

*Double Vision* by Pat Barker (Hamish Hamilton) R143

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Pat Barker is best known for the *Regeneration* trilogy of First World War novels, the third instalment of which, *The Ghost Road*, was awarded the Booker Prize in 1995. Since then, she has written *Another World*, *Border Crossing* and now this novel: none of them war novels in the usual sense, but all of them about people marked by war or violence, somehow having to regenerate, in the central metaphor of the trilogy, a sense of their own humanity and that of others.

Shifting her focus from the poverty-harrowed working classes of her early novels and the war-traumatised soldiers of the trilogy to the professional classes of modern Britain, Barker nevertheless retains from those earlier novels a sense of subdued violence, a threat always ready to erupt out of a cloudless sky – as it did, of course, on September 11, an event that she deftly weaves into her own narrative.

Like *Regeneration*, this novel has no clearly identifiable single protagonist: the narrative is split between Stephen Sharkey, a foreign correspondent suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and Kate Frobisher, the widow of Ben, one of Stephen's colleagues, and herself a sculptor. Stephen has withdrawn from the horrors of war to the countryside in the north of England, where his brother lives with his wife and son; Kate lives nearby, alone with her sorrow and her work. He undertakes an affair with Justine, the nineteen-year old babysitter of his nephew; she, injured in a car accident, employs Peter Wingrave an attractive but enigmatic and rather sinister young man as assistant.

The novel's themes dove-tail almost too perfectly. Stephen is writing a book about representations of war; Kate, having lost her husband to the violence witnessed by Stephen, is involved in a sculpture of Christ arising from the grave, in which she depicts him as in the first place a human being who has suffered extreme pain. Justine, attacked by two housebreakers, recalls to Stephen the young woman, raped and murdered, whom he and Ben came across in Sarajevo; and the mysterious Peter Wingrave, we find out, was a child murderer. In short, violence is everywhere, even here in the apparently tranquil countryside.

And if Stephen is writing a book on the representation of war – so, of course, is Pat Barker. She uses as her epigram three of Goya's captions to his horrendous series of etchings "Disaster of War" in which he recorded the atrocities of Napoleon's troops invading Spain: "One cannot look at this. ... I saw it. ... This is the truth." As Stephen points out, this is the justification for all graphic depictions of the suffering of others: one has seen it and it is the truth.

Barker tests this justification by challenging us to accept, for instance, that Ben, having accompanied Stephen back to their hotel after coming across the murdered woman, returns to the scene the next morning, rearranges her clothing to reveal her mutilation, and photographs her. Coming across the photograph after Ben's death, Stephen reflects: "It was shocking. Stephen was shocked on her behalf to see her exposed like this, though, ethically, Ben had done nothing wrong. He hadn't staged the photograph. He'd simply restored the corpse to its original state. And yet it was difficult not to feel that the girl, spreadeagled like that, had been violated twice."

The pornography of violence or, in Stephen's word, "witnessing"? Pat Barker does not resolve this conundrum, any more than Goya does. She does give us other perspectives – Justine's for instance, who, with youthful impatience, refuses to watch the news on television: "It's just *wanking*" – but leaves the question wide open. Even Kate's statue of the risen Christ has this ambiguity about it (very relevantly, in the light of the present controversy over Mel Gibson's appalling film): as even the vicar recognises, "the risen Christ was, among many other things, a half-naked man in his early thirties."

Barker herself is clearly fascinated by a certain eroticism in violence. In *Regeneration*, her main character, Billy Prior, asked by a psychiatrist what it is like to enter battle, says: "It felt ... *sexy*." In *Double Vision* the sexiness of violence is embodied in the young man Peter: when first seen, he is scything the grass amongst the graves in the churchyard. This would have been too glib a reference to the grim reaper had he not also been, well, sexy: "[Kate] remembered him clearly now, sweat glistening on his arms and chest, his jeans slipping further and further down his hips as he swung and turned."

Peter is clearly related to Danny Miller, the young man in Barker's previous novel: also young and attractive, also curiously insinuating, also, it turns out, a murderer. Peter, though, has quirks of his own, like dressing in Kate's clothes and mimicking her actions with her sculptor's hammer and chisel: another suggestion, perhaps, of the affinity between artist and murderer.

Surprisingly, given the actual and potential violence contained in this novel, Barker allows us a relatively tranquil ending, in which all the characters end up more or less with what they wanted. This raises the Killjoy's Protest which, normally invoked against the neat resolution of the nineteenth-century novel, runs something like this: by allowing its characters to resolve their own personal situations more or less satisfactorily, the novel lulls us into a false sense that all's right with the world. After all, at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* England still has to deal with Napoleon; but, rejoicing in the union of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy, we put down the novel with a silly grin on our faces.

By this gloomy argument, the ending of *Double Vision*, too, allows us to forget the woman raped and murdered in Sarajevo, the slaughter of thousands of cattle in the foot-and-mouth scare in England, the September 11 catastrophe. But that may be part of Barker's point: just as personal tragedy can cast a shadow over the brightest day, so personal happiness can offer human beings temporary respite from the horrors of war and violence. Can one begrudge them this?