

**Pat Barker's *Double Vision*: Vulnerability and trauma in the
pastoral mode**

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*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.*

– Pat Barker, *Double Vision*¹

The September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the USA are commonly understood to have unsettled the West's sense of its own global dominance and generated a collective feeling of vulnerability, a situation which has led critics² of Pat Barker's *Double Vision* (2003) to read this post-9/11 novel as a response to that seismic shift in power relations.³ Even if the attacks appear only as a flashback in the novel, they manage to cast a shadow over the various depictions of violence, survival, and witnessing which occupy its narrative. In this way *Double Vision* introduces a new subject into Barker's writing while amplifying an existing theme. Namely, her long-running novelistic study of trauma, which circulates as the creative lifeblood to her Booker Prize-winning *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-1995), continues to sustain the narratives of *Double Vision*. The more recent novel follows on from progressively darker texts about war trauma (*Another World*, from

1998) and therapeutic confession (*Border Crossing*, from 2001), which called into question the uses that could be made of trauma and the manipulation of therapy to escape moral responsibility for one's past. Despite this thematic continuity, Philip Tew suggests that *Double Vision* differs appreciably from what Barker has written previously. He argues that it joins other millennial texts in rejecting what in his view are the solipsistic excesses of trauma culture to embrace a "larger sociological and historical condition" of public fear that he terms "the traumatological."⁴

Since the 1990s, Barker's novels have absorbed discussions about trauma that were revived on a cultural level by the psychological scars of the Vietnam War and the collective attempt to remember the Shoah. Trauma theory in its most sophisticated form reworked Freud's ideas of traumatic repetition through the lens of Derridian deconstruction.⁵ For the Yale scholar Cathy Caruth, trauma became defined as an aporia in understanding that nevertheless bound the witness in a relationship of ethical responsibility to a traumatic event. In understanding trauma in this way, Caruth insisted that "the shock of traumatic sight reveals at the heart of human subjectivity not so much an epistemological, but rather what can be defined as an *ethical* relation to the real."⁶ Caruth did not simply claim that contact with trauma was one type of ethical experience; she implied that it was the definitive type. Although certain trauma fiction explores the political and social implications of shattering events, it is trauma theory's ties with an aporetic postmodernity that Tew critiques and that he suggests are transcended in traumatological fiction in which the emphasis on uncertainty is replaced by the literal threat of violence, and the obsession with the individual, traumatised subject is replaced by trauma as a public event.⁷

Yet Barker's novels have always been more concerned with the interpersonal than the subjective dimension of trauma, the idea that it could be understood or dealt with through relation to another person, which took the form of psychotherapeutic discussions in the *Regeneration* trilogy. So that while the solitary experience of trauma establishes the ethical questions of her novels, it is the dialogues that amplify them with their plain-spoken yet halting prose. The effort to place a novel like *Double Vision* within a broad cultural turn like the traumatological risks losing sight of the specific development of the author's body of work. While there has been a growing complication of aspects of trauma theory in Barker's novels, what is most unprecedented about *Double Vision* is the articulation of these ideas in a pastoral framework. Although critics have discussed this novel's use of the pastoral they have not fully accounted for the reason it might be morally resonant for contemporary readers. I will attempt to do so

by drawing on William Empson and Paul Alpers's ethical readings of pastoral. Empson and Alpers do not see the pastoral as an escape from the reality of suffering, war, and violence. Rather, they see it as a way of dealing with vulnerability, and then, of discovering strength relative to that limitation. In its rejection of heroism and tragedy in the face of suffering, the pastoral mode has come unexpectedly to yield a space for Barker to restate her almost career-long concern with the subjects of violence and trauma.

Pastoral Contexts for Double Vision

Double Vision is set in a recognisably post-9/11 England, a rural hamlet in the Northern border country between England and Scotland, where a war reporter retires to his brother's vacant cottage to write a book about how wars are represented. Stephen Sharkey is implicitly a figure of the returning soldier, a contemporary version of the poet-soldier of the Great War era that featured in Barker's earlier historical novels.⁸ Much is made of the peace of the English countryside relative to the danger Stephen has encountered in Bosnia, Africa, and Afghanistan, and much is also made of the uncertainty of this distinction. In this way the novel plays upon expectations of rural simplicity and timelessness. The countryside has just suffered a foot-and-mouth epidemic, and the farms surrounding Stephen's cottage have recently slaughtered sheep and cows, leaving blackened pyres that create a post-apocalyptic mood. Indeed, the threat of random violence hangs over the novel, much as it did in *Another World*, in which English society "lives in the shadow of monstrosities."⁹ The difference between those monstrosities and *Double Vision's* is that the latter resonate across national borders. Local catastrophes are connected by invisible threads to war atrocities overseas through the preoccupations of the two central protagonists, Stephen and Kate Frobisher. Both are mourning the death of Ben Frobisher, a war photographer who was killed while photographing the war in Afghanistan. Beginning as a pastoral elegy for Ben, the novel widens to include fragments of contemporary wars.

Double Vision approaches the rawness of 9/11 and its aftermath, and Ben's death abroad, from a certain geographical and modal distance that the pastoral provides. While it is useful to read the text as a post-millennial study of trauma and violence, it also borrows from a tradition that recurs across the twentieth century, in which writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf, W. H. Auden, and Philip Roth have used pastoral forms to register the destruction of modern warfare.¹⁰ Thus *Double Vision* pivots between two points: war and Arcadia. For although the two main characters are

connected to the atrocities around them, they are essentially living the contemplative life: Kate as an artist creating a sculpture of the risen Christ while recovering from a car accident, Stephen as a writer responding to the representation of wars. The pair's conversations about their work, war, and trauma frame the novel. It is this inclusion of an artist and writer that distances the novel, generally, from the direct encounter with violence, reinforced by a structure of aesthetic patterning that is almost Woolfian. The other distancing device is the use of convention, and most pointedly, the representation of war by means of pastoral retreat and return.

Barker's text comments explicitly on its use of pastoral conventions in an ambivalent passage in which Stephen compares himself to an anonymous soldier returning to the English countryside from the Great War. Stephen both dignifies the plight of the returning soldier and destabilises the mythology that surrounds this figure. There are precedents in classical literature for this willingness to show the limitations inherent in the pastoral vision of the good life through reference to war.¹¹ Characteristically, Barker summons up not a classical but specifically an English *urtext* to her novel:

A man gets off a train, looks at the sky and the surrounding fields, then shoulders his kitbag and sets off from the station, trudging up half-known roads, unloading hell behind him, step by step.

It's part of English mythology, that image of the soldier returning, but it depends for its power on the existence of an unchanging countryside. Perhaps it had never been true, had only ever been a sentimental urban fantasy, or perhaps something deeper—some memory of the great forest. Sherwood. Arden. Certainly Stephen had returned to find a countryside in crisis. Boarded-up shops and cafes, empty fields, strips of yellow tape that nobody had bothered to remove even after the paths reopened, just as nobody had bothered to remove the disinfectant mats that now lay at the entrance to every tourist attraction, bleached and baking in the sun.¹²

As this passage indicates, the novel interrogates the very tradition it is inscribing. In effect it accuses the pastoral of false consciousness, an inability to really account for war, change, or economic turmoil. Because it links pastoral with "a sentimental urban fantasy," the argument is haunted by Friedrich Schiller's *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, which assumes that the pastoral tradition sustains the ideal of a golden age that is impervious to historical realities.¹³

Sharon Monteith and Nahem Yousaf's essay on *Double Vision* highlights Barker's demythologisation of the pastoral, which can be seen in

the way she engages with the English anti-war poetry of the Great War.¹⁴ They argue that the passage quoted above embodies “Paul Fussell’s view [that] war is the ‘ultimate anti-pastoral’ [and] it is perhaps not surprising that the most anti-pastoral image is of the soldier from the wars returning.”¹⁵ Monteith and Yousaf’s argument is strengthened by the echoes between this passage from *Double Vision* and aspects of the *Regeneration* trilogy. In the second volume of the trilogy, *The Eye in the Door*, Barker has Billy Prior, a returned soldier, dismantle the Arcadian myth of a green and pleasant land cherished by his fellow officers. Prior knows by experience that for the working-class soldiers, the Western front “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.”¹⁶ Given this typology of war and pastoral in Barker’s novels, it makes sense that Monteith and Yousaf classify *Double Vision*’s returning soldier figure as anti-pastoral, although, by the end of their article, they acknowledge that the pastoral itself enables contradictions.¹⁷

Trauma and Vulnerability

To classify war as the ultimate anti-pastoral surely raises a question that is implicit to Monteith and Yousaf’s reading: Can the pastoral encompass trauma? Or does trauma change the pastoral? For Paul Alpers, who continues to explicate the serious capabilities of the pastoral mode first revealed by William Empson, it certainly does allow for war and suffering. But Alpers specifically does not use the language of trauma in *What is Pastoral?* Rather, he writes in another, more concretely political register, in which the emphasis is on “vulnerability” rather than trauma. Pastoral’s enduring relevance in Alpers’s view relates to its historical evolution around the anecdote of shepherds and their lives, which established an ethos in which vulnerability became representative of the human condition. The definitive moment for pastoral is Virgil’s first *Eclogue*, which fundamentally adjusts Theocritus’s earlier bucolic vision by depicting two shepherds whose lives have been altered irrevocably by civil war. Power—who has it and who does not—becomes a condition of pastoral otium. Through this example, Alpers demonstrates what is at stake in Empson’s famous idea that pastoral puts the complex into the simple: it is revealed to be a mechanism for negotiating powerlessness and contingency.¹⁸ Alpers argues that

[i]n their simplicity and vulnerability, shepherds fittingly represent those whose lives are determined by the actions of powerful men or by events and circumstances over which they have no control. Even

though they are among the least powerful members of society, they are far from alone in experiencing the dependency and victimization presented in this eclogue.¹⁹

This characterisation of the pastoral begins to explain why, although Barker is outwardly hostile to certain mythologies of rural life, pastoral's attentiveness to weakness and vulnerability resonates with her novelistic ethos; when she explores the lives of returning soldiers in the *Regeneration* trilogy, it is to focus on the political dimension of their shell shock as war protest. She returns repeatedly to vulnerable groups, from the working-class communities of her early novels to the war veterans of her later ones.²⁰

The word "trauma" signifies a different scale of suffering to vulnerability. For Alpers, vulnerability is a matter of one's social position and it refers to systematic social deprivation. This word retains a humanism that informs Empson's reading of pastoral—albeit a negatively humanist one that accounts for human limitation. In contrast, trauma theory is significant ethically as a discourse that in its articulation of unspeakable atrocities calls humanism into question. As Giorgio Agamben articulates it, "in Auschwitz ethics begins precisely at the point where the Muselmann, the 'complete witness,' makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man."²¹ Agamben's searing refutation of humanism would seem to obliterate considerations of human limitation (which as an ethical concept becomes meaningless) and the good life. If it is true that when "one really wants to study the general correctly, one need only look around for a true exception,"²² then trauma is precisely the exception that makes visible the limitations of pastoral convention. This sentiment is central to Czeslaw Milosz's "Song on Porcelain," a poem that alludes, in Donna Coffey's words, to the "death of the pastoral tradition"²³ following the Shoah. In Milosz's poem, the speaker is troubled most of all by the remnants of the pastoral tradition made visible by the cracked porcelain abandoned in a war-torn European field, which seems ethically suspect given the far more unsettling presence of graves in the same field. Except that of course the poem is drawing our attention to the chilling disjunction evident in the German masters' capability of creating such destruction and at the same time making ideological use of the pastoral tradition. Contemporary critics have followed Milosz's lead in characterising pastoral as something that cannot be salvaged unless it too becomes traumatised.²⁴

In a different sense, Alpers too raises the Shoah to address the case against the pastoral. As a mode of literature that is concerned most centrally with poetry itself, as demonstrated in its representative anecdote of shepherds coming together to create poetry that summons their bucolic

landscape into life, the pastoral's vision is, he admits, a contingent one. This is shown in Alpers's text perhaps most forcibly in a passage which discusses a section of Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*. While describing conditions in a Nazi camp, Levi relates an occasion on which he and his friend are able to snatch some hours of leisure within which to remember lines of poetry from Dante. In his discussion, Alpers emphasises that what is at stake in this scene is that "under ordinary conditions of life in the camp, one did not remember lines of poetry."²⁵ He is adamant that Levi's brief allusion to a pastoral dialogue does not restore humanity to the two camp inmates, but rather, "the serious case against pastoral is precisely that, for all its acceptance of limitation, it does not envisage deprivation of this extent and severity."²⁶ Yet he goes on to say that far from negating the pastoral, *If This is a Man* continues to uphold the importance of poetry and specifically the pastoral mode of looking at life that had become untenable within Auschwitz. While this does not address the same argument that is raised for example by Milosz's poem,²⁷ that is because Alpers rejects the mythic pastoralism that was ideologically exploited by the Nazis, and is instead here discussing the structurally generative ethos of strength relative to world.

While Alpers admits that a serious exception to the pastoral vision exists in the form of traumas such as the Shoah, he also uses this exception to reassert the desirability of the pastoral ethos. For a community to be pastoral, everyone in it, including its most vulnerable members, must enjoy certain basic entitlements; the most basic of these is that suffering remain within bearable limits. The notion of the exception is useful for considering the situation in Barker's novel in which pastoral ideas come into conflict with, but also seek to redress, the fundamentally estranging effects of trauma. On one side is the reality of trauma as an impossible and solitary responsibility, and on the other is pastoral as a mechanism that brings together communities in mourning and "attempt[s] to reconcile some conflict between the parts of society."²⁸ Alpers continues:

A convention is a usage that brings human beings together; a pastoral convention brings them together under the figure of shepherds. When shepherds and their lives are taken to be representative, literary conventions take on a certain character, which historically is due to Virgil's transformation of Theocritean bucolic and which can be specified theoretically in modal terms. The literary conception of the shepherd's strength relative to his world explains why pastoral is so "conventional" a form: as opposed to epic and tragedy, with their ideas of heroic autonomy and isolation, it takes human life to be inherently a matter of common plights and

common pleasures. Pastoral poetry represents these plights and these pleasures as shared and accepted, but it avoids naïveté and sentimentality because its usages retain an awareness of their conditions—the limitations that are seen to define, in a literal sense, any life, and their intensification in situations of separation and loss that can and must be dealt with, but are not to be denied or overcome.²⁹

Although it might seem odd to relate a contemporary novel to classical poetry that explores shepherds' lives, Alpers makes a good case for the enduring significance of pastoral based on its conventional form and its concern with human vulnerability. This understanding of pastoral is useful in relation to Barker because of Alpers's explication of convention as something that is stylistically and thematically performative, such that the "conventional" takes on the positive sense of bringing people together. While a novel might critique its own pastoral conventions, on a deeper level it might *reassert* them by establishing an ethos in which a communal worldview trumps other ethical positions—such as heroism or nihilism. Notably, the conflict staged in *Double Vision* is held between the limit experience of trauma and the idea that human life is one of common plights and common pleasures.

Extreme States Versus Common Plights and Common Pleasures

For all the irony with which it is treated in *Double Vision*, the figure of the returning soldier encapsulates Stephen's efforts throughout the novel to slough off Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and rejoin communal life. What Stephen cannot easily discard after years covering foreign conflicts is his instinctual awareness of the potential for violence to break out at any moment. His lover Justine Braithewaite accuses him of having developed a "dark-adapted eye."³⁰ Seeing the dark possibilities in every situation is here shown to be problematic, but in the Barbara Vine novel to which Justine is referring,³¹ the dark-adapted eye is also a moral asset; it describes the ability to perceive and analyse disturbing events—an ambiguity Barker's text explores. Given his capacity to witness darkness and evil, it is perhaps surprising that Stephen continues to embody the pastoral idea of retreat as wish fulfilment. He reassures himself that no one has died a violent death in the English countryside since the end of border raiding centuries ago, but his insistence on a bloodless English Arcadia recalls to consciousness what it represses: there are "[n]o skulls in the grass," he repeatedly asserts,

and yet, from the moment he arrives at his brother's ancient farmhouse, he encounters his nephew Adam's morbid fascination with the road kill that litter the forest road, and later helps him collect the small skulls of owl prey from the tree outside his bedroom window.³² Stephen's displacement of death is countered by the insistent reappearance of skulls, a variation on the theme of *Et in Arcadia Ego*. This striking pastoral motif appears in Nicolas Poussin's paintings of the same name in which shepherds in a golden age stumble upon a tomb that reads, "Even in Arcadia, there I [death] am."³³ It is a moment of uncanny recognition, of remembering that what the mode had appeared to have forgotten was there all along.³⁴

Repetition also structures Stephen's relationship with Justine, the nineteen-year-old nanny to his nephew, which unfolds as if it were the continuation of a traumatic encounter. In Sarajevo, Stephen and Ben had accidentally discovered the body of a woman who had been brutally raped and murdered,³⁵ and Stephen first meets Justine following a flashback to this event. Like Justine's Sadeian namesake, it is "her capacity to feel pain that arouse[s]" Stephen, although he is self-aware enough to recognise this and is consoled by the belief that she has not yet suffered.³⁶ The uncanny connections between Justine and the woman in Sarajevo foreshadow the shockingly random violence at the peripety of the novel, when Justine walks in on a robbery and is violently assaulted. This late disruption to the plot pointedly breaks novelistic rules and exemplifies, as John Brannigan notes, the "dislocation of First World safety" that Judith Butler suggests shapes the post-9/11 world.³⁷ The threat to Justine's life jolts the novel out of its contemplative mode and into a direct confrontation with violence. This enacts the shift that Tew has noted in millennial novels from trauma to physical violence.³⁸ Barker involves her reader in the painful awakening to danger by focalising the scene through Stephen's position of powerlessness as he watches from a distant hillside and then exploring his loss of control when he attacks one of the intruders to save Justine from further suffering.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler suggests that the impact of 9/11 could have positive effects if it allowed the usually privileged members of the First World "the ability to narrate [them]selves not from the first person alone, but from the position of the third, or to receive an account delivered in the second," which "can actually work to expand our understanding of the forms that global power has taken."³⁹ Barker's novel puts such ideas into action in the use it makes of a sudden shift in focalisation during and after the attack on Justine, who experiences a radical break of her own first-person narrative; the narration now shifts into a dissociated third-person voice. This change in perspective

amplifies the mode of the novel as a whole, which in Stephen's focalisation had recurrently projected into the position of the victim—in particular the small animals preyed upon by the owls in his own garden, that find “dusk turn to night in the shadow of immense wings.” The reference to Milton is apt as Barker's moral vision attempts to explain the position of the perpetrator who has become a victim, although the text stops short of identifying with this position. Another shift that occurs with this late turn in the novel is that the characters' direct encounter with vulnerability and the need for moral action inscribes Butler's idea that 9/11 could lead to “a renewal of our collective responsibility for the physical lives of others.”⁴⁰

The numerous disembodied eyes that appear in the landscape, partially obscured or blinded, indicate the overwhelming focus of the novel on witnessing. To bear witness is not just the responsibility of professionals like Stephen; Barker's narrative emphasises that the inception of contemporary news reporting and the bombardment of 9/11 images has made proxy-witnesses of everyone. It is in this sense that the novel can be seen to address the question of collective responsibility. To develop a dark-adapted eye like Stephen's is shown to be morally suspect but, paradoxically, also the only basis for moral action. At the same time, the novel offsets its focus on violence by emphasising the healing nature of common plights and pleasures. For Stephen, this is the restoration of his body through exercise and sex; for Kate Frobisher, the trauma of her husband's death is never denied—it is described as an “amputation”—but it is survived through simple acts of hospitality: “Since Ben's death that had been her only rule: to refuse no invitation, to acknowledge and return any small act of kindness—and it was working, she was getting through, she was surviving.”⁴¹ The village is described as having a “dense, secretive life, [with] its rivalries, feuds and gossip.”⁴² Yet, in spite of its flaws, Kate remains resolutely connected to the village. But overwhelmingly, it is the very form of the novel—the presentation of ideas through a series of dialogues—that presents an alternative to loss and trauma.

Conversations on Witnessing and Ethics

One aspect of *Double Vision* easy to overlook is that it is based around discussions of divisive topics between seemingly reasonable, essentially likeable people. Yet it is this apparently simple effect of the dialogic structure that contributes to the novel's pastoral *mode*. A passing comment that sets up the dynamics of the village community highlights this point: Stephen's brother is a cutting-edge scientist whose work should put him at odds with the local vicar, Alec Braithewaite, except that he has in the past

praised the vicar's "level-headed discussion"⁴³ of therapeutic cloning. This ethos of respect and moderation is reinforced countless times. While characters frequently argue with each other, there is a harmonic structure connecting their ideas, which is allowed for in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Bakhtin argues that dialogism is not simply a matter of argument or polemics, but that "it appears more subtly in the agreement between voices."⁴⁴

Alpers suggests that the challenge for the pastoral novel is to adapt ideas and structures that are essentially not novelistic; one of these is the pastoral use of dialogue rather than dramatic action. He quotes from Gillian Beer in locating tension in the pastoral novel "between framing, perfecting and completing (the pastoral impulse), and narrative movement with its dangers and freedom, its possibilities for radical change."⁴⁵ The dialogues in *Double Vision* which take place in farm houses, churches and museums, conspicuously frame the narrative and threaten to stop its momentum with what are essentially prose eclogues. These take place in a landscape that is hardly more than "an atmosphere, a darkness, barely sketched in,"⁴⁶ a space from which details and objects have been strikingly removed, which, as in Auden's war eclogues, serves to strengthen the speakers' voices.⁴⁷ Ostensibly, they are there to provide commentary, but they have a secondary function of convening the characters into a community of mourners and friends.

The meeting between Kate and Stephen in Chapter Twelve follows a pattern of pastoral elegy, because although they are discussing personal grief and collective losses that might have been represented through a tragic register, the conversation instead turns their suffering into "a common condition acknowledged as obvious."⁴⁸ After an initial reticence, each begins to finish the others' thoughts and they find themselves carrying on a conversation that includes Ben's ghost. Stephen is discussing the book he is writing about the representation of wars, and asks Kate if she knows of

"Jules Naudet, the guy who was following a rookie fireman round New York on 9/11 and just found himself filming the attack on the towers? Well, something he said haunted me. At one point he turned his camera off—he wouldn't film people burning—and he said, 'Nobody should have to see this.' And of course immediately I thought of Goya."

"One cannot look at this'?"

"Yes—but then 'I saw it.' 'This is the truth.' It's that argument he's having with himself, all the time, between the ethical problem of

showing the atrocities and yet the need to say, 'Look, this is what's happening'... and I thought, My God, we're still facing exactly the same problem"...

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. I had this conversation with Ben ... oh, hundreds of times." The sadness returned. "You should be doing this book with Ben, really."

"If I use his photographs, I will be. In a sense."⁴⁹

This conversation is not exactly representative of Barker's dialogues, which are often more conflicted and interrogative; the characters usually leave marked silences, or get exasperated and undercut each other. Yet there is a lack of conflict here precisely because this meeting enacts a form of pastoral convening. Without being sentimental, Kate and Stephen commemorate Ben's life, for their conversation is aimed at continuing the work he has done. What is more, this passage demonstrates Alpers's conception of convention as a unifying usage. The dialogue is conventional in the way it rolls along, unashamedly offering an exposition of the novel's ideas, and this straightforwardness allows us to hear more clearly the offhand, modest grace of the voices. What is true of this particular extract is true of many others: Barker is more concerned with ethos, with character, than narrative momentum. And this is why the pastoral mode proves so effective.

There is in fact a quartet of voices present in this dialogue: Kate and Stephen, Ben and Francisco Goya, the Spanish artist whose work the three contemporary characters agree best articulates the dilemmas of witnessing that have become newly urgent in the context of the spectacle of 9/11. To reflect yet more on voice, this scene adopts not only the conversational approach, but also the central questions of Susan Sontag's post-9/11 book on Goya and war photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.⁵⁰ The exchange between Sontag's essay and Barker's novel may be a combination of synchronicity and intertextual referencing; whatever the case, both texts explore the ethical role of the witness. In Barker's novel, her characters share common ground because they both identify as witnesses: Stephen is a first-person witness and Kate an artist and proxy-witness. From this position, they discuss trauma in a different way from the combative dialogues between therapist and patient that marked the *Regeneration* trilogy and *Border Crossing*, because Goya's art guides a new orientation to trauma. This approach can be summed up by three of Goya's art captions that are fused together in the novel: "*No se puede mirar*. One cannot look at this. *Yo lo vi*. I saw it. *Esto es lo verdadero*. This is the truth."⁵¹ These words frame the novel as they originally framed three

discrete images from Goya's *The Disasters of War*, a series of etchings that stands behind the ethical questions of Barker's novel. While the condensed nature of the three statements is obliquely poetic, it is also literal. To come upon these words in Barker's epigraph is to know immediately what Goya is talking about. His words have become epigrammatic, casting trauma as the catastrophic real beyond the text that does not require analysis, only response. In the dialogue between Kate and Stephen, Barker translates these words into one consolidated meaning: there is a need to go on producing art and other forms of testimony to atrocities even when we are uncertain about the instrumental impact of bearing witness.

Although Barker is clearly aware of the complexity of trauma theory, as is evident in her previous novels, the dialogue on Goya puts the complex into the simple. The dilemma and ambiguity of witnessing is elsewhere represented dramatically in the text, for instance in the actions of the witness who fails to respond to Kate's suffering at the crash site at the start of the novel. But nowhere is it more powerfully handled than in the conversations between Kate and Stephen that take the complex moral questions raised by trauma and transform them to reflect directly on the public role of the artist in representing catastrophes. Goya comes to embody the artist who, with full awareness of the darkness of the human psyche, retains a moral centre. A very pastoral approach to suffering emerges in Kate's response to Goya's painting, "Prison Interior":

It was so small, not much larger than a sheet of typing paper, all the colours subdued. The interior of a prison, seven men in shackles, every tone, every line expressing despair. She stood back. Knelt down. Stared. ... These men have no hope, no past, no future, and yet, seeing this scene through Goya's steady and compassionate eye, it was impossible to feel anything as simple or as trivial as despair.⁵²

Goya's vision is primarily pastoral *because* of the darkness of his subject matter. Not only is his vision modest in scope, it also demonstrates the capacity of art to uphold a moral value such as compassion while acknowledging that suffering goes on and cannot be stopped. Barker's argument that Goya's art is exemplary because it rules out a despairing response in the viewer echoes Empson's statement, made with regard to Shakespeare's version of pastoral, that "the feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that the good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral."⁵³ Further, Goya becomes the model survivor who guides the two living characters to

embrace the raw material of common life, arguing that he took this approach to combat the more solipsistic dimension of trauma. For example, he sought crowds to drown out the “horrible meaningless noises” of his tinnitus, which is a synecdoche for all the traumas he has witnessed.⁵⁴ Because Goya’s approach is presented as an alternative to therapy, Barker purposefully sets off her two characters’ mourning and recovery against therapeutic contexts.

This is evident in the scene in which Stephen, who has rejected therapy, instead finds refuge from the images that haunt him in the crowds of the fairground, a landscape that recalls Goya’s “noisy” paintings. Brannigan reads this in opposition to the broodingly empty landscapes of the novel and as a corrective to his previously solitary forms of witnessing:

The fairground is a disorienting landscape in which he is compelled to recognise the vibrant, roaring, indefatigable presence of human life. It demands of him an openness to the existence of others as subjects in the here and now, and thus serves as a corrective to his routine nightmares of the dead woman in Sarajevo, and to his instinctual desire to isolate himself from others.⁵⁵

Essentially, Stephen’s journey away from trauma leads through Goya’s art to a levelling experience that is embodied by the crowd.

Art Over Therapy

The shift in focus from trauma to physical vulnerability that accompanies the 9/11 themes of *Double Vision* informs the conversations about art, and in particular, the sculpture of Christ that Kate constructs over the course of the novel. The Christ is amorphous; it is always described in the process of becoming something, and Kate’s assistant, Peter Wingrave, uses it as a blank slate on which to project his own history of murder and imprisonment such that it becomes an embodiment of traumatic memory. Kate, on the other hand, sees the Christ more concretely as the Jesus of History whose scarred body attests to the universal exchange of suffering between the strong and the weak. Her sculpture resonates with Albert Camus’s atheological version of Christ, as Shoshana Felman describes it: “not a man-God but an archetypal human witness.”⁵⁶ Indeed, a link can be made between Camus’s existentialism, which takes an interesting moral position by first recognising the absurdity of human life and then rejecting despair as a valid response, and Barker’s pastoral view of art. This type of ethos informs what I have already said about her reading of Goya, but also her depiction of the Christ. For while the sculpture is a reminder to Kate of what

Felman would call “history as outrage,” devastatingly asserted through a trinity of atheological statements that negate the possibility that suffering can be transcended,⁵⁷ its completion symbolises Kate’s commitment to life.

Barker has commented that art, even when it depicts dark subject matter, is an inherently hopeful creative act.⁵⁸ She embodies this idea through Kate’s memory of an evening before Ben’s death when, after an uncanny midnight encounter with a bird at her window, she had returned to bed and embraced him and he had protested that she was treating his body as if it were clay. In remembering this moment, Kate invokes the double meaning of clay—Ben is now clay and clay is the material through which she shapes her sculptures.⁵⁹ There is a pastoral turn to this metaphor which encapsulates the themes of this very open-ended novel as being about war, death, and trauma, and how art uses these as its materials, and transforms them. And this discourse about art running through the text accounts for the contemporary moral resonance of the pastoral mode. By talking about pastoral art, Barker is able to restate her conception of trauma and violence. She does not deny the finality of loss or the scars left by injustice, but emphasises the ability of the artist to present society with a double vision that is morally performative, which continues to act as if morality existed and renewal were possible, despite full awareness of the contrary. Even if abandoning humanistic ideas seems the most rational course, Barker’s novels continue to hold onto them.

Part of Barker’s pastoral vision of art is to interrogate its limitations and ambiguities. This is dramatised in Kate’s struggle with Peter to retain her autonomy over the sculpture as he becomes invested in the process. Peter, who is linked to the ambiguous pastoral figure of the mower, is pathologically unaware of interpersonal boundaries. He is Barker’s second version of the grown-up child as murderer and as such he represents a kind of monstrosity,⁶⁰ the capacity for evil that the philosopher Slavoj Žižek defines as the antithesis of egotism, the desire to deprive others of life and freedom even at the expense to one’s own life.⁶¹ Barker’s vision of morality accounts for this irrational instinct in individuals and societies towards self-sabotaging violence. Along with trauma, the meaningless evil represented by Peter exceeds the power of pastoral framing.

Kate’s struggle with Peter is laid aside through the pastoral processes in which completing and framing her artwork are emphasised. Although her art and her moral vision have been challenged through contact with the “abrasive form of nothingness”⁶² represented by Peter, they have also been strengthened. With clear allusions to Virginia Woolf’s own pastoral elegy *To the Lighthouse* in mind, the ending of the novel stages Kate’s completion of her artwork alongside Stephen and Justine’s journey to the Farne Islands

to recover from the attack. As Barker intersperses the two narratives, a striking image of an object hitting water not only connects the dual strands, but also enacts a form of closure. With direct reference to Woolf's text, Kate's internal exchange with her sculpture is described as dropping words into a deep well,⁶³ an image which suggests the delayed impact of trauma and the attempt to test its depths by listening for the words' echo.

As the novel draws to a close, Barker repeats a variation of this image on the beach where Justine and Stephen are skimming stones on the water:

He knew, before the stone left his hand, that this one would walk, miraculously, across the water, each point of contact setting off concentric rings that would meet and overlap, creating little eddies of turbulence but always, always spreading out, so that the ripples reached the shore, before, finally, it sank.

"There," he said. "You see?"⁶⁴

The overlapping rings suggest the repetitions in the structure of the narrative that have indicated unhealed traumas, and here, finally, the repetition in itself has enabled the completion of something, for the stone—the narrative about trauma—has been suspended long enough for the ripples to reach the shore. And sure enough, one of the key images repeated across the text—acres of marram grass—which has become a metonym for Barker's pastoral landscape, is repeated in this scene with a difference. No longer an unpopulated landscape embodying invisible pain, the miles of marram grass now incorporate the figures of Justine and Stephen moving through and connecting water and land in a unifying image.

The obvious effort to impose pastoral order on suffering through such aesthetic patterning does not negate the traumatic elements of the text. Rather, pastoral framing enables for *Double Vision*, as it did for Woolf's novel, a commemoration of private and public losses. If the art that is privileged in this novel is elegiac, then it is elegiac for a purpose: to forge a community of mourners, not only inside, but also outside, the text. That community is basically a pastoral one operating in a post-9/11 context. The contingency between the local and the global in Barker's novel—the continuity between foreign war zones and a contemporary English wasteland, and between the Bosnian woman and Justine—reveals that the pastoral can operate powerfully within contemporary political contexts. Butler suggests the possibility of a common humanity evolving out of the shared experience of trauma, and this is exactly what I have been suggesting Barker inscribes with the dialogues of her pastoral elegy. While

the pastoral might once have been conceived as a tool for thinking through the unsatisfactory nature of individual mortality or class relations on a local level, Barker's novel reveals that it can become a critical apparatus for thinking about the unequal global power relations that have been brought home to the first world in a post-9/11 global paradigm, and for imagining a response that is not based on "anything as simple or as trivial as despair." As Butler suggests, rather than being narcissistic, grief can enable a sense of loss that leads to a renewal of "our collective responsibility for the physical lives of others,"⁶⁵ and this is just the reversal from awareness of actual loss, suffering, and mortality, to a renewed ethical investment that the pastoral facilitates.

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NOTES

- ¹ Pat Barker, *Double Vision* (London: Penguin, 2004), 180–81.
- ² See John Brannigan's *Pat Barker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Philip Tew's "The Post-Millennial, 9/11 and the Traumatological," in *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2007); and Ulrike Tancke's "Uses and Abuses of Trauma in Post-9/11 Fiction and Contemporary Culture," in *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*, ed. Cara Cilano (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).
- ³ A few of the ideas and examples I use in this essay have already appeared in my previous article on *Double Vision*: "Adaptation and Ekphrasis: Looking at Art in Literature," in *Pockets of Change: Cultural Adaptations and Transitions*, eds. Tricia Hopton et al. (New York: Lexington, 2010).
- ⁴ Philip Tew, "The Post-Millennial, 9/11 and the Traumatological," in *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2007), 200.
- ⁵ See Roger Luckhurst's introduction to *The Trauma Question* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008) for a comprehensive account of this context.
- ⁶ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 92.
- ⁷ Tew, "The Post-Millennial," 190, 197, 199, 200, 205.
- ⁸ The *Regeneration* trilogy, published separately as *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, and *The Ghost Road* (New York: Viking, 1991–1995).
- ⁹ *Pat Barker, Another World* (London: Penguin, 1999), 3.
- ¹⁰ I am thinking of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth Press,

1927); W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (London: Vintage, 1998).

¹¹ Virgil's *Eclogues* themselves open with the image of the countryside in turmoil following civil war, and with the shepherd Meliboeus whose lands have been confiscated by the veterans of Octavian's army. The contrast between Meliboeus, who is exiled, and Tityrus, who continues to enjoy pastoral otium, is important to *Eclogue I*: "Tityrus, so there you lie beneath the spread of sheltering beech / And practice country tunes upon your shepherd's pipe. / But we must leave our native place, the fields so dear to us."

¹² Pat Barker, *Double Vision*, 201.

¹³ Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 28.

¹⁴ Sharon Monteith and Nahem Yousaf, "Double Vision: Regenerative or Traumatized Pastoral?" in *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, ed. Sharon Monteith et al. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 283–299.

¹⁵ Monteith and Yousaf, "Double Vision," 292. They quote from Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 231.

¹⁶ Pat Barker, *The Eye in the Door* (London: Penguin, 1994), 116.

¹⁷ Monteith and Yousaf, "Double Vision," 297.

¹⁸ I would like to acknowledge Ruth Blair's idea that pastoral is a mechanism; she raised this idea in "Some Thoughts on *Some Versions of Pastoral*—A Kind of Map" (informal presentation, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 7 July 2010).

¹⁹ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 24.

²⁰ The communal traumas of working-class communities are explored in Barker's first three novels: *Union Street* (1982), *Blow Your House Down* (1984), and *Liza's England* (1986); while the traumas experienced by war veterans are explored in the trilogy and *Another World* (1998).

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 47.

²² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab and Tracey B. Strong (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 15; qtd. by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, 48. Schmitt himself is loosely translating and paraphrasing Søren Kierkegaard's *Repetition: An essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper, 1964).

²³ Donna Coffey, "Blood and Soil in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*: The Pastoral in Holocaust Literature," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.1 (2007): 30.

²⁴ See Coffey, "Blood and Soil."

²⁵ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

- ²⁷ This argument has been addressed by Coffey in her article on *Fugitive Pieces*. She has shown that if the Nazis used pastoral myths for ideological ends, then the same tradition could be adapted to respond to the genocidal horrors they brought about.
- ²⁸ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 19.
- ²⁹ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 93.
- ³⁰ Barker, *Double Vision*, 227.
- ³¹ Barbara Vine, *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (New York: Plume, 1993).
- ³² Barker, *Double Vision*, 40–41, 103–04.
- ³³ See Erwin Panofsky's explication of the meaning of this Latin phrase in "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in *Meaning and the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 295–320.
- ³⁴ For a short yet insightful essay on this idea, see Michael Wood's "At the Movies," review of *True Grit*, dir. by John and Ethan Coen. *London Review of Books* February 3, 2011, accessed February 2, 2011, www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n03/michael-wood/at-the-movies.
- ³⁵ Barker, *Double Vision*, 52–53.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ³⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 8; see Brannigan's *Pat Barker*, 162, in which he anticipates my reading.
- ³⁸ See endnote 7.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁴¹ Barker, *Double Vision*, 2.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 185.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text in Linguistic, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 121.
- ⁴⁵ Gillian Beer makes these comments in relation to George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede*. See Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 64; quoted in Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 379.
- ⁴⁶ I borrow this phrase from Susan Sontag, who is describing the backgrounds of Francisco Goya's etchings, and I am led to do so because Barker directly refers to the artist in *Double Vision*. See Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 45.

- ⁴⁷ In his introduction to Auden's *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, Alan Jacobs describes "the unpopulated visionary landscapes the characters move through" (xxxviii).
- ⁴⁸ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 73.
- ⁴⁹ Barker, *Double Vision*, 119.
- ⁵⁰ Barker acknowledges her debt to Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which was published in the same year as *Double Vision* and is referred to in Barker's "Author's note."
- ⁵¹ Francisco Goya, *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (London: Phaidon, 1937), Nos. 26, 44, 82.
- ⁵² Barker, *Double Vision*, 152–53.
- ⁵³ Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 114.
- ⁵⁴ Barker, *Double Vision*, 154.
- ⁵⁵ Brannigan, *Pat Barker*, 159–60.
- ⁵⁶ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 185.
- ⁵⁷ Barker, *Double Vision*, 181.
- ⁵⁸ She made this comment in an interview with John Brannigan. See Brannigan's "An Interview with Pat Barker," *Contemporary Literature* 46.3 (2005): 389.
- ⁵⁹ Barker, *Double Vision*, 174.
- ⁶⁰ With Peter Wingrave, Barker continues the story of Danny Miller, a relocated child murderer who was the subject of her previous novel, *Border Crossing* (2001).
- ⁶¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009), 74, 78.
- ⁶² Terry Eagleton uses this phrase to refer to the "bad" version of the sublime as it has been conceived of by postmodernist theorists, and it encapsulates the invasive threat implied in the novel by Peter's lack of personal boundaries. See Eagleton's *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.
- ⁶³ Barker, *Double Vision*, 301.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.
- ⁶⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.