Introduction: Pat Barker’s Regeneration

In her critically acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy—comprising *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995)—Pat Barker describes the impact of World War I on British society from the summer of 1917 to just before the armistice in 1918; in the process, she destabilizes the boundary line between the (feminine) ‘home front’ and the (masculine) ‘war front,’ or rather exposes the permeability between these two gendered spaces.

The title of the first volume and of the trilogy as a whole is borrowed from a medical experiment conducted by W. H. R. Rivers, anthropologist, neurologist, and psychiatrist and one of the protagonists of the three novels, and by his one-time colleague Henry Head, on the latter’s radial nerves, which were severed so that the two could trace their “regeneration” (*R* 45; *Eye* 142 and 232). Rivers is portrayed in the trilogy in his wartime working environments, chiefly as medical officer at Craiglockhart War Hospital, one of the specialized treatment centers set up to deal with the vast number of soldiers suffering from what was then known as ‘shell shock’ or ‘war neurosis’ and is nowadays usually referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder.

Rivers is only one of the historical personages who populate Barker’s trilogy; the others include trench poets Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen, the latter two of whom were Rivers’s patients at Craiglockhart, or Rivers’s friends and opponents in the medical establishment. In addition, there are cameo appearances...
by, for instance, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a friend of Rivers's father, and by Rivers's sister Katharine, one of the young girls whom Dodgson, also known as Lewis Carroll, was notoriously attracted to, inflicting on her, as Barker has said, "an emotional pressure and emotional demands that call something out of the child that the child is not ready to give" (qtd. in Stevenson 178).

However, although Barker herself rejects the label "historical fiction" (qtd. in Westman 163) for her texts, as it seems to her to consign historical events to the past while ignoring their relevance for the present, these ‘real’ people are made to interact with fictitious characters such as Billy Prior: Prior, in whose person issues of gender, class, and individual and collective violence are united, is one of the minor figures of the first, but emerges as one of the key players in the second and third volumes of the trilogy. It is through him that the reader, in *The Eye in the Door*, is introduced to the repressed and repressive atmosphere of a wartime London riven by sexual and political tensions and obsessed with espionage and surveillance. It is also with Billy Prior that the reader is finally taken, in *The Ghost Road*, to the Western Front: paradoxically, the excerpts from the diary Prior writes there, which supposedly provide the most authentic account of life in the trenches in the novel, are those chapters in which Barker, in the one fully invented case history of the trilogy, departs completely from her sources.

These sources, some of which she acknowledges in her paratextual “Author’s Notes,” in which she also identifies historical precedents for the less commonly known events that she has fictionalized, fall into three groups: one group is comprised of first-hand, and thus to an extent unmediated, accounts of the Great War written during the war itself, such as diaries and letters by Sassoon, Owen, or Graves, poems by those three and other trench poets, and medical treatises like Rivers’s “On the Repression of War Experience.” This was a lecture initially delivered before the Section of Psychiatry, Royal Society of Medicine, on December 4, 1917, and later published in *The Lancet* and again in the posthumous volume *Conflict and Dream*, where Sassoon makes a brief appearance as “Patient B.” Sassoon’s poem of that title, incidentally, predates his stay at Craiglockhart, but was probably re-titled following his treatment by Rivers.

Secondly, there are autobiographical and semiautobiographical narratives of World War I, written predominantly during what has been called the ‘War Books Controversy’ of the late 1920s and early 1930s, for instance Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* of 1928, Robert Graves’s *Good-Bye to All That* of 1929, and Siegfried Sassoon’s