

“Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together?”¹: The Literary Sibling as Dr Frankenstein in Pat Barker’s *Toby’s Room*

Agata Woźniak,
independent scholar

Abstract: Harold Bloom’s highly influential model of the ‘anxiety of influence’ – the *agon* between fathers and sons – and the haunting presence of the ‘myth’ of literary Modernism, which all succeeding generations of writers have had to contend with, may induce literary critics to view contemporary writers as the ‘children’ or ‘grandchildren’ of their great Modernist precursors. While investigating the intertextual relationship between Pat Barker and Virginia Woolf, however, it is, I argue, far more useful to analyse Barker’s engagement with Woolf’s work in the context of Juliet Mitchell’s theories of sibling relationships (2003). The lateral aspect of Barker’s intertextual relationship with her precursor is best demonstrated through a detailed analysis of *Toby’s Room* (2012), whose title is a direct reference to Woolf’s third novel, *Jacob’s Room* (1922). Like Elinor Brooke, whose paintings express her desire for freedom from the oppressive absence of her dead brother, Toby, Barker attempts to „clear [some] imaginative space”² for herself, to make some ‘room’ in which she can exist, by challenging a few of Woolf’s most influential views, as expressed in her fiction and in such works as *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. *Toby’s Room* is thus the product of Barker’s combined admiration and hostility towards Woolf’s oeuvre – an ambivalent *hommage* in which Barker positions herself not as Woolf’s descendant, but as a literary sibling. By re-assembling various fragments of Woolf’s oeuvre, just as Elinor re-assembles the ‘pieces’ of her brother, Barker resurrects her precursor in such a way as to be able to simultaneously honour her and to allow her own literary self to exist.

Keywords: Pat Barker, Virginia Woolf, influence, model, siblings, *hommage*, re-construction, literary criticism, contemporary women’s writing

1 (Woolf 1992b, 161)

2 (Bloom 1997)

We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred
 fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate,
 to surmise, and even to use the imagination.
 (Woolf 1993, 84)

Virginia Woolf's work has cast a shadow over contemporary British women's writing,³ not only due to the haunting presence of the 'myth' of literary modernism, which is part of her legacy, but also because of her status as a feminist icon. One of the writers who have chosen to openly engage with Woolf's novels and non-fiction is Pat Barker, whose complex intertextual relationship with the Bloomsbury author – an awkward combination of sameness and difference, admiration and hostility, *hommage* and repudiation – is reminiscent of the relationship between siblings as explored in Juliet Mitchell's ground-breaking study, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (2003). I argue that Barker's ambivalence towards her precursor, which is particularly evident in *Toby's Room* (2012), is reflected in Elinor Brooke's relationship with her brother. Like Barker, who both resurrects and repudiates Woolf's work in her novel, Elinor simultaneously commemorates and rejects Toby through the medium of her art. In the process, both the protagonist and Barker herself push their subjects to the margins of their work, which is, nevertheless, suffused with their presence, in an attempt to make some room for their own creative selves to exist.

A Sibling Model of Literary Influence

In her study of sibling relationships, Juliet Mitchell argues that every small child expecting a sibling "imagines [the] new baby as himself reproduced" (Mitchell 2003, 99). Consequently, the subject's own self is temporarily lost, creating a void or "gap" characteristic of traumatic experience (9). The new baby is loved narcissistically and simultaneously hated for its "dethronement" (200) of the self (10). And even though Mitchell focuses her analysis on the older child, she makes it clear that the trauma of the "loss of uniqueness", which is, "at least temporarily, equivalent to annihilation", is also felt by the younger child (43), who both hates "the pre-existing older brother or sister that it will never be" (10)

3 References to Woolf's work are present in the fiction of numerous contemporary British writers, including Ali Smith, Jeanette Winterson and Maggie Gee.

and “registers [the] threat to its existence from the older sibling” (47), who experiences “murderous desires” (43) towards this new version of himself/herself. Stressing the curious interplay of love and hate taking place within all sibling relationships, Mitchell argues that sameness and difference, affection and the desire to kill – which the child “experiences [...] simultaneously” (37-8) – have to be successfully negotiated, for it is only by recognizing the other as not only the same, or “alike in position”, but also as “different in identity” (103) that the child can accept what Mitchell refers to as the “law of the mother” or the law of “seriality”, according to which “[t]here is room for you as well as me” (44).

Despite the universal nature of the phenomenon of sibling relationships, which affects not only brothers and sisters but also only children, it is the “vertical relationship of child-to-parent” that has been “greatly privilege[d] over all else” “in all the social sciences” (x). This is clearly demonstrated in the study of literary influence, where writers are almost uniformly fathers or mothers, sons or daughters.⁴ What the use of Mitchell’s study for the purpose of constructing a model of influence can do, on the other hand, is to demonstrate the simultaneity, the interplay, and (in cases such as Barker’s) the closeness – in the relationships between women writers – of sameness and admiration on the one hand and difference and hostility on the other. Mitchell herself states that “we need [...] a paradigm shift from the near-exclusive dominance of vertical comprehension to the *interaction of the horizontal and the vertical* in our social and in our psychological understanding” (2003, 1; my emphasis).

Art As the Reconstruction of the Dead

The lateral aspect of Barker’s intertextual relationship with Virginia Woolf is best demonstrated through a detailed analysis of *Toby’s Room* (2012), which has a distinctly Woolfian title. Released ninety years after the publication of *Jacob’s Room* (1922), it might be read as both an instance of *hommage* and an open expression of hostility towards the earlier writer.

Significantly, both novels reflect an attempt to cope with the death of a beloved brother, Toby/Thoby. Barker’s work tells the story of Elinor Brooke, whose brother commits suicide whilst fighting in the First World War and whose grief is most successfully worked through in her paintings. In turn, Woolf’s

4 The most obvious example is Harold Bloom’s *agon* between fathers and sons (Bloom 1997).

protagonist is frequently assumed to be based on Virginia Woolf's brother who died prematurely of typhoid. Valerie Sanders, who mentions a few similarities between Thoby Stephen and Woolf's hero (Sanders 2002, 165-6), argues that Woolf attempts, in this novel, "to reconstruct her dead brother from isolated memories of him" (166). Interestingly, Jacob's enigmatic figure, which the numerous characters of Woolf's work try unsuccessfully to fathom, mirrors the structure of the whole novel, for *Jacob's Room* is made up of a series of relatively isolated scenes. What joins them is the unknowable main character, as well as the fact that they have been assembled and subsumed under a single title – what Hermione Lee has described as "a biography of fragments" (Lee 1977, 72).

A Frankenstein-like resurrection of the dead performed by joining separate pieces – reminiscent of the way Mary Shelley's hero created his monster out of body parts – becomes even more literal in *Toby's Room*. As one reviewer has insightfully observed, "through her art, Elinor seeks to retrieve a dismembered self, embarking on the immemorial journey of Isis to collect the parts of a brother into a whole" (Davies 2012). This interpretation is reminiscent of the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal's argument regarding the function of art. Referring, among others, to Melanie Klein's theory of the "depressive position" (Klein 1935, 153), she contends that

all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. It is when the world within us is destroyed [...], when our loved ones are in fragments [...] that we must re-create our world anew, re-assemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life. (Segal 1994, 491-2)

Similarly, according to Mitchell, both after the birth and death of a sibling, the surviving brother or sister has to reconstruct the self that they had subsequently lost, for "if a brother dies or is killed in war, his sister will retard an awareness of his loss by identifying with him" (Mitchell 2003, 191). Both the birth and the death of a sibling are thus seen by Mitchell as equivalent to the death of the self.

Elinor uses her art not only to commemorate and reconstruct her brother, but also to capture his essence – an effort bringing to mind Lily Briscoe's painting of Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), as well as Woolf's own portrayal of Jacob Flanders/Thoby Stephen. Like Barker's protagonist, who struggles

to acquire a complete picture of her brother, for she knows very little about his private life, Lily is unable – until the very end, when she manages to “[strip] away” Mrs Ramsay’s iconic beauty (Waugh 2012, 40) – to truly *see* the subject of her painting. What is more, the empty space on Lily’s canvas can be seen as symbolising the trauma of her loss of Mrs Ramsay. It is thus suggestive of the empty landscapes in Elinor’s paintings:

she [Lily] scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space. Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space? (Woolf 1992b, 172)⁵

Elinor Brooke as a Dead(ly) Sister

Despite Elinor’s artistic tribute to her brother, her attitude to him is highly ambivalent, as typical of early sibling relationships (Mitchell 2003, 37-8). On the one hand, she desires to merge with him, as evident in their incestuous relationship and in Elinor’s identification with Toby’s stillborn twin sister. At the same time, the protagonist’s sense of herself as a mirror-image of the dead baby illustrates her feeling of entrapment within her relationship with Toby and a related desire for freedom and independence. As Elinor’s mother informs her at the beginning of the novel, Toby had a twin sister, who “had died quite late in the pregnancy”. As Toby continued to grow, he squashed the other baby against the wall of the uterus, turning her into a roll of flesh, a so-called “papyrus twin” (Barker 2012a, 17). And even though he did not kill the other foetus, Elinor struggles not to blame him for her death. Following the conversation with her mother, she experiences a strong feeling of identification with her dead sister. Looking into the mirror, which “stared back at her with no sign of recognition,” she sees

floating between her and the glass, [...] the flattened, scroll-like body of the little female thing Toby had killed. Oh, what nonsense, of course he hadn’t killed it; [...]. It had died, that was all, it had

5 This passage is also quoted by Hermione Lee (1977, 131), whose chapter on *To the Lighthouse* drew my attention to the importance of empty spaces in the novel.

died, and he went on growing, as he was bound to do, *taking up more and more room until there was no space left for her.* (20; my emphasis)

Elinor's use of the word "room" is significant here, not merely because it refers to the womb, but also because it mirrors its use in Juliet Mitchell's study of sibling relationships, where it appears as a metaphor for the struggle between the newborn child and its brother or sister, who must accept what Mitchell refers to as the "law of the mother". This law "introduces seriality – one, two, three, four siblings, playmates, school friends ... [...]. *There is room for you as well as me*" (Mitchell 2003, 44; my emphasis).

As if to strengthen the association between Elinor and her dead sister, Barker literally puts her protagonist in a similar position to that of Toby's twin. When Toby is seriously ill in bed, Elinor "curl[s] up in the narrow space between his spine and the wall", the word "curl" suggesting an ancient, folded manuscript, or papyrus.

[...] [A]fter a while she did manage to doze off, though she was aware, all the time, of the other body beside her, kicking, turning, never still, [...], *always wanting more room, more room.* [...] She wriggled away, but *he seemed to be following her, pressing in on her, until her face was only a few inches from the wall.* (Barker 2012a, 56; my emphasis)

Consequently, the landscapes in which Toby appears as an indistinct figure on the edge of the canvas can be seen as acts of revenge on Elinor's part for his unintended mutilation of the other baby and for "always wanting more room, more room". By pushing her brother to the edge of her paintings, Elinor leaves nearly all of the space to herself and her dead sister. In other words, the empty landscape can be seen as representing Elinor's and her sister's independence and freedom. It is thus a highly feminist space, a Woolfian "room of one's own" (Woolf 1998a), where Elinor can resurrect her predecessor – a sister who, by being *literally* thwarted by male presence, resembles Woolf's famous vision of Judith Shakespeare (63) – and where she can also fulfil her own ambitions as a person and an artist. Toby's pre-natal 'crime' makes him a symbol of male oppression, especially as Elinor's sense of the sexism raging around her is particularly strong, if not excessive, as when she reflects on her aversion to the word

“‘muse’”, which “*always makes me think of seedy old men groping young girls*” (Barker 2012a, 206; Barker’s italics). Her desire to liberate her twin, and thus herself, is reflected in Barker’s subtle reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s famous short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). On visiting Paul in his lodgings, Elinor notices that “[t]he walls were covered in a dingy yellow paper with an intricate paisley pattern that would have driven her mad in a week” (175-6). Elinor is thus identified with Gilman’s protagonist, a woman writer who discovers a female figure trapped within the pattern of the wallpaper as if behind bars and whose obsession to liberate her – a mirror image of herself – leads to a mental collapse. It could even be argued that the phrase “*papyrus twin*” (17; my emphasis) establishes a connection between literary sisters, or literary precursors, and the dead baby. It is also worth noting, in this context, that Elinor is an artist interested primarily in women – in the female, rather than the male, body (36).

The Violence of Barker’s Literary Sisterhood

That female authors ought to focus their attention on depicting their own sex is advocated by Woolf in that Bible of literary feminism, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Woolf criticises the literary output of past generations for its omission of a woman’s view of her own body (Woolf 1998a, 115) and mind and their neglect of exclusively female relationships. She also complains that “all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex” (107). She is, in other words, suggesting that the space occupied by men in art needs to be reclaimed by and for women and that the male point of view of a woman ought to be replaced by a female one.

But whilst Barker may appear to agree with this argument, her own fiction attests to the fact that she is against the marginalisation of men in women’s literature. While her two most recent works – *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *Women of Troy* (2021) – suggest a preoccupation with female experience and a woman’s point of view, in much of her fiction to date, including the *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-95), *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (1988) and *Border Crossing* (2001), it is women who are pushed to the edges and men who constitute the centre of Barker’s attention. Furthermore, the empty space on Elinor’s canvases symbolises not only the apparent freedom and independence of the female artist – the Woolfian “room of one’s own” – but also trauma, absence and loneliness. After Toby leaves Elinor’s lodgings, for instance, she finds herself “staring at the space

where he'd been, feeling the empty air close around his absence" (Barker 2012a, 30). Her overwhelming sense of grief after his death is yet another proof of it.

In addition, Woolf's room of one's own is shown as a site of violence. Woolf herself sees it in two different ways. It is, thus, on the one hand, a space in which the female artist can freely think and create, although this meaning applies to it only in the sense of a physical space, away from the distractions of family life. As a space inside the mind, it is far more complex, for the woman writer must fight against prejudice directed at her from all sides—from "the bishops and the deans, the doctors and the professors, the patriarchs and the pedagogues", who inform her solemnly that "'[w]omen can't paint, women can't write ...'" (Woolf 1992b, 54). Woolf's vision of a room of one's own as both a physical and a creative space aligns it with the womb, a parallel clearly established in Elinor's paintings. As suggested above, in the case of Elinor's sister, the womb is also a death chamber. The similarities between the three are, in fact, strengthened by the words themselves, for "room", "womb" and "tomb" are near-homophones. But whilst the womb in *Toby's Room* is seen by Elinor as a site of violence inflicted by a brother on a sister, her own 'womb', creative mind or the space in her paintings which represent it is the site of female aggression against men, for it is only by reducing Toby to a "shadowy figure" (Barker 2012a, 95) on the edge of her paintings that Elinor can reclaim the space for his, and her own, dead sister. Most importantly, this feature of Elinor's work illustrates the tendency to diminish the presence of men and to focus on portraying women in feminist writing and art. Significantly, when Elinor hides Toby's army clothes in the attic, she feels as though she had "disposed of a corpse" (81). Similarly, Paul reflects that "[h]er talent flourished on his death, like Isabella's pot of basil growing out of a *murdered* man's brains" (96; my emphasis). What her art represents is thus not so much the harm done to the female artist by the system of patriarchy, but the bloody chamber of feminism, filled with the 'corpses' of men.

Barker also makes it clear that women are not as innocent as feminism would like them to be. Specifically, Elinor remembers "*women in Deptford hurling bricks through the windows of 'German' shopkeepers*", as well as the white feathers handed out by girls to embarrass young men into volunteering. "No", she concludes, "*it's not true, women aren't more peaceful than men. [...] the one thing this war has shown conclusively is how amazingly and repulsively belligerent women are. Some women*" (71; Barker's italics and emphasis). Elinor is here referring to Woolf's views on women and war, according to which waging war is an essentially

male need, and since women neither feel the same urge nor are able to contribute to the making of political decisions in the same way as men, they ought to refuse to contribute to it in any form whatsoever, “to maintain an attitude of complete indifference” (Woolf 1998b, 310). In this seemingly passive way, Woolf argues, they are actually helping to “prevent war” (314). As pointed out by Barker herself, Elinor’s initial attitude to World War I is very similar (Williams 2012), prompting her to isolate herself from it completely. Thus, when Michael Stoddart, a conscientious objector, tries to elicit Elinor’s reaction to the fact that he is not on the front, her reply is that

[...] *it didn’t concern me. As a woman, it didn’t concern me. To be honest, I was copying something I’d heard Mrs Woolf say last night after dinner, about how women are outside the political process and therefore the war’s got nothing to do with them. It sounded clever when she said it, and stupid when I repeated it.* (Barker 2012a, 71; Barker’s italics)

The reason why it sounds “*stupid*” is arguably that it is merely a copy of Woolf’s opinion, rather than Elinor’s own. It is at this point that she recalls her own experience of women’s warmongering and aggressive acts, a recollection which undermines Woolf’s views on the subject. The challenge is only partial, however, for the statement that women are as belligerent as men is qualified by the addition of “*Some women*” (71; Barker’s italics and emphasis). When she is offered the position of Tonks’s assistant at Queen’s Hospital—a job which involves drawing the mutilated faces of his patients—she replies that she is ““trying not to have anything to do with the war”” “[b]ecause it’s evil. Total destruction. Of everything”” (141). Despite these qualms, she accepts the job, which provides her with an experience that finally liberates her from the influence of Woolf—who is, as Barker’s portrayal of her implies, isolated from the horrors of the conflict and thus not really qualified to comment upon it. Elinor thus manages to form opinions which are distinctly her own, if not uninfluenced by the Modernist writer. She finally has the courage to express them during her visit to Garsington, when Ottoline admits that she cannot understand why Sassoon would “*want to go back and look after his men*”:

I can actually and I said so. Everybody seemed surprised. I suppose I don’t normally say very much. It’s a hangover from being a Sladette: look pretty,

keep your mouth shut. I said I admired people like Tonks, who hates the war as much as anybody but nevertheless spends hour after hour drawing ruined faces, because it's the only thing he can do to help. And perhaps looking after a particular group of men is the only thing Sassoon can do.
(205; Barker's italics)

Consequently, although it may at first appear more natural to connect Virginia Woolf with Elinor's dead sister, whom the artist tries to resurrect in her work—a traditional feminist interpretation—I would argue that Barker's intertextual relationship with Woolf bears more similarities with Elinor's ambivalent attitude to Toby, for it represents Barker's desire to liberate herself from the Modernist writer's influence, or, in Harold Bloom's words, to "clear [some] imaginative space" (1997, 5) for herself. Like Elinor's brother, who is placed on the very edge of her paintings, the figure of Woolf—who briefly appears in the novel—is present at the metaphorical 'edges' of Barker's text. Although Elinor does mention meeting the Bloomsbury author, her presence (if not her views) is overshadowed by that of Vanessa Bell and Ottoline Morrell. Barker's marginalisation of her precursor in this way thus echoes Juliet Mitchell's depiction of sibling relationships as a struggle for personal space. More emphatically, Elinor's attitude to the Modernist writer is a highly hostile one. Having presented Woolf's views on women and war as her own, for example, she points out that Michael Stoddart "*didn't have the temerity to disagree with me. No doubt Mrs W's [Woolf's] views are sacrosanct*" (Barker 2012a, 72; Barker's italics). Describing her meeting with the author upon arriving in Charleston, she also presents Woolf as a rather unpleasant woman who appears not to remember Elinor despite having met her several times.

By challenging Woolf's views on war and her vision of a room of one's own, as well as by presenting her in an unfavourable light, Barker manages to undermine not only the myth of the literary sisterhood of feminism, but also Woolf's status as a feminist icon. Her attack on the latter does not end there, for she also questions Woolf's famous concept of androgyny, which is illustrated, in *Toby's Room*, both by Elinor's paintings and, more literally, in the coexistence of the two foetuses of both sexes—Toby's and his sister's—side by side in the womb. The womb containing the twins is, in fact, a subversive re-telling of the famous scene in Woolf's essay when the narrator illustrates her idea of androgyny by the image of a man and a woman getting into the

same taxi-cab (Woolf 1998a, 125-6). Significantly, for Woolf, the best writers are androgynous, their minds “resonant”, “porous”, “naturally creative, incandescent and undivided”, the two sexes coexisting in the mind, if not in the same proportions—for “in the man’s brain the man predominates over the woman” and vice versa—then in “harmony” (128) and “peace” (136). Barker shows Woolf’s ideal of androgyny as a utopia, suggesting—through the symbol of Elinor’s paintings as well as the story of Toby’s birth, which Elinor interprets as a site of battle between the sexes—that the male and female elements cannot, as Woolf would wish, be reconciled.

Toby’s Room as Hommage Through Reconstruction

Like Elinor’s brother, who is pushed to the edge of her paintings, Woolf is thus presented as a dangerous presence capable of annihilating her younger literary sibling. But just as Elinor’s art is a simultaneous representation of her struggle for expression outside Toby’s influence and a tribute and reconstruction of her brother, so is Barker’s novel a powerful *hommage* to Woolf. This is most evident in its title, for the phrase encapsulates not only Woolf’s biography (in its reference to Thoby Stephen), but also the Bloomsbury writer’s third work of fiction. There are, in fact, numerous parallels between Jacob Flanders and Toby Brooke. Both die at virtually the same age (Toby is twenty-seven, Jacob—twenty-six) whilst fighting in the First World War and neither is ultimately knowable to the people who come into contact with him. Both are, in this way—and as a result of their deaths—defined primarily by their absence. Barker’s own description of *Toby’s Room* is perhaps the best illustration of the connection between the two characters, for she calls her latest work the “story of a man who, actually, in the novel, hardly appears”. She also draws attention to the fact that “the reader gets to know him, basically, through the minds of the other characters” (Barker 2012b). Toby’s skin is also frequently described as “glow[ing]” (2012a, 57; 263), “gleaming” (162) or “glitter[ing]” (14; 250, Barker’s italics), a fact which connects him with Woolf’s protagonist, whose “whole person”, after long exposure to the sun and sea air, [...] *tingled and glowed* so as to make even black cloth an imperfect screen” (Woolf 1976, 54; my emphasis).

Less obviously, Barker’s portrayal of Toby Brooke echoes the enigmatic figure of Percival in *The Waves* (1931). Like Toby Brooke and Jacob Flanders, Percival dies at a young age and is seen by the reader “through the minds”

and memories “of the other characters”, for he himself “hardly appears” in the text. In addition, while Toby is a fearless army captain who often risks the lives of other soldiers, as well as his own, to bring in dead bodies and find identity discs, Percival is perceived by Bernard as “a hero” who is not only admired, but also unsuccessfully imitated, inspiring the other boys to “assume the [...] air of soldiers in the presence of their captain” (Woolf 1992c, 92).

Toby Brooke echoes one more Woolfian figure – Septimus Smith (*Mrs Dalloway*) – who also fights in the First World War. Both men are victimised and driven to suicide by a society which castigates what it perceives as effeminacy in men, whether in the form of Toby’s homosexuality or Septimus’s ‘unmanly’ nervous breakdown in the face of the horrors he experienced in the trenches. The suffering of Woolf’s and Barker’s respective protagonists, coupled with their symbolic resurrection by their female counterparts – Elinor through her art and Mrs Dalloway during her party⁶ – make them into Christ-like figures. Toby is, in fact, explicitly, compared with Christ, as when Elinor sees his ghost – her brother come back from the dead – and remarks that “his arms [were] outstretched in a parody of crucifixion” (Barker 2012a, 263).

Apart from Toby Brooke, who, like one of Sir Francis Galton’s composite portraits, unites various aspects of Thoby Stephen, Jacob Flanders, Percival and Septimus, the character who can be perceived as a direct reference to Woolf’s fiction is Elinor, whose name is arguably an echo of Eleanor Pargiter, Woolf’s protagonist in *The Years* (1937) – a novel full of siblings and sibling relationships, particularly those between brothers and sisters. The most intense of these is the relationship between Eleanor’s younger sister, Rose, and her brother Martin, whose frequent quarrels resemble those often found between lovers. It could, in fact, be argued that the relationship is of a romantic, if not a sexual, nature, although Woolf never states this explicitly. When, many years later, Martin and Rose recall a particular “row”, which was “one of the worst” and one of “so many”, Eleanor senses that “[t]here was something queer about the memory”, for Rose “spoke with a curious intensity” (Woolf 2004, 136). By portraying the incestuous relationship between Elinor and Toby, Barker can thus be seen as filling in the gaps – the unsaid – in Woolf’s fiction.

6 “She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (Woolf 1992a, 204).

As well as a few of Woolf’s characters and themes, Barker’s novel borrows a significant number of images from the Modernist writer’s work. Most prevalent in *Toby’s Room* are symbolic representations of life and death, such as (respectively) light and dark, hot and cold, rising and falling, up and down, all of which recur throughout Woolf’s oeuvre. Of these, rising and falling are perhaps most prominent in *Mrs Dalloway*, where they function as mirror images of each other (Miller 1982, 53). This is also the case in *Toby’s Room*, where the words “rising” and “falling” are used repeatedly and where the characters can frequently be seen going up and down staircases, echoing both Clarissa’s daily climb to her attic bedroom and the elderly man “[c]oming down the staircase opposite” the Smiths’ window seconds before Septimus’s suicide (1992a, 164). Life and death are also connected in *Toby’s Room* through the appearance of bluebottles and butterflies feeding on animal droppings (Barker 2012a, 8; 67), as well as birds devouring a discarded chicken carcass (59). This theme is, significantly, explored in *Jacob’s Room*, where butterflies feed on animal flesh (Woolf 1976, 22). Both Barker and Woolf can thus be seen as presenting waste, or death, as a source of life in very literal terms. As well as that, Barker’s use of these images arguably symbolises Elinor’s mourning for her brother, which involves her introjection of his qualities into herself⁷ and her painting, as well as the fact that Toby’s death feeds, or inspires, her art.

As the above parallels make clear, *Toby’s Room* is much more than an engagement with Woolf’s third work of fiction. It is, rather, a compilation of references to the most important works of Woolf’s fictional and critical oeuvre, many of which have been enumerated above. Like the protagonist of *Toby’s Room*, whose paintings are a Frankenstein-like attempt to re-assemble the fragments of her dead brother, as well as herself, Barker appears to be putting together the various pieces of Woolf’s *body of work*—her criticism, fiction and biography—in an attempt to resurrect her precursor, to “infuse life into dead fragments” (Segal 1994, 492), as much as to try and arrive at the essence of her subject. It is in this sense that Barker’s attempt to reconstruct her literary sibling recalls Elinor’s obsession with finding out the identity of the corpse in whose dissection she participates as part of her training as an artist. In order for the man’s body to be analysed in detail, it has to be dismembered, its fragments

7 Elinor remarks that she feels as though “*I’m turning into Toby. [...] As if you cope with loss by ingesting the dead person*” (Barker 2012a, 206; Barker’s italics).

scrutinised in isolation. Elinor remarks that “[t]he need to name him, to understand how and why he’d come to this, grew in her with each stage of his disintegration” (Barker 2012a, 45). But while Elinor does make the attempt to find out the man’s name, she is forced to abandon her quest with less knowledge of his identity than she possessed when the body was still whole. This thread in the story is thus reminiscent of Mitchell’s observation that “we murder to dissect” (Mitchell 2003, 120)—a treatment to which literature is also typically subjected, for in order to analyse a particular novel, as well as a writer’s whole body of work, it is necessary to divide it into parts: characters, themes, symbols, influences and the like. Literary critics, writers and readers all commit this violation, dismembering the text in the process of reading, re-writing and literary analysis. As both Elinor’s story and Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* demonstrate, those who attempt to return to the whole are doomed to fail. This is evident in Elinor’s only portrait of Toby, in which his face fills the whole canvas, and which does not quite “work”. Instead, Elinor finds that she has “slipped into self-portraiture” (Barker 2012a, 261), recalling the remark of the narrator of *Jacob’s Room*, who states that “[n]obody sees anyone as he is [...] They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves... .” (Woolf 1976, 28; my emphasis).

The “whole” perceived by others being an artificial construction, the only successful paintings of Elinor’s brother are those in which the absence, the ‘wound’, is acknowledged, and where he himself is but a shadowy figure placed in the corner of the painting. This does not mean that his position in these landscapes is not simultaneously ‘central’, however, for the figure influences the mood of the whole picture. Woolf’s presence in *Toby’s Room* is similar, for however numerous are Barker’s references to her work, many of them are so subtle that they could easily be missed were it not for the explicitly Woolfian title of the novel, as well as for the Bloomsbury author’s brief appearance in Elinor’s diary. These echoes do, nevertheless, strengthen the sense of Woolf’s presence throughout *Toby’s Room*, for Barker connects these fragments of Woolf’s life and work not only through the figure of the Modernist writer, but also through their presence within Barker’s novel. The fragments remain merely fragments, however, for a full reconstruction, or resurrection, of the dead is impossible. Rather than trying to present a whole, which would constitute, at best, a partial self-portrait, Barker arguably settles for the acknowledgement of absence, which is the best way of conveying the essence, or presence, of her literary sibling. It is, nonetheless, an ambivalent *hommage*,

Mitchell’s unresolved sibling conflict, for by pushing Woolf to the margins of her text and by questioning some of her most influential political and literary views, Barker opens up the space for her own literary self to exist, managing to retain, in the process, some *room* of her own.

Works Cited

- Barker, Pat. 2012a. *Toby’s Room*. Hamish Hamilton: London.
- Bloom, Harold. 1997. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1973.
- Davies, Stevie. 2012. “*Toby’s Room*, By Pat Barker.” *Independent*, Aug 25. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/tobys-room-by-pat-barker-8076665.html>.
- Klein, Melanie. 1935. “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States.” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 16:145-174.
- Lee, Hermione. 1977. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*. London: Methuen.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 1982. “Mrs. *Dalloway*. Repetition as the Raising of the Dead.” In *Fiction and Repetition*, 176-202. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mitchell, Juliet. 2003. *Siblings: Sex and Violence*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Sanders, Valerie. 2002. *The Brother-Sister Culture in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Segal, Hanna. 1994. “A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics.” In *Essential Papers on Object Loss*, edited by Rita V. Frankiel, 486-507. New York: New York University Press. First published 1952.
- Waugh, Patricia. 2012. “‘Did I Not Banish the Soul?’ Thinking Otherwise, Woolf-Wise.” In *Contradictory Woolf: Selected Papers from the Twenty-First Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Derek Ryan and Stella Bolaki, 23-42. Clemson, South Carolina: Clemson University Digital Press. <http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/pubs/vwcon/21.pdf>.
- Williams, John. 2012. “Art and War: Pat Barker Talks About ‘Toby’s Room.’” *New York Times*, Nov 8. <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/08/art-and-war-pat-barker-talks-about-tobys-room/>.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1976. *Jacob’s Room*. London: Granada. First published 1922.
- . 1992a. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Penguin. First published 1925.
- . 1992b. *To the Lighthouse*. London: Penguin. First published 1927.
- . 1992c. *The Waves*. London: Penguin. First published 1931.

—. 1998a. *A Room of One's Own*. In *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, edited by Morag Shiach, 3-149. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1929.

—. 1998b. *Three Guineas*. In *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, edited by Morag Shiach, 151-414. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1938.

—. 2004. *The Years*. London: Vintage. First published 1937.