Pat Barker’s Regeneration Trilogy
by Hilda D. Spear

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by

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Scope of Topic

Pat Barker, who was born in 1943, during the Second World War, approached the events and literature of the First World War through her interest in history. This Bookmark looks at the three novels which comprise her 'Regeneration' Trilogy and aims:

I. to look at the imaginative recreation of the events of war and to distinguish for the reader the various historical and fictional strands
II. to encourage an interest in literature of the war period and
III. to share with the reader my own pleasure in and appreciation of the novels.

BOOKS TO READ

*The Eye in the Door* (1993); Penguin Books, 1994

NOTES

Pat Barker had already published a number of novels, *The Century's Daughter* (1986) - later renamed *Liza's England* - probably being the best among them, when *Regeneration* appeared. In this and in the other two novels of the trilogy she makes considerable use of the literature, particularly the poetry, of the war period, as well as of historical research into the events of the war and the conduct of medical work with 'shell-shocked' patients. Though not absolutely necessary for the enjoyment of these novels, some knowledge of the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen will greatly enhance the understanding of the account of life at Craiglockhart Hospital. It may also add a frisson of pleasure when brief references to and quotations from the poems, which appear frequently, are recognised.

The whole trilogy is a vivid reconstruction of a short historical period at the end of the First World War. It begins in July 1917 with Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘Declaration against the war’; it ends with one of the final battles of the war in early November 1918 in which Wilfred Owen was killed. If there is a 'hero' in this trilogy, it is Dr Rivers, who is present throughout and whose work with neurasthenic patients binds together the three novels.

Though ostensibly the trilogy is concerned with the healing of psychologically damaged soldiers, there are many other themes which lie just below the surface. Prominent among these is the father-son relationship which is reflected both in the relationship between Rivers and his patients and in that between the wounded officers and their men. Likewise, the question of class significantly intervenes in the fictional persona of Billy Prior who, in some respects has affinities with Wilfred Owen and who, being in the Manchester Regiment, was used by the author to fill in part of Owen’s story. Homosexuality, too, is a theme which is gradually developed during the course of the three books. Some of these themes will be briefly explored in the sections on the separate novels below.
Regeneration

Regeneration is Siegfried Sassoon's story from the time he was sent by the military authorities to Craiglockhart Hospital in July 1917 until he was discharged as fit for active duty nearly five months later.

The title of the novel originates in a medical experiment undertaken by Rivers and his friend Henry Head, in which they severed Head's radial nerve, stitched the wound together again and then made observations on its long drawn-out recovery over five years. Symbolically, it refers to the damaged nerves of the soldiers and their gradual regeneration under the care of Dr Rivers and the hospital staff.

The novel is set mainly in Edinburgh at Craiglockhart Hospital where, during the First World War, 'shell-shocked' officers from the trenches were sent to be cured.

The reader is introduced to Sassoon indirectly, first through a full transcript of his 'Declaration' against the war and secondly through a discussion about him between Dr Rivers and Dr Bryce, the Commanding Officer at the hospital. It is not until the second chapter that we meet Sassoon himself.

The scene at Craiglockhart is fleshed out by the presence of a number of other patients, all suffering from neurasthenic problems. Though Billy Prior, Anderson, Broadbent, Willard and the others, apart from Wilfred Owen and Sassoon himself, are fictional characters, they are prototypes of the sick officers who were sent to Rivers for treatment. Sassoon's poem 'Survivors', quoted in full in chapter 16 was written as a direct result of what he saw at Craiglockhart - the stammering, the 'disconnected talk', 'the ghosts of friends who died', the dreams dripping with murder - and Pat Barker has shown her characters suffering from a variety of such ailments.

Presiding over the whole horrifying scene is the sympathetic figure of Dr Rivers, himself at this time physically ill, psychologically troubled and desperately trying to help men whose traumas lay deep beneath the surface of their personalities, buried in war horrors that he was convinced could be laid to rest only by dredging them up through the layers of determined repression until they were met again and fully confronted by the sufferer.

Rivers, whose treatment of neurological illness was at the time revolutionary, takes a central role in the novel, as he struggles against his conscience to do his duty and to get officers such as Sassoon and Prior back to active service. He gains the sympathy of the reader and eventually the confidence of most of his patients.

The dilemma which he is facing by the time that he meets Sassoon shadows Sassoon's own problem: Sassoon does not oppose the war itself; he opposes the lack of definite war-aims which would bring an end to the conflict and the consequent needless loss of life. Rivers is an officer in the R.A.M.C. whose job as a healer appears to be to help men become fit enough to go back to the Front and be killed. They are both, however, aware of the fact that, whilst the neurasthenic officers in Craiglockhart Hospital are physically safe, there are thousands of fighting men in France, suffering and dying. This is finally the catalyst which prompts Sassoon to give up his protest against the war. Rivers's treatment has forced him to face the truth of his withdrawal from the Front and he realises that his present safety is more bitter than the danger of being with 'the Battalion in the mud'. In his dreams he hears his men calling out to him:

'Why are you here with all your watches ended?
'From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the line.'
The shock of the poem lies in the line which follows: ‘In bitter safety I awake, unfriended’; it is this understanding that makes Sassoon decide to return to France.

Wilfred Owen was in Craiglockhart at the same time as Sassoon and this novel explores the developing friendship between the two men until Owen leaves the hospital. The other character of significance in this first part of the trilogy is Billy Prior, who contrasts with Sassoon in being from the working-class; suffering at the outset from mutism, brought on by his experiences in the trenches, he is awkward and abrasive and appears at first to resent Rivers.

Our reactions to the story are constantly manipulated by the narrative methods employed. Though Rivers appears to be the protagonist, we are by no means limited to seeing events and people through his eyes. The novel begins with a short section of objective narration but proceeds through the use of multiple viewpoints, through the accounts of dreams, though Prior’s recollections under hypnosis, through quotations from documents and poems and through the beginning of a parallel narrative involving Rivers, which is developed more fully in the second and third parts of the trilogy.

Above all, we are forced to consider the paradoxes of war - young men, enlisting for the adventure and the glory, finding only cold, misery, death and the worse than death maiming of mind as well as body. Yet the psychological strain on Rivers in having to come to terms with all this and send back to the trenches men whom he had cared for and even loved, often makes him wish that he himself was ‘young enough for France’.

One of the most vivid and horrifying sections of this novel is, perhaps, Rivers’s visit to the National Hospital to observe Dr Yealland’s work with ‘shell-shocked’ patients. It serves, however, to highlight the understanding and compassion of the treatment at Craiglockhart as compared with the cruelly uncomprehending electrical treatment served out by Yealland.

*The Eye in the Door*

The second novel of the trilogy, *The Eye in the Door*, is set mainly in London a few months after the previous novel ends. Whilst *Regeneration* had at its centre the traumas brought about by trench warfare, this novel looks at some of the problems of the deliberate non-combatants - the pacifists - particularly when their anti-war sentiments were pursued actively and thus appeared as a threat to the country.

Most of the principal characters from the previous novel are re-introduced but now both the setting and the context are different. The scene has moved from Edinburgh to London and just as the previous book was mainly Sassoon’s story, this is mainly the story of Billy Prior. A number of new characters are introduced, principally the wounded homosexual officer, Charles Manning, and the group of pacifist plotters with Beattie Roper and Mac at their centre. Sassoon also reappears, sent home from France for a second time with a bullet through his head.

There are links enough to make it clear to the reader of *Regeneration* that this is a sequel to the story told there. The atmosphere of this novel, however, is different. Despite the fact that the first novel depicts the horrors of war in gruesome reality, the violence, malice and cruelty of this book is in many ways more frightening. The introductory scene between Prior and Myra sets the tone: the vocabulary is deliberately coarse as Prior tries unsuccessfully to seduce her. It is followed by the sexually explicit homosexual scene between Prior and Charles Manning, which contrasts with the delicately hinted homosexual attractions weaving in and out of the previous book.

There has been a shift in the predominant themes; the concentration is no longer on the war in France but rather on the effects of trench warfare upon those who have returned wounded.
in mind or body; the exploitation of women for sex helps to highlight the problems of women in the society of that time and homosexuality is now overtly treated.

Though for different reasons, Prior here faces the same dilemma which Sassoon had to face in *Regeneration*. The lower-class background into which he was born and from which he is striving to rise, demands his loyalty but he feels ‘at times very powerfully that the only loyalties that actually mattered were loyalties forged (in France).’ Picard clay was a powerful glue’. Like Sassoon, he feels ‘unfriended’ and knows that he must return to his comrades in France; this novel ends with him making the decision that, despite not believing in the war and not trusting the Generals, he must go back.

The title of the novel refers directly to the surveillance of Beattie Roper in her prison cell but it is a symbolic reference to the atmosphere of distrust which the war generated, in which everyone felt that they were being spied upon. Furthermore, we are also reminded of the ghastly eyeball which precipitated Prior’s breakdown and now he experiences the added terror of the ‘eye in the door’ surveying him in his dreams.

By this time Billy Prior has become dependent on Rivers to help him through his neurasthenic illness but flashes of his old resentment still arise. It is he who ‘priest’ into Rivers’s psyche and, ironically, forces him to consider the repression of his own childhood traumas, which have caused him both to stammer and to hide, even from himself, a significant aspect of his personality. We see Rivers as the mythical figure of ‘the wounded healer’, a type of Christ, the crucified saviour: ‘He saved others, Himself He cannot save’.

At the end the way is prepared for the third volume of the trilogy. Sassoon is being sent to a convalescent home where he hopes he may be able to visit Wilfred Owen; Billy Prior has still to convince the Medical Board of his fitness for active duty and Rivers has yet to overcome, or at least to come to terms with his own ghosts.

*The Ghost Road*

‘Now all roads lead to France’ - the epigraph of this book suggests, perhaps, how inexorable was the call back to France for those who had left their fighting comrades in the trenches. *Regeneration* had ended with Sassoon returning; this one begins with both Billy Prior and Wilfred Owen preparing for the Medical Board that they hope will return them to France.

The threads of the previous two books are gradually drawn together. Sassoon and Prior, the protagonists of the two earlier novels, are still significant characters but this is Rivers's book. Just as *The Eye in the Door* delved into Prior's childhood, so this novel takes us into Rivers's past.

This is the most complex of the three novels, several levels of plot progressing simultaneously. First, there is the continuation of the war story and of the healing process that was the starting point of the trilogy; secondly, Rivers’s mind returns through flashbacks to his troubled childhood; thirdly, his reminiscences take him back to a period of this life spent among the Melanesian tribes; and finally, the war in France reaches its bleak conclusion with the deaths of Wilfred Owen, Billy Prior and most of their Battalion from the Manchester Regiment.

The narrative methods, too are more varied. The first chapter is straightforward third person narration but in Chapter 2 we begin to move in and out of Rivers’s stream of consciousness, through flashbacks sparked off by pictures from *Alice in Wonderland* displayed around the hospital ward. Barker makes frequent use of a literary device, akin to the *leitmotif* of music, by which single words, phrases or themes are used repeatedly in order to bring about connections with other parts of the book. Here, the ‘Alice’ references in Chapter 2 lead on, through the reference to Lewis Carroll to a reminder that Rivers stammers; at this point an
oddly significant and pertinent quotation from his own childhood in a conversation with his mother comes into his head:

“Boys are rough and noisy. And they fight.”

“B-b-but you h-h-have to to f-f-fight, s-s-sometimes.”

The whole trilogy is about boys or men who ‘have to fight sometimes’.

Another narrative method, not employed at all in the two previous books, is that of the diary. Prior’s diary of the last two and a half months of war begins in London in jaunty mood just before his return to France; it charts his life in the trenches until almost the end of the war. Interleaved with this diary is a detailed account of Rivers’s experiences among the Melanesians, where he too had observed life and death and raw emotion.

The ‘Ghost Road’ of the title is the road trudged by the men who fought and died in France: the ‘ghosts (who) drag home’ of Wilfred Owen; the ‘millions of the mouthless dead’ of Charles Sorley; the ‘ghosts of friends who died’ of Sassoon. It is the road of memories and each man has his own memory to people the road. So, Rivers’s ghost road is walked, not only by Prior and Hallet but also by the spirits of his Melanesian friends, as the ghost of Njiru comes to him in the night with the prophetic words to end the trilogy:

There is an end of men, an end of chiefs, an end of chieftain’s wives, an end of chieftain’s children - then go down and depart. Do not yearn for us, the fingerless, the crippled, the broken...

CONCLUSION

The three novels which comprise the Regeneration Trilogy are a brilliant, moving and often terrifying evocation of life in the First World War. Vivid, horrifying, sometimes very funny, the truths of war are never flinched from. The soldiers are not romanticised, neither in the trench scenes, nor in their lives back at home in Britain. The trilogy is a remarkable feat of imagination supported by meticulous research and the terrible final battle recorded in the book, when fictional Billy Prior and factual poet Wilfred Owen are both killed, underlines the futility of war.

FURTHER READING

The most useful further reading is probably the war poetry of Sassoon and Owen; many of their poems appear in paperback anthologies of war poetry, which are readily available. Two other novels by pat Barker help to fill out both the early history of the twentieth century and the background to the First World War.


Another World, 1998. This latest novel is ostensibly concerned with the life of a dislocated family but it is again put into historical perspective through the survival of Geordie, a First World War veteran, whose memories help to reshape the past. (Available in a Penguin edition).
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