

Re-reading Pat Barker

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Edited by

Pat Wheeler

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P U B L I S H I N G

Re-reading Pat Barker,
Edited by Pat Wheeler

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	vii
Sharon Monteith	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	xi
INTRODUCTION.....	xiii
Pat Wheeler	
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
MATRIX, METRAMORPHOSIS, AND THE READYMADE IN <i>UNION STREET</i> , <i>LIZA'S ENGLAND</i> AND <i>ANOTHER WORLD</i>	
Maria Holmgren Troy	
CHAPTER TWO.....	13
“TO SEE AND TO KNOW”: ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN <i>DOUBLE VISION</i> AND <i>LIFE CLASS</i>	
John Brannigan	
CHAPTER THREE.....	25
HER STORY: <i>LIZA'S ENGLAND (THE CENTURY'S DAUGHTER)</i>	
Jessica Gildersleeve	
CHAPTER FOUR.....	43
“WHERE UNKNOWN, THERE PLACE MONSTERS”: READING CLASS CONFLICT AND SEXUAL ANXIETY IN THE <i>REGENERATION</i> TRILOGY	
Pat Wheeler	
CHAPTER FIVE.....	63
“IT HAPPENED ONCE...IT CAN HAPPEN AGAIN. TAKE CARE”: GOTHIC TOPOGRAPHIES IN PAT BARKER'S <i>ANOTHER WORLD</i>	
Judith Seaboyer	

CHAPTER SIX.....	79
PATHOLOGIZED MASCULINITY IN PAT BARKER'S <i>DOUBLE VISION</i> : STEPHEN SHARKEY'S MONSTROUS OTHERS Marie-Luise Kohlke	
CHAPTER SEVEN	99
FIRE AND WATER IN <i>BORDER CROSSING</i> : TESTIMONY AS CONTAGION AND CURE Mary Trabucco	
CHAPTER EIGHT	113
THE FICTIONAL EXCAVATION OF THE FUTURE IN <i>DOUBLE VISION</i> Nick Hubble	
CHAPTER NINE	131
FORMING A NEW POLITICAL AESTHETIC: THE ENABLING BODY IN PAT BARKER'S <i>LIFE CLASS</i> Simon Avery	
CONTRIBUTORS	151
BIBLIOGRAPHY	155
INDEX	165

FOREWORD

SHARON MONTEITH
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I was a reader before I read Pat Barker but after reading her I found something of a critical vocation. I am an Americanist who researches and writes predominantly on the US South and the African American freedom struggle of the 1960s yet I find that I cannot stop reading or writing about the work of this fascinating contemporary British writer.

If I were to relate a story about the very first time I read her fiction, I would be lying. I don't remember; I have been re-reading Pat Barker for some 30 years now and the fascination with her work is cumulative in any case. But I do remember the first time I met her and her late husband David, very clearly and fondly, and the many times since then, including a public interview she did with me one year at the Hay-on-Wye literary festival in a marquee so crammed with Barker's many readers that I held my breath as we walked onstage. Once the interview began, I felt the audience's long-standing respect for Barker as an acclaimed writer enhanced by their experience of seeing a seasoned professional at work. When afterwards members said how much they had enjoyed the conversation, I knew that was because Barker had answered honestly and wisely. She drilled down into each question I asked and idea I posited, as she always does when she talks about her writing fiction, or about war, violence, psychology, art, history or politics. And she responded to each question her audience asked in the same clear-sighted and thoughtful way. No tired or recycled *bon mots*; no disingenuous comments about inspiration that seek to demolish what is revealed in such interviews about the craft of writing. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that she has become an important writer for me as for others: Pat Barker makes critics think hard about how literature works and about how we read fiction. The following is a quick but revealing example of Barker thinking aloud about her craft from an interview I conducted in 2003:

Dialogue is very important to my writing method because a novel doesn't really get going until the characters begin talking to one another and until they begin to have conversations that I don't feel I am making up, by which I mean that I feel I am listening to them as well as making them talk. They have many conversations that don't get written down; sometimes they are talking to each other and at other times I am talking to them. Once these conversations begin, the book is alive for me. Up to that point, no matter what I've written about the characters, what character analysis I may have been involved in, or what notes I may have taken, there is absolutely nothing there. But I think that writers who tend to write in dialogue suffer an enormous delay in being taken seriously. It is as if there is no easy or precise critical vocabulary in which critics can talk about dialogue: they tend to comment on whether it is convincing and that's it, so you are vulnerable to being under-read. You don't have to read far into a descriptive passage by Martin Amis, for example, before you come across a startlingly brilliant figure of speech, but in a novel containing a lot of dialogue the reading experience is very different. You always come across a deceptively simple "Yes" or "No" and in the context of the previous twenty pages, that "Yes" or "No" might be absolute dynamite. The effects of dialogue have to be worked up over a long period and when they arrive they are so apparently simple.

The admixture of creative and critical commentary is just a fragment of a larger discussion about dialogue as the primary site of tension in Barker's novels but it reveals so much about the writer and her work. It goes some way toward explaining why she has acted as a creative spur to other writers and as a primary source for directors, as in award-winning dramatist Sarah Daniels' 1995 play "Blow Your House Down" which operates in a performative dialogue with Barker's second novel published in 1984, or Gillies Mackinnon's 1997 film *Regeneration* adapted from Barker's monumental literary testament to the First World War. And we will find ourselves turning to her work again when we commemorate the centenary of the First World War in 2014.

The self-consciousness of Barker's commentary on her writing practice goes some way towards explaining the subtlety of the fiction so that at times, to extend the example of her dialogue, a character's speech is so unaffected that it is deceptively simple, even when it carries considerable weight for the plot, as in the following example that Barker remembered in interview:

There are two types of dialogue that fascinate me: the apparently unselfconscious, inconsequential dialogue and the hyper-conscious dialogue between a therapist and a patient where every word is loaded.

Apparently inconsequential dialogue might be Lauren getting off the train in Newcastle in *Border Crossing* and stating to her husband Tom, “It’s raining again.” He replies to the effect that it is raining everywhere and she says, with apparent simplicity, “It wasn’t raining in London.” What she actually means is “We’re getting a divorce.”

The writing is never over-worked and the research underpinning her narratives about British culture from the 1890s to the 1990s is never glaring but is used to polish the grain of each story. Barker’s fiction has “re-generated” interest in historical figures including writer-soldiers Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, army psychologist W.H.R. Rivers, artist and surgeon Henry Tonks, and war painters Paul Nash, and C.R.W. Nevinson. She has created memorable characters through which to explore British culture over the long twentieth-century, as in *Liza’s England* where the eponymous heroine prepares for death by telling her story, in the way one imagines Barker might have prepared for writing the novel, by singling out key episodes and looping back and forth in ways that forge parallels between periods and between different characters. Hers is a kaleidoscopic literary vision that accelerates away into postmodern anxieties at the century’s end and tells stories of twenty-first century Britain that disturb and disquiet as well as delight.

In “Reading Pat Barker” the title of the Introduction to *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker* to which this volume returns, Nahem Yousaf and I cogitated on the ways in which Barker engages with a panoply of social and intellectual problems around ethics and morality, faith, crime, psychoanalysis and psychosis, memory and trauma, modernity and postmodernity and the politics of representation. This volume returns to many of those ideas and extends them, particularly Barker’s concern with art and vision, aesthetics and feeling, texturing her most recent fiction. In *Double Vision* and *Life Class* how one composes a picture of war, whether in a photograph, a painting, or indeed a novel, is presented as an aesthetic and ethical quandary. The critics gathered here engage with these ideas.

Pat Wheeler’s *Re-Reading Pat Barker* confirms that Barker’s fiction is being read and re-read by literary critics around the world. Among them are established commentators on her work, including John Brannigan and Wheeler herself, early career researchers, critics such as Maria Holmgren Troy whose published work has situated Barker’s fiction in relation to other women writers, and even those whose scholarship does not usually focus on contemporary fiction, but who are nevertheless drawn to her work, as is the case with Simon Avery whose essay here on *Life Class* is a tour de force. This essay collection showcases a growing and increasingly

diverse community of critics for whom Barker's fiction continues to resonate in different but equally illuminating ways.

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I would like to thank Professor Sharon Monteith for her generosity and for her support for the collection. And, I would like to thank Pat Barker for giving freely of her time over the past twelve years to discuss her work with us. Happy memories of Durham in the sun.

INTRODUCTION

PAT WHEELER

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In November 2006 the University of Hertfordshire held the first international conference dedicated to the work of Pat Barker. A significant number of academics and postgraduate students came together from across the world to discuss her writing. At the conference established Barker scholars Sharon Monteith and John Brannigan were joined by delegates from Australia, Turkey, the USA, and from across Europe, including Belgium, France, Sweden and Norway. This is indicative of the world-wide appeal of Barker's work and the esteem in which she is held as a writer. Professor Monteith, who is known worldwide for her work on Pat Barker, delivered the plenary at the conference. Monteith has followed Barker's writing since 1982 and was the first person to write and publish on her work and I am delighted she has lent her support to the collection by writing the Foreword. Monteith published *Pat Barker* (2002), following it with a co-edited collection *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker* (2005) both of which are returned to and engaged with by contributors to the volume. From the lively and stimulating debates that took place over the two days of the conference it became clear that Barker's body of work still lends itself to critically diverse explorations.

The essays here offer new and innovative readings of Barker's work. Maria Holmen Troy rereads *Union Street*, *Liza's England* and *Another World* through Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's feminist theories. In Troy's considered discussion of the aesthetics and ethical issues in Barker's work she draws on psychoanalytic ideas of subjectivity and transference, and what she terms "subjectivity-as-encounter and trans-subjectivity", an enlarged and partial subjectivity that enables mediation between the outer and inner worlds of individual characters. In her reading Troy explores Barker's different characters' inner worlds both conscious and unconscious. John Brannigan considers *Double Vision* and *Life Class* and suggests that each reading, or rereading, potentially constitute a different understanding of how the novels end, drawing our attention to the ways

that Barker uses the act of seeing as a source of “resolution and knowing” as a source of healing. Drawing on writing by Laura Mulvey, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas he discusses the ways that the novels represent a development of Barker’s engagement with the ethics of vision, from the violence of seeing, to the ethical demand to see.

In a very personal engagement with *Liza’s England*, Jessica Gildersleeve explores the interactions of community and time, drawing extensively on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the dialogic. She links her discussion of the novel to female experience, referencing Julia Kristeva’s notion of “women’s time”, rereading the novel in relation to matrilineal heritage in Barker’s work. Pat Wheeler discusses the constraints and expectations placed on men in wartime. She focuses on the characters of W. H. R. Rivers and Billy Prior in the *Regeneration* trilogy to explore the ways in which Barker uses the unresolved conflict inherent in men during wartime to debate issues of sexual identity and class consciousness, issues that underpinned her previous novels. Judith Seaboyer’s reading of *Another World* situates the novel at the intersection of institutional and personal violence in twentieth and twenty-first century Britain. She examines the ways in which the Gothic haunts the darker corners of Barker’s work exploring the ways in which her use of Gothic imagery informs the broader social and historical hauntings that form the ethical ground of her fictions.

Marie-Luise Kohlke extensively explores the pathologising of masculinity through a close reading of *Double Vision*. Drawing on critics Elaine Showalter, Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young, Kohlke asserts that Barker’s pathologisation of masculinity also permits a more positive reading as an interrogation of collective myths of maleness. She argues that Barker’s text eschews what some critics have defined as women writers’ gender bias and overly negative portrayals of men and in the light of this reading offers more positive readings of masculinity. Mary Trabucco reads Barker as a writer who privileges the role of the witness whose testimony to disaster, loss and poverty, provides a way to construct remembering as moral practice. In her chapter on *Another World* and *Border Crossing* she explores how Barker narrativises the transference relationship of psychoanalysis and offers an ethical dialogue with the past that revises the interaction between language, psychoanalysis, and history. Nick Hubble situates *Double Vision* as a novel about the reconciliation of two ways of seeing, the creative and the documentary. Hubble draws on Walter Benjamin’s and Slavoj Žižek’s work to explore the relationship between art, photography and film as explored in Barker’s novel. Finally,

in Simon Avery's reading of *Life Class* he engages in a wide-ranging discussion of the ways in which Barker continues and extends her political representations of the body. He asserts that Barker interrogates and shapes our understanding and perceptions of artistic representations which came to the fore in the transition from the Edwardian era to the fragmentation and displacement of the post-war world. In his interdisciplinary reading of the novel Avery asserts that Barker, by recognising, questioning and critiquing the often problematic relations between the body, power and dominant lines of thinking in *Life Class* is able to gesture towards and give voice to those possibilities of personal and political regeneration for which her protagonists, in one form or another, are constantly searching. The collection shows there is still much to say about the novels and the ways in which we chose to read them.

CHAPTER ONE

MATRIX, METRAMORPHOSIS, AND THE READYMADE IN *UNION STREET*, *LIZA'S ENGLAND* AND *ANOTHER WORLD*

MARIA HOLMGREN TROY

Pat Barker's novels often raise questions about individual characters' access to and construction of their own memories, especially of traumatic experiences, as well as the possibilities and dangers involved in sharing memories and gaining access to somebody else's psychic world. I would suggest, then, that Barker's novels problematise boundaries not only between subjectivity and the external world, but also between different characters' subjectivity. On a different narrative level, this challenging of boundaries is repeated in the links between novels in Barker's oeuvre and the relationship between her novels and other authors' literary works. In problematising the boundaries between individual characters' subjectivity and between her novels as well as other authors' works, Barker goes beyond conventions of realism, a narrative tradition with which her novels have often been associated.¹ This essay examines Barker's narrative technique and her depiction of subjectivity in *Union Street*, *Liza's England* and *Another World* with the help of artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's feminist theories.² Her notions of the matrix and metramorphosis allow for and explain composite partial subjectivity, subjectivity as encounter, trans-subjectivity, and differentiation in co-emergence.³ These notions and her work with and ideas on what he refers to as "readymade" material, I argue, can be used to enhance the understanding of pivotal aesthetic and ethical issues in Barker's novels, at the same time as these novels help explicate Ettinger's theories.

While keeping Lacan's psychoanalytic framework as a part of her model, Ettinger's feminist psychoanalytic theories reject his ideas that non-psychotic subjectivity is solely constructed through castration and phallic language and that the Phallus reigns supreme in the Symbolic.

Before and beside the processes of Lacan's framework – preverbal blissful fusion with the mother, the mirror stage, and castration – there is *metamorphosis*, the symbolic process of the Matrix, while the Matrix is a part of the Symbolic. As Ettinger puts it, “The *matrix* is not the opposite of the *phallus*, it is just a slight shift from it, a supplementary symbolic perspective. It is a shift aside the *phallus*, a shift inside the symbolic” (“Becoming” 49). Thus, her concepts provide a feminist psychoanalytic perspective that acknowledges that there can be a pre-Oedipal non-psychotic subjectivity, that the Symbolic is larger than the Phallus, and that castration is not the only way to the Symbolic. In Barker's *Union Street*, for example, this type of subjectivity and symbolic process can be detected in the meeting between two of the focal characters, Alice Bell and Kelly Brown, to which I will return later in this essay.

Ettinger's notion of the Matrix is modelled on the prenatal situation, and “the Matrix, whose primary meaning is womb/uterus, is not an organ but a symbol and a concept related to a feminine Real and to imaginary structures” (Ettinger, “Matrix” 197). Her notion of the Matrix thus suggests that there is symbolic access to the feminine Real, which is symbolically inaccessible in Lacan's model and only occurs as non-symbolic eruptions in Kristeva's model. The prenatal state offers a model of subjectivity with two or more emerging subjects related in different ways to each other, sharing a space that is the same but also very different: an interior space for one of them and the outside parameters for the other or others. The subjects are partly linked to each other, but they are not the same, or fused, nor are they entirely each other's other. It should be made clear that the Matrix is not associated with ideas of passive reception or feminine passivity: the Matrix is a place for encounters of the most intimate and the unknown, of outside and inside, of *I* and *not-I(s)*. According to Ettinger, this trans-subjective relationship or process, this plural or partial matrixial subjectivity, that the prenatal state suggests exists throughout life alongside other formations of subjectivity that are based on processes of (preverbal) fusion or (phallic) rejection.

Moreover, Ettinger emphasizes that “the *matrix*, as a symbolic filter that is different from the *phallus*, is at the disposition of both sexes” (“Becoming” 47). Barker's *Union Street* with its focus on women does not elucidate how matrixial subjectivity and metamorphosis may work for and between male characters, but I would argue that we can find examples in *Another World*, in which one of the male main characters, Nick, can be said to vacillate between the phallic and the matrixial, especially in relation to his grandfather Geordie. For instance, as I have discussed more in detail elsewhere, visiting the war monument on the Somme with his

grandfather makes Nick, in Ettinger's words, "a participatory witness" to Georgie's trauma; he is "wit(h)nessing" it ("Traumatic" 94).⁴ Nick's "wit(h)nessing" his grandfather's trauma in this specific environment is a matrixial trans-subjective process that leads to the suspension of his role as a late twentieth-century professor of psychology and prepares him for his role as a "participatory witness."

In both *Liza's England* and *Union Street*, there are moments when female characters experience a matrixial connection to their environment. Liza experiences one of these moments when giving birth to her second child, her daughter:

Liza was absorbed in her long labour and yet not divided from the life of the street that went on all around her. The tramping of feet of men who had work to go to, the squatting on haunches of men who had none, the skitter of a stone over the pavement as children played hopscotch, the hanging out of washing, the billowing of sheets, the snap and crackle of shirts blowing on the line, women with open-pored, harassed faces chasing a little bacon round and round the frying pan, always asking, *Will it be enough?* [...]: all these things and many more revolved around the periphery of her vision, and she felt as her labour went on that she was giving birth to them all (*LE* 142).

In this passage, Liza has a sense of being linked to everything that is going on around her, while at the same time being absorbed in giving birth. She can be seen both as a composite partial and a plural subject in this moment, which is matrixial in a literal sense as well as symbolically.

In the last chapter of *Union Street*, sitting down on a bench in the park, Alice Bell also experiences a moment of acute matrixial awareness: "The membrane that had divided her from the world was permeable now, self and not-self no longer an absolute division" (*US* 264). What follows is strongly interrelated to the end of the first chapter, Kelly Brown's chapter, in terms of content as well as in the actual repetition of some sentences and phrases. I will suggest that the connections here between the chapters and between Alice Bell and Kelly create a matrixial borderspace in which the process that Ettinger terms metramorphosis takes place.

Indeed, *Union Street* is an excellent example of how Barker's narrative technique allows for a focus on subjectivity-as-encounter and trans-subjectivity,⁵ an enlarged and partial subjectivity that involves more than one character—that is, matrixial subjectivity. Thus, there is not only mediation between the outer and inner worlds of individual characters, but different kinds of mediation between different characters' inner worlds: conscious and unconscious. In fact, aspects of subjectivity-as-encounter

and trans-subjectivity permeate the entire novel and deeply influence its form. The narrative of *Union Street* is nonlinear: in the different chapters some events and objects recur but are seen from different characters' perspectives.⁶ This somewhat loose and at times even tangential interweaving of the characters' stories and the non-linear structure of the novel make *Union Street* different from "classic" realist novels. In fact, Barker's novel can be said to "trace connectionist webs" in a nonlinear matrixial manner (Ettinger, "Metramorphic" 134).

As indicated above, the matrixial qualities of the novel are emphasized and developed in the last chapter, which clearly sidesteps conventions of the realist novel. Alice Bell is the oldest woman in *Union Street* and, after an arduous and poverty-stricken but also a humanly dignified and politically aware life, she faces a lack of control of her body and life situation. An unbearably humiliating move from her own house to the institution of the "Workhouse," an institution, is close at hand, and in a superhuman effort, beyond willpower, she manages to leave her house and heads for the wintry park where she plans to die like she has been careful to live, with dignity. On her way there,

a bubble broke in her mind, releasing the memory of another day. A younger woman, running, running away. And the wet sheets stinging and slapping her face. Then she was leaving the alley and entering the railway tunnel. Other memories rose to the surface, tugging at the corners of her mind like the mouths of tiny fish.

There were more footsteps running, a child's this time, and the child stopped and looked behind her as if afraid of being pursued. And a young girl stood just inside the entrance to the tunnel, with a young man's arm around her. Flakes of plaster drifted down and landed in her hair.

She stopped in confusion as the memories threatened to overwhelm her. These fragments. Were they debris of her own or other lives? She had been so many women in her time (*US* 262-63).

Although Alice Bell may not be sure, the reader knows that these are not her memories, but the memories of Muriel Scaife, Kelly Brown and Joanne Wilson, who have their own chapters in the novel. The emergence of their memories in Alice Bell's consciousness is an instance of trans-subjectivity on the level of the characters: the other characters in the form of memory fragments are united in Alice Bell while she is turned into a partial (in combination with the other women) as well as a multiple subject (she herself has been "many women"). The water imagery – "bubble," "surface," "fish" – is of importance here in light of the matrixial process that Ettinger describes in terms of dissolution: "In a joint and multiple marginal trans-individual awareness, perceived boundaries are dissolved

into becoming new boundaries; forms are transgressed; borderlines are surpassed and transformed into becoming thresholds; conductible borderlinks are conceived, transformed and dissolved” (“Trans-Subjective” 634). The forms transgressed in this particular instance in *Union Street* are also the conventions of the realist novel: it is not common that realist characters inhabit or are inhabited by other characters’ memories – the memories of characters that they have not even encountered in the novel.

According to Ettinger the “subjectivizing stratum” of the matrix, unlike the phallic, is “informed by *touching, hearing and moving*” (“Matrixial” 7), and it is Alice Bell’s movement that triggers the memories discussed above. Immediately afterwards, her connection to the other women is reinforced by “a web of voices.” She recognizes these voices as something different than the apparitions that have tormented her during recent nights at her house: “At first the voices were soft but they grew louder and clearer as she toiled up the hill: a child shouting, a young girl laughing, a woman crooning over her child. She carried the web of voices with her up the hill” (*US* 263). While the memories that are triggered by her moving are related to traumatic experiences in the other women’s lives – the death of Muriel’s husband, the rape of Kelly, and the machinelike attempt of Joanne’s boyfriend to bring about a miscarriage – the voices she hears are playful and content. In Alice Bell’s carrying the web of voices up the hill, the novel itself temporarily comes together and moves to another becoming threshold.

It is at this point that Alice Bell sits down on the park bench and experiences what I have described as a moment of heightened matrixial awareness. The connections and interrelations between Alice Bell and Kelly Brown and between the first and the last chapter that are expressed in the content as well as in the repetition of some sentences and phrases form what Ettinger calls a matrixial borderspace in which metamorphosis takes place:

Metamorphosis not only is the *effect* of joint investments by the *I* and the *non-I* in one another and in a shared borderspace, but it also constitutes a primary dimension of all matrixial configurations, in which elements are effected *via* links. *Metamorphosis* alternates between memory and oblivion, between what is about to be and what is already, between what will be and what will become possible. [...] *Metamorphosis* accounts for transformations of in-between moments. (Ettinger, “Becoming” 45)

In the first chapter of *Union Street*, Kelly is disoriented by the same phenomenon that confuses Alice Bell just before she reaches the park bench in the last chapter (*US* 263): “It was disorientating: the leaden,

lifeless sky and the radiance of light beating up from the earth. She [Kelly] felt dizzy and had to stop” (US 64). When she starts walking again, Kelly has “a sensation of moving outside time” (US 64). She is in between moments:

At first, there was total silence except for the squeak of her gym shoes in the wet grass. Then a murmuring began and mixed in with it sharp, electric clicks, like the sound of women talking and brushing their hair at once. The noise became louder. She climbed to a ridge of higher ground and there at the centre was the tree, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky (US 64-65).

In the last chapter, Alice’s impression of the same moment is recorded in the following words:

At first there was total silence, except for the beating of her heart, quickened by the long walk up the hill. Then a murmuring began, as of the wind through summer trees or waves unfurling on the shore, only darker and more secret: the sound of the sea in an underground cave or blood coursing through the hidden channels of the ear. Then, mixed in with the murmuring, a series of sharp, electric clicks as if a group of women were talking and brushing their hair at once. The noise became louder. And now when she looked at the skyline she saw that one tree stood out from the rest, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky (US 264, my italics).

The tree is filled with birds, but it seems to both characters as if the tree itself is singing. Kelly’s and Alice’s experience of and reactions to the same unusual phenomena of light, colours and sound are then depicted in similar and sometimes identical phrases at the end of the first and the last chapter of the novel. Thus, Barker posits links between the characters’ perceptions and consciousnesses by using partial repetition, which creates a shared borderspace in which they encounter each other, a borderspace of joint investments of the *I* and the *non-I*.

The encounter and its transformational potential are depicted in both chapters, but more asymmetrically than the characters’ perceptions of the sights and sounds leading up to the encounter. While the meeting is summed up in one paragraph in the last chapter (the novel’s penultimate paragraph), in the first chapter there is the dialogue between Kelly and Alice Bell and many more details. The background against which the meeting takes place in the “Kelly Brown” chapter is what happens to Kelly after she has been raped. People in her environment are unable to deal with the situation in any way that would benefit her: “Nobody knew how to react” (US 45). She becomes more and more lonely and (self-)destructive,

and she is unable to allow herself to feel pity or empathy for other people (US 59, 62). She is described as inhuman: “as wild and unkempt as an ape, as savage as a wolf” (US 54). Finally, as she becomes increasingly unable to relate to other people, “[s]he seemed to be drying up, to be turning into a machine” (US 64). The trauma of the rape is lodged in her consciousness in the form of the man who raped her: “a homunculus, coiled inside her brain” (US 56). Even as the tree gleams and pulses with light, just before she meets Alice Bell, she is trapped inside her head with the Man, and she cannot break out (US 65). The hope Kelly feels when she sees the black figure on the bench, which to her disappointment turns out to be an old woman, seems to be connected to an unformulated, unthought wish to meet the Man in the world outside her head. It is in fact the disappointment that at first makes Kelly talk to Alice Bell, but to her own surprise she feels “concern for the old woman: an ordinary, unfamiliar feeling” (US 66). After some dialogue that expresses Kelly’s concern with Alice Bell’s physical discomfort and the old woman’s disregard for the same, they sit together in silence and the light increases.

Alice Bell’s next comment and Kelly’s following her gaze set off a process of metamorphosis in Kelly, which illustrates that “[t]he *matrix* deals with anticipations of that which is not yet, as well of that which is no more” (Ettinger, “Becoming” 51):

“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 (US 67).

Kelly suddenly and for the first time becomes aware of that which is no more, an old woman’s childhood, and of that which is not yet, her own death. The gaze depicted in this passage should be seen as matrixial⁷: “The matrixial gaze creates in the course of its inscription – and inscribes while emerging – the singularity of each encounter, designated for another transgression later on. Metramorphic means of transport conduct traces of ‘events without witnesses’ and convey them on to witnesses who were not there, to witnesses without events” (Ettinger, “With-In-Visible” 109). Kelly’s sudden awareness is both related to the life of the stranger, the old woman, and her own life. As Ettinger states, “When the stranger is discerned in the matrixial borderspace, s/he is invested libidinally and becomes a partner in some of the *non-I*-zones of my-yourself. The stranger

may give rise to curiosity and wonder, or apprehension and uncanny feeling. S/he is neither hated nor loved, yet neither is s/he ignored. S/he is with-in and with-out" ("Metramorphic" 131). In Kelly's case the matrixial interaction with the stranger gives rise to terror – at the sudden insight of her own mortality – and curiosity – she stares at the old woman as if she might know and tell her the secret of life.

In the last chapter of *Union Street* we learn that Alice Bell experiences both wonder and apprehension when she first sees Kelly: although Kelly seems to her almost as a gift of light, Alice Bell is first afraid – "Then – not afraid" (*US* 265). Just before she meets Kelly, the old woman has had an out-of-body experience and a vision of the singing tree, but has been unable to sustain it. In contrast to this spiritual experience, and Kelly's sudden insights in the first chapter, Alice Bell's and Kelly's meeting is described strictly from the outside and in physical, external terms in very short, almost abrupt sentences: "They sat beside each other; they talked. The girl held out her hand. The withered hand and the strong young hand met and joined. There was silence. Then it was time for them both to go" (*US* 265). The short sentences echo Alice Bell's shortness of breath – her last breaths – and, besides her initial wonder and apprehension, the matrixial impact of the meeting can only be traced in the words "beside," "met," and "joined."

The last chapter ends with one single sentence after their meeting: "So that in the end there were only the birds, soaring, swooping, gliding, moving in a never-ending spiral about the withered and unwithering tree" (*US* 265). This image of the withered and unwithering tree may actually represent Alice Bell's vision of the secret of life while dying rather than the omniscient narrator's transcendent vision of womanhood. In contrast to this short poetic sentence, the first chapter follows Kelly on her way home. Her meeting with Alice Bell seems at least potentially to have freed her from the prison of trauma, from the room in her head where she is trapped with the Man – her meeting with Alice Bell, who has "understood the full indignity of rape" after the visit of the man who has assigned her to a nursing home, the "Workhouse," without seeing and acknowledging her as a human being (*US* 260). On her way home, Kelly shows an interest in other people again: she stops to watch the women coming out of the cake bakery. She even stares hungrily after a young girl and boy kissing, which indicates a non-traumatic interest in sexuality. Although the outcomes of young women's sexual desire and activities in the rest of the novel are depicted as a mixed blessing at best, my point here is that it seems like Kelly, with the help of her matrixial encounter with Alice Bell, has started to move beyond her trauma. But then again, Kelly's going home in the

footsteps of the young couple also means her having to face the dour living conditions that are outlined at the beginning of the first chapter and emphasized in the rest of the novel.

The focus on matrixial aspects above highlights ways in which Barker's novels depart from realist conventions, which to a large extent can be seen as related to the phallic dimension with its "Oedipal subjectivity, whole objects, one-ness, sameness, all-ness" rather than the matrixial dimension. For instance, in realist novels we find characters that are unified, distinct subjects, omniscient third-person narrators or clearly demarcated first-person narrators, and a privileging of linear development and temporality. Ettinger believes "that poetry (like the visual arts and music) can escape the destiny of reproducing existing values, through special use of language. Art can create differences in the transmission, destroy it, and posit new symbols" ("Matrix" 182-83). Here I would add that prose as well as poetry may have this potential, which is demonstrated in Barker's "special use of language" and narrative techniques. Although Barker employs third-person narrators, critics have commented on the multi-voicing of her novels,⁸ which is related to the matrixial qualities of Barker's writing. This movement between points of view without resort to a narrator with an authorial voice or a privileged perspective serves to diminish the importance of the realist unified self-enclosed individual or character in favour of a more plural and partial view of subjectivity, which is in line with Ettinger's ideas.

By extension, Ettinger's notions can also be used to explore Barker's ways of referring to other literary works in her novels and her "recycling" of similar events or scenes in different contexts in her own oeuvre. Allusions and intertextuality could of course always be said to link texts to each other and destroy any illusion of the sealed-off, self-contained novel, and thus constitute a kind of textual "trans-subjectivity." More specifically, though, many of Barker's references to other authors' works resemble Ettinger's work with and view of the "readymade." Examples of readymade material in Barker's three novels include West-Indian Bertha, who just might be a literary descendant of *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason, in the cake factory in *Union Street*; the window scene in *Another World* that is very close to that in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*; and the following passage seems oddly familiar to readers of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" although it actually occurs in *Liza's England*: "She stared at the wallpaper and lost herself in the intricacies of the pattern, which was not a pattern at all, for where there should have been only ordered repetition there were minute differences, divergences from the expected, and each one had to be traced to its source" (*LE* 239).

Ettinger states that, in matrixial terms, “it makes no difference if the materials of artwork come from with-in, as source/origin, or from without, as readymade. Source/origin and found/readymade, two opposite poles in the phallus, lose their opposition in the matrix” (“With-in-Visible” 109), and there seems to be a convergence between Barker’s strategies and Ettinger’s ideas of the relation between the “readymade” and creation. In her article “Matrixial Refrains,” Lone Bertelsen points out that “Ettinger’s ready-mades are related to affective encounters” (125), and I believe that the same can be said both for Barker’s use of other authors’ material and the recycling of her own.

What is particularly interesting with Barker’s recycling of similar events in different novels is that she manages both to create links between different works in her oeuvre and to infuse the same act, event or even phrasing with different meaning and emotional impact. One recurring event is the lighting of an open fire with a piece of newspaper that features an article about war. At the beginning of *Union Street*, Kelly Brown, who has just put on one of her mother’s sweaters for comfort as well as warmth, is about to light the fire in their cold and poverty-stricken house: “She picked up the first sheet of paper. The face of a young soldier killed in Belfast disappeared beneath her scrumpling fingers” (US 4). In *Another World*, towards the end of his grandfather’s life, Nick lights a fire on his grandfather’s request: “He holds a sheet of newspaper across the fire place [...] A picture of ruined Sarajevo blackens and begins to burn” (AW 244). The open fire and the image of war in the newspaper that is used to light it create a link between the novels, as well as a link between the domestic or the family and war, but the two characters involved – Kelly and her mother, Nick and Geordie – and their relationship to each other are very different.

An even more striking example of a recurring event is the pulling of clotted blood out of somebody’s throat that occurs in both *Union Street* and *Liza’s England*. In *Union Street*, it is Muriel Scaife who tries to clean the blood out of her beloved husband’s throat: “Her fingers found a thick rope of blood, twined round it, and pulled. The clot slid out of his mouth, with the sound of a sink coming unblocked, and after it flowed a frothy, bright-red stream of blood, looking almost gay against the blackness of the other blood” (US 163). In *Liza’s England*, Stephen does the same for his father, with whom he has nothing in common and with whom he has never been able to communicate: “Stephen cleared the clots of blood from his throat, found one stringy enough to twine his fingers round, and pulled. The gush of frothy, red blood looked almost festive against the whiteness of pillow case and sheets” (LE 121). The similarities in phrasing are

noteworthy, as is the contrast of black and white against the red blood. Another similarity is that right afterwards both Muriel and Stephen think “Shock.” Muriel fights desperately to keep her husband alive, not least because theirs is a loving marriage – a rarity in *Union Street*. In contrast, Stephen is of two minds when it comes to saving his father and actually contemplates smothering him with the blankets he covers him with, although he actually does what he can to keep him alive. In both novels the event with pulling the blood clots out of another’s throat has a deep emotional impact, but in very different ways.

Barker’s novels and Ettinger’s theories illuminate each other. The novels give indications of how matrixial subjectivity can be constituted, and Ettinger’s ideas help to explain some important aspects of Barker’s novels such as her special use of intertextuality, which not only creates links between literary works, her own and others, but also is clearly related to affective encounters between different characters, and between novels and readers.⁹

Notes

¹ As Sharon Monteith has pointed out, “Barker has never been an uncomplicatedly realist writer, despite the temptation for early reviewers to term her novels ‘gritty social realism’ without delving beneath the surface expectations of such epithets”. Sharon Monteith, *Pat Barker* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), p. 5.

² A collection of Bracha L. Ettinger’s essays, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, with a foreword by Judith Butler and an afterword by Brian Massumi, was published in 2006 by University of Minnesota Press as volume 28 in the series *Theory Out of Bounds*. In 2004, a special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* (21.1) was devoted to Ettinger’s work and its importance to the social sciences. This issue includes contributions from Jean-François Lyotard and Judith Butler, among others. All further references will be included in the text.

³ Trans-subjectivity plays a big part in Ettinger’s way of thinking and is a part of her concept of the Matrix. It has to do with links between parts of subjects, shared (partial) objects, and even a shared trans-subjective field. Trans-subjectivity is specifically related to parts of subjects, which is why it is slightly different than intersubjectivity, which I argue, can be seen as a relationship between subjects.

⁴ See Maria Holmgren Troy, “The Novelist as an Agent of Collective Remembrance: Pat Barker and the First World War.” *Collective Traumas: Memories of War and Conflict in 20th-Century Europe*. Ed. Conny Mithander, John Sundholm and Maria Holmgren Troy (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007) pp.73-74.

⁵ Both Peter Hitchcock and John Kirk draw attention to intersubjectivity in *Union Street* in the context of a working-class community. See Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

and John Kirk, "Recovered Perspectives: Gender, Class, and Memory in Pat Barker's Writing." *Contemporary Literature* 40.4 (1999), p. 614.

⁶ Margaretta Jolly examines Marianne Hirsch's notion of maternal plots in connection with Barker's novels: "that iterative, circular, and open-ended structures might more successfully mimic the more relational life story of mothers [...] than narratives of linear development, closure, and singulative construction" (p. 240). Jolly's discussion and her development of Hirsch's notion in this essay touch issues that Ettinger would see in terms of the Matrix. Jolly, "Toward a Masculine Maternal: Pat Barker's Bodily Fictions." *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*. Ed. Sharon Monteith, Margaretta Jolly, Nahem Yousaf and Ronald Paul (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 235-53.

⁷ Ettinger identifies three kinds of gaze: the phallic, the symbiotic, and the matrixial. "The phallic gaze excites us while threatening to annihilate us in its emergence to the screen; the symbiotic gaze invites us to submerge inside it while threatening to annihilate us together with the screen. The matrixial gaze thrills us while fragmenting, scattering, and joining grains together and turning us into participatory witnesses; it enchants us and horrifies us while attenuating us into particles participating in a drama wider than of our individual selves. It is extricated with the unknown, and it threatens to partially extract its presence via dispersion and diffraction, whether we wish it or not" (Ettinger, "With-In-Visible", p.109).

⁸ See, for instance, Hitchcock (p. 55, pp. 62-63) and Jolly ("After Feminism", p. 77) on Barker's use of third person narration, shifting narrative point of view, and double-voiced and free indirect discourse. For the most extensive discussion of Barker's narrative techniques (including her use of free indirect discourse) to date, see John Brannigan, *Pat Barker*. Contemporary British Novelists (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

⁹ I would like to thank the research group on cultural memory at Karlstad University for providing some time for me to write this essay. I would also like to express my gratitude to Helena Wahlström, Liz Kella and Sharon Monteith for their valuable comments on earlier versions of my reading of *Union Street*.

CHAPTER TWO

“TO SEE AND TO KNOW”: ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN *DOUBLE VISION* AND *LIFE CLASS*

JOHN BRANNIGAN

“There,” he said. “You see?”¹

These are the last words of character speech in *Double Vision*, and are said by Stephen to Justine after he has made a pebble skip beautifully across the calm surface of the sea, and before they walk off down the beach, not heroically into the sunset, but at least away from the sunrise. With these words, the novel draws our attention once more to its central preoccupation with vision, and with the paradoxical epigraph from Goya’s *The Disasters of War*: “One cannot look at this. I saw it. This is the truth”. In the epigraph, vision is central to truth, to knowledge, and also to ethics. To see is to know, and also then to be responsible for what one sees and knows. These related philosophical ideas form much of Stephen’s thinking as he writes his book about the problems of representing war and terror as a journalist, as a photographer, as an artist. But what is it that Stephen is calling upon Justine to see, here in this final scene? The image he has placed before her is one that is narrated for us in the preceding paragraph:

This time he got the flick of his wrist exactly right. 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 (DV 307).

It is impossible to see the image which the narrator describes here.² One cannot follow the spread of the ripples to the shore and the course of the stone to the point of its sinking at the same time. The two can only be held in unity, as the narrator does here, as a concept, as an image which is

known but not seen in its totality. To see the whole requires a kind of double vision, then, just as earlier in the novel Kate struggles with the problem of how to marry two lines of sight in one spatial form in her sculpture of Christ. Here, time is the problem, specifically the simultaneity of these two perspectives necessary to see the whole. Indeed, the whole is not only described as knowing rather than seeing; it is also narrated as fore-knowing, knowledge in advance of the fact, or foresight. Stephen calls Justine then to see what is impossible to see, but what is right “there” before her eyes. The contracted speech-“There,” he said. “You see?”-continues the child-like nature of their relationship in this scene, competing with each other at throwing pebbles in the sea, and thus Stephen’s emphatic words are in one sense asking Justine to witness the child’s demonstration of victory. That victory also has sexual connotations, for Stephen’s previous attempt at throwing a pebble “sank, ignominiously, with a detumescent plop” (*DV* 307). Perhaps, then, these words reinstate Stephen’s phallic authority, the virility of the male, written in the points of contact across the water which create their little eddies of turbulence. In a curious inverse reflection of the opening chapter of *Union Street*, in which Kelly Brown is forced brutally into adulthood by rape, Stephen and Justine are described in this closing scene of *Double Vision* as brought to an “intent, childlike, silly, innocent” state by extraordinary, passionate sex (*DV* 306). Or perhaps, given this passion, “There. You see?”, is a tender affirmation that beauty is possible after terror, light after the darkness of violence and pain, if we can see it, if we have the vision to see it.

However we read these words, and I would suggest that each reading would constitute a different understanding of how this novel ends, our attention is being drawn to the visible, to the act of seeing, as a source of resolution and knowing, as a source of healing. The ethics of seeing has a longer history, of course, in this novel, which begins on the first page with an image of an iced puddle as “like a cataract dulling the pupil of an eye” (*DV* 1); in Barker’s work, extensively throughout her oeuvre, but perhaps most memorably in the recurring image of Kath’s eyes in *Blow Your House Down*, and of course in the surveillance technologies and imagery of *The Eye in the Door*; in feminist philosophical and political thought about the male gaze, in the famous essay by Laura Mulvey on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, most notably;³ and in Western philosophy more widely, from Heraclitus who tells us that “men are deceived over the recognition of visible things” but that “the eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears”,⁴ to Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida whose work critiques the violence of vision as a mode of knowing, while also