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Unsettling ageing in three novels by Pat Barker

SARAH FALCUS*

ABSTRACT

Within the growing body of interdisciplinary work on ageing, more attention is now paid to literary engagement with and representations of ageing, often in the form of literary gerontology. This field locates literature as part of the cultural discourses around ageing in our society. Pat Barker's work, already the subject of some gerontological attention, is important here, because her texts offer detailed representations of the ageing subject, and engage with the often disturbing challenges that ageing presents to self and social identity. This paper considers three of Pat Barker's novels – *Another World* (1999), *Liza's England* (1986/1996), and *Union Street* (1982) – within one of the central debates in ageing studies: how far we are aged by culture and where culture might meet the material. In these novels, ageing characters are clearly at the mercy of cultural constructions of age; nevertheless, the texts also insist on the centrality of the body, forcefully reminding us of the limits of cultural ageing. This paper argues that these novels explore the interplay between cultural and corporeal ageing, forcing the reader to acknowledge the complexities of, and unsettle any easy assumptions about, ageing subjectivity. In the process, this suggests that what fiction can offer to gerontology is, at least in part, an exploration of the ineluctability of 'contradictions' when it comes to ageing.

KEY WORDS – literary gerontology, gender, age, fiction.

Introduction

As Catherine Hagan Hennessey and Alan Walker argue, the need for interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches to research in ageing has been long recognised. The past two decades have seen the development of fertile links between studies in ageing and the humanities, in works such as those of Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker (1999) and Kathleen Woodward (1991, 1999). This development can be situated within what Julia Johnson (2004: 1), citing Gilleard and Higgs, calls the 'cultural turn' in gerontology, a movement to combat the positivist and biomedical

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approach to ageing by drawing on other disciplines, such as the humanities, to get at what Johnson calls the ‘meaning’ of ageing, ‘that is, what ageing is like and the cultural freight it carries’. Cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s work on being aged by culture is important here and a significant part of this is in the field of what is commonly termed literary gerontology, a particularly rich strand of study in ageing and the humanities. From the series of edited books coming from literary studies at the University of Lleida (Worsfold 2005; Grau and Gual 2004; O’Neill and Llena 2002), to Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen’s (1993) literary work on the impact of ageing on creativity, and Mike Hepworth’s sociological approach to narratives of ageing (2000, 2002), the opportunity to yoke together literature and gerontology has proved appealing and fruitful.¹ This link between ageing and literature is, however, a complex one; as literary critic Jeannette King (2009: 297) reminds us, fictional representations of ageing are not simply a ‘reflection’ of the ageing process, but implicated in ‘shap[ing] both the experience of ageing and how it is perceived and represented by others’. This makes clear the very valuable role literary gerontology has to play in the wider field of age studies, where literature is not just reflecting society, but is itself part of the cultural discourses around ageing that permeate our Western society.

Pat Barker’s work, already the subject of some critical attention in this field (Hepworth 2000, 2002), is important here, because her texts offer detailed and complex representations of the ageing subject, and engage with the often-disturbing challenges that ageing presents to self and social identity. Barker is a British Booker-prize-winning novelist whose work receives significant critical attention. Her early novels, of which *Liza’s England* (1986/1996) and *Union Street* (1982) are part, explore working-class communities in northern English settings, particularly in the light of the challenges of economic deprivation. Therefore, *Liza’s England* finds the 84-year-old Liza Goddard telling her life story (from her birth on the first day of the new twentieth century) to a young social worker, Stephen, who has come to try to persuade her to move from her home so that the row of terraced housing can be demolished. This demolition of a working-class community is a process that Liza has watched throughout the final part of her life. *Union Street* is set in a similarly deprived community and it tells the stories of seven women, moving from the rape of the young Kelly Brown to the death of the aged Alice Bell (who is of the most interest in this paper). Themes of violence, poverty and ambivalent community echo throughout the tales. *Another World* (1999), on the other hand, is a later Barker novel and one which picks up on the interest for which she is probably most well known: her work on the First World War. In this novel, Nick attends his dying grandfather as the 101-year-old Geordie copes with both imminent death and the memories of

a war in which he may or may not have murdered his brother Harry. It is therefore clear that in Barker's work, ageing cannot be disentangled from class and gender.

Literary scholar Sally Chivers (2003: x) argues that 'A humanities-based approach to aging can consistently maintain the crucial complexity of growing old because works of art, such as literature, can comfortably encompass contradictions and even gain their aesthetic strength from doing so.' It is as texts which 'encompass [some of the] contradictions' of ageing that this paper will analyse these three Barker novels. I situate these texts within a crucial concern in ageing studies: how far we are aged by culture and where culture might meet the material, or the 'matter' that 'matters' (Barad 2008: 122). In these novels, ageing characters are clearly at the mercy of cultural constructions of aged bodies and identities. The reader is privy to the feelings and experiences of these ageing characters, and those around them, as they are treated as infirm, incapable and passive and, in many cases, read into silence. Nevertheless, the texts also insist upon the very bodiliness of old age and the challenge that the ageing body presents to postmodern theories of discursive construction. The interplay of the cultural and corporeal aspects of ageing in these texts forces the reader to acknowledge the complexities of ageing, unsettling any easy assumptions about the ageing subject. In another context, literary critic Catherine Bernard (2007: 183) argues that Barker's work 'acknowledges that representation, to remain paradoxically true to itself, must "peer into the darkness," must also stand face to face with what defies linguistic re-cognition'. This paper will argue that these novels attempt to 'peer into the darkness' of the ageing subject in their presentation of the interaction of cultural and corporeal ageing, in the process making clear that what fiction can offer to gerontology is, at least in part, an exploration of the ineluctability of 'contradictions' when it comes to ageing.

Cultural construction and the challenge of the material

The argument for cultural construction of the ageing body has gained ground in gerontology in the face of a traditional biomedical and physiological approach that sees ageing as coterminous with the body. In this latter approach, the aged body is associated with what Hepworth (2000: 46–8) calls 'dys-ease' and, as Twigg (2004: 60) argues, is presented within a 'narrative of decline'. Against this, the cultural argument has tried to assert, in Margaret Gullette's (2004) words, that we are 'aged by culture' and that the body is a 'social text, something that is both formed and given meaning within culture' (Twigg 2004: 60), ideas taken up by other gerontologists and critics such as the literary gerontologist Kathleen Woodward (1991, 1999).

This notion of culturally constructed ageing draws upon postmodern accounts of discursivity and the production of the subject by power, language and knowledge. This ageing by culture often results in stereotypes of the ageing subject that depend heavily upon binaries such as that of age and youth. However, there have been recent compelling critiques of social constructionism. This challenge comes from many quarters, including the study of science and feminism. Karen Barad's (2008: 120) important work in this area explains the present situation thus: 'Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.' In relation to ageing studies, Twigg argues that the body and its very materiality cannot be reduced entirely to discursive production:

Radical cultural critics, drawing on poststructuralist theorising, especially that of Foucault, present the body as discursively produced. Any basis in nature or physiology is denied – or rather any basis that we can know, since our understandings of the body are themselves the product of discourses. But aging forces us to engage with physiology, not least because of the ultimate undeniability of death. Like pain it forces the reality of the body on to the analytic stage. (Twigg 2004: 63)

Ageing, pain and the 'undeniability of death' often work together to foreground the body and make it 'matter'. Woodward, similarly asserting that in deep old age, particularly, the decline of the body cannot be reduced entirely to cultural and social meaning, argues that this poses a fundamental challenge to representation: 'My guess is that as we move toward the limits of old age – and that limit is death – we move toward the limits of representation' (1991: 194). It is here that I situate these three Pat Barker novels, not as texts which deny cultural ageing, but as texts which 'move toward the limits of representation'. The paper begins with a detailed examination of the way in which characters in these novels are 'aged by culture' into invisibility and silence, and the impact of gender and class on this, to make clear the way in which these texts can be read in the light of this approach. I then move on to explore the troubling and unsettling ways in which Barker's novels suggest the limits of cultural ageing by the foregrounding of the corporeal, working to exploit and not minimise the inevitable contradictions of ageing.

Being 'aged by culture': invisibility

Critics such as Kathleen Woodward (1999: xvi) argue that the old is a group in society still ignored and allowed little voice, an invisible group. And *Another World*, *Liza's England* and *Union Street* engage with this idea very clearly as the elderly characters become increasingly invisible, silent and powerless in social life. Woodward (1999: xvi) asserts that this invisibility is

suffered particularly by women and it is certainly the case that the emphasis on appearance in relation to the female body traps women in this powerless position, but it is clear in these novels that this invisibility applies to both men and women. Significantly, these novels offer the perspective of the ageing subject, disturbing the ageist gaze by exploring its effects and insisting on the complex emotional lives of the ageing characters, making their invisibility visible.

The invisibility of women is symbolised in colourful terms in *Liza's England* (1986/1996: 256) as young girls pass old – in both senses – friends Liza and Mrs Dobbin on the street: 'A group of young girls came helter-skelter down the hill towards them, bare thighs flashing, stiletto heels striking the ground with a noise like rifle-fire. They scarcely saw the two old women, though they broke ranks and flowed around them, like a brightly flashing stream.' The binary of youth and age is clearly created here, with the activity and enthusiasm of youth overlooking and othering the aged. Many critics, such as Twigg (2004), Germaine Greer (1992) and Woodward (1999), argue that there is a gendered nature to the invisibility of the old, since, for women, value rests in sexual attractiveness, which is linked to youth, and this is clearly the case here. Clarke and Griffin's (2008: 66g) in-depth interviews with women aged 50–70 provide evidence of these feelings of invisibility and the authors recognise the irony in these responses, since 'the women's perceptions of invisibility were grounded in their acute visibility as old women'. In the case of *Liza's England*, it is significant that this episode is immediately preceded by Liza's thoughts on her relationship with the woman she has always, despite their years of close friendship, called Mrs Dobbin and her conclusion that they are now a '[c]ouple of old trouts together' (Barker 1986/1996: 256). The text therefore exhibits Liza's awareness of her ageing self and the way that she, and Mrs Dobbin, are positioned within society, offering the reader imaginative access to the subjective experience of this othering. But, at the same time, to an extent this empowers Liza in her acceptance of her own position and her determination to exercise her agency as an ageing woman.

The idea of invisibility in old age is symbolised even more poignantly by Alice in *Union Street* (Barker 1982: 234) as she lies in her bed in a shrunken state, since she is saving for her funeral and therefore starving herself: 'A stranger coming into the room would hardly have noticed, at first, that there was a body in the bed, for Alice's emaciated frame scarcely raised the covers, and her skin, over the years, had yellowed to the same shade as the pillowcases and the wall.' This merging of Alice with her surroundings also introduces the idea of the physical isolation of the aged, as they retreat into homes, becoming less visible to the outside world. Alice's house makes up her whole world and is a 'refuge' (Barker 1982: 234). John Brannigan

(2005*b*: 11) makes clear the class element in this as he argues that ‘Barker’s novel here suggests the ambivalence of the working-class home as a construct, for, in a culture in which the identity of house and self is a potent and pervasive myth, it exhibits at one and the same time the marginal social status of its inhabitants and the stubborn assertion of self-identity’. This is the case for Alice and for Liza in *Liza’s England*, who both battle to remain in their increasingly dilapidated homes in the face of the threat of eviction into institutional care, something predicated upon cultural associations between old age and lack of control, intellect and self-determination. For these women the home does represent self and identity, and a struggle to retain control of what is left of life, and death. The home also represents the very bodiliness of these women; Alice feels her home to be ‘almost an extension of her own body’ (Barker 1982: 234). This accords with Hepworth’s (2000: 78) sociological argument about the way bodies and spaces become linked in ageing, with decaying houses and decaying people often connected, but it is a step on from this, with these houses binding up self and identity in material terms, a place in the world that ‘matters’. Nevertheless, as Brannigan (2005*b*) makes clear, this assertion of place and identity rests alongside seclusion from the outside world and, more specifically in these cases, a retreat into the invisibility of agedness.

Since institutionalisation can encourage the erasure of subjectivity, it is therefore not surprising that it is feared by many of the characters and that this fear is often articulated forcefully. Alice and Liza dread entry to what they regard as the workhouse. Geordie in *Another World* (1999: 48) resents the white hospital gown and the ‘young bits of lasses shoving their fingers up your arse every verse end’. As this suggests, the body itself becomes a contested site, subject to the intervention of the authorities and the medical profession. *Union Street* and *Liza’s England*, in particular, do make clear that fear of institutions is not groundless, as many of the aged are treated as less than full human subjects by those in authority, ‘pointing up’, as Sarah Brophy (2005: 36) argues, ‘the inadequacy of the social safety net in 1970s [and we could add 1980s] Britain’. Connecting Geordie’s better care to family intervention, class, lack of poverty and, to a point, changing times supports this argument. In *Union Street*, Alice’s interview with Wilks, who is evaluating her case for admission into a home, is a poignant illustration of the invisibility of the old as he speaks about Alice in the third person and addresses all of his questions to her son and daughter-in-law. Alice’s reaction makes clear the way that institutional authority can erase subjectivity and induce a sense of violation: ‘She understood now the full indignity of rape. That man, the expression in his eyes when he looked at her. The not-seeing. And she could see no way out, except to submit, to accept herself at his evaluation. To give in’ (Barker 1982: 260), Class, age and the fragility of

Alice's emaciated body come together here, and the shocking image of rape insists upon the experience of the physical in this process. The reader cannot help but empathise with Alice's suffering and see Wilks's objective efficiency as inhumane. Wilks's effacement of Alice's agency involves the take-over of her materiality: she will have no choice but to be parcelled into a care home, with her body made subject to the ministrations of strangers.

Being 'aged by culture': silence

The invisibility of the old in these novels indicates a marginalisation of the aged that is compounded by the silencing of older voices. In many cases the voices of the old are literally not heard by others, as with Liza in *Liza's England* whom the authorities are trying to evict and therefore aim to prove senile, even though she is obviously not, as Stephen, the young social worker who visits her, recognises. In *Union Street*, Alice faces a similar marginalisation when her silence after her stroke leads people to make assumptions about her intellect and understanding, particularly as she struggles with language and finds that the sounds coming out of her mouth are not what she intends. At the same time, the text illustrates the different ways in which this silencing can be effected, in the more general homogenisation of generations, for example, as when the young Kelly Brown (Barker 1982: 66) remembers being told in school assembly about how the cold could kill 'old people'. This evasion of individuality can take other forms, too, such as Stephen's tendency to see Liza as representative of a generation, the century's daughter, or of some form of (arguably) romanticised aged wisdom.² However, this must be set against the novels when seen in their entirety. *Liza's England* undercuts the marginalisation of its aged protagonist by presenting her life story and her memories, her older and her younger selves, meaning that the structure of this text ensures that Liza's voice is heard and represents a formal subversion of the silencing of Liza that is being enacted within the novel.³ Similarly, Alice's perspective dominates in this part of *Union Street* and the reader is able to access her emotional and physical experiences, challenging the effacement of her agency that is occurring in the narrative. More complex still is *Union Street's* presentation of stages of life, with links made between the different female characters, most obviously when Kelly and Alice meet at the end of their stories. Therefore, as John Brannigan (2005a: 31) suggests, 'it is possible to argue that each of the characters are really versions of one character's progress through life', situating ageing as part of a lifecourse, rather than a stage apart. These novels therefore demonstrate the way that society attempts to silence ageing subjects, but challenge this with the dominance of older voices and perspectives.

Being 'aged by culture': gender and social roles

Cultural ageing is in many ways a gendered process, generally seen as affecting women earlier and more negatively than men, as society judges older women more harshly and in more demeaning ways than men.⁴ As Sally Chivers (2003: xv) puts it, for older women their 'loss' is 'twofold' 'because it is not just their utility but also their femininity that is considered to fade'. But this does not mean that it is in all ways more harmful for women than for men. In some cases ageing and the retreat from social worlds, in particular the world of work, can be more difficult for men than for women. In the case of a number of the men in these texts, this is linked to either redundancy or retirement and is clearly class based. In this sense, these texts bear out Catherine Silver's argument that in certain ways men find ageing harder than women because they have more to lose in terms of power, status and public position. Silver (2003: 387) acknowledges that women may initially find the loss of traditionally valued female attributes around sexuality and desirability difficult, as in the case of Iris in *Union Street*, who dyes her hair as a response to her daughter's puberty, a reminder of her own ageing (Barker 1982: 195). But Silver (2003: 387) argues that these difficulties are short term and that old age can actually be a time of increased freedom for women: 'What these changes have in common is the lifting of social and symbolic controls around sexuality, femininity, and family obligations. It is this transformative process that creates a potentially disruptive situation in existing gender relations.' Silver may be overstating the 'lifting of social and symbolic controls for ageing women'; these controls very clearly persist for women. However, there are aspects of these novels that do suggest that ageing may bring some freedom for women, albeit in limited ways. This can be seen in *Liza's England* in the case of Liza. After her second motherhood (her mothering of her granddaughter), Liza finds herself relieved at the freedom she attains when the teenage Kath goes to university: 'although Kath's departure meant loneliness it also meant that, for the first time in half a century, she was responsible for nobody but herself' (Barker 1986/1996: 258). Significantly, it is a female community, particularly her friend, Mrs Dobbin, that supports Liza at this time, as it has for a long period of her life, suggesting a continuity into old age for women. A similar sense of continuity as part of a female community is seen in the life of Mrs Harrison in *Union Street*, who in her old age goes on cleaning her house, arguing with Iris, and picking up condoms to burn on the chapel fire. On the other hand, the newly retired George Harrison experiences the boredom and monotony of life without regular working patterns, where time is slowly measured by the rather ironic present of the clock given to him on his retirement. Economic circumstance comes together with ageing to blight the lives of many of the

men in these novels. For example, in *Liza's England* (Barker 1986/1996: 256), Liza's friend, George, suffers a loss of direction after the closure of the pub he runs, looking 'like a half-spent candle' when Liza and Mrs Dobbin visit him in the boarding house. And Walter, Stephen's father, struggles to sustain a sense of identity as an older man made redundant, no longer part of economic life and no longer the breadwinner of the family: "Frightened?" He laughed. "I was scared shitless, because I knew I'd never work again. And I didn't know what to do" (Barker 1986/1996: 115). Ageing, class and gender here leave Walter – a man significantly younger than Geordie or Liza – in an impotent position, where he is cast adrift in a domestic environment that cannot offer him a masculine identity to replace that he has lost with the loss of working life. For Walter, the home does not become a place where he is able to assert an identity, as it is for the older Alice and Liza, but a place that reminds him of what has now gone.

At the limits of cultural ageing: visibility and the body

Despite the exploration in these texts of ageing as a process of increasing social invisibility, there is a paradox here: with the ageing process, particularly in the period of deep old age, comes the foregrounding and increasing visibility of the body.⁵ Woodward (1999: xvi) argues that for the aged subject the body is indeed 'both invisible and hypervisible'. This ambiguity brings together the cultural and corporeal aspects of ageing, unsettling what Twigg (2004) argues is the postmodern desire to privilege discourse over matter, and offering the reader sometimes disturbing perspectives on the ageing body. In this analysis, I bring together those in deep old age, such as Alice, Liza and Geordie, and those in what we would now call the third age, such as Walter. This also leads to a blurring between ageing and illness and disability. But it is clear that the contradiction of visibility and invisibility is something experienced by the disabled as well as the aged subject, as Zitzelsberger (2005) makes clear in her study of disabled women. Her findings demonstrate that the disability of the women is often very visible, if not hypervisible, whilst the women's individual subject positions and life stories are rendered invisible. The body becomes all and the gaze does not see anything other than the disabled body. This link between the aged, infirm and disabled body is something that these novels actively encourage, not insisting upon ageing as a process that stands apart from factors which affect the material conditions of everyday life, such as class, gender, poverty and illness.

Again, the novels illustrate the ambiguity of ageing, illness and the body. On one level the body is silenced or rejected in these novels, as many

characters refuse to articulate physical decay and the effects of illness. And this is true not just of the characters who decline to acknowledge their own medical conditions, such as Geordie in *Another World*, but also of their relatives. In *Liza's England*, Stephen's mother, for example, prefers to remain ignorant of the doctor's diagnosis of his father's condition. This is, in part, a class-based attitude to authority, something that Stephen, as the next, educated generation does not share. However, it extends beyond this to a denial of physical deterioration and the probability of death. This illustrates the way that ageing and infirm subjects may actually collude in their own silencing and marginalisation, enhancing the sense of generational divide that these texts represent. In this way, the physical effects of ageing and death are not signified and remain the underside of language, the unacknowledged presence in every conversation that Stephen has with his parents, and Nick has with Geordie.

However, matter and materiality *are* represented in these texts very forcefully, as the novels imagine the limits of the cultural construction of old age. The body is the visual signifier of age, bearing on its skin and in its frame the marks of experience, such as the 'moles, brown spots [and] tags of flesh' that cover Geordie's hands (Barker 1999: 239). And, as such, the ageing and ill body forces itself into view in these texts. This 'hypervisibility' (Woodward 1999) is illustrated in the process of infantilisation of the old that is seen in these novels. At one level, this is a reversal of traditional caring roles, as a daughter cares for her mother, or a son (or grandson) cares for his father. As Nick recognises, '[t]he wheel's turned full circle' as Frieda cares for her father Geordie (Barker 1999: 65). In these relationships increasing elderly dependence and illness lead to the formerly private processes of the body being shared: Alice's incontinence is witnessed by her son; Geordie is helped to the toilet by Nick and Frieda; Walter is shaved and washed by Stephen; Stephen shares a bed with Walter, as Nick does with Geordie. This means that in many ways the body becomes and is treated like an infant's. For example, Geordie's hospital bed is like a cot, he drinks from a feeding cup, has his groin shaved (a process of both infantilisation and perhaps feminisation) and has his 'bum wiped like a toddler' (Barker 1999: 223). This increasing frailty can actually have a positive aspect, as for Alice. When she initially becomes dependent, she is taken into the community of women in *Union Street*, which she was not part of before this. But as she gets worse, Alice is and feels herself to be a burden on her son, and she is aware of others withdrawing from her: 'They were sorry for her, but she made them uncomfortable. It was difficult for them to believe that this slobbering, glugging thing that could not make its wants known was a human being' (Barker 1982: 249). The invisibility imposed by institutional erasure, as described earlier in Alice's interview with Wilks, can also be read as a repression of visibility, a

form of self-protection by society in the face of the inevitability of the ageing body, as the quotation above suggests and as Alice herself recognises: 'she made them uncomfortable, lying there under layers of newspaper, emaciated and dirty' (Barker 1982: 254). The text's exploration of this process, however, focuses on Alice's perspective and therefore, her increasing withdrawal from social life and power is experienced intimately by the reader, making her final decision understandable, if still tragic. On the other hand, the concentration on Stephen's perspective in parts of *Liza's England* means that the reader is given access to his feelings about his father's ailing body, as he finds himself 'withdrawing mentally from the crumpled bedclothes and the smell of sick flesh' and realises that he has never seen so much of his father's body before (Barker 1986/1996: 101). Here the body becomes 'hypervisible', and as such it is experienced as threatening and as a challenge to the cultural constructions which try to mediate the irreducibility that matter presents. Though the fear here is intimately related to mortality and the dying body, it also has something in common with the visibility of the disabled body, which, as Zitselsberger (2005) finds in her study of disabled women, can arouse hostile reactions. As literary texts, these novels allow the reader to experience different perspectives on the ageing and infirm body, from the horror of the frightened son in the face of his father's impending death, to the desire for self-preservation which motivates Alice's retreat from society.

Further evidence of the anxiety provoked by the visible ageing and infirm body is not hard to find in these novels. Stephen is very aware of Liza's ageing body at points in *Liza's England*, such as when he visits her in the morning and sees her almost-bald head (Barker 1986/1996: 10). In *Another World*, Nick is consciously aware of Geordie's body as he sits with him in the hospital and at home, noting its fragility and its signs of ageing. And this is often in grotesque forms, with the aged body becoming death-like, as when Nick sees Geordie in the firelight: 'The firelight, seeking out the hollows of the eye sockets, seems to strip flesh from bone. He's looking at a skull' (Barker 1999: 244). Kelly similarly describes the skin stretched tight over the bones of Alice's skull in *Union Street* (Barker 1982: 66–7) and Liza in *Liza's England* (Barker 1986/1996: 181) sees her ageing mother's skull 'rising closer to the surface night by night' as they sit together in the firelight. This insistence on the materiality of the body and the discomfort and even fear it arouses supports Margaretta Jolly's (2005: 235) assertion that 'Barker suggests that the body is less knowable than we would like to believe'. In these ways, these novels disturb the more identifiable forms of cultural ageing with unsettling representations of the physicality of the body. To some extent these representations further the sense of 'otherness' of the ageing body, positioning the reader with the viewer rather than the ageing subject; however, when taken

as a whole, the novels insist on both this unsettling materiality and the experience of ageing from the perspective of the ageing person, encompassing the complex dynamics that make up the discourse of ageing.

As this suggests, Barker's novels do not simply explore the effects of the hypervisible ageing body on those around the ageing subject. Important in these novels, unsurprisingly, is the centrality of the body for ageing characters like Geordie, Alice and Liza. In *Another World* (Barker 1999: 54), Geordie's illness traps him within its demands, as he keeps 'his whole attention focused inwards on managing the pain'. Geordie, certainly a character in deep old age, or the fourth age, experiences this in terms similar to those described by Twigg (2004: 64), where the fourth age 'can seem to be not just about the body, but nothing but the body'. Alice is similarly trying to cope with a body that can no longer express her thoughts clearly and of which she is no longer in control, as her incontinence illustrates. She sees a 'dislocation between what the mirror showed and what she knew herself to be', contrasting the 'hag' she sees with the 16-year-old inside (Barker 1982: 255). Alice here invests in the idea of the 'mask' of ageing, associated with the work of critics such as Featherstone and Hepworth (1991). This is based on the idea of a disjunction between the experience of self and identity, and the mirror image of the ageing body. As Twigg (2004: 63–4) argues, there are problems with this approach, primarily in its seeming reduplication, in postmodern terms, of Cartesian dualism. And there is certainly a danger here that Barker is representing the aged body as a trap, something from which an 'inner self' is disassociated. However, the narrative of the text itself works against this simplistic duality of body and mind. Despite Alice's expression of youth, her feeling of being 16, the narrative, now increasingly fragmented in time as it blends Alice's memories with her present, makes clear that she is a subject formed through the lifecourse and not an identity frozen in time; she has indeed 'been so many women in her time' (Barker 1982: 263). This is emphasised when she again stands in front of the mirror, this time naked: 'Normally she would have hurried over such a moment, not liking to see this body that had been fastened to her by time. But today she let herself look. Silver branches spread out across her belly, springing from the sparsely-rooted hair. A tree in winter' (Barker 1982: 261). Alice does not hide herself with her hands, as she did before, but looks with interest at her body, which is presented in non-judgemental, even aesthetically pleasing terms.

As Alice's mirror image suggests, the aged body is the visible sight of experience in these novels, seen in Alice's '[b]lack dug[s] [and] belly silver-streaked from the child-bearing of half a century ago' (Barker 1982: 259). The body is the text of a life. The same is true of the prostitute Blonde Dinah's body in *Union Street*, which tells of her child-bearing, though there

seems to be no other evidence of this. And Geordie's body shows clearly his experiences and his mental as well as physical injuries, in his scarred face and his bayonet wound, and in his new operation scar. However, as visual texts, these bodies require interpretation. Seeing Geordie's body when a child, Nick wonders 'Why? How? What happened?' (Barker 1999: 58). The body as text in this case only points to a silence, an unknown that is never fully resolved in the novel, even after Geordie begins to speak of his experiences. This can of course be widened to the issue of invisibility and visibility: if the body is text, but the aged subject is silenced within it, confined to materiality, then interpretations of others will define selfhood, as in Sharon Monteith's (2002: 83) discussion of the way that wounded bodies, such as Geordie's, can be made to stand as a memorial for war or, indeed, as in the case of Alice and Wilks, the way that the body can lead to the rejection of the subjectivity of the old. In the case of Geordie, the novel itself enacts this interpretative stance, as others try to make sense of Geordie and his experiences, with Helen framing these within the thesis of her book, and Nick struggling to label Geordie's experiences in psychological terms. In this way, as Monteith (2002: 84) argues, the text foregrounds the means by which the old, and in this case a man scarred by the traumatic experience of a war that looms large in the collective consciousness, are positioned by others, particularly academics, at the risk of 'losing sight of the individual behind the terminology', a salutary reminder to those working in the field of gerontology and age studies. This makes clear that Barker is not reverting to a traditional biomedical or essentialist approach that would reduce the body to 'transparency or opacity', or 'pure cause' rather than 'pure effect' (Barad 2008: 130), but keeping open the ambiguity of a 'middle way' between the binary of cultural construction and materiality.

The challenge of the body: sexuality

This ambiguity or this 'middle way' is amply illustrated in an analysis of the challenge presented by sexuality in these novels. Monteith (2002: 84) argues that 'Barker's elderly characters do not conform to easy stereotypes and those younger characters that underestimate them are usually forced to re-examine the stereotypical patterns into which their assumptions have atrophied.' And this is certainly true in relation to ageing and sexuality, where Barker upends stereotypes and, more fundamentally, unsettles cultural constructions of the aged body as sexless and passive.

Auntie Clem, in *Liza's England*, is therefore a representation of the outrageous, non-conventional old woman, with her wig, fancy man and make-up. Overtly sexually active, she is the antithesis of the stereotype of the

non-sexual old woman. Seen in the light of Twigg's discussion of clothing as an exercise of agency, linked to age resistance and age denial, Clem seems to represent the former. As Twigg (2007: 299) acknowledges, age resistance comes perilously close to age denial, as the rejection of 'frumpy' clothing can be a 'form of radical age-denial thorough the pursuit of youth styles that present the body – and the self – as if it were unchanged, and in so doing actually expose and emphasise those changes'. However, the performative and excessive nature of Clem's dress, and indeed her behaviour, which mixes sexual freedom with a desire for social conservatism (in her attitude to death rites, for example), positions her as a knowing and self-aware subject exercising her agency, a challenge to the narrative of decline in old age.

However, it is the sexuality of older men that is more fully explored in these texts and it is this which once again cannot entirely be contained within the idea of ageing by culture. In *Another World*, Nick is disturbed by the sight of Geordie's genitals on his visit to the hospital and then again when he is with Geordie at home. Geordie began a new affair at 78 and Nick wonders about his sexual life, 'speculation he doesn't want to have to entertain about what form sexuality might take in that inconceivably frail, and dauntless, body' (Barker 1999: 127). Nick's reaction here demonstrates the typical social response to ageing sexuality: something that cannot be 'entertain[ed]'. Geordie's penis, even after his death, possesses a symbolic and unsettling power for his grandson and this response to the sexual body of the older man is a good example of the way that Barker foregrounds the materiality of the ageing subject, both as a challenge to stereotypical representation and as a way of gesturing at the limits of social ageing. Geordie's body and his sexuality inspire discomfort and become a silence around which his carers tiptoe. Geordie's desire is also represented by his relationship with Helen, something that even Nick recognises has sexual undertones. However, Nick prefers to read their final encounter in romantic terms, playing down the features of this relationship which disturb his preconceptions of ageing sexuality. The disjunction between the frailty of Geordie's body and his sexual desires make the body itself central, but not entirely knowable here.

In *Union Street* Mr Harrison's encounter with Blonde Dinah, the prostitute, also presents an alternative view of sexuality and ageing, in a realist and non-romanticised scene between the two. Blonde Dinah, by virtue of her profession, is locked into a sexual body and the sense of this body as both sexual and aged is clear; the negative presentation of this verges on the grotesque, as other characters judge that Dinah is too old, with her seamed face and dyed hair, to continue as a prostitute. And yet, it is Dinah's wrinkled and sagging body that offers the newly retired and lonely George Harrison his first glimpse of female genitals, and indeed his first sight of a fully naked female body. The conjunction of the 'shammy-leather breasts' and thinning

pubic hair, and the exposed genitalia, that George finds himself unable to describe, present a sexualised and aged body, one with the agency Dinah exhibits in her active pursuit of George and yet the constriction her profession entails (Barker 1982: 230–1). Significantly, the thing that most disturbs George when he wakes next to the naked Dinah is that she ‘look[s] like Gladys’ (George’s wife), preventing him from distinguishing between ‘decent’ women ‘and the rest’ (Barker 1982: 230). Insistently blurring the sexual and the non-sexual, ageing and agency, this scene presents these characters experiencing sexuality, not *despite* their ageing bodies, but *of* their ageing bodies.

A more disturbing aspect of sexuality is presented in *Liza’s England* in the conversation between Stephen and his father as Walter lies dying. Walter admits to a fascination with teenage girls, that leads him to loiter around school gates. Walter claims that this is not from lust but from a desire to be that age again, though this is unconvincing. Stephen interprets this confidence negatively, assuming that Walter is arguing that Stephen’s own sexuality means that he can’t afford to judge his father. What this conversation does insist upon is active sexual desire in an older man, a desire that does not conform and so is disturbing.

Conclusion

In these three novels ageing men and women are clearly constructed and situated in certain ways by the discourses to which they are subject. Often silenced and infantilised, with bodies literally imposed upon by others, they can be read as characters aged by culture in specific and often demeaning forms. This is not to say that they are passive in all of this; Liza, the garrulous political pirate, is certainly evidence of this. And, crucially, all three novels offer (to differing extents) the perspectives of the ageing subjects, challenging the ageist gaze in the presentation of complex self- and often age-aware characters. Nevertheless, Barker’s novels foreground a more challenging aspect of ageing (and illness) in the ways in which the ageing and infirm body is both made ‘hypervisible’ (Woodward 1999) and yet irreducible to discursive production. These three novels keep open the ambiguous and contradictory position of the ageing body. It is silent and imposed upon by others; hypervisible and disturbingly powerful; controlled and infantilised. It is central to those characters struggling with infirmity and impending death. Offering the points of view of ageing and infirm characters and those who care for them, the novels present a multifaceted and sometimes disturbing picture of the body, not reducing ageing to the biomedical, but insisting upon the need to consider the place of the body in

discourses of ageing. Fiction therefore becomes a crucial part of the ways in which ageing is debated as it enacts the very limits of discursivity, gesturing towards what ‘defies linguistic re-cognition’ (Bernard 2007: 183) and housing the apparent contradictions of ageing without attempting to diminish the challenges that these present to the reader and to society.

NOTES

- 1 See also the work of literary scholars Waxman (1990), Chivers (2003), Brennan (2005) and Paloge (2007).
- 2 *The Century's Daughter* was the original title of this novel when published in 1986.
- 3 See Brannigan (2005a: 56–76) for an extended discussion of storytelling in this novel, including analysis of narrative technique.
- 4 On women and ageism, see Arber, Davidson and Ginn (2003), Bernard *et al.* (2000), Woodward (1999) and Twigg (2004).
- 5 See Twigg (2004) on deep old age and the fourth age. She defines this as 75+, but, as she points out, the definition is ‘qualitative’ rather than quantitative.

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