. At the hospital, Paul meets one Sister Byrd, who combines toughness with an efficiency that is completely unhampered by any useless compassion. Elinor has already got three paintings accepted for the New English Gallery. In the arts world there do not seem to be any insurmountable barriers for female artists, perhaps partly owing to the war and notwithstanding the recent resurgence of machismo like Marinetti's, who, in his futurist manifesto, managed to combine misogyny with a war-mongering rhetoric, which appeals to Christopher, who has even written some articles denouncing "the effeminacy of the Oscar Wilde years" (*Life Class*, 42).

The 'great' Tonks is introduced as an instructor given to laconic bullying: "[i]s this really the best you can do?" – "Then why do it?" (5), he asks Paul. Yet the student soon learns that Tonks is deeply concerned about art and humanity. The former physician and anatomist has reduced his hours of teaching at the Slade to be able to do plastic surgery to help the mutilated. He calls Paul a technically accomplished artist, though someone, it appears to him, with very little or nothing to say. With ordinary art students it happens to be the other way round. Christopher and Elinor, however, seem to transcend such ordinariness though the former appears emotionally retarded and the latter's egotism may be somewhat repellent. Does Paul volunteer because he has manoeuvred himself into a cul-de-sac and the war now offers him a chance to re-invent himself as an artist – following the very same pattern Jean Moorcroft Wilson discovered in the biography of Siegfried Sassoon? Against such a view, Elinor maintains that the war has been "imposed on [them] from the outside" (176). Hence it cannot be a fit subject for a work of art. Moreover, there is the moral conundrum of the artist thriving on the suffering of others. The idea of a Faustian pact is dismissed as nonsense. Art provides no justification of whatever kind for atrocities. Aestheticism has aged badly, though its antinomianism must be given the tribute it deserves in 'illiberal times.' In the Trilogy, Barker made the same point when writing about a performance of Wilde's *Salomé* that fell flat because war veterans could not help finding the head on a platter ridiculous.

Paul's pre-war work is dismissed by Christopher as "anaemic pastoral" (85), like Sassoon's, one might add, before the latter had got a commission and seen action. Having returned from the war hospital, Paul confronts Tonks with his latest productions: starkly realistic portraits of disfigured soldiers. "He'd painted the worst aspect of his duties as an orderly: infusing hydrogen peroxide or carbolic acid into a gangrenous wound" (203). At long last he has found a subject. It seems, however, as if Barker did not care to fully work out the implications of Paul's new aesthetics and contrast it with Christopher's, who has also become a war artist, albeit of a different sort, implications which reach far beyond these characters and the world they inhabit and touch upon the novelist's own work. For more insights into an 'aesthetics of cruelty' we have to turn to *Double Vision*, which argues for the superiority of reflection and dialogue to the shock of graphic images and hence can be read as a vindication of the Trilogy's probing into the depths of civilisation and war.

III. *Double Vision*

The war reporter Stephen Sharkey has returned from Afghanistan where his friend and colleague Ben Frobisher has been killed by a sniper. During a sojourn spent on the Scottish border, in a cottage owned by his brother Robert, a physician, he does not only meet the latter's family but also Ben's widow Kate, a sculptor, nineteen-year-old Justine, a soon-to-be medical student with whom he falls in love, her father Alec Braithewaite, the local vicar, and Peter Wingrave, an ex-convict, who became Kate's assistant after he had been one of Braithewaite's protégés. (He is dismissed when he turns out to be a stalker, though the object of his stalking is not the sculptor but the figure of Christ she is working on.)

The novel's thematic focus is on violence and its representation in war photography and art. Stephen, who is haunted by the picture of a dead girl in war-torn Sarajevo, is writing a book on the subject, though, in the end, he does not care whether he will be able to finish it or not. He has made up his mind never to return to any conflict zone or theatre of war, however great the temptation may be.

The intriguing thing about this novel is the way in which it manages to explore how deeply ingrained in our civilisation violent behaviour actually is and how deeply implicated we all seem to be – the war reporter by pandering to the vices of a voyeuristic public, the sculptor by (re)creating the mutilated body of Christ while relying on the assistance of a young man with a murderous past, the vicar, a divorcee, who can barely restrain his aggression, Peter, who killed an old lady when still in his early teens and who now writes short pieces of fiction which are reminiscent of the early McEwan, the two burglars who have descended on Robert's opulently furnished farm house, one of whom severely injures Justine, who has surprised them, and finally Adam, Robert's little son, who is suffering from Asperger's syndrome and hence is incapable of showing empathy. Adam spends his free time studying animal corpses – he likes animals best when they are dead, like the badger he has found on the day of Stephen's arrival or the pellets of an owl, which, when carefully dissected, reveal what this bird of prey has feasted on. As the child of a physician, he is even allowed to play with human femurs, which were left behind in the attic by his grandfather.

By no means should we forget the thousands of farm animals which have been killed, virtually immolated on pyres burning all over the country, to prevent a foot-and-mouth epidemic from spreading. The action has not only had a deep impact on the rural economy. Farmers have given up and chosen not to restock. The "clouds of oily black smoke" (*Double Vision*, 20), which could be seen everywhere, seem to have established beyond doubt that there is no place where innocence can be found, no haven, no idyll. They occlude all pastoral visions, and thereby repeat a great theme of the war poets, which is echoed in the Trilogy. If *Double Vision* does not appear to have exactly the same force as the earlier three novels, this has to do with the fact that the Great War constitutes an important caesura in European cultural history. As Fussell has made abundantly clear, the havoc it wrought and which Barker managed to render so superbly in her fiction cannot be repeated. What it has destroyed has ceased to exist forever. And it was this war that exploded the peculiarly English myth of the soldier returning to find solace in an unchanging countryside, though Stephen was cherishing a similar illusion when, back from Afghanistan, he had the idea to visit his brother.

What then does *Double Vision* contribute that is essentially new? It could be argued that its novelty consists in the narrative web Barker has spun around deeds of violence and their perpetrators, a web that seems to entangle everyone. If we take Stephen Sharkey, for example, we only have to study the impact he has had on his environment and how he has been shaped by it in return, in the many roles he has (chosen?) to perform – as a war reporter, an author, a friend, an uncle, a lover, and even as a rescuer. He has become far too deeply involved in the moral degradations of civil war to avoid contamination. Photos documenting acts of violence are needed to inform the public, but they also constitute a violation. They produce a kind of "double vision" which leaves us in a moral quandary. As a war reporter Stephen has come to realise that "images before words" (*Double Vision*, 135) may be the wrong creed – or is Barker manipulating us here with the kind of metafictional discourse she already excelled in when writing the Trilogy? "You want perception, you go to a novelist, not a psychiatrist" (*Regeneration*, 147), she has a minor character say. In *Double Vision*, she makes the point that diachronic art should take precedence over the synchronic, dialogic reflection over gory pictures.

What grieves Stephen most is that he was incapable of helping his friend. When he actually succeeds in being of help the result is always ambivalent. Thus it is Stephen who recommends Peter's fiction to his literary agent in spite of the misgivings he has about these 'little vignettes.' He thinks of Peter "as a cold bright star circling in chaos" (*Double Vision*, 150), dangerous to those around him. And it is Stephen who provides Adam with the owl pellets. He also knows it is not right to love someone thirty years his junior. With his anger flaring up, he does not merely want to protect his beloved but kill the burglar who has injured her. But he is definitely capable of empathy. Thus he can sympathise with what he thinks is Alec Braithewaite's view on his relationship with Justine.

If he may be seen as a mild case of post-traumatic stress disorder, what about Kate Frobisher? The bereaved artist needs the mutilated male body to express herself. When she has nearly finished her work it begins to dawn upon her that her statue has become a denial of salvation:

[t]he huge figure towered over her [...]. The belly was scored in three, no four different places. She put her hands into the cracks. Chest and neck gouged – it looked like a skin disease, bubonic plague, a savagely plucked bird. Pockmarks everywhere. Slowly, she raised her eyes and looked at the head. Cheekbones like cliffs, a thin, dour mouth, lines graven deep on either side, bruised, cut, swollen. Beaten up. Somebody with a talent for such things had given him a right going over. This was the Jesus of history. And we know what happens in history: the strong take what they can, the weak endure what they must, and the dead emphatically do not rise. (*Double Vision*, 180-181)

There appears to be a kinship between Kate's art and war photography because both constitute acts of violation. Mimesis invites complicity. But this can hardly be the final word about truth telling. Barker's 'poetics of cruelty' seems grounded on the negative imperative that "the pity war distilled" should not remain among "the truth[s] untold" (Owen in Motion 2004, 107). Having achieved a 'fruitful integration' of the literary and historical imagination, by having insisted on the need to listen to a plurality of voices (from the past) *and* by having reclaimed female agency, Barker has conquered a male domain. However, though her novels may challenge the overt pessimism of Owen's "Last Meeting:" "Now men will go content with what we spoiled, / Or, discontent, boil bloody and be spilled" (ll. 107-108), and though they have clearly

benefitted from a vast accumulation of knowledge about the Great War and more recent military conflicts, they tend to confirm the war poet's intuition of the brittleness of our civilisation.

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