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Pat Barker's *Double Vision* and *Life Class*: Revisioning Trauma in Narratives of Romance

Abstract: This essay aims to discuss the themes of trauma, memory and healing through art and love in Pat Barker's *Double Vision* (2003) and *Life Class* (2007), which are basically romance narratives. Barker's fiction occasionally turns its back on the realistic tradition and enters the realm of the romance to create an alternative way of realistic investigation. It is proposed in this essay that the romance exemplified in these two novels is presented through the double filter of Barker's realism and the ethical concern of her fiction, which foregrounds a sense of loss and healing simultaneously. More significantly, Barker's use of romance strategies aims at freeing the narratives from the constraints of realistic representation by the help of the generic structure of romance. The essay also argues that Pat Barker's last two novels *Double Vision* (2003) and *Life Class* (2007), while confronting a traumatic past with historical realism, open a space for the silenced or unspoken parts of history by using the strategies of romance.

The English writer, Pat Barker is the award-winning author of eleven novels and short-stories whose writing explores historical, social and individual traumas, from poverty to war, from oppression to violence, from rape to murder. In this respect, she shows the consequences that collective traumas have on individuals, evaluates the symptoms of individual trauma as an indication of greater social problems, and insists that if they are not healed properly, they might affect the lives of later generations. In her fiction, while revisiting the themes of social inscriptions and traumatic experience, she not only decentres the message but also unsettles familiar ways of answering the question of how an artist can represent social and individual traumas. In so doing, she often resorts to romance strategies, as will be developed later with reference to her last two novels, *Double Vision* (2003) and *Life Class* (2007).

In *Double Vision*, Barker weaves the story around the traumatic effects of violence and war on individuals and communities in the aftermath of Sarajevo and 9/11. The narrative of the novel centres on the overlapping stories of two characters: Stephen — a war reporter, and Kate — the widow of Stephen's photographer

friend Ben. Both characters are forced to reassess their pasts and have an uncanny feeling about it: Kate is trapped in the scene of a car crash and the grief of a dead husband; and Stephen struggles with his nightmares of Sarajevo. *Life Class*, on the other hand, presents us with a group of artists — Elinor, Paul, and Neville — who concern themselves with the artistic responsibility of representing violence in the time of the First World War through their works. In *Life Class*, society is represented as being in the grip of an irresistible need to believe in its national myths and beset by unresolved traumatic memories. The engaged artists of the novel, Elinor, Paul, and Neville, help us understand the public nature of war, which has its roots in the private sphere through its traumatic effect on these individuals.

In her concern for the individual's vulnerability at the hands of history, Barker suggests that the twentieth century really began with the First World War, which made history visible. For her, the key fact of this war is that it remains in the collective unconscious as a persistent traumatic experience that has been insufficiently acknowledged and worked through. On the other hand, the twentieth century can be seen to have ended with the fall of the twin towers in New York on 11 September, 2001, which was a moment that made everyone feel subject to history again. Such a feeling, of course, is prominent in Barker's former novels, *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995), which are set in 1917–18 and make up *The Regeneration Trilogy*, a wide-ranging study of the effects of war on individuals in terms of responsibility and identity. As John Brannigan states, "the return of the dead to haunt the living, whether in the form of ghostly apparitions or uncanny experiences, functions to unsettle the conceit of the present. This appears to be an important recognition in Barker's trilogy" (Brannigan 2003: 21). The trilogy is connected to *Double Vision* and *Life Class* by a concern with violence and trauma and by the writer's concentration on recent world events as the cause of the individual's present worry and grief. Like the trilogy, the later novels also rely heavily on borrowings from the mode of romance, as will be argued in the following pages.

Barker's use of metaphors of vision and memory throughout *Double Vision* aims to emphasise that one's view of the past affects one's perception of the present. In fact, memory in the novel specifically functions as a repetition of the past and therefore creates a "deferred past," as Jacques Derrida indicates in *Writing and Difference.* He points out that the recovered memory of the past is the reconstitution of meaning through deferral (Derrida 1978: 214). Interestingly, in *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead explains this kind of deferred action in terms of Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, and writes that "for Freud, the concept refers to the ways in which certain experiences, impressions and memory traces are revised at a later date in order to correspond with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development" (Whitehead 2004: 6). She goes on to explain that

> Insufficiently grasped at the time of its occurrences, trauma does not lie in possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive influence which

> not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition. (Whitehead, 5)

This suggests that traumatic memory is not flexible in the same way as ordinary memory. Similarly, Freud observed that a traumatised patient could experience the traumatic flashback or dream in the present, generally without any difference, and that it is delay and invariability that define traumatic symptoms (Freud 1955: 33).

The title *Life Class* is a pun on the name of the lesson, the life class, in which the students of the London Slade School of Art practice drawing "decapitated heads, limbless torsos, amputated arms and legs" (*LC*, 14).[1] Both Paul and Neville consider the dilemma of creating art at a time of suffering and they restate war art as a "Faustian pact," in other words, as a deal in which the artist sells her/his integrity (*LC*, 265). Later in the novel, Paul describes his dislike for his best painting because of this feeling of guilt: "If I'd worked on it more I'd have ruined it. It's the best thing I've ever done and yet I don't like it. It reeks of some kind of Faustian pact" (*LC*, 265). Ironically, Neville confesses that he has seen the war as a "painting opportunity," and that he is now ready to benefit from the results in the post-war world: "it's a Faustian pact. I get all this attention for a few months, however long the bloody thing lasts, but once it's over — finish. Nobody wants to look at a nightmare once they've woken up" (*LC*, 297). By contrast, Neville seems motivated by a desire to create a representation approaching reality, just as Paul, a less-gifted artist, decides to make a more significant contribution, which leads him to work at a hospital and drive an ambulance. But both *Life Class* and *Double Vision* share a concern about the capacity of the visual arts to represent both ethically and empathetically the suffering of people in times of war.

History, in Barker's fiction, is often haunted by the memory of loss and is always struggling to restore the traumatic past. This endeavour is also present at the end of *Life Class*, where Paul is haunted by memories of the war and of dead friends: "He thought of Lewis in his grave under a thin covering of snow. Of the ambulance crews coming to the end of a long night. Of Sister Byrd, … the sooner he was out there again the better, he thought. He didn't belong here" (*LC*, 307). This reflection brings to mind Michel de Certeau's statement in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* that:

> there is an uncanniness about th[e] past that a present occupant has expelled in an effort to take its place. The dead haunt the living …, what was excluded re-infiltrates the place of its origin — now the present's clean place. It resurfaces, it troubles, it turns the present's feeling of being at home into an illusion. (Certeau 1986: 3–4)

Similarly, Hayden White observes that

[1] For page references in parenthesis *Life Class* (2007) is abbreviated as *LC* and *Double Vision* (2003) — as *DV*.

> the historical past is, in a word, 'uncanny' both known and unknown, present and absent, familiar and alien, at one and the same time. Thus constructed, the historical past has all the attributes that we might ascribe to the psychological sphere of the 'imaginary.' (White 1987: 37)

Moreover, the experience of "das Unheimliche" is a feeling which in Freud's words, is "frightening that goes back to what was once known and had long been familiar" (Freud 2003: 124). The uncanny, then, is the revelation of that which is private and concealed; hidden not only from others, but also from the self, and Freud argues that, being both familiar and strangely disturbing, it involves in most cases a recurrence of the repressed. Thus, the feeling of the uncanny arises when a long forgotten memory resurfaces and a feeling of uncanniness is the mark of the return of the repressed. The notion of memory and history, and of how the past, present, and future are all present at one point in the traumatised person's experience, is also reminiscent of the uncanny.

Given the fact that the uncanny experience emerges from the unconscious — from the realm of the unknown — which is foreign to the self, the sense of the uncanny is easily created within the mode of romance owing to the mode's closeness to the borderline between the foreign and the familiar. Corinne Saunders states in this respect that "romance is a genre of extraordinary fluidity: it spans mimetic and non-mimetic, actuality and fantasy, history and legend, past and present" (Saunders 2004: 2). Traditionally, romance offers escape, yet it also reflects social comment and explores gender relationships on a psychological level by blending reality with fantasy, the near with the far, the probable with the imaginary. Barker's novels, and more especially the two discussed here, confront a history that hurts in its need to make sense of a traumatic past. This confrontation with the uncanny border of historical realism opens a space for the silenced or unspoken parts of history. Moreover, Barker's depiction of romance, which is experienced within the concept of war in both novels, indicates the fragility of human psychology and human relations during a time of war. More significantly, the transformative power of romantic love exemplified in these two novels is presented through the double filter of Barker's realism and the ethical concern of her fiction, which simultaneously foregrounds a sense of loss and healing.

Pat Barker constantly combines the romantic and the mimetic in her novels, leaving the reader with an uncanny feeling as to whether the events are real or merely the hallucinations of the characters. Since the origin of the genre, romance has been seen as closely linked to the themes of mystery, love, the quest, and the past. Moreover, as Jean-Michel Ganteau has written in his article "Fantastic, but Truthful: The Ethics of Romance," it is "concerned with things foreign," "what is outside the walls of the city, what escapes common experience" (Ganteau 2003: 226–227). Despite the ongoing transformations of the genre, romance avoids verisimilitude and is thus defined in contrast to the novel. In other words, where the novel is concerned with the deductive observation of life, romance seeks escape from the constraints of realism to let the imagination work without restraint. In

this respect, while arguing the function of romance, Ganteau writes that "romance prolongs investigation by probing zones that notoriously remain out of the reach of realistic narrative" (Ganteau, 227). In other words, the fact that romance trades with the far and the strange enables encounters with the other, the foreign, the unknown and the uncanny.

Ganteau's definition of romance is echoed by Pierre Vitoux, who defines romance as "the antagonist of mimesis in the mode of irony" (Vitoux 2007: 408) and suggests that romance inherently includes fantastic elements and naturally creates a sense of the uncanny owing to its position between the strange and the supernatural. In keeping with all this, Barker's fiction occasionally turns its back on the realistic tradition and enters the realm of the romance to create an alternative mode of realistic investigation. Barker's use of romance strategies has an ethical component, as they are aimed at freeing the narratives from what Fredric Jameson described in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) as the constraints of "oppressive realistic representation" (Jameson 2006: 91) and that transformation is inherent in the generic structure of romance. Analysing the upsurge of the romance in contemporary fiction from a Marxist perspective, Jameson argues that:

> it is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. (Jameson, 91)

Together with this freeing dimension, Jameson, concurring with Northrop Frye, underlines its salvational element and associates the upsurge of romance in contemporary fiction with "the reexpression of Utopian longings" and the reconquest of "some feeling of salvational future" (Jameson, 91). This Utopian endeavour is not, however, achieved through "the substitution of some more ideal realm of ordinary reality," but rather through "a process of *transforming* ordinary reality" (Jameson, 97), in other words, through the reconfiguration or blending of romance and realism that characterises Pat Barker's fiction.

Double Vision and *Life Class* propose, through the characters Kate, Stephen, and Paul, that traumatic experience cannot easily be represented and therefore healed, as the event is already distorted in the traumatised person's mind. Kate, in *Double Vision*, is so overwhelmed by the memory of her husband's death that she paradoxically delivers him to a traumatic time that is always present. Stephen repudiates the potential label of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder — not that he thinks he does not fit it but because he does not think the label will help him get better. The reader comes close to the idea of hope only at the moment when Kate is in the Bowes Museum looking at Francisco de Goya's picture of seven prisoners gripped by despair. Kate feels a dual response: despair combined with joy. It is a "double vision" of what art can do:

> Photographs shock, terrify, arouse compassion, anger, even drive people to take action, but does the photograph of an atrocity ever inspire hope? This one did. The prisoners in the painting 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. (*DV*, 152–153)

The complexity of the emotional reaction induced by this painting reinforces Susan Sontag's contention that Goya introduced to art "a new standard for responsiveness to suffering" (Sontag 2003: 45). According to Sontag, the emotional impact of Goya's paintings was intended to express the most ethical response to war atrocities. Both Kate and Stephen believe that Goya invites the spectator to the sort of humane and compassionate response which Sontag proposes, the equivalent of Dominick LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 1999: 722).

Now, such a view may be consistent with Cathy Caruth's contention, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, that trauma disorder is "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event" (Caruth 1995: 4). For the characters in the novels, the meaning of the past experience undergoes a kind of displacement that is in keeping with this description. Laura S. Brown writes that trauma happens when the person has experienced an event which is "outside the range of human experience," and she lists various categories of symptoms: "re-experiencing symptoms, nightmares, and flashbacks; avoidance symptoms, the marks of psychic numbing; and the symptoms of heightened physiological arousal: hyper vigilance, disturbed sleep, a distracted mind" (Brown 1995: 100). Likewise, in *Double Vision*, Stephen has intrusive flashbacks: "[he] had a flashback to the stairwell in Sarajevo. One of the worst he'd had for quite a while. It's not true, he thought, that images lose their power with repetition, or not automatically true anyway" (*DV*, 154). And he also suffers from recurrent nightmares with flashbacks stemming from the scene of a war crime[2]:

> in a corner of the landing, away from the danger of flying glass, a girl huddled on a mattress. She didn't speak or cry out or try to get away. … Eyes wide open, skirt bunched up around her waist, her splayed thighs enclosing a blackness of blood and pain. Stephen fell on his knees beside her and pulled down her skirt. A voice in his head said, don't touch anything. This is a crime scene. (*DV*, 52–53)

Stephen is haunted by this image, which has an intense emotional impact on him, and which, thwarting the logic of linear time, is repeated in the present in passages that smack of the darkest aspect of romance.

The novels' prevailing themes of trauma, remembering and revision may be seen as enlarging the broader purpose of Barker's writing to understand and discuss contemporary social traumas. Her main concern at this point is the problem of how to represent the atrocity of war ethically, which might be the reason why both novels create a meta-comment on the role of the artist and on the ethics of the

[2] Freud, while examining war neuroses just after the First World War, made connections between the repressed reality in the unconscious mind and recurrent dreams: "Recurrent dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (Freud 1955: 13).

representation of violence. In an interview with Sharon Monteith, Barker herself casts light on her ethical position with respect to the representation of war: "Are there in fact any differences between legitimate violence in war and the illegitimate violence of crime?", she asks and then answers: "There is a bridge of violence between the two that is becoming more and more blurred" (Monteith 2004: 29).

Another aspect of Barker's writing is her constant invitation to readers to be sceptical toward the representations of narratives, especially at a time when social reality is created through the mass media. Furthermore, she encourages us to interrogate social representations and to reappropriate them as part of our self-discovery and understanding of the world. The representation of socio-cultural or historical reality is most difficult to achieve when this reality has a traumatic component, since the truth of disasters, wars or atrocious experiences stubbornly resists representation. Such a claim may be envisaged in the light of Diane Elam's contention in *Romancing the Postmodern* that "the difference between realism and postmodern romance can be seen in terms of remembering and forgetting: while realism remembers the past so as to forget it, the postmodern romance re-members the past, re-situates its temporality, in order to make the past impossible to forget" (Elam 1992: 15).

Through her novels, Barker attempts to show that representing the past accurately and ethically is always a problem. Stephen, for instance, has an argument with himself all the time,

> between the ethical problems of showing the atrocities and yet the need to say, 'Look, this is what's happening' … There's always this tension between wanting to show the truth, and yet being sceptical about what the effects of showing it are going to be. (*DV*, 119)

Elaine Showalter's general comment on *Double Vision* is significant in this respect: "The overt plot is explicitly concerned with the morality of writing about and representing atrocity and war. Is watching TV news voyeurism? Is reporting and photographing complicit and addictive? When does witnessing become disseminating?" (Showalter 2003: 8). Barbara Korte also addresses this issue when she writes that contemporary novels are interested "precisely in this kind of war journalism with an ethic dimension" (Korte 2007: 184), and that: "recent fiction … is distinguished by a particular attention to the correspondent's exposure to human suffering: pain that is psychological and physical, observed and self-experienced." She interprets this as a reaction to a media culture in which "images of atrocities proliferate" (Korte, 184). This kind of ethical challenge to images of atrocities spread by the mass media is discussed in Pat Barker's novels in terms that bring to mind Susan Sontag's argument in *Regarding the Pain of Others.* Sontag raises ethical questions about being a spectator of those images and representations:

> there is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it … The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be. (Sontag 2003: 42)

Sontag believes that in today's "culture of spectatorship" (Sontag, 105) it is not easy to define the appropriate reaction when confronted with the suffering of other people: "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen" (Sontag, 13).

As regards the meta-comments on the responsibility of the artist who represents the past, it might be stated that Barker endorses Fredric Jameson's view that the contemporary historical novel "can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only represent our ideas and stereotypes about the past" (Jameson 1991: 25). In the novels under discussion, one of the functions of romance is to take the responsibility of making the past specifically unforgettable, in Elam's terms.

Additionally, *Double Vision* and *Life Class* raise the issue that, in traumatised individuals or societies, complete regeneration is rather difficult to achieve, and suggest that only art can aspire to do it. According to psychoanalysis, trauma is triggered off by an unexpected external event which is not fully owned, explained, placed in time, or related to any form of prior knowledge. Caruth explains this aporetic characteristic of trauma in terms of the incapacity of the traumatic memory to become "a narrative memory … that is integrated into a completed story of the past" (Caruth, 153). Building upon this, one might contend that access to a traumatic history can be gained by situating it in a contextual artistic framework. Barker shows this in the novels through the pairs of characters Stephen-Peter and Paul-Elinor, who are writing their memories in letter or story form. Thus, for Barker, writing gives form to memory — it is a way of remembering repressed traumatic events and of re-ordering them in time and space. Writing, thus, controls and sometimes exorcises traumatic memory by transforming it into narrative memory.[3]

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra proposes the concept of "working through" (LaCapra 2001: 22) as a counterpart of Freud's concept of repetition-compulsion, or "acting-out," to describe the role of writing in representing trauma and its healing power. He states that the preferable type of trauma literature is the type that not only embodies "acting out" but also "working through"; however, in all narratives of trauma, there is the danger of the readers' "over identification" with the victim and the traumatic experience. Thus, from an ethical perspective, it is important that the trauma narrative avoids overidentification and promotes instead the "empathic unsettlement" of the readers. In LaCapra's definition, empathic unsettlement "involves a kind of virtual experience through

[3] It was J.M. Charcot's disciple, Pierre Janet who first drew attention to the conversion of traumatic memory into narrative memory which starts the process of recovery from trauma. He shared with Freud the idea that trauma cannot be assimilated into consciousness as it occurs; however, Janet further claimed that trauma is registered directly in a process that he calls "dissociation," which is an alternate state of consciousness. He also made a distinction between "traumatic memory" and "narrative memory": the first one, as Janet described it, is inflexible and replays the past in identical repetition, while the latter is not fixed, the account of the event alters (Janet 1928).

which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (LaCapra 1999: 722). Furthermore, he points out the problems raised by empathic unsettlement at the stage of composition of trauma narratives, and defines the best method: "neither confuse one's own voice or position with the victim's nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure but allow the unsettlement that they address to affect the narrative's own movement both in terms of acting-out and working-through" (LaCapra 1999: 723).

In *Life Class*, Paul, whose past includes his mother's suicide, has a relationship with Teresa, a model at the Slade School of Arts, who is being stalked by her suspicious husband, who beats Paul severely. In addition, violence and violation of bodies occur in *Double Vision* even in safe post-war England. When Stephen's girlfriend Justine is brutally beaten up by burglars, Stephen, mad with anger, manages to come to Justine's rescue but almost kills one of the burglars. In fact, the rage he shows is not only directed at this specific man, but includes the perpetrators of all the violence Stephen had to witness in his career as a war reporter:

> All the way down the hillside he'd had flashbulbs exploding in his head. So many raped and tortured girls — he needed no imagination to picture what might be happening to Justine. It would not have surprised him to find her lying like a broken doll at the foot of the stairs, her skirt bunched up around her waist, her eyes staring. Years of impacted rage had gone into the blow he'd aimed at the back of the burglar's head. He'd meant it to kill. (*DV*, 250)

At a time when any optimism has been negated by traumatic events, each character is forced by different circumstances into a simultaneous reappraisal of the past and the present. Stephen, for instance, starts a relationship with Justine and as a result of his affair he begins to value life and love. The novel ends with Stephen's vision of "the girl in the stairwell in Sarajevo," — the haunting image of a war crime in Stephen's recurrent nightmares — "but she'd lost her power," at the moment in this bed, now that he is near Justine: "he rolled over and took Justine in his arms" (*DV*, 302). Similarly, at a time when Paul has lost all hope, he thinks that he has something to say as a painter and an artist. He decides to paint what he sees in his daily routine at the hospital:

> He's painted the worst aspects of his duties as an orderly: infusing hydrogen peroxide or carbolic acid into a gangrenous wound. Though the figure by the bed, carrying out this unpleasant task, was by no means a self-portrait. Indeed, it was so wrapped up in rubber and white cloth: gown, apron, cap, mask, gloves — ah, yes, the all-important gloves — that it had no individual features. Its anonymity, alone, made it appear threatening. No ministering angel, this. A white-swaddled mummy intent on causing pain. The patient was nothing: merely a blob of tortured nerves. (*LC*, 254)

Both *Double Vision* and *Life Class* describe love affairs that are born out of the context of war or experienced in the aftermath of it, claiming that wartime romance demonstrates both the traumatic effect of war and the healing power of love. War separates people from their normal life, leaving psychological wounds and traumatic memories. Meanwhile, romantic love outweighs the horrors of war

and the claims of art for a period of time and connects the characters back to life again. As Dominick LaCapra has stated, "the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future," yet "something of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence" (LaCapra 1999: 700). Barker's writings not only challenge theoretical generalizations about the traces of violence in memory, but also discuss the role of art and literature in shaping consciousness of war. The two novels considered here suggest that history is continually haunted by the memory of loss, and is constantly striving to regenerate and work through the traumatic past. Nevertheless, "history," Barker states, "is never a judge but a dialogue between past and present. The answers change because the questions change, depending on our preoccupations" (Jaggi 2003: 19). Ultimately, these novels challenge generalisations about trauma and its effects on individuals and communities, and strive to draw attention to the role of art and romance in providing ethical answers to suffering by emotionally unsettling and reshaping consciousness about the traumatic past.

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