

# Speaking for the Ghosts: Pat Barker's Novel *Regeneration*

Vincent A. Broderick

The main story line in *Regeneration* (1991), the first novel in Pat Barker's World War I trilogy of "historical novels," completed by *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995), deals with the hospitalization for "war neurosis" of Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) at Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburg, Scotland. In a novel which manages to include a very high proportion of actual historical personages, it is perhaps fitting that the main character is himself one of the more memorable English poets of World War I.

The novel opens with the document that caused its author to be sent to a military psychiatric hospital, at the insistence of his friend and fellow soldier Robert Graves, who feared Sassoon would be arrested and incarcerated.

Finished with the War  
*A Soldier's Declaration*

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them ; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

S. Sassoon

July 1917<sup>1</sup> (R, p. 1)

Sassoon, who had also thrown away the Military Cross medal he had won, was daring the authorities to court-martial him, despite the risk of severe punishment, so that he could testify further against the war. Only the decision of his friend and fellow-soldier, the poet Robert Graves to tell the army authorities that Sassoon had been hallucinating visions of dead and wounded soldiers in London, and to lie to Sassoon by telling him he would not have a trial, but would be put away in a lunatic asylum, convinced Sassoon to accept being sent for treatment to Craiglockhart.

The doctor to whom Sassoon was assigned as a patient is also a historical personage. Dr. William Rivers (1864-1922) was a distinguished neurologist and cultural anthropologist, and a Gold Medalist of the Royal Academy. Among the many treatments proposed for "war neurosis" being attempted at the time, and which included severe electric shocks or injections of ether under the skin, Rivers used an approach which stressed his patients' discovering and confronting the combat experience that had made them psychologically unfit for duty, by talking about what had happened if they could remember, or discussing indirect manifestations, as in dreams.

Reading Sassoon's file, from the start Rivers sensed that this "case" would be different from those of his other patients.

He'd been working on the file for over an hour, but, although he was now confident he knew all the facts, he was no closer to an understanding of Sassoon's state of mind. (...) Misguided the Declaration might be, but it was not deluded, illogical or incoherent. (R, p. 8)

It takes only one consultation with Sassoon for Rivers to realize that Sassoon's situation is just as expected, but that it also can not change his duty as an army psychiatrist.

Sassoon stood up. 'You said a bit back you didn't think I was mad.'

'I'm quite sure you're not. As a matter of fact I don't even think you've got a war neurosis.'

Sassoon digested this. 'What have I got, then ?'

'A very powerful *anti*-war neurosis'

They looked at each other and laughed. Rivers said, 'You realize, don't you, that it's my duty to . . . to try to change that ? I can't pretend to be neutral.'

Sassoon's glance took in both their uniforms. 'No, of course not.'

Later the same day, Robert Graves comes to visit Sassoon, and Rivers asks to talk with him. Graves believes that Sassoon has been used by his pacifist friends Bertrand Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell, without concern for the effect his Declaration will have on him. Graves tells Rivers the main reason he wanted Sassoon to come to Craiglockhart,

Sassoon's the best platoon commander I've ever known. The men worship him . . . .

And *he* loves them. Being separated from them would kill him. And that's exactly what a court-martial would've done. (R, p. 15)

Afterwards, Rivers reads three poems Sassoon gave him. They were written ten days after he had been wounded in action, and, after reading the last one, Rivers has the sudden realization that the poems show Sassoon's psychological attitude toward the war to be the opposite of the typical Craiglockhart patient.

To the Warmongers

I'm back again from hell  
With loathsome thoughts to sell ;  
Secrets of death to tell ;  
And horrors from the abyss.  
Young faces bleared with blood,  
Sucked down into the mud,  
You shall hear things like this,  
Till the tormented slain  
Crawl round and once again,  
With limbs that twist awry  
Moan out their brutish pain,  
As the fighters pass them by.

For you our battles shine  
With triumph half-divine ;  
And the glory of the dead  
Kindles in each proud eye.  
But a curse is on my head,  
That shall not be unsaid,  
And the wounds in my heart are red,  
For I have watched them die.

Everything about the poem suggested that Sassoon's attitude to his war experience had been the opposite of what one normally encountered. The typical patient, arriving at Craiglockhart, had usually been devoting considerable energy to the task of *forgetting* whatever traumatic events had precipitated his neurosis. (. . .)

Sassoon's determination to remember might well account for his early and rapid recovery, though in his case it was motivated less by a desire to save his own sanity than by a determination to convince civilians that the war was mad. (. . .) If that was true, then persuading Sassoon to give in and go back would be a much more complicated and risky business than he had thought, and might well precipitate a relapse. (R. pp. 25-6)

Before leaving Craiglockhart, Robert Graves sees Rivers one last time, and mentions that Sassoon had told him he planned to kill Lloyd-George, the British prime minister. When Rivers mentions this, Sassoon explained he'd said he merely felt like killing Lloyd-George, and that Graves misquoted him out of a wish to think Sassoon is really mentally ill, so as to avoid having to act on his own feelings of opposition to the war. Graves had told Rivers he felt his having agreed to become an officer prevented him from changing his mind about his role in the war while it was still going on.

It is at this point that the novel takes up the theme of "revenge against the (absent) father," with the Lloyd-George remark representing Sassoon's attitude toward his own late father, who had left the family when Siegfried was 5 and had died of TB when he was 8. Raised by an over-protective and wealthy mother, Sassoon felt he had drifted from childhood into adulthood. Sassoon must have at first seen the war as some kind of liberating opportunity, since he joined the army as an ordinary soldier the day before war was declared in 1914, and was only made an officer later while recovering from injuries. Sassoon tells Rivers the army was probably the only place where he ever really belonged. Rivers realizes that Sassoon finds meaning in risking his personal safety while leading the men under his command, and he points out the logic of his situation : because his opposition to the war is seen as a nervous breakdown, as long as he keeps it up the army must consider him "ill," and he will remain in the hospital, safe, for the rest of the war.

"If you maintain your protest, you can expect to spend the remainder of the war in a state of Complete. Personal. Safety."

Sassoon shifted in his seat. "I'm not responsible for other people's decisions."

"You don't think you might find being safe while other people die rather difficult ?"

A flash of anger. "Nobody else in this stinking country seems to find it difficult. I expect I'll just learn to live with it. Like everybody else. (R, p. 36)

If Sassoon's "problem" can be seen as a need to *silence* himself in order to return to France and be with his men, then this stands in contrast to the problem

faced by the other major character in the novel, Lieutenant Billy Prior, who must find a way to *speak*. Prior is an entirely fictional character, and he will assume the role of the main protagonist in the remaining two novels in the trilogy. Also, he and Rivers are the only characters present in all three novels. Prior has come to Craiglockhart suffering from nightmares, amnesia regarding the incident that caused him to be "shell-shocked," and mutism. He also has asthma that is bad enough to have kept him out of combat in France had he not successfully hidden it before it was too late to keep him away. At the beginning, he communicates with Rivers only in writing, and his use of block capital letters amply reinforces his aggressive, enraged attitude. Prior, unlike the vast majority of officers, does not come from an upper or upper-middle class background, and so he is subject to a wider range of emotional impacts from the war and the contradictions and conflicts it brings out in British society. During their first interview, Rivers examines Prior's throat, and jokingly corrects Prior's spelling when he writes, "THERE'S NOTHING PHYSICALY (sic) WRONG." This is true, in that his vocal cords are not damaged, but Prior's inability to speak begins to bring out the point that what has happened to the emotions of patients at Craiglockhart is all very *real*, that it was of course engendered by an accumulation of very horribly real events, and that it will still be difficult to say completely, even after Prior regains his (physical) voice.

If Sassoon's father is too "absent," then Prior's is too "present," as we learn when both his mother and father, separately, come to see Rivers during a visit to their son. The father, whom Billy later characterizes as a "barroom socialist", practically feels contempt for his son for being in a hospital with no apparent *physical* injury, and sees it as a continuation of his wife's striving to get Billy to educate himself and work his way out of the working class. Billy's father complains that it has all just made his son weak and "different," although much of this is jealousy at the fact that his son has succeeded and become an officer.

Working with Sassoon, Prior and his other patients also turns out to have an emotional impact on Dr. Rivers, as he realizes after waking from a dream involving an experiment on nerve regeneration he and his colleague Dr. Henry Head had performed in Cambridge before the war.

Henry Head had been working for some time on the regeneration of nerves after accidental injury. (...) Head had volunteered himself as the subject of the proposed experiment, and Rivers had assisted at the operation in which Head's radial nerve had been severed and sutured. Then, together, over a period of five years, they had charted the progress of regeneration.

During the early stage of recovery, when the primitive, protopathic sensibility had been restored, but not yet the finely discriminating epicritic sensibility, many of the experiments had been extremely painful. Protopathic sensibility seemed to have an 'all or nothing' quality. The threshold of sensation was high, but, once crossed, the sensations were both abnormally widely diffused and -to use Head's word- 'extreme.' (R, p. 46)

During the five years of experiments, neither Rivers nor Head would have considered stopping their work, despite the pain it caused Dr. Head, but in his dream, Rivers felt a strong desire to stop, and Head had taken a scalpel and made a fine incision on Rivers's arm. Rivers felt that the latent meaning of the dream involved the conflict between the duty to continue and the reluctance to inflict more pain.

Rivers was aware as a constant background to his work, of a conflict between his belief that the war must be fought to a finish, for the sake of the succeeding generations, and his horror that such events... should be allowed to continue. (...)

Recently almost all his dreams had centred on conflicts arising from his treatment of particular patients. In advising them to remember the traumatic events that had led to their being sent here, he was, in effect, inflicting pain... (R, p. 47)

Rivers realizes that his approach was inevitably an experiment on his patients and on himself.

In leading his patients to understand that breakdown was nothing to be ashamed of, that horror and fear were inevitable responses to the trauma of war and were better acknowledged than suppressed, that feelings of tenderness for their men were natural and right, that tears were an acceptable and helpful part of grieving, he was setting himself against the whole tenor of their upbringing. They'd been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures. Not men. And yet he himself was a product of the same system, even perhaps a rather extreme product. Certainly the rigorous repression of emotion and desire had been the constant theme of his adult life. (R, p. 48)

And at all times, in the background lurks the unchanging purpose behind all the internal change Rivers's "approach" demands.

The change he demanded of them –and by implication of himself– was not trivial. Fear, tenderness –these emotions were so despised that they could be admitted into consciousness only at the cost of redefining what it meant to be a man. Not that Rivers's treatment involved any encouragement of weakness or effeminacy. His patients might be encouraged to acknowledge their fears, their horror of the war –but still they were expected to do their duty and return to France. It was Rivers's conviction that those who had learned to know themselves, and to accept their emotions, were less likely to break down again. (R, p. 48)

As the novel proceeds, the author uses the discussions Rivers has with Billy Prior to provide details of what the war in the trenches was like, as they fill in the details of what lead up to Prior's breakdown, before deciding whether or not to try the more risky procedure of questioning Prior under hypnosis. The sessions with Sassoon focus more on the issues surrounding the conflict between opposing the war on principle and being expected to fight in it out of a sense of duty. This comes out strikingly in a discussion Rivers has with one of his colleagues about Sassoon.

'Isn't there a case for leaving [Sassoon] alone ?'

'No.'

'I mean, simply by being here he's discredited. Discredited, disgraced, *apparently* lied to by his best friend ? I'd've thought there was a case for letting him be.'

'No, there's no case,' Rivers said. 'He's a mentally and physically healthy man. It's his *duty* to go back, and it's *my* duty to see he does.'

'And you've no doubts about that at all ?'

(...) 'I'm simply asking him to defend his position. Which he admits was reached largely on emotional grounds.'

'*Grief* at the death of his friends. *Horror* at the slaughter of everybody else's friends. It isn't clear to me why such emotions have to be ignored.'

'I'm not saying they should be ignored. Only that they mustn't be allowed to dominate.'

'The protopathic must know its place ?'

Rivers was taken aback. 'I wouldn't've put it quite like that.'

'Why not ? It's your word. And Sassoon does seem to be a remarkably protopathic young man. Doesn't he ? I mean from what you say, it's "all or nothing" all the time. Happy warrior one minute. Bitter pacifist the next.'

'Precisely. He's completely inconsistent. And that's all the more reason to get him to *argue* the position—'

'Epicritically ?'

'*Rationally.*'

'Brock raised his hands and sat back in his chair. 'I hope you don't mind my playing devil's advocate ?'

'Good heavens, no. The whole point of these meetings is to protect the patient.'

Brock smiled, one of his rare, thin unexpectedly charming smiles. 'Is that what I was doing ? I thought I was protecting you.'

Rivers finally agrees to hypnotize Prior, so he remembers the incident that led to his breakdown : his trench had taken a direct hit, with two of his men blown to bits. While helping remove the body parts scattered around the trench, he

suddenly realized he had picked up the eye of one of his men, whom he remembered as having had very blue eyes. After remembering what had happened, Prior broke down and wept, because cleaning a trench of body parts had become routine work for him, and all along he had been afraid that the only thing which could have made him forget was having been in some mistaken combat incident that led to his killing his own men.

Rivers tells Prior it had in fact been the repetition of routine horrors that led to his breakdown. Afterwards, Rivers realizes that it is a kind of *maternal* instinct that binds officers and men in this particular war.

One of the paradoxes of the war –one of the many– was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was . . . domestic. Caring. ( . . . ) And that wasn't the only trick the war had played. Mobilization. The Great Adventure. They'd been mobilized into holes in the ground so constricted they could hardly move. ( . . . ) The war that had promised so much in the way of 'manly' activity had actually delivered 'feminine' passivity, and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known. (R, pp. 108-9)

Rivers's work with Sassoon continues to have an effect on his thinking about the war.

. . . as soon as you accepted that a man's breakdown was a consequence of his war experience rather than of his own innate weakness, then inevitably the war became the issue. ( . . . ) Rivers had survived partly by suppressing his awareness of this. But then along came Sassoon and made the justifiability of the war a matter for constant, open debate, and that suppression was no longer possible. ( . . . ) Siegfried's introversion was remarkable, even by the normal standards of unhappy young men. His love for his men cut through that self-absorption, but Rivers sometimes wondered whether anything else did. And yet he had so many good qualities. It was rare to find a man in whom courage was the *dominating* characteristic . . . (R, pp. 115-6)

One night, Sassoon has a vision of one of his dead fellow-officers, and is reluctant to share it with someone he considers as *rational* as Rivers. But Rivers tells him of a wake he attended with natives in the Solomon Islands, where there was a strange and inexplicable whistling sound at the moment the natives believed the spirits of the dead had come to carry away the soul of the dead person. Sassoon tells him the vision of his friend, now six months dead, looked *puzzled*, as if it could not understand why he was at Craiglockhart. He shows Rivers a poem he wrote about it.

When I'm asleep, dreaming and drowsed and warm,  
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.  
While the dim charging breakers of the storm  
Rumble and drone and bellow overhead,  
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.  
They whisper to my heart ; their thoughts are mine.

'Why are you here with all your watches ended ?  
'From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the line.'  
In bitter safety I awake, unfriended ;  
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain  
I think of the Battalion in the mud.  
'When are you going back to them again ?  
'Are they not still your brothers through our blood ?' (R, p. 189)

Rivers asks if the question at the end of the poem has an answer, and Sassoon tells him he has decided to go back to fight in France.

At the medical board meeting to decide which patients can leave Craiglockhart, Billy Prior is excused from combat in France and assigned to army service in England because of his asthma. He realizes this was thanks to Rivers's having insisted on including a specialist's report on his asthma in Prior's file for the review board. Rivers knows Prior feels ashamed at knowing his chances of surviving the war are greater than if he were sent back to France.

Rivers said gently, 'Everybody who survives feels guilty. Don't let it spoil everything.'

Prior then makes a rather startling admission about himself and how he sees Rivers.

'It's not that. Well, partly. It's just that I've never let the asthma stop me. I was ordered to stay out of those gas huts, I was quite prepared to go through them. Even as a -a child I was *determined* it wasn't going to stop me. I could do anything the others did, and not only that, I could *beat* them. I'm not suggesting this is peculiar to me, I-I think most asthmatics are like that. My mother was always pulling the other way. Trying to keep me in. (...) And then suddenly here *you* are' He raised his hands. 'Doing exactly the same thing.' He looked at Rivers, a cool, amused, mocking, affectionate, highly intelligent stare. 'Probably why I never wanted you to be *Daddy*. I'd got you lined up for a worse fate.' (R, p. 210)

At his final review board, Sassoon surprises the army doctors by saying that he has not changed his mind about the war's being wrong, but before they can react unfavorably Rivers asks him if he will go back to combat in France because he sees it is his duty to do so, and Sassoon answers, "Yes."

After saying good-bye to Sassoon, Rivers realizes how much he has been changed by the experiences of the past 12 weeks.

He remembered telling Head how he had tried to change his life when he had come back from Melanesia for the second time and how that attempt had failed. He'd gone on being reticent, introverted, reclusive. Of course it had been a very introverted, self-conscious attempt, and perhaps that was why it hadn't worked. Here in this building, where he hardly had a moment to himself at all, the changes had taken place without his knowing. (...) As a young man he'd been both by temperament and conviction deeply conservative, and not merely in politics. Now, in middle age, the sheer extent of the *mess* seemed to be forcing him into conflict with the authorities over a very

wide range of issues . . . medical, military. Whatever. A society that devours its own young deserves no automatic or unquestioning allegiance. Perhaps the rebellion of the old might count for rather more than the rebellion of the young. (R, p. 249)

But even in his role as doctor and father-figure to Sassoon, Rivers realizes he can do nothing to change the reason for Siegfried's return to France, the way in which he reconciles his beliefs and his sense of duty and obligation to his fellow soldiers.

It was a dilemma with one very obvious way out. Rivers knew, although he had never voiced his knowledge, that Sassoon was going back with the intention of being killed. (. . .) There was nothing more he wanted to say that he could say. He drew the final page towards him and wrote: *I Nov. 26, 1917. Discharged to duty.* (R, p. 250)

(Siegfried Sassoon returned to combat in France, but was sent back to England after suffering a (fortunately minor) bullet wound to the head when fired on by one of his own sergeants while returning from leading a small "unofficial" night raid on the German trenches.)

1. Barker, Pat, *Regeneration*. Penguin Books, New York, 1993. Subsequent citations are identified by page numbers in the text.