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WAR AND THE VISUAL ARTS IN PAT BARKER'S *LIFE CLASS AND TOBY'S ROOM*

Shortly after the publication of *Double Vision* and while already working on her next novel *Life Class*, Pat Barker declared in an interview that the two books are connected by “a much more overt than normal preoccupation with how things should be represented, with the ethics of representation, rather than the ethics of action” (Barker, qtd. in Brannigan, 370). Written in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror, *Double Vision* marked a visual turn in Barker’s work: in her almost signature exploration of trauma, she began to foreground the importance of the image.¹ The novel’s epigraph, borrowed from Francisco Goya’s series of etchings *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, signalled the new concern with the responsibility of seeing and reproducing unsettling scenes: “*No se puede mirar*. One cannot look at this. *Yo lo vi*. I saw it. *Esto es lo verdadero*. This is the truth” (Barker, *Double Vision* 1). Goya’s impulse to record the horrors of war painstakingly and in private, expecting no audience for his work, prompted Barker to reflect on the use of art in the face of atrocity. Is violence depicted on canvas a way of bearing witness, a reconstruction, an act of compassion? Should the disturbing images be disseminated? Do they perhaps feed off the glow of the evil they condemn, making the artist and the viewer complicit in it? Or maybe conversely, do they place ethical demands on the audience, by unflinchingly exposing unpalatable truths?

¹ The terrorist attack of 9/11 was, to use a term from Baudrillard, an “image-event.” As such, it was certainly conducive to a reflection on trauma triggered by violent images, prompting questions about the right kind of reaction, the role of the media, the responsibilities of the commentators etc. For an extended discussion of the visual impact of 9/11 and literary responses to it, see Kowal, *The Image Event in the Early Post-9/11 Novel: Literary Representation of Terror After September 11, 2001*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012.

Double Vision, with its backdrop of contemporary wars and multiple protagonists drawn to brutality or engaging in representations of it, clearly did not exhaust the subject. In the two novels that follow, *Life Class* and *Toby's Room*, Barker returns to the conflict she so skilfully depicted in the early days of her career – World War I – this time to regard it through the eyes of the Slade school artists. While *Regeneration* was a book about translating horrible experiences into language, in the shape of war poetry or “the talking cure” offered by doctor Rivers to the Craiglockhart patients, Barker’s recent writing focuses on the image of trauma which cannot be contained in words. It persists like the footage of the planes crashing into the twin towers, or the recording of James Bulger’s abduction captured on CCTV cameras.²

The Slade painters portrayed by Barker all have their horrors to confront. Their careers have been marred by the outbreak of the war: they are allowed only a few months of carefree student life before the global conflict emerges as their “painting opportunity” (Barker, *Life Class* 119), but not all of them throw themselves into it with equal zest. To their professor of drawing, Henry Tonks, they will one day become Slade’s “second and last crisis of brilliance” (the first being the generation of Wyndham Lewis, Augustus John and Spencer Gore) (Haycock 3), though in the novels’ pages he judges their artistic efforts extremely harshly. *Life Class*, for instance, opens with the insecure Paul Tarrant cornered with a fundamental question about his vocation:

A second later Tonks’s shadow fell across the page [...] A long pause. Then he said, conversationally, as if he were really interested in the answer, ‘Is that really the best you can do?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why do it?’ (Barker, *Life Class* 5)

Humiliated, the young artist answers Tonks back and stormily leaves the room. Not long afterwards, however, such crises cease to matter: Slade’s ‘*les jeunes*’ must mature quickly, devoting their mental and emotional energy to the consideration of destruction.

Among the bunch of the school’s pre-war students, there are three figures who come to the fore and become central to the plot: Elinor Brooke, Kit Neville and Paul Tarrant. They can be partly identified as Dora Carrington, C.R.W. Nevinson and Mark Gertler, with an admixture of Paul Nash. Unlike in Barker’s earlier World War I novels, historical accuracy has not been observed: the painters’ lives are reimagined freely, the result being a combination of fact and fiction. This decision has met with accusations of irrespon-

² In an interview, Barker gives these two examples of trauma for which “there is no talking cure” (Barker in: Brannigan 383). Both have found their way into her work, in *Border Crossing* and *Double Vision*.

sibility,³ as Barker has accustomed her readers to conscientious renderings of the past. In the case of *Life Class* and *Toby's Room*, the actualities of British art of the period are reproduced only to a limited degree, despite the realist manner of representation. Barker's interest lies elsewhere this time – in an exploration of the ethical questions related to the visual arts' engagement with violent events.

Apart from forming the background for a conventional love-and-rivalry intrigue, the Brooke-Neville-Tarrant triangle serves the purpose of illustrating three different perspectives on the artist's role in times of war. The two males, Neville and Tarrant, leave the safety of their life class room at the Slade, filled proleptically with the plaster casts of human body parts – “decapitated heads, limbless torsos, amputated arms and legs” (Barker, *Life Class* 12), to face the carnage of the Western Front. Neville, the son of a war correspondent, volunteers to drive an ambulance for the Belgian Red Cross, hoping to reach the centre of action by the fastest possible route. Already before his service begins, he is “painting the war, the regiments, the searchlights, the guns on Hampstead Heath” (Barker, *Life Class* 111). Modelled on the futurist Nevinson, he is initially enthusiastic about the new potential of mechanised combat and uses modern painting techniques to a powerful effect, quickly gaining fame and recognition. Portrayed somewhat crudely as an upper-class confrontational bully, Neville performs, in Barker's fictional scheme, the role of “an artist of renown who has been handed [the] poisoned chalice of war as subject” (Barker qtd. in Crane).

In contrast to his futurist friend, Paul Tarrant does not embrace modern technology, and when the war erupts, he is enduring the painter's block. His figure is a distant echo of D.H. Lawrence's protagonists: with his North England origins, Tarrant mourns the industrial devastation of landscape and wishes to escape “the shadow of the ironworks that gobbled men up at the start of a shift and regurgitated them twelve hours later fit for nothing but booze and sleep” (Barker, *Life Class* 30). Identified by the recruitment office as a TB suspect, Tarrant cannot fight, but soon resolves to follow in Neville's footsteps and serve in the Red Cross. Reaching the Front, he finds it to be a grim extension of industrial society: an impression further confirmed by

³ See, for instance, Alan Munton's critique of *Life Class* in his chapter entitled “Rewriting 1914” in Michael J.K. Walsh's *London, Modernism and 1914* (Cambridge UP, 2010). Among numerous reservations, Munton emphasises Barker's liberal handling of biographical resources, her ignorance of early 20th-century art history, the foregrounding of the figure of Henry Tonks and the simultaneous suppression of the achievement of more avant-garde figures at the Slade. Richard Warren's review of *Toby's Room* in *Lewisletter* (No. 30, 2013) mentions similar shortcomings, additionally claiming that Barker would have done better inventing viable artists of her own, rather than meddling with “the lives of renamed but identifiable historical figures” (Warren 20).

his work in a field hospital. At least, amid the universal ruination, his creative energies slowly rejuvenate, and the problem of “why do it,” once posed by Tonks, resolves itself. He decides to draw wounded soldiers, asserting, in Goya-like manner, “That’s what I *see*. [...] *They’re* there, the people, the men. And it’s not right their suffering should just be swept out of sight” (Barker, *Life Class* 175).

Elinor Brooke, the woman in the triangle, has reservations about depicting the horrors of war. She fears that Paul’s pictures, if exhibited, might only provoke insensitive voyeurism:

‘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 be just a freak show. An arty freak show.’ (Barker, *Life Class* 176)

A modern, tomboyish figure, Brooke refuses to be pulled into the maelstrom of historical forces: war threatens her newly-won artistic independence. When her brother Toby answers the call to arms, she complains of the conflict’s oppressive effect: “More than anything I resent the way the war takes over all our lives. It’s like a single bullying voice shouting all the other voices down” (Barker, *Life Class* 116). For the same reason, war should not be approached creatively. Looking at Paul’s drawings, Elinor argues her point:

‘The truth is, it’s been imposed on us from the outside. You would never have chosen it and probably the men in hospital wouldn’t either. It’s unchosen, it’s passive, and I don’t think it’s a proper subject for art’

‘So, what is?’

She lifted her head. ‘The things we choose to love’ (Barker, *Life Class* 176)

The declaration carries the overtones of high-modernist detachment, reminiscent of Joyce’s Bloom preaching in *Ulysses* that “[f]orce, hatred, history, all that [...] is the very opposite of that that is really life” (Joyce 432), of Yeats’s refusal to include the war poets in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* on the grounds that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry” (Yeats qtd. in Baldick 345), or of Woolf’s pacifist sentiments expressed in *Tree Guineas*. Following the argument in the latter text, one may see that Elinor’s position is a logical consequence of her status in society: as a woman, she does not even have the right to vote, so she is reluctant to consider the war as hers. Even though she realizes that her life may be affected, for instance by the experience of loss, she prefers to remain in denial, as if the course of history could be averted by excluding it from one’s thoughts. Such escapist tendencies are well visible in the scene in which her family receive the news of Toby’s uncertain fate: “Missing. Believed Killed.” Elinor indulges in wishful

thinking, imagining that the telegraph boy may be prevented from delivering his message: "Listening to the doorbell chime, she almost shouted out: *Don't answer, he'll give up, he'll go away*. If he went away, it wouldn't have happened" (Barker, *Toby's Room* 77).

Much as she would like to isolate herself, Elinor is forced to find a visual language for the new reality which descends upon her. The transition from *Life Class* to the next novel marks a gradual change in her character: she becomes like Woolf's Lily Briscoe, with a touch of the narrator of *Jacob's Room*, trying to come to terms with the disappearance of the person most dear to her. Through a series of pictures which she paints, and through repeated visits to Toby's bedroom to contemplate, touch and smell the bundle of clothes sent back from the Front,⁴ Elinor looks her demons in the eye. The imponderables of her and Toby's transgressive relationship, the mysterious circumstances of her brother's death, her mother's dark secret of the "papyrus twin" girl born alongside her son – all the taboos that, to paraphrase Goya again, "one cannot look at," resurge in Elinor's art as symbols. The paradox of absence that is at the same time a haunting presence, so characteristic of Woolf's writing, finds its way onto the canvas. Paul Tarrant is allowed an intimation of Elinor's trauma, which merges with his own memory of the war:

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 realized 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. Many of these figures were so lightly delineated they might have been no more than an accidental confluence of light and shade. He stood back, trying to pin down his response. At one level these were firmly traditional landscape paintings, but there was something unsettling about them. Uncanny. Oddly enough, he recognized the feeling. It was the paradox of the frontline: an apparently empty landscape that is actually full of men. How on earth has she managed to get that? (Barker, *Toby's Room* 96)

As the novel (and the war) progresses, the consciousness of uncomfortable truths becomes a pressing problem for all painter protagonists, including their professor Tonks. Paul gets the commission of a war artist and depicts ravaged landscapes, knowing that censorship would not allow any disturbing images. Kit Neville returns from the Front with half his face destroyed by shrapnel, his disfigurement mirroring that of the "mutilated machines"

⁴ This is one of many allusions to Woolf's writings in Barker's text. The motif of clothes retaining the "memory" of the dead person's physical presence can be found in *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*. The name of Barker's eponymous protagonist alludes to Woolf's brother Toby, who died young and who was mourned in the character of Jacob Flanders. As a pair of androgynous, incestuous siblings, Elinor and Toby bring to mind the lovers from *Orlando*, while Elinor's views on war echo the argument of *Three Guineas*.

(Barker, *Toby's Room* 234) he now paints. He too becomes a war artist, though in contrast to Paul, he wants to tease the censors by ignoring the official guidelines. The traditional British attitude of restraint drives him to fury, and he is prepared to shake non-combatant audience out of their complacency. On an evening out with Paul at the Café Royal, he is wearing a metal mask with the features of Rupert Brooke but suddenly removes it, exposing his injuries with a roar to the disconcerted gathering of old Slade friends and restaurant patrons. "Through the mask of the Apollo bursts an omnipresent Dionysus" (Davies), and Neville, though modelled on Nevinson, momentarily brings to mind another of Slade School's alumni, Wyndham Lewis, attacking the British sensibilities with the series of post-war *Tyro* pictures.⁵ Yet despite his unchecked anger and willingness to flaunt his physical damage, Neville's darkest secrets remain hidden from sight. Numerous hints in the novel suggest he is suffering from symptoms of posttraumatic stress: recurrent nightmares, anxiety, survivor guilt. As it is later revealed, he is haunted by the memory of Toby's demise, for which he partly is to blame. In the concluding pages, Paul enters his friend's studio and discovers an unfinished painting, reflecting the psychic residue of Neville's last interaction with Toby in no man's land:

No wonder Neville had seemed so preoccupied with what the censor would allow, because he'd been painting the moment of death, the only subject more strongly discouraged than corpses. The figure at the centre of the composition was being blown backwards by the force of an unseen explosion, while behind him on the horizon a grotesquely fat sun, a goblin of a sun was eating up the sky.

Paul knew he was looking at the moment of Toby Brooke's death, though not exactly as Neville had related it. [...] Now that he was better rested and able to look more clearly, Paul wasn't sure how much of Neville's story he believed. Oh, Neville had set out to tell the truth – he didn't doubt that for a moment – but was it possible that, in the end, he'd ducked out of revealing something too dreadful to be told? (Barker, *Toby's Room* 254)⁶

Confronting the ugly face of war, in a very literal sense, is also the daily occupation of Henry Tonks, who divides his time between teaching at the Slade

⁵ The grinning *Tyro* pictures, painted by Lewis in 1920–1921, marked his reaction against the way in which the legacy of World War I became marginalised in post-war Britain. In accordance with the traditional "keep smiling" attitude, the creatures in the pictures leer sickly, pathetically anxious to deny the actuality of shattered mind and bodies. Behind their manic gaiety there lurks a sense of disillusionment.

⁶ The reader has no chance to determine whether Neville's representation of Toby's death is true to fact. The narrative is inconclusive and the truth that Elinor Brooke wishes so much to discover is "marred by recall and subjectivity" (Sanai). It is likely that the mystery will be solved in the future, as Barker is considering adding another instalment to the story. The final part of what will then be her next World War I trilogy may pick up some of the threads let loose so far.

and hospital work. Having trained as a surgeon in his youth, he assists Harold Gillies, a pioneer of plastic reconstruction, first in Aldershot and then in Sidcup. An artist turned documentalist, the formidable professor is making pastel portraits of facially disfigured soldiers before and after surgery. Neville, who ends up as one of Tonks' models, commends his work as comparable to *Disasters of War* (Barker, *Toby's Room* 198) and almost regrets that the drawings are not meant for display.⁷ Elinor, invited to help her former tutor, is deeply impressed, too, although not sure how to approach what she sees:

Were they portraits, or were they medical illustrations? Portraits celebrate the identity of the sitter. Everything – the clothes they've chosen to wear, the background, the objects on a table by the chair – leads the eye back to the face. And the face is the person. Here, in these portraits, the wound was central. [...] There was no point of rest, no pleasure in the exploration of a unique individual. Instead you were left with the question: How can any human being endure this? (Barker, *Toby's Room* 138)

Like Goya's etchings which, as Barker writes in *Double Vision*, "absolutely roar at you" (154) from the gallery wall, Tonks's series of faces enter into a dialogue with the beholder, begging questions about the limits of human endurance. They testify to the reality of pain and trauma, leaving the viewer in no doubt as to the real cost of war. Although ostensibly they are medical illustrations, where the draughtsman is not supposed to take an artistic position, their impact cannot be escaped. What remains is to acknowledge it and bear witness, repeating after Goya: "I saw this. This is the truth."

Distressed though she is by the experience of viewing the pictures, Elinor agrees to work by Tonks's side and once again realises the inevitability of addressing war creatively. Even if neither Tonks nor herself consider their commission as 'art', it soon becomes clear that the artist's gaze cannot be averted, or the aesthetic sensibility switched off. Any attempt at representation entails involvement: "However subordinated to the surgeons' need for precision and accuracy Tonks's drawings may be, they were nevertheless unmistakably his" (Barker, *Toby's Room* 167). It is impossible to efface oneself from one's work, or stop searching for beauty even in the most unlikely subject. Working on one of her first patients, Elinor is alarmed at her own impulse to aestheticise:

⁷ Barker makes much of the fact that "Tonks did these [pastels] believing they could never be on public show and knowing they were his best work." She emphasises the similarity between his project and Goya's achievement: "I was surprised at the warmth and compassion, but the central thing for me was that they were not able to be shown. He is like Goya – who was a better artist, obviously – because he believed the truth had to be told even if it was told in secret" (Barker, in: Appleyard).

He reminded her of some of the ‘fragments’ they used to draw at the Slade where so often a chipped nose or broken lip seemed to give the face a poignancy that the undamaged original might have lacked. It disturbed her, this aesthetic response to wounds that should have inspired nothing but pity.

‘It’s worrying, isn’t it?’ Tonks said. ‘When it makes them more beautiful.’ (Barker, *Toby’s Room* 166)

The mirror of art reflects, but also distorts, drawing attention to what the artist wishes to foreground. For the Slade painters imagined by Barker, the focus is on wounds, both physical and psychological ones. The truth about devastation of the body and mind in war, usually absent from the official narrative, appears, in the novels’ worldview, to be a crucial concern for those who deal in visual images, perhaps the only subject worth recording, even if the resultant artwork may not be presentable to a wider audience. While Barker’s critics may be dissatisfied with the limited variety of responses to war she depicts, and her somewhat impoverished conception of art as reportage, combined with therapy, *Life Class* and *Toby’s Room* are logical developments of her past novelistic explorations. From one book to another, she continues to return to society’s relationship with atrocity and conflict, and the ways in which people are trying to leave traumatic experiences behind, hoping for, but never really attaining, full recovery.

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