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Warring Fictions: Reading Pat Barker¹

Pat Barker has written seven novels to date: *Union Street* (1982) which earned her a place on the 1983 *Granta* list of young British authors and gained her The Fawcett Prize; *Blow Your House Down* (1984); *The Century's Daughter* (1986); *The Man Who Wasn't There* (1988); *Regeneration* (1991) chosen by the *New York Times* as one of the four best novels of 1991 and which featured strongly among Critics' Books of the Year in Europe and America; *The Eye in the Door* (1993) winner of *The Guardian* Fiction Prize and *The Ghost Road* (1995).

In 1995 Pat Barker won the Booker Prize for *The Ghost Road*, the final novel in a trilogy exploring the First World War, and she began to receive serious critical attention. In the trilogy she combines overtly fictional characters with imaginary re-constructions of historical figures such as the anthropologist and neurologist turned army psychologist W.H.R. Rivers, and soldier poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. She provides a creative and critical intervention on a period of history that is well documented and on writers who remain the focus of much literary study. Overall, her work could be said to unite the predominantly social realist "working-class" tradition in British fiction, with the historiographical postmodernist interests of contemporary writing and criticism. Critics and reviewers of contemporary British fiction have begun to anticipate her books and news of future projects but Barker was not always so generally appreciated. Despite being the author of seven novels, the first of which, *Union Street*, was transformed (and distorted in the process) into a Hollywood film entitled *Stanley and Iris* and, another, *Regeneration*, is currently being filmed, it has taken far too long for the breadth and quality of her work to be appreciated.

Barker is a writer whose fiction began to make its mark in Left and feminist circles in the 1980s in Britain, a period of narrow and reductive social policies on the Right and local and municipal organising according to communitarian ideals on the Left. In her early work she takes as a major theme the disintegration of Northern industrial communities in the 1970s and its repercussions in relationships between men and women. She sees her work as originating in an oral tradition of articulate working-class tellers of stories and she provides an unqualified and unapologetic focus on the

voices of those who have received scant recognition or celebration in the English literary tradition. It is this which particularises the force and power of novels in which communities, of women in particular, battle for survival.

Union Street is a novel about crises in the North East of England in the "winter of discontent" of 1971-2 when unemployment was at its highest since WWII. The Heath Government found itself in dispute with the TUC and strikes followed so that many Britons spent the winter with only sporadic electricity and water supplies. Precise in its political and geographical location, the narrative explores what a "post-industrial" world may mean for individuals and communities who have traditionally relied upon the manufacturing industries for their social presence and regional pride, as well as for their material and economic survival. The menfolk in particular are pushed to the edges of the text where they hover like ghosts, spectres on a barren industrial wasteland.

Importantly, there is no single protagonist for the reader to identify as representative; promoting empathy with a single idiosyncratic character might also serve to alienate their experiences from those around them. Instead, Barker charts a historical trajectory, or a working class continuum, through the lives and memories of seven women, ascending in age, who inhabit the same terraced backstreet and whose lives draw on a century's experience of girlhood and womanhood, and she traces them finally to old age and death. Alice Bell the oldest of the street's inhabitants has battled to stay out of the Workhouse and continues to fight to retain what she construes as her independence, outside of the home for the elderly that occupies the spot where the Workhouse once stood. Alice relives the past in her worries about the instabilities of contemporary Britain. Finally, she chooses suicide rather than death from hypothermia, in an old house she scrimped to buy but can no longer afford to heat. Suicide is the nearest she can muster to taking control over her own future. Barker pulls no punches; not with Alice nor with eleven year old Kelly who has been raped and is traumatised by the experience, and bitter in a way that connects with Alice's final resolution of her pain and anguish. They meet in the park where Alice intends to sit in the cold until it penetrates to her very bones and kills her:

"I used to come here when I was a little lass, aye, younger than you." The old woman looked with dim eyes around the park. Kelly followed her gaze and, for the first time in her life, found it possible to believe that an old woman had once been a child. At the same moment, and also for the first time, she found it possible to believe in her own death. There was terror in this, but no sadness. She stared at the old woman, as if she held, and might communicate, the secret of life. (*Union Street* p. 67)

Barker is attempting a distillation of historical and class memory, of the national with the personal, if you like. This is an idea she develops in the

¹ This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the conference "Twentieth Century Reflections: Cross-Cultural Writings of Great Britain and the United States" at the University of Uppsala in November 1996. My thanks go to Elisabeth Herion-Sarafidis who organised the conference.

more lyrical *The Century's Daughter* where Liza Jarrett, born on the eve of the twentieth century, grapples with the vicissitudes of the 1980s whilst picking her way back through memories and stories of earlier decades, and of two World Wars, before dying at the hands of a gang of dispossessed young men who break into her home. Barker's novels can be disturbing reads, I would allow, but they are also dryly humourous. This is very true of *Blow Your House Down*. In this novel Barker provides an equally disturbing and illuminating read, confronting the sexual violence directed against women in general and prostitutes in particular, using the hunt for the rapist and murderer known as the Yorkshire Ripper in the Bradford and Leeds areas between 1975 and 1981 as a model. He left 13 women dead and at least 7 more badly injured but Barker purposefully undercuts tabloid depictions of such individuals as asocial monsters, and the unnamed man who stalks the women in her novel retains his social specificity as a man, as "Somebody's Husband, Somebody's Son" to borrow the title of Gordon Burn's 1984 study of Peter Sutcliffe. Barker's fiction places her women victims and their friends at the centre of the text and reaffirms their humanity and camaraderie in the face of abuse and victimisation. *Blow Your House Down* is also a warmly funny book in which women talk and laugh as well as fear and despair.

It has been argued that Barker has radically altered track with her latest work the First World War trilogy of *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and most recently *The Ghost Road*. I would argue that the shift is not a categorical change but an extension and development of her earlier work. Barker has indeed said that she made a conscious decision to pursue a change of subject matter – the carnage of war and its emotional and psychological repercussions – to some degree as a response to the confining and categorising critical paradigms and assumptions to which some reviewers consigned her work. *The Guardian's* Philip Hensher calls the early fiction "sociological" and feels Barker limited her fictions by "limiting her subject matter" to working-class and predominantly female working-class communities.² The concept and dynamics of "working-class fiction" have proved immensely problematical for critics who expound upon the limitations of fictions that represent working-class people and experience. The First World War is however "an immense subject" in Hensher's view and one that Barker can be justifiably proud of engaging with; her works on the subject are "novels of ideas", not "anecdotal evocations" as he describes *Union Street*. Issuing such a synoptic description of writing that is complex and challenging is to fall into the familiar literary-critical trap of equating postmodernist complexities with "intellectual" writing and of assuming that fictions that may be described as "working-class" necessarily render their themes in

² Philip Hensher, *The Guardian* 26th November, 1993.

naturalistic and less theorised ways.³ It is also, in this instance, to miss the fact that representations and stories of both World Wars, and of human emotional and physical conflict in general, have long been a source of interest and concern for Pat Barker.

As *The Century's Daughter* exposes the effects of both Wars on Liza and her husband Frank and deploys an image of a slag heap as Lloyd George's "land fit for heroes to live in", her fourth novel, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, almost uniformly sidestepped by critics of her work, imagines a young male protagonist, a child of the Second World War living in its shadow. Colin (a kind of Billy Liar character) is obsessed by fantasies of the father he never knew and his childhood in the 1950s is shot through with cinema images and older people's stories of wartime experiences, especially those of the female community he grows up in, women who oftentimes relished the freedom of working and socialising afforded to them in wartime. In an interview published on this novel's publication, Barker also equates the women's communities in her earlier work with those of soldiers in the First World War, "they shared the kind of humour men had in the trenches, fighting a war that should not have been fought... There's a stoicism without any idea of what the alternatives are"⁴ (Donna Perry, "Going Home Again" *Literary Review* 34, 1991). So it is this stoical endurance on the part of men and women that characterises each of her novels, at their most gritty and at their most lyrical, as when Barker has Wilfred Owen in *Regeneration* describe the trenches as ancient labyrinths filled with skulls that seem to grow out of the mud like mushrooms and when Frank in *The Century's Daughter* thinks of men living their lives by the factory clock: "Clocking on, clocking off, time anaesthetised, vivisected... the working class selling the carcass of time."

It is erroneous to imply that novels that situate the violence of war are "about" men and those that feature women in co-existence and co-operative support are exclusively "about" traditionally female preoccupations, and therefore to detect a shift in Barker's work according to gender. Barker is much more energised by the ways in which gender stereotyping may distort and repress the personal development of individuals of both sexes. She has described young Colin in *The Man Who Wasn't There* as beginning to deal with his own sexual ambivalence and this bright Northern grammar school boy sounds an echo in her later and more complex representation of the working-class and bisexual army officer Billy Prior whose ambivalence, angst and courage contribute to making him the most engaging and complex

³ See my reading of novelist Livi Michael, whose novels about working-class women have been criticised on similar grounds but who I argue is a complex postmodernist writer: "On the streets and in the tower blocks: Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* and Livi Michael's *Under A Thin Moon*" *Critical Survey* 8:1 (1996) pp. 26-36. See also Elizabeth Baines' discussion of dominant and subversive literary languages in *Metropolitan* No 7 (Winter 1996/7).

⁴ Donna Perry, "Going Home Again" *Literary Review* 34, 1991.

of Barker's cast of characters in the trilogy. In the earlier *The Century's Daughter* her exploration of a young gay man's friendship with the elderly Liza, placed under his care by a rapidly depleting Social Services, involves a sensitive investigation of his carefully negotiated relations with family and community from whom he feels both kinship and rejection. In *Regeneration* through the army psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers she states quite clearly that there are few unequivocal gender boundaries. Rivers thinks of boyish fantasies of warfare crushed by the reality of the War itself, when men and boys find themselves scared, paralysed by fear, helplessly waiting in the trenches for death to come instead of being able to fight it off:

The War that had promised so much in the way of "manly" activity had actually delivered "feminine" passivity, and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known. (*Regeneration* p. 108)

Barker has consistently explored ideas of communities and individuals under stress whether in late twentieth century urban centres or in the trenches, war hospitals and sanatoriums of the First World War. They are each conveyed as war zones in different ways in her narratives. She writes of the damage individuals and communities have suffered and in her pithy unsentimentality sheds light on the aspirations and consolations that persist amidst the social debris she describes. She cracks open the adage that "actions define the man" and speculates as to the dreams of these men, ghosts of their former employed selves in contemporary Britain or of their civilian selves following the Great War. Barker excavates the cultural terrain of masculinity and male identities. The War sets up relationships between men that are domestic, even maternal, and that hark back to those networks between women in the early novels. The experiences and thoughts of men and women are interwoven across the novels as connections across genders, generations and classes expand in Barker's work.

Barker keys into contemporary debates as to the social constructions of gender and sexuality in the apparently historical novels of the trilogy. There is no nostalgia for the idea of an England that vanished around 1914, or for a myth of Englishness so equivocal and inchoate that it rarely touches the lives of her characters. When Siegfried Sassoon remembers hunting it is with painful irony at how well his leisure pursuit has equipped him for hunting the enemy at the Front and the trenches are named after the London streets and the towns that their occupants left behind to enter the nightmare of battle. The conspiracies of war and the Anti-War Movement are also given significant play in *The Eye in the Door*: War "saboteurs" are imprisoned, kept naked in freezing cells until they agree to put on a uniform, and the moral objections to the War first explored in *Regeneration* through Sassoon's "A Soldier's Declaration" of July 1917 are intricately drawn out via women as well as men. It is the *psychological chaos* of war that interests Barker most of all, through victims of shell shock, neurasthenia and attendant

conditions related to repression of memory and soldiers' experiences "out there". Barker portrays the physical and emotional casualties, who are patients of William Rivers or Henry Head, as individuals – not symbols of frontline quotidian horror – and no one is left unscathed by the War, in the trenches of France and Flanders or at home, in novels that push to the limits of human endurance and perseverance.

It has taken some time for Barker's creative achievement to be valued and discussed in terms that express the developed discursive practices that her novels open up for readers interested in gender and war, and British cultural studies, and who are as willing to grapple with these ideas as they are to enjoy powerful and gripping stories. It is only now that she has been honoured with the Booker – the kind of award that brings her to the attention of those who closed their eyes to the force and vigour of her earlier work – that Barker's place on the map of British fiction is secured.

Barker's novels are published in paperback by Virago and Penguin:

Union Street (Virago, 1982)

Blow Your House Down (Virago, 1984)

The Century's Daughter (Virago, 1986)

The Man Who Wasn't There (Virago, 1989, Penguin, 1990)

Regeneration (Viking, 1991; Penguin, 1992)

The Eye in the Door (Viking, 1993; Penguin, 1994)

The Ghost Road (Viking, 1995)

The Patterns of Metaphors

A large part of the world of language is made up of metaphors. In her new book, *Metaforernas mönster i fackspråk och allmänspråk*, Mall Stålhammar, who is Associate Professor at the Department of English in Göteborg, looks at how we are all influenced by metaphors both in our attitudes and reactions. Metaphors can affect, consciously and subconsciously, our pattern of thought and even change our perception of reality.

This is a pioneering linguistic survey of how metaphors are used in today's Swedish, and includes chapters on the metaphorical world of politics, science, technology and the economy. The book is published by Carlsson Bokförlag.