WHERE HISTORY MEETS ETHICS: 
PAT BARKER’S LIZA’S ENGLAND

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In her interview with Mark Rawlinson, Pat Barker asserts the worth of fiction and contends that “It is the only form that makes you think deeply and feel strongly, not as alternative modes of reaction, but as part of a single, unified reaction” (168). Much has been said about the way Barker’s work, especially her *Regeneration* trilogy, produces that unified reaction. For many Barker critics, the rich critical and emotional potential of her novels is one of the strongest features of her writing. For instance, in his introductory chapter of the monologue on Barker’s fiction, “Why Should We Read Pat Barker’s Fiction?” Mark Rawlinson argues that her fiction “causes us to stand back and ponder moral and intellectual dilemmas at the same time as we are drawn into identifying with her characters (14). Another important Barker scholar John Brannigan makes a similar comment and maintains that Barker’s fiction has an “ethical commitment to fictionalising the story of victims, victims of war, poverty, oppression, while never allowing her character to be defined or objectified solely as victims” (4-5). In her article on Barker’s *Double Vision*, Barbara Corte underlines the novel’s moral depth by pointing to its potential to “call for a compassionate response whenever the pain of others is regarded” (193). Exploring the ethics and aesthetic features of Barker’s *Life Class*, Fiona Tolan also suggests that art is, if not essential, a “potential good in the face of relatively poorer alternatives” (391). With the retrospections of its titular heroine, *Liza’s England* (formerly published as *The Century’s Daughter*) has become a focus of attention for critics who explore issues like representations of history, memory and working class women in contemporary British fiction. Critical work on *Liza’s England* notes the emphasis the thematic concerns of the novel such as silence, trauma and poverty but most of these works study them as common thematic features of Barker’s fiction. This paper aims to investigate the ways *Liza’s England* fosters an ethical stance by exploring the link between the...
narrative strategies and their thematic implications. Thus, I will argue that Barker offers an ethical trajectory in *Liza’s England* both through its plot and narrative strategies.

Providing evidence for Barker’s scholarly interest in history, *Liza’s England*, set in 1984-85, centres on the story of Liza, an octogenarian, who has lived since 1922 in the house she is now forced to evacuate. The row house which survived the bombings in World War II is scheduled to be torn down and replaced by the Clagg Lane housing project. To go beyond an interest in history, the novel engages Stephen, a 29-year-old gay social worker, who is sent to persuade Liza to move to an old people’s home. Through a meeting of these marginalised characters, and their evolving friendship, the text presents a story of bridging the gap between different generations and making an attempt to establish connections. The regular visits Stephen pays to Liza unfold their stories and help the reader to explore different lives spent in different times.

In the beginning, Liza is a mere subject to the new housing policies of the Thatcher government and as her old house, a bastion of memories, faces demolition, she sees Stephen as a “bloody do-gooding cow from the social” (1). Accordingly, the text starts *in medias res* taking us straight into a conversation between Liza and Stephen presented as antagonistic forces. But as soon as Liza starts telling about herself, Stephen sees her as a human being. And as Stephen shows a growing interest in her story, Liza becomes less hostile:

> Telling the story of her birth had animated her: her cheeks had flushed to the same hectic colour as her shawl; and suddenly, in Stephen’s eyes, she ceased to be a case, a social problem, a stubborn, possibly senile old lady, and became instead what she had called herself: the century’s daughter. (6)

This shift in perspective that results from communication sets the tone and suggests the ethical stance that the text offers. As John Branigan contends, “community, or sense of solidarity” that emerges from the relations between her characters is almost a “signature” in Barker’s writing (10). In *Liza’s England*, this signature is made evident through the call to understanding and sympathy Liza and Stephen make as antagonistic forces.

Interestingly, in its employment of a social worker as an agent of communication, Barker’s novel lends itself to a discussion of ethics of care. While endorsing social bonding and connectedness through various scenes of reconciliation, the text explores social work as a theme and raises questions about rendering “care” a profession. For Brian, one of the unemployed youth in the club Stephen visits, social work is meaningless. He is sceptical about the help social work offers
and bitterly says that he “get[s] pissed off with people helping the unemployed and getting paid for it” (14). Walter, Stephen’s father who worked in a factory for years, also sees social work as worthless. Stephen tries to explain how hard his job can be since it involves making decisions about people’s lives and gives an example:

There was a little boy, a baby, about six weeks old, and his Mam spilt boiling fat all over him. By accident. She said. And I had to decide whether he should go back to her. You don’t sleep after a decision like that. And whatever you might like to think Dad, that is work. I don’t care if I never get a spot of bloody grease on me hands, [...] I work. (40-41)

The text justifies Stephen’s view that “[Social work]’s bloody hard work sometimes” both through his encounters with the young people at the club and through the help he offers to Liza.

Although she explores it more centrally in Double Vision, inspired by Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), Barker raises a moral question regarding the problems of others. Liza’s England asks if refusing to be a mere spectator of tragedies and working to help others is not valuable enough to be regarded as a profession. By employing Stephen as a sympathetic character, the text proposes that at a time when people try harder to survive in a more alienating and divided society, going beyond ourselves and being responsible to others can make life more endurable. It is important to note here that Barker does not naively claim that social problems like unemployment and poverty can be solved simply by philanthropy. A clear evidence for this is her intelligent character Brian, who challenges Stephen and implies that what can deter the unemployed youth from crime and violence is not various kinds of social engagement but jobs. When Stephen asks if its workshops or discos they want to happen at the club, Brian sceptically suggests an objection asking: “Money?” (13).

The strength of the ethical suggestions Liza’s England makes mostly lies in its portrayal of care as a reciprocal process. The novel does this by a convincing picture of the interaction between Liza and Stephen. Although they are presented as opposing forces, the similar traits they are endowed with help underscore the reciprocal quality of care. The main similarity between Liza and Stephen is that both are lonely individuals who are pushed to the margin of society. The third-person narrator introduces Liza as “the sole remaining inhabitant of a street scheduled for demolition” (1). She is “isolated, helpless, and threatened with eviction” (1). Liza’s literal and metaphorical insularity, namely her marginal position in society, is verified by the comment Stephen makes as a social worker; ironically, such people living amid dereliction and decline are outside the reach of even the social services the state provides. Upon his first visit to Liza’s house,
Stephen says: “I did not know places like this existed” (11). Like Liza, Stephen confronts the risk of being *invisible* due to his marginal status. He is firstly marginalised due to his sexual choice: for his parents, Stephen is a failure with no family of his own. His job also renders him an isolated figure in a money-oriented society which sees social work as worthless. Besides, for the people he serves, Stephen’s presence is a constant reminder of their predicament, thus they tend to avoid him. Therefore, both Liza and Stephen suffer from alienation at various levels. It is this similar isolated condition that brings these initially opposing forces together. Thus, it can be argued that the text suggests the meeting of the two marginalised figures as a model of solidarity which provides a remedy for the emotional coldness that surrounds both Liza and Stephen. In that sense, the scene in which Stephen builds a fire for Liza is symbolic of the warm domestic space they both yearn for. He first goes out into the yard to get some coal for Liza and tries to heat the room; as he manages to revive the “almost-dead fire,” he both feels rejuvenated and becomes literally *visible* to the reader:

Then he began to fan the fire with the cardboard top of a Weetabix packet he’d found propped up by the hearth and, as the flames took hold, *his shadow began to grow on the wall* behind him and his face re-emerged into the light.

It was a blunt-nosed, high-cheek-boned face, the face of a man who is nearing thirty and therefore no longer thinks of himself as young. A tired, self-disciplined, lonely face [...]. (my emphasis, 8)

As he helps Liza, Stephen finds the opportunity to receive the recognition denied to him in his family. It can be suggested that this fire, which is initially the concrete help Stephen offers for Liza, becomes a metaphor for the regenerative dimension of care. In his famous *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bachelard draws an analogy between fire and love, and quoting Rilke suggests that “To be loved means to be consumed in the flame; to love is to shine with an inexhaustible light (106). The fire that Stephen builds on his first visit for Liza works its miracles and generates reciprocity, which defines the revitalising quality of care. As he is busy with the fire, Liza keeps telling about herself and feels reanimated: “Her face kindled and glowed in the light of the fire. She was not so much recalling the past as reliving it” (9). The ethical stance that the novel cultivates relies on this crucial moment of healing interaction between the two parties.

Barker portrays the interaction between Liza and Stephen by using juxtaposition as her main narrative device. Throughout the text, Liza’s retrospective, objectivising and generalising viewpoint that gives us a generous account of the time past, is put next to Stephen’s
future-oriented perspective. This technical strategy of juxtaposing two different perspectives not only enables Barker to explore a wide span of time in her text, it also functions as an element that bridges the gap between consciousnesses shaped by different contexts, namely different centuries. Moreover, the temporal distance in Liza’s perspective that encourages a critical stance is punctuated by Stephen’s present voice. In other words, the narrative technique reduces the temporal distance and adds to the text an intensifying effect, which supports the theme of communication.

Some ethical concerns of the text are presented directly through the thematic network as well. As Sharon Monteith also maintains, “failure to communicate effectively is a significant theme for Barker” (37). To expand on the vital need for communication, Liza’s England offers scenes of failure in love and suggests that it is mainly the failure to communicate that causes this failure of love. For instance, as a child, Liza means to her mother a mere helping hand in housework. She constantly feels “weak, useless, small and ignored” (22). Whenever she is sick and throws up, her mother typically replies with an insult: “You stupid little bugger!” (27). This lack of motherly affection in Liza’s life soon leaves its place to an equal lack of love and communication with a husband whose answer to Liza’s pleas for help is: “You can go Liza. Anytime you want” (91). Liza’s barren family life is paralleled to the complete indifference Stephen gets in his relation with his parents. Every time he visits his family, Stephen feels “strange” and “awkward” (35). Feeling “like an intruder,” he senses that the only thing they are really interested in is his job (99). Stephen is mature enough to see that his parents cannot communicate their feelings effectively and he sourly notes that his mother’s offer of a sandwich is a masked word of endearment: “Food was communication!,” he says (36).

Forging the theme of connection to others, the novel employs imagery as another device. As many critics agree, images of failure to communicate and blocked speech are central to Liza’s England. For instance, the lack of communication in Stephen’s life is externalised by the image of broken telephone boxes and interrupted phone calls. Stephen is annoyed when he cannot find a working telephone, which presents the theme of failed communication as a social problem. He says: “It is a disgrace; there is never one that works” (100). In order to highlight the impossibility of communication, the text also mentions that the only means of communication between Stephen and his partner, Gordon, is the very expensive long-distance calls (63). To the same effect, Stephen’s mother is described as a character almost “afraid of the phone” (98). Accordingly, the first thing they give up to cut down expenses is their landline.
Among the images that intensify the novel’s theme of failure to communicate is silence. Vivid descriptions of domestic interiors in the novel are often dominated by an uneasy silence, by “interminable, unspoken conversations”; Stephen’s father demands “absolute silence at mealtimes,” which makes him feel unloved (144). The narrator describes such moments of uneasy silence in mechanical terms and compares Stephen and Walter to “a pair of electric plugs that wouldn’t fit into each other” (40). His frustration is so overwhelming that when his father falls ill and physically fails to speak, Stephen feels relieved; he thinks that he is no longer “embarrassed of finding nothing to say” (102). The text describes a similar failure to speak at a different narrative level too. This time, it is Liza’s husband Frank who is delineated as an unloving father to Tom. Like Walter to Stephen, Frank is indifferent to Tom and he has “no idea how to approach a child” (93). The third person narrator suggests that the reason for Tom’s literal silence is this emotional distance: “Tom sat up, crawled and walked early, but talked late” (93).

Barker employs silence not only as a sign of failure to communicate but also as an indicator of weakness; Stephen’s description of the silence in the lifts in his apartment building places the communication problem in a social perspective:

And yet in the lifts... Again silence. You knew too much about people to talk, and too little. Did that quiet little man in number thirty-three really beat his wife’s head against the wall? That’s what it sounded like. You met him in the lift and said nothing. (64)

As such, this uneasy silence also points to the limits of the help and care Stephen can offer. As a social worker whose job is to offer professional help, he becomes a mere spectator to the pain of others, which renders lack of communication as a social ill.

I argue that silence as a negative force is an important motif in the text that supports the novel’s ethical stance and encourages social bonding as a form of solidarity. Monteith contends that in Barker’s work “characters are revealed through what they say—and to whom they are speaking—but also through what is left unsaid—or what they avoid saying. (10). Following this premise, one can suggest that description of the silence at a meeting of spiritualists from Liza’s perspective reveals the theme of connectedness:

At first it was the usual silence of people in a crowded room: coughs, breathing, tummy rumbles, a belch politely smothered, the rasp of wool as women crossed and uncrossed their legs. [...] Then, without warning, the silence deepened, became something that was not merely the absence of speech, but a positive force. Positive, or perhaps negative, she couldn’t tell. At any rate a source of power, binding them together, drawing them in, [...]. (60)
This positive feeling about the unifying effect of the silence felt together pervades *Liza’s England*. Throughout the novel, the narrative voice remains stable but the narrative perspective that expands on the theme of silence varies between different characters. This alternation produces a text that sounds like a musical composition, a variation upon the same theme. As different characters go through a similar problem in different contexts, repetition as a narrative method becomes a way of endorsing an inclusive logic of interconnectedness. And through a textual exercise of moving between different standpoints, the reader gains a certain degree of flexibility in observing different minds at work. This flexibility encourages the reader to interact with the text and cease to be a mere spectator. What Pat Barker says on the topic of creating a fictional voice in her work gives us clues about her interest in promoting a more encompassing view in her novels:

If you listen very carefully to people, you often find a particular group of people that come together as individuals, speaking in a kind of recognizably individual way. As the group gets going and imposes its rules on all of the people in it, those individuals actually tend to sound more and more alike, [...]. What you get then is a kind of communal voice. I find that I get very interested in the communal voice as well as in the individual voices of the characters, and also try to listen for that and bring that across. (41)

Interestingly, in *Liza’s England* reconciliation is achieved through the mingling of voices and characters that belong to different times and spaces. The novel offers an image of interconnectedness as Liza remembers the time when she gave birth to Eileen just at the moment of helping Eileen at labour:

As the hours passed, Liza felt herself merge into the girl on the bed. She had laboured to give birth like this, in this room, this bed. She became afraid of the *vanishing boundaries* and turned to the fire, only to feel it strip the flesh from her face and reveal her mother’s bones. Eileen was not Eileen, Liza was not Liza, but both were links in a chain of women stretching back through the centuries, into the wombs of women whose names they didn’t know. (my emphasis, 211)

It is obvious that the communal voice Barker “tr[ies] to listen for and bring across” is present in *Liza’s England* also as a visual image of “vanishing boundaries.” This transgression results from a heightened awareness and erases the borders that impose otherness. Stephen

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1 Both of the titles Barker found for her novel, *The Century’s Daughter* and *Liza’s England*, mark this communal aspect of the text in the sense that they both present Liza as part of a wider context, whether it be temporal or spatial. Thus, in both cases, the novel promises to speak not just for Liza but also for those who are in contact with her, which hints at the novel’s potential to suggest notions of inclusion and connectedness.
experiences a similar experience of transgression in his dream with a theme of dissolution of the boundaries: In the shadow of trees among a mixture of music, mud, feet and light, Stephen sees a “cowled figure” he couldn’t tell whether it was a man or a woman. In his dream, he feels that one day, all will “crumble” and “dissolve away.” This similar image of vanishing boundaries seems to be evoked by the effective communication he establishes with Liza. As he opens himself to the rewarding friendship of an octogenarian. Stephen ceases to perceive himself as a failed son: “In the labyrinth of his dream, his father and Liza were one” (272). In return for the care he offers, Stephen receives a big change in his consciousness, which is mirrored in his liberating dream. The text suggests, once again, the mutual aspect of loving care: In his dream, he holds out his hands and receives the “box” his father offers and gets reconciled with him.

In his “Repetition as the Raising of the Dead,” J. Hillis Miller suggests that “repetition in narrative is the representation of a transcendent spiritual realm of reconciliation and preservation, a realm of the perpetual resurrection of the dead” (202). In Liza’s England, the need for reconciliation and mutual understanding is highlighted not only through the mingling of voices and events, but also through a repeated auditory image of the “rattle on the grate.” At first, it is employed as a call to Mrs Dobbin for help when Liza is in labour with Eileen (208). Later, it is Eileen who rattles on the grate asking for help, as she is in labour with Kath. Mrs Dobbin humorously marks the likeness by saying, “You always start when I’m baking” (209). Then comes old age: on Tuesdays, Mrs Dobbin and Liza go out for drinks: at 7 o’clock Mrs Dobbin “does rattle on the grate.” Finally, the boys in the gang break into Liza’s house, and her mind plays a trick upon her: she thinks what she hears is “a rattling in the grate.” Twenty years after her neighbour’s death, she thinks that “Mrs Dobbin must be calling her” (260). So it is the same image that marks the scenes of birth and death in the personal history of Liza. With this auditory image of breaking the silence and calling for help, Barker enables us to see not only the personal details dissolving in the bigger picture but also the ever-present need to connect. In other words, repetition of events suggested by the repeated image of “rattle on the grate” erases the personal boundaries and reconciles all the little stories to the whole. In this plane of reality, there is nothing more important than the common good of all people involved.

In Barker’s Liza’s England, the aesthetic and the ethical melt into one another; aesthetics supports ethics and fosters moral meaning. Weaving bonds of humanity and representing experience of sympathy, the text encourages an ethical reflection on the nature of relating
to others. Through an investigation of her characters’ ability to transgress silence and communicate, the novel underlines the fact that to turn this mechanical repetition of events called life into a unique experience, communication is essential. By leaving her reader with an image of Stephen speaking to Liza’s parrot Nelson, her old friend, Barker seems to refuse an ending and makes another attempt to invite her reader into a critical engagement with the text; mimicking the notion of reciprocity inherent in care, the text heightens what Wayne Booth calls “the level of reciprocity between author and reader” (180). Stephen, the new owner of Nelson upon Liza’s death, quotes from John Skelton’s satirical poem “Speke Parrot” (1521), “Parrot is a fair bird for a ladie,” which presents the parrot as a symbol of immortality of the soul (282). While immortalising Liza and her memories, Nelson’s presence in the finale of the novel suggests that as parrots simply repeat sounds they have been taught, it is our responsibility to choose the words we want to hear. This final image with which Barker leaves the reader not only supports the emphasis on the notion of responsibility in the novel but also accentuates her view about the function of fiction: in an interview, Barker states that her work “comes very close to therapy in that there is a preoccupation with darkness and trauma” (Garland 199). Apparently, like Barker’s other novels exploring the darkness and trauma, Liza’s England points to the need for the effort literature should make to create a better future.

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