

# Ghosts in Craiglockhart: Sassoon's textual presence in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*

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## Biography

Marie-Noëlle Provost-Vallet worked as Maître de Conférences at Université de Caen Basse-Normandie. Her thesis was about the literary landscapes of London during World War II, and her research interests concern representations of war and the city, censorship, and propaganda in fiction and film since 1939.

## Abstract

The numerous criticisms levelled at Pat Barker by Esther MacCallum-Stewart, on her now-defunct blog, provided the starting point for this paper, whose purpose is also to show Barker's integrity with the historical materials that form the basis of her fictional trilogy about World War I. How does Barker transform historical fact into historical fiction? The use of poems and the poetic friendships of her novel, *Regeneration*, are analysed and celebrated as transforming and regenerating forces.

## Résumé

Les nombreuses critiques qu'Esther MacCallum-Stewart a formulées sur son blog, maintenant inactif, vis à vis de Pat Barker, sont à l'origine de cet article qui vise également à montrer la conformité de la matière qui sert de base à sa trilogie romanesque sur la Première Guerre Mondiale avec les documents historiques. Comment Barker transforme-t-elle des faits historiques en une fiction historique? L'intégration de poèmes et les amitiés poétiques au sein du roman intitulé *Regeneration* font l'objet d'une analyse et sont jugées admirables en tant que forces de transformation et de régénération.

## Keywords

Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (1991), *The Ghost Road* (1995), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), *Regeneration* (1997), World War I, Craiglockhart, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, War Poetry, 1914-1918, Trauma, PTSD, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, W.H.R. Rivers, Sigmund Freud, Shell Shock.

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*Regeneration* is now looked upon as a modern classic and as such is widely read and studied. One critic, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, on her weblog, is incredibly one-sided in her denunciation of the novel and condemnation of the public acclaim won by Pat Barker as a historian (which she never claimed to be, even though she is made

and willing to endorse this role when asked to discuss the Great War in contemporary mediatized panels). Several times in this article Barker is said to be unable to deal properly with the subject matter she found fit to choose for her first novel in her trilogy on the Great War (the third volume, *The Ghost Road* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1995) and her first intrusion outside her usual area of interest, 'feminist working-class Northern England'. The main charges by Esther MacCallum-Stewart can be summed up – and countered – on different levels:

1. Barker re-appropriates post-modern preoccupations, such as gender roles and homosexuality, which were of no concern at the time of the Great War. Yet, this so-called lack of interest is not true, one only has to read the poems collected by Martin Stephen in *Never Such Innocence* (1993, republished in 2003), but of course this anthology aims at rehabilitating writings long neglected by scholars and critics and therefore relatively unknown by the public; E. MacCallum-Stewart's insistence might stem from the fact that in her (incomplete) bibliography at the end of the novel, Pat Barker praises two 'recent' studies on the impact of the Great War, and, although she lists a great number of libraries and librarians, she fails to indicate which first hand material she got her inspiration from.

2. Barker seems to take for granted that Freud's theories were well known among the British public. Yet a close reading of *Regeneration* shows that only Anderson, one of the major characters, and the only one to discuss Freud, is actually a doctor and not an average citizen, and Rivers, his therapist, comments on misconceptions about Freud. Indeed, in the second volume of Barker's trilogy, *The Eye in the Door* (1993), this ambiguity is made clear: "Manning, he knew, had read a certain amount of Freud" (158).

3. Barker shows her character Rivers as feeling compassion towards his patients, which does not actually appear in his medical or clinical reports (Anderson and S. Sassoon are depicted as cases in such reports). However, the reports on Sassoon quoted in the novel for the use of the Medical board clearly indicate that Rivers, when writing as a professional, is not on the same level as Rivers when he becomes a character in a historical novel, and Barker makes us understand that she has taken the full measure of this distance. Once again *The Eye in the Door* confirms this concept of 'suspension of empathy' when working on a patient (146).

4. Barker is unfair to her characters: she defends Sassoon whose 'arrogance' is depicted as 'shyness', while she is not so complacent towards Prior (a totally fictive character). On the one hand Sassoon describes himself as behaving in a superior way and showing off in front of Wilfred Owen (*Regeneration* pages 83 and 121). Rivers's and Sassoon's or even Robert Graves's class prejudices belong either to themselves as historical figures or to the characters invented by Barker, but in both cases it seems unfair to reproach her with being one-sided when a close reading reveals that she is indeed even-handed.<sup>1</sup>

5. Finally Barker makes anachronistic use of the setting of one of P. D. James's detective stories ("a Martello tower," in Alderburgh, Suffolk, *Regeneration* 171), in a chapter that can be considered far-fetched from a realistic point of view but which has meaning from a thematic point of view in so far as the visit to the third major patient-character, Burns, enables Rivers to voice scepticism on the myth-creating and hero-worshipping human propensity and need. Here it must be admitted that the visit is not totally convincing in the novel, and it remains to be seen whether Rivers did visit Burns there in 1917. However, the point is that Barker's legitimacy in choosing to deal with the Great War by focusing on real public literary and medical personalities seems to me justified by the very honest and crafty way in which she uses Sassoon's original and subsequent writings, as well as, to a lesser degree, the

writings of Owen and Rivers. Not all of Barker's admirers are easily manipulated readers. Many more (or less) contemporary writers could be accused of trespassing on historians' grounds.<sup>2</sup> It is far more interesting, in my opinion, to see *how she does it* and the perspective that she manages to instil in her narrative.

The novel is composed of four parts: the first centred on Sassoon's arrival in Craiglockhart, the second on the meeting between Owen and Sassoon (I leave aside the less famous historical characters or the purely fictive ones), the third on the resolution of Sassoon's conflict (the climax) and the fourth on the resolution of Rivers's conflict. Barker uses 'first-hand' original texts quoted as such, in both her opening and concluding chapters as well as in the major scenes in the novel. The narrative is encircled, as it were, by the mention of Sassoon's name.

Chapter one opens with Sassoon's famous protest letter to be published in *The Times* and read in the House of Commons on July 31 1917, which Rivers reads. That event—or rather non-event, as no major rebellion movement followed it—is related in the novel (69). Readers learn that Sassoon has just escaped being court-martialled thanks to his friend Robert Graves and is now coming 'willingly' to Craiglockhart, where all severely shocked officers were given psychological treatment at the time. Other types of electric treatment inflicted upon the other soldiers are depicted and justified in part four by Yealland, who was a real scientific celebrity at the time (see also Freud's "Memorandum on the Electrical Treatment of War Neurotics" written in 1920).

In chapter 3 Graves gives Rivers three poems by Sassoon in an envelope dated April 22: the then untitled "The Rearguard", "The General", and "To the Warmongers". These anti-war poems are read both by the readers of the novel *Regeneration* and by the character in the novel, Rivers (24-25). By comparing the initial versions of these poems and their subsequent form in the published edition it is obvious that in no way has Sassoon changed after his stay and 'pacification' in Craiglockhart. However "The Rearguard" has changed a lot (see Appendix I), and one of these changes becomes part of the narrative (123) when Sassoon explains to Owen that first drafts are not enough, however inspired one might feel. Sassoon the professional poet, intent on being published, is shown at work here. As for "The General," the only change is that the original phrase "with his plan of attack" is replaced by the even more vindictive 'by his plan of attack'. The third poem is unaltered.

In chapter 8, the first chapter of the second part, we are introduced to Owen at the same time as Sassoon himself. Owen is stammering badly in front of his hero until he comes to realize that the real Sassoon is the poet and not the haughty man sitting there, and he starts quoting, "from memory" from "The Death-Bed" and "the Redeemer" (82). In part 3 Owen quotes a stanza of "The Troops" to prove to Sassoon that he himself has expressed the idea that there can be consolation and pride in the sacrifice. This leads Sassoon to make his point clearer: 'I just don't like the idea of...making it out to be less of a horror than it really is' (157). This argument introduces the conclusion of this third part, when Sassoon hands a sonnet to Rivers, "Death Brotherhood" or "Sick-leave" as it came to be known but was yet untitled in the novel. By answering the question he asks in the last two lines of the sonnet, Sassoon reveals his decision to go back to the front. The main plot is now solved. Part four ends on three words in italics, dated Nov. 26, 1917. The final words are signed by Rivers: "*discharged to duty*" (250). Rivers is giving Sassoon the go-ahead at the end of this final part, focused mostly on the doctor's own conflict. The circular structure is now closed.

Along with these fragments or first versions of poems and the original report by Rivers (not to mention Owen's own poems as they are discussed and read to Sassoon), the novel is interspersed with name-dropping: Robert Ross, Oscar Wilde, H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, Lady Ottoline Morrell and even Lewis Carroll under his real name, Dodgson (he was a patient and a friend of Rivers's father, a speech therapist and a priest as well). To the readers these names act as realistic details granting verisimilitude to the narrative, to a higher or lesser degree according to the readers' knowledge. The names give a seal of genuineness, signalling that this is not a romance: the poems, the report and the celebrities create a realistic background which can easily gull or deceive the reader into believing that everything in this novel is true to the historical facts. Barker is careful to indicate that no one, including herself and the reader, can be really certain of what those facts are, exactly. "I don't know what I am. But I do know that I wouldn't want a faith that couldn't face the facts" (83). These are the very words uttered by Owen before Sassoon on their first encounter. Sassoon then uses this declaration to encourage Owen to write about the war while at Craiglockhart.

*Regeneration* is about the Great War seen from a distance but it is also about writing about the war, facing facts and filtering experiences through words, for therapeutic reasons as well as creative ones. Owen and Sassoon are thus shown joking about it when they both exclaim that it would be mad not to write about "such an experience" (123). When facing facts and trying to tell the truth about its "horror", whether on the spur of the moment or eighty years later, the question remains the same: are first-hand witnesses more reliable than later writers or later versions of one's own experience? Sassoon's texts and his "case" do not just provide a clever backbone to the story telling. Choosing Sassoon rather than Owen enables Barker to insist on the very nature of reliability, a reliability which she insists on in the two pages she dedicates to her historical characters as a postface to the novel (though the word postface is not used).

In her sequel Barker thus provides information about Julian Dadd, who is just mentioned in her novel. Julian Dadd is the grand nephew of a parricide "of glorious memory" (34). These are the words used by Sassoon when he had to explain why he had threatened to kill Lloyd George, and then told the whole story to Robert Graves, who then repeated it to Rivers, anxious as he was to prove his friend's unbalanced mental state. In the novel, Sassoon is deeply worried about Julian Dadd, whose two brothers have been killed already. But what worries him even more is Robert Graves's lack of belief in rhetoric. Such threats should not be taken at face value, but as images, as he is very careful to explain to Rivers. Or is it Barker who is telling us to read her story 'with a pinch of salt'?

In the same way, both Burns and Anderson, the two major cases treated by Rivers are forgotten in this supplement. Yet Burns comes to play an unexpected (if not unlikely) role in the novel and our curiosity about him as a historical figure would be legitimate. His escape from the hospital and the hallucinatory scenes which follow (the opening scene in the film version), provide a hint at the trauma undergone by all those who returned from the front. The Burns episode prepares the way for the scene in which Sassoon's own vision of a ghost leads him to write the decisive sonnet. His invitation to Rivers and the latter's subsequent visit enable Barker to depict Rivers in a new light, before his actual 'epiphany' (the nightmare in part four after witnessing Yealland's methods used "to silence a human being"): Rivers turns into a physical saviour as he rescues Burns from drowning in a scene where the light, the darkness the flashes and the noise of the storm are an echo of the battle scenes haunting the characters, whether historical or fictional. Although this episode by the sea can be

considered far-fetched, this visit gives Barker the opportunity to develop her narrative while warning the readers against hasty conclusions. The old man Glegg, whose company is sought by Burns as the recipient of the real past, is condemned as a fraud by Rivers (174). Enjoying being treated as a myth is, to Rivers, unforgivable, 'yet, so easily done' (173)

Exactly which Sassoon did Barker depict? Strangely enough her postface, "Author's note", is a warning, in that the bibliography contains even more intriguing voids. While Wilfred Owen's *The Complete Poems and Fragments* is listed, in the Stallworthy edition, which provides biographical comment, her sources for Sassoon are not clearly indicated. Furthermore, Sassoon was particularly prolific, in so far as he wrote and rewrote his memoirs in different ways, but which versions did she consult? Sassoon did not really insist on his poetry after the war and is more remembered (or forgotten) for his memoirs than his poems. Deconstructing Barker's narrative in the light of different versions of his life by Sassoon himself might prove an interesting if daunting task. In his diaries of the time it is easy to trace the poems as well as an episode such as the bayonet (117; see Bowen). Another task would consist in studying closely Rivers's posthumously published book and see how Barker used what she terms Sassoon's "brief appearance as patient B"(251). For now, the focus will be on the part played by Sassoon's original texts.

Indeed Sassoon's character has a very complex and mysterious stature. The poet is obviously staged in a genuine way through the numerous texts quoted yet he is the one to warn Owen that his words should not automatically be taken at face value. Sassoon the man, the friend, the son, and the aristocrat crop up on different occasions, and so does his status as a war hero. What does Barker reveal about the way she created Sassoon as a character in her novel? As if to answer this question and to make up for the absence of bibliographical references, she 'invents' (?) a conversation between Sassoon and Rivers (35). Sassoon, during a therapeutic interview, mentions his three selves and then starts describing them:

"I mean, there was the riding, hunting, cricketing me, and then there was the...the other side...that was interested in poetry and music, and things like that. And I didn't seem able to...' he laced his fingers. 'Knock them together'.  
'And the third?'  
'I'm sorry?'  
'You said three.'  
'Did I? I meant two.' "

In chapter 10, Sassoon, on his own, remembers a moment on the front when "the old Sassoon cracked open" (115), the very moment he realized he had become a warrior and a leader-father, as well as, paradoxically, a kind of mother who cared for the physical well-being of the men under his orders.

The three Sassoons on a personal level have their equivalent in Sassoon as a character in the novel: he is the letter writer, public and private (with rhetoric in mind), he is the poem writer and a kind of mentor and father image for Wilfred Owen, and he keeps playing golf and remaining aloof from the other patients ("he'd never bothered to disguise his hatred of the place", 247). While he tries to reconcile his three sides and to decide what he should do to respect his true self, he keeps asking for time to write. The first decisive moment is experienced on his own, during a walk, when he quotes Wordsworth to himself ("*From sunshine to the sunless land*" the words in italics are said by Sassoon, but neither Wordsworth nor the poem's title,

“Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg” are named in *Regeneration*). The words incite Sassoon to contemplate the prospect of his pacification and therefore the corruptibility of his nature. The second moment is the night when he sees Orme’s ghost (a single, familiar ghost has now replaced the numerous corpses he was seeing in Piccadilly in April 1917). The idle man, who was to become his most famous “public image”, gives way to the poet, a poet who will never deny the “horror” and to the warrior who decides to go back and stand by his men. In *The Eye in the Door*, Barker has Rivers allude to the “two versions” of Sassoon (158).

Barker brings together the different pieces of the puzzle created by Sassoon himself as a survivor, and she creates an image which seems to me perfectly acceptable in so far as she keeps us aware that her character is only a character, that rhetoric should be kept in mind, and, to quote Owen (as a character, 82), only the poet (hence the poems quoted) is real. Sassoon’s decision is finally built upon the sonnet, which he shows Rivers, while adding, “I know you will hate that”. To Rivers Sassoon is not a public figure but a patient who should come to terms with his conflict in a reasonable way, not a poetic one. Still Sassoon was sent to him precisely because he was famous and his protest was to be silenced: a court martial would have advertised the pacifists’ cause and for his close friends he was taking the unnecessary risks of becoming a martyr. Robert Graves betrays the private person when he reveals to Rivers what he feels is the extent of Sassoon’s despair and determination, to which Sassoon replies: “I had rather hoped my letters to you were private” (7). The border between the private and public Sassoon became even thinner when the diaries and letters were published, after Sassoon had himself mythologised some aspects of his life.

Rivers is pragmatic, he is a scientist (his anthropology studies are quoted several times throughout the novel) who does not imagine things but rather observes them carefully. Imagination (or rather the lack of imagination) is a recurrent leitmotif in the contemporary or subsequent comments on the civilians’ attitude during the Great War. Barker gives us two instances where she has Sassoon first, then Prior (a fictive character) discuss the paradoxes of imagination and therefore the limits of what should be expected, both from the actors at the front and from those behind the lines. These concerns affect contemporaries as well as later generations.<sup>3</sup> Change is inescapable, and there is no such thing as immutable reality. Whether such change is a sign of corruption or not is asked by Sassoon:

And for a second he was back there, Armageddon, Golgotha, there were no words, a place of desolation so complete no imagination could have invented it. He thought of Rivers, and what he’d said that morning about finding safety unbearable. Well, Rivers was wrong, people were more corruptible than that. (44)

Prior, in a meeting with his lover, both reproaches her with being unable to understand what he’s been through, yet is grateful that her ignorance should provide him with a haven of forgetfulness (216).

*Regeneration* is definitely a novel about Rivers’s scientific obsession with the phenomenon of regeneration (see the flashback on medical experiments, 46) and his difficulties at “curing” Sassoon while remaining honest.<sup>4</sup> To him being a therapist has nothing to do with silencing a human being, especially when this silencing is so perverse as to make people speak: “*You must speak but I shall not listen to anything you have to say*” (231 in italics in the text). These quandaries are as central to and as structuring for the narrative as Sassoon’s own “hesitations” and both men express

themselves in a written definitive form while sharing their hesitations with colleagues and friends during conversations. Their texts are at the core of the narrative, both opening and closing it. Rivers is also given the task of explaining to Sassoon (and the readers) that there is always “a possible way of telling a story” (247), and he then goes on to reflect about Sassoon’s useless rebellion and, finally, before writing the final lines of his report, he ponders over Sassoon’s “youthful self dramatization” (250).

The final paragraphs of the novel can be seen as an expression of Barker’s point of view, an illustration of what she thinks of her own ‘novelist’s report’ on the material she used for her fiction. She uses Sassoon’s original texts as foundations around which she weaves her narrative, and, however lopsided her postface might be, her novel is a tribute to Sassoon the poet.

## Appendix 1

### The Rear-Guard

<p>Groping along the tunnel, step by step, He winked his prying torch with patching glare From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.</p> <p>Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know, A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed; And he, exploring fifty feet below The rosy gloom of battle overhead. Tripping, he grappled the wall; saw someone lie Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug, And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug. "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply. "God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.) "Get up and guide me through this stinking place." Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap, And flashed his beam across the livid face Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore Agony dying hard ten days before; And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound. Alone he staggered on until he found Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair To the dazed, muttering creatures underground Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound. At last, with sweat of horror in his hair, He climbed through darkness to the twilight air, Unloading hell behind him step by step.</p>	<p>Groping along the tunnel in the gloom He winked his tiny torch with whitening glare, And bumped his helmet, sniffing the hateful air.</p> <p>Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know, And once the foul, hunched mattress from a bed; And he exploring, fifty feet below The rosy dusk of battle overhead. He tripped and clutched the wall; saw someone lie Humped and asleep, half-covered with a rug; He stooped and gave the sleeper's arm a tug. "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply. "Wake up, you sod!" (For days he'd had no sleep.) "I want a guide along this cursed place." He aimed a kick at the unanswering heap; And flashed his beam across that livid face Horribly glaring up, whose eyes still wore The agony that died ten days before Whose bloody fingers clutched a hideous wound. Gasping, he staggered onward till he found Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair, To clammy creatures groping underground, Hearing the boom of shells with muffled sound. Then with the sweat of horror in his hair, He climbed through darkness to the twilight air.</p>
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### Filmography

*Regeneration*, motion picture directed by Gillies MacKinnon, 1997.

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<sup>1</sup> In Jon Stallworthy (ed.), *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (2004), Owen describes his first meeting with Graves (153), which has its mild equivalent in *Regeneration* (196-7).

<sup>2</sup> It should in fairness be said that Esther MacCallum-Stewart has also at times taken Barker's defence in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> Barker insists on that point again in *The Eye in the Door*: "The past is a palimpsest. Prior thought. Early memories are always obscured by accumulation of later knowledge" (55).

<sup>4</sup> "What he always did so easily in conversation, always nudging Siegfried gently in the same direction, and yet always avoiding any suggestion of pressure, was a feat he couldn't apparently perform on paper." (156)