

# Mise en abyme in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*

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Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991),<sup>1</sup> the first novel of her trilogy on the First World War<sup>2</sup> is remarkable in various respects. For example, it explores the horrors of the great war from an entirely new angle, that of a military doctor and the shell-shocked patients at Craiglockhart War Hospital. Among the inmates are the highly decorated officer and war poet Siegfried Sassoon as well as Wilfred Owen, at the time an aspiring poet. Another significant feature of the book is its high level of intertextuality. Furthermore, the humaneness that pervades the book, largely represented by the protagonist Dr Rivers, the compassionate and self-searching army psychologist, is a hallmark that contributed to its most favourable reception and its inclusion into the canon of set books of many British schools.<sup>3</sup>

In my paper I will analyse the first section of chapter 14, the first chapter of the third part, located at the very centre of the novel, also in terms of thematic and structural importance. With regard to character development this section marks a turning point, with respect to subject matter it focuses the essential concerns of the book, which I will argue, can be regarded as *mise en abyme*.<sup>4</sup> This mirroring effect is achieved and emphasized by intertextual devices, which also reflect the presence of the two major war poets in the novel.

Before I take a closer look at this section I will outline the thematic keynotes of the novel which are echoed there. One of the principal issues of *Regeneration* is the deconstruction of wide-ranging patriarchal structures governing relationships between state and officer, officer and private, doctor and patient, mentor and disciple, and father and son. Likewise, conflicting duties in the context of the war that was supposed to end all wars are investigated. A soldier who enlisted entered a contract with the state, a contract which he could not annul. At the same time an officer assumed responsibility for the privates under his command. At the beginning of the novel Sassoon's 'Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration' introduces the clash between the duties deriving from his contract with king and country and those towards the soldiers in his company. He indicts the authorities to have broken the contract by continuing the war despite the immense toll of human lives, a war which had turned from a war of defence into a war of aggression. Sassoon argues that on account of his responsibility towards his soldiers he can no longer support and take part in such a military conflict. The military hierarchy strikes back by sending him to Craiglockhart, the hospital for the shell-shocked, where he becomes one of the patients of Dr Rivers. The term 'contract' is introduced by Robert Graves, Sassoon's friend and fellow-writer, who had pulled the strings in the background to the effect that Sassoon was not court-martialled but found to have suffered a nervous breakdown. In a conversation with Rivers, Graves explains the slight distinction between his own and Sassoon's attitude to the continuation of the war. Although he agrees with Sassoon's views, he disagrees as to the form and the effectiveness of his friend's protest. Moreover, unlike Sassoon, Graves opts for contractual fidelity: 'The way I see it, when you put the uniform on, in effect you sign a contract. And you don't back out of a contract merely because you've changed your mind' (23). In any case, now it is Rivers's

task to cure Sassoon of what he calls ‘a very powerful *anti-war* neurosis’ (15), in other words to persuade him to give up his protest and to return to the battlefield.

On the one hand, Captain Rivers is an officer, on the other hand, he is a doctor. Although disturbed by the horror of the war and faced with the pain of his patients, in the early parts of *Regeneration* Rivers is still convinced that the war has to be continued and brought to a victorious end. However, in the course of the novel he comes to question his role as officer and doctor. He gradually begins to comprehend the paradoxical nature of his part: he heals the soldiers in his care in order to send them back to the front, where they will be either killed or traumatized again.

A condition of dependence is inscribed in these contracts between a superior authority and a subordinate party. Yet, the relationships between psychologist and patient as well as between officer and private do have an important paternal component. Listening in on Rivers’s thoughts we learn that ‘[h]e was used to being adopted as a father figure’ by his patients (34). As regards the relationship between officers and ordinary soldiers, ‘Rivers had often been touched by the way in which young men, some of them not yet twenty, spoke about feeling like fathers to their men’ (107). These father-son relationships are placed in the wider context of the private lives of the characters. For instance, Sassoon was abandoned by his father, who left the family when Siegfried was five and died when he was eight. Similarly, Dr Rivers’s childhood memories provide us with some noteworthy insights into the problems he had with his father. Rivers senior was a priest and a speech therapist, who ‘embodies the combined patriarchal authorities of family, education, and church,’ as Karin Westman puts it (Westman 2001: 34).

A further variety of hierarchical relations presented in *Regeneration* is the somewhat one-sided friendship that develops between the war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. The shy Owen looks up to Sassoon as an already well-known poet and an officer renowned for his courage who has been awarded the Military Cross. One can argue that Owen hero-worships Sassoon, while Sassoon sees himself as the poetic mentor of a talented writer.<sup>5</sup>

The crucial passage I will examine now mirrors, accentuates, and universalizes the issue of hierarchical frameworks in the novel as a whole. On leave, Dr Rivers attends mass, listens to hymns, looks at a church window and meditates on questions of belief, sacrifice as well as familial and generational patterns in view of the ongoing war and his own role in the war machinery. The first paragraph, including the quotation and the following comment, sets the ironical tone, also by way of an intertextual allusion. The churchgoers, necessarily, represent what has come to be called *the nation at home*, that part of the population that was not directly involved in the war—children and women as well as, most importantly, middle-aged and elderly men. The dichotomy between *the nation at home*, which also came to denote those men in power who perpetuated the war at all costs, particularly at the cost of *the nation abroad*, the soldiers who actually fought in the trenches, is indicated here. Ironically, Rivers notices that after the Somme ‘God moves in a mysterious way’, the hymn by the eighteenth century religious poet William Cowper, advising absolute trust in God’s providence, won national popularity.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, there is a striking similarity to the punch-line of Sassoon’s satirical war poem ‘They’, which adds to the meaning, or rather subverts the meaning of Cowper’s hymn. In this poem, *the nation at home* is represented by a bishop, who spouts hollow propaganda slogans with religious overtones. The soldiers—they—stand for *the nation overseas*, who take the bishop’s figurative stereotypes literally and relate them to their actual experience, thereby sarcastically mocking the bishop’s, the church’s, the nation’s support of a war they do not have to fight. In the first stanza of ‘They’ the bishop explains to the soldiers the ennobling spiritual change they will undergo fighting in this just war. In the second stanza, the soldiers respond by pointing out the physical changes they have to cope with, death, blindness, loss of limbs or syphilis. ‘After this, the bishop’s final words are

impotently unctuous' (Campbell 1999: 126): 'The ways of God are strange!' The piousness of Cowper's hymn has turned into the helpless cynicism of Sassoon's poem. We can also interpret this process in terms of the above-mentioned conflicting duties. Sassoon portrays a high-ranking representative of the Church as a warmonger. Although this is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in the history of the Christian churches, it is nevertheless a travesty of the role of a spiritual leader.

This division between *the nation at home* and *the nation overseas*, an omnipresent notion in the literature of the Great War, is also explored in other sections of *Regeneration*. The final paragraph of Sassoon's declaration defines this discord:

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. (3)

Furthermore, Sassoon's contempt for civilians who promote the war surfaces in a couple of poems he gives Rivers to read. For example, in 'To the Warmongers' the poet contrasts the horrid reality of the sufferings of the soldiers with the constructed, idealized conception of those at home. When Owen first approaches Sassoon, he compliments him on the crucial lines of 'The Death-Bed', which pinpoint the conflict between the two opposed nations as well as that between the two antagonistic generations: 'He's young; he hated War, how should he die/When cruel old campaigners win safe through?' Moreover, in his very first anamnestic conversation with Rivers, Sassoon gives vent to his hatred for his fellow-countrymen at home, particularly

'old men you see sitting around in clubs, cackling on about "attrition" and "wastage of manpower" and...' His voice became a vicious parody of an old man's voice. "'Lost heavily in that last scrap.'" You don't talk like that if you've watched them die.' (14)

This animosity overcomes Sassoon again, when he observes and overhears 'two old men nattering about the war' (113) in the Conservative Club in Edinburgh:

He listened to the rumble of their voices and felt a well-practised hatred begin to flow. It needed only a slighting remark about the courage of the German Army to rouse him to real fury, and very soon it came. (113-14)

Another topos of the poetry of the Great War and a major theme of *Regeneration* is sacrifice. Rivers sees the representation of two sacrifices on the church window, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and Abraham's sacrifice of his only son Isaac. In a number of war poems the analogy between the fate of the soldiers who suffer and are sacrificed with that of Christ is explored, for example, in 'The Redeemer', a poem by Sassoon, which is quoted by Owen in the novel. Likewise, in many of his own poems Wilfred Owen represents soldiers as 'sacrificial victim[s]' (Kerr 1993: 29).<sup>7</sup> A perversion of the idea of sacrifice in general and of the passion of Christ in particular is also referred to in the novel. *Crucifixion* was the popular name for Field Punishment No. 1, a specially humiliating and also dangerous punishment for minor offences such as drunkenness (Hynes 1990: 465 and Ferguson 1999: 347). The offender was attached to a fixed object for up to two hours a day for a period of up to three months. Sometimes these men were put in a place within range of enemy shell-fire. The image of the

offender strapped to a wheel or a cross-like construction resembled that of the crucified redeemer.

The belts and straps with which the offending soldiers were tied were also used by Abraham to tie Isaac before sacrificing him. God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son was meant as a test of his unquestioning faith and obedience. Although at the last moment the angel orders Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead, the father *was* prepared to yield to God's authority. The images of the biblical stories induce Rivers to reappraise the clauses of the generational contract in terms of the contractual structure of our civilization:

[T]he two bloody bargains on which our civilization is based. *The* bargain, Rivers thought, looking at Abraham and Isaac. The one on which all patriarchal societies are founded. If you, who are young and strong, will obey me, who am old and weak, even to the extent of being prepared to sacrifice your life, then in the course of time you will peacefully inherit, and be able to exact the same obedience from your sons. Only we're breaking the bargain, Rivers thought. (149)

Without doubt, Rivers interprets the relations between the generation of the fathers and that of the sons in terms of Wilfred Owen's poem 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', which provides a chilling new version of the parable from *Genesis*. While the first fourteen lines closely follow the biblical text, the final couplet inverts the familiar ending of this patriarchal myth: Abraham actually slaughters Isaac. Moreover, Owen reinterprets Abraham's role as that of the ancestor of fathers who send their sons to the battlefields of Europe: 'But the old man would not so, but slew his son, | and half the seed of Europe, one by one.' Towards the end of his considerations Rivers takes up this quotation and slightly adapts Owen's point of view: 'All over northern France, at this very moment, [...] the inheritors were dying, not one by one, while old men, and women of all ages, gathered together and sang hymns' (149). It appears that we can speak of two varieties of *mirror-texts* here; on the one hand, key concepts of the entire text are mirrored in these passages, on the other hand, the various manifestations of the Abraham myth could be considered as being reflected in distorted mirrors: the biblical parable, in Rivers's perception slightly misrepresented on the church window on account of the facial expression of the figures (Abraham hides his regret, Isaac smirks), Owen's subverted version and Rivers's extension of Owen's rendering.

Another noteworthy aspect of this section is the narrative strategy. Generally speaking *Regeneration* can be positioned on the authorial-figural continuum; however, there are hardly any longer exclusively figural text segments. Significantly, in these passages we are allowed to share the perspective of the protagonist Dr Rivers. The inner discourse of the central figure additionally underlines the centrality of this section. Furthermore, we have the privilege of seeing Rivers at the crossroads, of gaining a new insight into his ambivalent existence as doctor and officer. When Rivers becomes aware of the breach of contract that the older generation is guilty of, that is to say that the fathers cheat the obedient sons of their inheritance by sending them to their death, he includes himself, thereby acknowledging his complicity: 'Only we're breaking the bargain' (149). Although Rivers has shown self-criticism and self-irony from the beginning of the novel, it is only in this scene that he comes to see himself as one of the patriarchs who are breaking the contract. The military psychologist regenerates the minds of soldiers with the purpose of returning them to the trenches, one could even argue, with the intention of sacrificing them. At the very centre of the novel the reader observes the protagonist in an epiphanic moment.

This section also marks an essential point in the structure of the main plot line, Sassoon's protest and its repercussions. The novel begins with Sassoon's declaration and his

arrival at Craiglockhart War Hospital, where he is placed under the care of Dr Rivers; it ends with Sassoon's return to the front. Rivers, fully aware of breaking the generational contract, 'recommend[s] [Sassoon] for general service overseas' (245). This ending is doubly ironical. Both Rivers and Sassoon act against their convictions. Despite the insight into his complicity he gained in the central scene Rivers represses his doubts. And Sassoon, though still holding the views expressed in the declaration, decides to go back to the front. In terms of the biblical story, the latterday Abraham sacrifices his surrogate son. The inversion of the parable at the heart of *Regeneration* anticipates the ending of the novel. With reference to the final words of the book—Rivers's entry into Sassoon's file: 'Discharged to duty' (250)—Catherine Lanone aptly comments: 'The pen has become the sacrificial knife, but no angel stays his hand' (Lanone 1999: 264).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> All quotations from this novel refer to the following edition: Barker, Pat (1992), *Regeneration*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- <sup>2</sup> The second novel is *The Eye in the Door* (1993); for the third, *The Ghost Road* (1995), Barker received the prestigious Booker prize.
- <sup>3</sup> Like the poets Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, Dr William Halse Rivers is one of the historical figures in the book.
- <sup>4</sup> Rimmon-Kenan defines this phenomenon as follows: 'An analogy which verges on identity, making the hypodiegetic level a mirror and reduplication of the diegetic, is known in French as *mise en abyme*. It can be described as the equivalent in narrative fiction of something like Matisse's famous painting of a room in which a miniature version of the same painting hangs on one of the walls' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 94). Wenche Ommundsen, who foregrounds the metatextual significance of such text-segments, considers *mise en abyme* as 'an embedded self-representation or mirror-image of the text within the text. The *mise en abyme* may [...] refer to the whole work which includes it; it may also refer to a particular element within that work, or it may take as its subject the processes of fictional creation and communication' (Ommundsen 1993: 10). Since it is rarely the entire text which is reduplicated but only one or several aspects of it, Mieke Bal suggests to use the term 'mirror-text' for *mise en abyme* in the analysis of narrative fiction (Bal 1997: 146).
- <sup>5</sup> Compare the argument of Sharon Monteith, who finds that 'Barker [...] recreates a relationship she believes meant more to Owen than to Sassoon [...]' (Monteith 2002: 53).
- <sup>6</sup> The battle of the Somme was an unsuccessful Allied offensive that cost innumerable casualties; it was, perhaps, the most traumatic battle for the British and took on the connotation of pointless loss of lives as well as incompetent and irresponsible conduct of the war.
- <sup>7</sup> We can also find an ironical exposition of this idea of the soldier-Christ in one of Owen's letters to Osbert Sitwell: 'For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross in numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not imagine he thirst till after the last halt; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands to attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha' (Owen 1967: 562).

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