

**THE FRICTION LINE BETWEEN “LYING” AND “TRUTH”, OEDIPAL
CONFLICT, AND TRAUMATIC SPEAKING AND SILENCE IN PAT
BARKER’S *REGENERATION***

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Abstract

The present article analyses the first part of Pat Barker’s trilogy *Regeneration* (1991-1995), of the same title. It is set in the First World War and turns around the encounter between psychiatrist E. M. Rivers and War poet Siegfried Sassoon when the latter suffers from shell shock and publishes a complaint against the war politics of the British government. From the analysis of Sassoon’s Declaration, my main contention is that the novel addresses the liminal territory between “truth” and “lying” when representing and memorialising a traumatic event like WWI. In the second part, I delve into the poetics of psychoanalysis and (poetic) language as the narratives Barker uses to articulate the rapport between generations: fathers furthering a war in which their sons are involved. With this in mind, the paper analyses their oedipal conflict, as well as that between healer (Rivers) and trauma victim (Sassoon) both at a personal and national level.

Keywords: “Lying”, “truth”, oedipal conflict, WWI trauma.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la primera parte de la trilogía *Regeneration* (1991-1995). Ambientada en la Primera Guerra Mundial, gira en torno al encuentro entre el psiquiatra E. M. Rivers y el poeta Siegfried Sassoon cuando éste sufre de “Shell-shock” y publica una protesta contra la política bélica del gobierno británico. Desde el análisis de esta Declaración, mi tesis es que la novela hace referencia al territorio liminal entre “verdad” y “mentira” al representar y memorializar la Primera Guerra Mundial. En la segunda parte, exploro la poética psicoanalítica como la narrativa que Barker utiliza para articular la relación entre generaciones: padres fomentando una guerra en la que sus hijos se ven envueltos. A partir de esto, el artículo analiza el conflicto edípico, así como el que se da entre el sanador (Rivers) y la víctima del trauma (Sassoon) a nivel personal y nacional.

Keywords: “Mentira”, “verdad”, conflicto edípico, trauma de la Primera Guerra Mundial.

1. Introduction

Pat Barker's *Regeneration* Trilogy (1995) gained its author international acclaim. Its first part, *Regeneration* (1991), was made into a film in 1997. *The Eye in the Door* (1993) won the Guardian Fiction Prize. And finally, *The Ghost Road* was the winner of the Booker Prize in 1995. Many factors explain the success of the trilogy. However, for John Brannigan, it is the fact that few of the First-World-War combatants survived in the 1990s to celebrate the Remembrance Day service, which "meant that the subject was ripe for valedictory fictional representation" (93). In other words, the conflict was becoming a liminal event, one between the memory of its victims and protagonists and the transformational and deferred articulation of fiction. It is my main contention that Barker's trilogy, and *Regeneration* in particular, addresses the liminality of traumatic experience and its repression. In this sense, the paper will delve into the poetics of "truth" and "lying", and health and disease concerning war neurosis from Sassoon's protest against war politics. Next, the article will move into the liminal and blurring territory between science and affects in the context of the Oedipal battle of trauma victims and second-hand witnesses. With all this in mind, when acts of remembrance for the victims, heroes and veterans of the Great War recur, my paper delves into *Regeneration* as a trauma-inflected literary reappraisal of the conflict. It is a "historical" trilogy; yet, the events recalled are so close (they constitute the beginning of the Western conception of a worldwide conflict and presentness) and so far (their first-hand witnesses being dead) that our identification with the victims is as powerful as our disengagement from a world our own and not our own any more. Although the novel deals with historical events, they are narrated against themselves, particularly deconstructing the so-called "authenticity" of history. In other words, characters' remembrance constitutes a valid approach to the past, rather than classic historiography. Hence, *Regeneration* fits in what Linda Hutcheon called historiographic metafiction, namely "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988: 5). Yet, Hutcheon does not discard history as obsolete. She mainly claims it is "being rethought as a human construct" (1988: 16). The fact of combining real historical characters with fictional ones is key in this turn of the screw; as it is the slippery nature of the past, which is only *knowable* "through its textualized remains" (1988: 19-20). Thus, *Regeneration* makes up a *tour de force* between historical and fictional characters' discourses and experiences about the war, and between so-called traumatic truth and surrogate traumas. In concrete, Dominick LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement" (as a desirable stand of reader/spectator to avoid overidentification with victims of traumatic events as in some Holocaust texts) will be useful in the analysis of the novel. The distance between the "authentic" testimony of the historical victim and the deferred one of fictional/secondary victims/witnesses is thus put to the fore. *Regeneration* works as a liminal territory for current readers to bear witness to their own temporality and agency, which helps renegotiate the dynamics between discourses of memory, "lying" and "truth".

In approaching the First World War, Barker’s novel answered to postmodern cultural anxieties, namely issues like “gender, emasculation, bisexuality and role reversals” (Brannigan 94). From the 1990s the impact of the Yale School of “trauma studies” and queer theory necessarily changed our vision of the conflict. Recalling Roger Luckhurst’s *The Trauma Question* (2008), Karolyn Steffens argues that Barker’s trilogy is “fully immersed in our contemporary trauma culture” (37). And, although Steffens thinks that many critics assume that *Regeneration* fundamentally relies on current “trauma theory”,¹ she points out that the novel “puts the trauma discourse of the late-twentieth century in conversation with W. H. R. Rivers’s specific psychoanalytic method” (38). In this sense, Barker’s text seems to rely on new conceptions of memory, like Michael Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory”, rather than on more classic memory readings (Kirk 1999, Winter 2000, Wurtz 2009) in view of first-centenary revivals of the Great War. Multidirectional memory prompts the multiple relations that memory traces establish with each other in multiple and unexpected directions and in a more or less direct fashion: the memory of a traumatic event like the Holocaust is the metonymic reference to other traumatic events it recalls. It is in this sense that Steffens addresses the conversation between Rivers’s psychoanalysis and late-twentieth century trauma theory as interconnected discourses of memory. However, when reading the Great War through a text of the 1990s, the event itself is doubly displaced. This is inevitable though, for, although Barker’s postmodern text presents historical events as cultural artifacts, current criticism revises the way “truth” is accessed behind the artifact. Being psychoanalysis itself a “survivor” of the Great War (Jay Lifton, in Caruth 81), its corollary “trauma theory” has been used to revisit the conflict and to explore how it is memorialized. Likewise, gender discourse (particularly masculinity and the Oedipal intergenerational struggle as a complex phenomenon) is culturally significant and relevant to understand current rewritings of the War and its protagonists. In the last years, and particularly with the anniversary of the WWI, biographies of heroes and anthologies of War poets have been published. Many of them approach the conflict and its protagonists from a self-indulgent ideological and nostalgic viewpoint. There are new texts however that, like Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* (2011) –a biography of the fictional war poet Cecil Valance– are closer to Barker’s ironic discourse. Being Hollinghurst’s novel a fictional recreation of a fictional war poet, it shows how he is recalled in multifarious ways depending on each moment’s anxieties, interests and concerns. Barker’s *Regeneration* is also a site of conflict and link of memories, past and present discourses which play on so-called reality representation.

Of the three parts of Barker’s trilogy I will focus my attention on the first one, *Regeneration*, because it features the actual encounter between the soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon and psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers. My main point is that the dialectics between both men compels the reader to analyze the articulation of

¹ Likewise, Roger Luckhurst points out that Barker’s Trilogy “retrofits the Great War with modern trauma theory” (53).

“lying” and “true memory” in war politics, as well as the articulation of masculinity, oedipal conflict and trauma healing in WWI. The novel constitutes a brilliant *tour de force* centred in Sassoon’s anti-war stand and his treatment by doctor Rivers at Craiglockhart hospital. Against first impressions, both characters’ views are complex, fluid and even contradictory, which greatly enriches the debate on war, its representation and its political and moral implications. Barker’s Sassoon is not a pacifist (neither was the actual poet) although historical figures such as Bertrand Russell used his anti-war complaint to suggest he was one. As concerns Rivers, although he was more a sociologist than a psychoanalyst, the novel focuses on his Freudian healing practices and the moral concerns they arouse when he tries to convince Sassoon to return to war. The role of poetry in this return to the past to better understand the present is also remarkable. War poetry in Barker’s novel is both the testimony of a bygone era and a potential healer. It is not only that poets bear witness to the horrors of warfare through poetry, as has been done for centuries. Sassoon and Owen use poetry to overcome trauma and re-articulate masculinity, emasculation and, particularly, Oedipal “conflicts” which transcend themselves.

2. The articulation of “lying” and “truth” in WWI in *Regeneration*

Steffens argues that *Regeneration* is not properly a post-structuralist text, but a realistic one that sets a dialogue between the author, Rivers, and Freud (47-48). Although I consider the novel a postmodern text, this point of the article will focus on how Barker makes up this “realistic” discourse, particularly through historical characters. I do not mean “realistic” in the classic sense, though; that is, a discourse that attempts to reflect the reality out there. It is rather, a discourse that addresses the complexity of so-called reality to make readers comply with it as a textual construct. The novel starts with Sassoon’s anti-war declaration, which I quote at length:

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 believe this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now *become* a war of aggression and conquest. ...

I have seen and endured the sufferings 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 potential 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 practiced on them. (Barker 5, my italics)

Sassoon’s complaint, which, Barker argues, is a real fact (220), constitutes the core of the novel. Not being a pacifist, the poet recriminates the authorities’ manipulation of truth and straight use of lies to prolong the war for unknown reasons. This delay, he denounces, provokes unjustified suffering, sacrifice and death on young soldiers. To better understand his morally-inflected statement I will make reference to Hannah Arendt’s views (as revised by trauma theorist Cathy Caruth) on the construction of lying from the First World War onwards. Also, I will use LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement” to consider the degree of implication of Rivers and Sassoon on the traumas triggered by war. Drawing on Arendt’s “Truth and Politics” (1967) and “Lying in Politics” (1972), Caruth explores the interaction between lying and history. I find her reading particularly illuminating to tackle Barker’s revision of Sassoon’s anti-war declaration. Assuming “the pervasive role of lying within the political sphere in the modern world” (39), Caruth describes how political action has been progressively replaced by political lie. On the outburst of WWI, Arendt already explained how the factual truth was rejected in favour of much more politically-concerned lying. This shift from reality and political action to the fictitious world of lying took place “when the massive destructiveness of [the Great] war ... inaugurated a new world of technological violence ... [which] is itself denied. The denial of the responsibility for the beginning of the war ... may be the first lie ... that leads to th[e] modern world” (Caruth 43).

Sassoon’s words are in line with Arendt’s arguments. Both reveal the starting point of contemporary deception. And somehow both take for granted a truth prior to the overall lie that covers the contemporary. An unknown power has distorted the “true” origin of the war and the political action taken as an answer to actual facts. It is no longer factuality and truth, but hidden interests, that determine the evolution of the war, not as political action, but as a lie that effaces what originally justified that political action. In other words, Sassoon’s declaration is not only a complaint against the British government and its war management. It is Barker’s late-twentieth-century recrimination of warfare politics, its lies, and its effects on individuals and whole populations. Obviously Sassoon could not foresee how war politics (of lying) would evolve. But Barker knows; and she injects her knowledge into the character’s words. In other words, *Regeneration* plays with layers of meaning and memory, the postmodern one of the text and the fictional one of the WWI protagonists. With Vietnam War, the process of deception was perfected to fulfil a process of image-making (45). Thus, war is manufactured as self-contained and self-justifying imagery. In the case of the USA and Vietnam, the imagery trapped and effaced actual facts to sustain an image of omnipotence that determined a fictitious political action. For Arendt and Caruth, the image defactualises the scenario and becomes the framework itself (48). This is, it seems to me, what underpins Barker’s use of Sassoon’s complaint against an invisible authority that uses soldiers like marionettes and delays the end of the war with lies. This invisible authority not only puts to the test the way we interact and recall. It also puts forward the emasculation that characterises Barker’s trauma discourse. However, the poet still believes there is a concrete political action behind their suffering and

sacrifice; at least at the beginning of the conflict. Little by little, the cause that triggered the effect/war fades away, or is perverted, and hence, the effect/war becomes an unfair performance without a justifying cause. Fighting then becomes a meaningless event that remains violent, but with no redeeming feature as it is when politics and moral principles support it. In this light, the novel addresses the imagery of British imperial power as an abstract concept soldiers were not informed about and did not agree to fight for.

There are two remarkable issues in the process of Sassoon's awareness of meaninglessness. First, it recalls trauma belatedness; that is the period of latency in which the traumatic event does not come out, but remains "hidden" so to speak. Caruth masterly explains it in relation with shell shock and, later, PTSD. It is the "response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events" (1995, 4) which takes different unwilling manifestations "stemming from the event" (4). In this sense, the victim's discourse is a return of/to the event that escapes its meaning: neither truthful nor deceitful because it is non-representable in "logic" terms. It is just a performance of human vulnerability when confronted with the unthinkable. Yet, after a period of latency, Sassoon works out the trauma and can render it in his declaration. In the second place, trauma poetics, as implicit in Sassoon's logically narrated complaint, address the complex articulation of masculinity. With shell shock, soldiers were vulnerable not only to the physical effect of physical harm. They were exposed to an emasculating perception of masculinity. With queer theory, Barker adapts the representation of WWI masculinity as psychologically vulnerable –Freud himself was startled (Caruth 5) and keen to understand soldiers' neuroses. In seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender is a social construction and can thus be deconstructed. In fact, she thinks gender is the effect of repeated performative acts that are socially meaningful and ascribed to pre-established gender roles: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time" (33). In this light, the traumatic emasculation of Barker's male characters is only a proof of how masculinity is just the effect intertwined performative acts. Indeed, when confronted with the trauma of war, all her characters are unable to articulate their alleged masculinity. Barker uses historiography against itself, re-defining taken-for-granted truths and lies, memory and identity.

Convinced by his friend Graves and afraid of being court-martialled, Sassoon prefers to pass for (i.e. perform) a shell-shocked soldier than for a conchie. The option of being sane and against the war was not feasible at the time. Yet, in the novel, the battlefield moves from the French trenches to the dialectics of disease/trauma and health, and lying and truth. The problem turns out that very often in the novel the limits between health and truth, and disease and lying are subtle. In fact, Sassoon's trauma is closer to "a medicalization of dissent" (Barrett 240) than to a disease to be healed. I am using health here in a Foucauldian sense, assuming it to be a cultural *dispositif* used to control people's bodies and minds. In this sense, Sassoon's arrival at Craiglockhart is a challenge not only for the poet, but especially for Rivers. The hospital is a self-contained

world, a sort of gigantic wounded brain inside which characters move around. Thus, in arriving there, one felt “daunted by the sheer gloomy, cavernous bulk of the place” (Barker 10). Craiglockhart proves to be the site of control, discipline and punishment which recalls Foucault’s “panopticon” wherefrom the one in power watches the other (Foucault 201). Rivers is the supervisor who disciplines the bodies and minds of his patients from a tower at the top of the building accessible to nobody else (Barker 19, 63). Thus, control, health, masculinity and “truth” are not only applied, but also represented physically. He stands on top as a metaphorical father figure, which, as will be shown, constitutes a recurrent trope along *Regeneration*.

In line with postmodernism, Barker’s novel “deconstructs” the binary system whereby concepts like health, truth, masculinity and reason are regarded as positive in contrast to their opposites. This relies on Jacques Derrida’s thesis on logocentrism, binary oppositions and hierarchy (41). Rivers embodies *a priori* the “positive” side of the binary. He is presented as a Freudian who over-values the healing potential of remembering, even if “the typical patient ... had usually been devoting considerable energy to the task of forgetting whatever traumatic events had precipitated the neurosis” (25). As concerns the dynamics of forgetting and remembering, Steffens’s analysis is rather contradictory. Firstly, she points out that Barker “offers successful working through ... insist[ing] on survival through voiced remembrance” (40). Paradoxically, a few pages later, she argues that “‘healing’ is highly problematic in Rivers’ case, since it implies a forgetting of the event in order to return to the Front” (47). In any case, Western holistic and Freudian-inspired culture regards the fact of remembering as positive because it helps reintegrate the past and the present into a coherent, cohesive and fully integrated narrative. When a patient remembers, the process of healing allegedly starts because (his/her/the) truth comes out from a psychoanalytic frame of mind. In this sense, verbalizing becomes the magic event, the way to enter the Symbolic order and overcome the oedipal conflict. In my view, *Regeneration* questions and supports this stance. Rivers fights against his patients’ denial to remember, through hypnosis sessions with deplorable results (Barker 62). However, the doctor insists in using abreaction to heal victims of shell-shock by assuming their “truth”. The novel thus addresses how “truth” is constructed, articulated and performed. It is forced upon its victims who, tortured by war or a medicalized discourse, must share their perpetrators’ desires and orders. Sassoon’s case is singular from the very start because it addresses what Arendt and Caruth put forward. His manifesto does not only denounce the violence of war, but the denial of the arbitrary and deceitful delay of that war (Caruth 44). Thus, remembering itself becomes a political act against the poetics of lying. His determination to remember, the narrator argues, “was motivated ... by a determination to convince civilians that the war was mad” (Barker 25). In brief, this is an act of rebellion.

From Vietnam War onwards, American politics have made up a whole system of make-believe related to the country war politics and its propaganda. In this context, Caruth makes a distinction between public relations managers and

problem-solvers. In her view, the former “*make images to sell the war*” whereas the latter “*make war to sustain an image*” (45). Sassoon is implicitly denouncing both techniques and/or figures. The authorities he accuses of lying are lying because an image had to be devised to convince the troops and population to go on fighting and/or resisting against the Germans. However, the lie feeds itself. Once the image has been created, the war has to go on. Otherwise, the image makes no sense. In his Introduction to *Poetry of the First World War*, Tim Kendall recalls Wilfred Owen’s conviction to fight as if he “was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote” (xv). In other words, an image of Britain has to be re-created and secured in the same way as masculinity must be performed to be affirmed. In preserving Britain’s literary (and cultural) achievements, these poets felt theirs was an ethically-justified war. They fought not out of hatred, like Germans did, but in defence of their national values (Kendall xv). That is, the British Empire had an image to be preserved and war seemed the only way to do so. If late-twentieth-century USA has “to behave like the greatest power in the world” (Arendt 17), the same applies to early-20th-century Britain. The gap between both moments/discourses is bridged in Barker’s Sassoon, a late-20th-century character performing an early-20th-century figure.

3. Psychoanalysis and poetry as narratives of oedipal conflict in *Regeneration*

Beyond the politics of “lying”, “truth”, and memory that Sassoon addresses, *Regeneration* draws on the poet’s writing and the implications it has in his relation with Rivers. Sassoon’s writing is, for the psychoanalyst, a Freudian event, a narrative that is triggered and aims to overcome trauma:

Writing the poems had obviously been therapeutic, but then Rivers suspected that writing the Declaration might have been therapeutic too. He thought that Sassoon’s poetry and his protest sprang from a single source, and each could be linked to his recovery from that terrible period of nightmares and hallucinations.” (Barker 25)

The fact that First World War Poetry and the protest against the conflict have the same origin is disturbing for Rivers and the culture he cares for and that, paradoxically, the poet embodies. In fact, this oxymoron has unexpected effects on both men along the novel.

As mentioned above (Kendall xv), preserving Britain’s literary (and cultural) achievements justified the war against the Germans for Rivers and, until his 1917 anti-war declaration, for Sassoon as well. However, their encounter reveals the side-effects of the politics of national lying at a personal level and vice versa. The novel turns around an oedipal battle between doctor and patient. However, their conflict can be extrapolated to an intergenerational one (Atkinson 2015) whereby a new generation of males confronts the decision of the old one to preserve and guarantee Britishness against the enemy. In short, the text recasts

the Great War as an oedipal battle which was fought both in France and at home. In this sense, Barker’s text is aptly titled *Regeneration*, for regeneration is not akin to rebirth. That is, the novel does not feature the birth of a new nation through warfare. It is a more complex process where the new absorbs (and replaces) the old, questioning but not denying it. The new generation, here voiced by Sassoon, preserves old values, but also recriminates the elder generation the disengagement with which youths are sacrificed, especially as the war is prolonged artificially. The crisis of truth and trust between fathers and sons constitutes the traumatic core of *Regeneration* and finds its correlate in religious iconography, especially Abraham’s sacrifice of his son. In this sense, the oedipal in the novel is rather ambivalent. It addresses the ambiguous relation between father and son, disregarding the role of the mother. In this sense, the oedipal redirects the libidinal desire of the male “child” (Sassoon/Owen) from the mother towards the father figure, here represented by Rivers. Or otherwise, in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), the oedipal is reframed outside the limits of the family well into the social. Hence, the intergenerational conflict between fathers and sons as passive and active agents of war respectively. As mentioned above, the oedipal is related to Abraham’s sacrifice of his son too, also a conflict between father and son where the mother is absent. However, unlike the classic libidinal desire of the son for the mother in Freudian and Lacanian Oedipus, Abraham submits himself to Father/God even to kill his own son. The intergenerational conflict between fathers and sons has thus in *Regeneration* a twofold referent that makes it particularly complex.

Eventually the oedipal “truth” of the novel –which de-constructs masculinity as a fixed and natural identity– can only be rendered in the form of poetry whereby two generations of men involved in the war relate to each other. In Barker’s text, youths take refuge from chaos (78) and feel safe since father figures like Rivers “share the[ir] horror and the[ir] conviction” (79), at least at first glance. This takes us to LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement”, a desirable stand that prevents witnesses from overidentifying with victims of traumatic events: “Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call “empathic unsettlement” (41). The young generation, who suffers from trauma, first in the trenches and later at Craiglockhart hospital, is somehow equalled to their fathers. Fathers, the narrator says, share the sons’ horror in their turn. However, as LaCapra aptly argues, being the victim of a traumatic event is not akin to bearing witness to it (47). In other words, the father figures who further the war are not trauma victims, at least not as those directly involved in the conflict. The role of empathy in the secondary witness is valuable. It involves, LaCapra points out: “A kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78). Trauma is thus untransferable. Yet, the oedipal restores (as well as short-circuits) the affective link that connects victim and secondary witness. In fact, even in the most brutal of conflicts, the narrator points out: “The relation between officers and men ... was domestic. Caring” (Barker 97). Back at home, Sassoon, Owen and other victims of war

must come to terms with their trauma through Rivers's expertise. In fact, *Regeneration* is a catalogue of traumatic experiences.

Sassoon describes his shell-shock trauma after a period of latency in a pedagogic fashion in his exchange with Rivers: "Nightmares and hallucinations come later'. . . 'I did have nightmares when I first got back from France. I don't have them now.' 'And the hallucinations?' . . . 'It was just when I woke up, the nightmares didn't always stop. So I used to see . . .' A deep breath. Corpses. Men with their faces shot off, crawling across the floor.'" (Barker 13). There are more extreme cases of belated war trauma other than Sassoon's which uphold the novel's pedagogic discourse. Burns is also a patient of Rivers's, and a paradigmatic case of shell-shock:

He'd been thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell and had landed, head-first, on a German corpse, whose gas-filled belly had ruptured on impact. Before Burns lost consciousness, he'd had time to realize that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh. Now, whenever he tried to eat, that taste and smell recurred. . . . He hardly looked like a human being at all. (19)

The imagery used is very effective, almost synesthetic, because the smell of that flesh can almost be "read". Obviously, readers are doubly deferred from the trauma itself, which is only vicariously rendered by the narrator. The empathy of readers towards the victim is unsettled (i.e. not over-identifying), though justified. It is meaningful that Burns's reiterative acting-out of trauma transforms him into a man who does not look a human. Dehumanizing the victim is the last step in traumatic suffering. He is diseased beyond understanding, an abject presence, and therefore he can no longer be recognized as a human, but as an animal or monster. In this line, Susan Sontag argues that "the most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing" (38); and in many cases, the diseased are metaphorically infected by and/or mutated into animals (39, 41). Although Sontag deals with the physicality of illness, her dehumanizing/animalizing metaphors can be applied to Barker's traumatized characters. They are queered not only from a sexual viewpoint; the gayness of WWI poets and their poems being a case in point. They are also queered because, in being emasculated, the "essence" of masculinity is discarded.

The language the novel uses to address trauma is, as has been shown, enmeshed in the Yale school of the 1990s and ultimately in Freudianism. Indeed, Rivers interprets the meaning of dreams (Barker 42-43). The horrors of the victims of so-called war neurosis are repressed for him to abreact them later. His encounters with his patients help understand the fight between wilful forgetting and imposed remembering, and between unhealthy acting-out and the curative working-through that upholds Rivers's oedipal fathering of his patients. However, *Regeneration* is rather ambivalent. Are Rivers's language and science the adequate tools to heal these men? Is he a *bona fide* father to his patients/sons? The discourses of traumatic memory and poetry prove valid in this revision of masculinity.

The bond between Rivers and Sassoon helps articulate men’s ambivalent interaction during the war. Their oedipal struggle makes a change in their views; particularly in the former, who eventually understands the origin of his own traumatic stammering and questions his job as healer/murderer of his metaphoric sons. Paradoxically he cures them to be sent to the reason why they fell ill. He is, in brief, the father in crisis. The bond Sassoon-Owen is also a father-son one. They put forward how the oedipal struggle between generations can be gentle. If the tandem Rivers-Sassoon recalls the Freudian oedipal battle, that between Rivers and Owen draws on Abraham’s oedipal conflict of love and submission. Yet, there is a third angle to the oedipal in *Regeneration*, namely the “love” relation between Sassoon and Owen which draws on classic elegies. Anne Whitehead considers Sassoon’s revision of Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” as “an analogy for [Barker’s] methods of writing the past” (in Monteith 215). It is in this sense that poetry and memory interact in the novel. The fact that Barker intervenes in both men’s re-creation of war for second-hand witnesses to have access to the traumatic events they experienced first-hand is significant; especially because both the novelist and readers can only bear witness to the War vicariously (Joyes 173). This is how Barker shows the process of poetic re-creation of traumatic facts. Owen’s original reads:

What minute-bells for these who die so fast?

–Only the monstrous/solemn anger of our guns. (Barker 126)

The revised version with Sassoon’s help reads:

What passing-bells for these who die ... *so fast?*

–Only the monstrous anger of the guns. (126)

Sassoon’s palimpsestic changes on the original poem demonstrate not only the confluence of the soldier-poets’ voices. They also address how language makes memory, and eventually, history. The final poem does not only address British troops (“our guns”), but all the European soldiers (“the guns”) involved in the war. Also, the glorious “solemn” is replaced by “monstrous”. It is no longer a nation’s glory, but the betrayal of the older generation of men on the new one in Europe which prevails. The discourse of *Regeneration* turns thus a counterdiscourse, for it questions the logic of intergenerational love by re-defining the oedipal as ambivalent but valid to render the trauma of masculinity and its performative character. Sons are betrayed by their fathers in what constitutes not only a historical but a cultural trauma.

The oedipal circle is closed with another of Owen’s poems, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young”. It links Rivers’ experiences to Owen’s words. The doctor rewrites and is rewritten by Owen’s poems and, in the process, becomes his father figure, as is Sassoon’s first. When Rivers attends a church service and examines the “eastern stained-glass windows” at the beginning of chapter fourteen, he appreciates two Biblical scenes, namely “a crucifixion” and

“beneath it, a much smaller, Abraham’s sacrifice of his son” (133). Christ’s redemptive death and especially the scene of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, are not only metaphors of Rivers’ use of his patients-sons. They also address the First World War as a mass sacrifice: “Rivers thought ... If you, who are young and strong, will obey me, who am old and weak, even to the extent to ... sacrifice your life, then ... you will inherit ... the same obedience from your sons. ... The inheritors were dying ... while old men ... gathered ... and sang hymns” (133). The images in the church also address Owen’s poetic performance of masculinity in crisis. As Joyes argues, the biblical scenes and the war episodes Rivers recalls inspire Owen’s “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (174-75). The poem draws once again on the oedipal. As a matter of fact, while Rivers is admiring the stained-glass windows in his childhood church, the narrator points out the two Biblical scenes represent “the two bloody bargains on which a civilization claims to be based” (133). The doctor fathers his patients because, in Sassoon’s view, they turn him “into a Daddy” (59). Sassoon’s case is particularly extreme. At the end of part 3, after an Epiphanic crisis, he comes to connect his sense of loss at war with his sense of abandonment. The scene turns around a hallucination or self-splitting process whereby he bears witness to himself as an abandoned child. This he associates to Rivers’s eventual abandonment, which, since the doctor has become “his father confessor”, constitutes a sort of “second abandonment” (129). The problematic relation between father and son at an individual or national level is a leit-motif, “never simple, never over” (139). Frictions come out between both in the way they interact, when the son remembers and replaces the father, and when the father regrets having overpowered the son.

This paper and Barker’s novel start with Sassoon’s declaration and Rivers’ answer as a professional to what is reported as a shell-shock case to the military authorities. However, the doctor’s response evolves from a psychoanalyst’s to that of a psychoanalyzed; from a father-redeemer’s to that of a redeemed; from a scientist’s to one who embraces affects and spiritualism in his interaction with the other. It is not that Rivers suffers from empathic unsettlement. It is only that the different methods of abreaction as unwilling memorizing trigger off a crisis of his role as authority in a Patriarchal system. His masculinity and authority are queered by his “sons” and by himself. That is the ultimate trauma that *Regeneration* reveals. He feels firstly disarmed about his rationalism in an exchange with his colleague Brock. Talking about Sassoon’s contradictions on war politics, Rivers notices, against Brock, that they are trying to impose rationality on irrationality (67) when their alleged rationality is defending the irrationality of a no-longer-justifiable war. His doubts increase when he reads Sassoon’s poem on his hallucinations and he is “not capable of saying anything” (168). The doctor feels increasingly guilty because he is fostering a war politics he no longer believes in unconditionally (104). Also, he feels the characteristic guilt syndrome of trauma survivors when he understands he is involved in the sacrifice of the new generation. New doubts about (his) science and rationalism arouse when, on chapter 22, Rivers bears witness to doctor Yealland’s practices with trauma victims; particularly when the latter uses electric shocks to make a

voiceless soldier recover his speech arguing: “You must speak, but I shall not listen to anything you have to say” (203). Yealland’s “Faradization” (Barrett 237) is a dehumanizing technique. Despite being “cured”, Yealland’s patients are denied a voice or any trace of empathy, taking LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement” to the extreme. Rivers, a mere witness to the session, counteracts Yealland’s method assuming an empathic stance, remaining still, scarcely moving (Barker 202). Although Jennifer Shaddock’s article escapes the scope of this paper because it deals with *The Ghost Road*, it analyses Rivers’s crisis. Confronted with Melanesian culture he begins “overtly to question the ethos of the Western scientist –the detached, authoritative empiric– and enact an alternative ethic, that of the engaged, complicit healer and emotional as well as intellectual father” (Shaddock 671).

Regeneration closes, as I advanced before, with Rivers at the height of his crisis, both as a doctor and as a fellow countryman of Sassoon and other soldiers-victims: “He was amused by the irony of the situation, that he, who was in the business of changing people, should himself have been changed” (Barker 218). Yealland’s dehumanizing practice not only makes River suspect the validity of science to come to terms with trauma. It also triggers the recurrence of his own traumas, particularly his oedipal complex, whose main symptom is his stammering. Both the traumatic event, his inarticulate rapport to his father, and his speech impediment merge in his father’s “dual role as priest and speech therapist” (137). In other words, being his father a spiritual father and a master of language, Rivers’s stammering is meaningful and his entering the Symbolic proves to be as compulsory as a traumatic outcome of the oedipal phase. He eventually confesses to have spent his whole life “trying not to say” (88). Most of the men the psychoanalyst “fathers” to sublimate his oedipal conflict share his difficulty/inability to speak: Owen (74), Prior (94), and Thorpe (183). Rivers summarizes the relation between trauma, its silencing and its utterance, particularly through psychoanalysis narratives, in a Freudian discourse with sociological undertones. What remains unknown is to what extent they are helpful for his own crisis:

I imagine ... mutism seems to spring from a conflict between *wanting* to say something, and knowing that if you *do* say it the consequences will be disastrous. So you resolve it by making it physically impossible for yourself to speak. ... What you tend to get in officers is stammering. And it’s not just mutism. All the physical symptoms: paralysis, blindness, deafness. They’re all common in private soldiers and rare in officers. It’s almost as if for the ... labouring classes illness has to be physical. (87-88)

Class implications apart, the transference from a psychic trauma into a physical impediment reverts the logic of shell-shock, which was primarily a bodily disorder. In any case, what matters is that, with Sassoon’s words, *Regeneration* proves to be a neo-Freudian trauma-inspired text revising the poetics of representation of so-called reality, memory and masculinity.

4. Concluding remarks

Gender issues, as Brannigan argues, are still central when analyzing Barker's return to the War. However, there are new concerns worth mentioning which enrich the trilogy, particularly the representation of trauma, the complex interaction between victims, healers and perpetrators, between generations, the crisis and revision of masculinity, "truth" and memory, and its ethical consequences. The extradiagetic narrator argues that Sassoon's protest is "a completely honest action" (Barker 219), which puts to the test the conflict between poetry and war, poetry and pacifism, life and death, heroism and victimhood, and glory and misery.

Being a postmodern novel that bears witness to particularly critical episodes with trauma theory, Freudianism and Rivers's own methodology as a framework, *Regeneration* opens more windows than it closes. The poetics of lying and truth, when it comes to political issues like war management, prove to be rather intricate. Power must confront any rebellious traces in a society under trauma and in crisis. Rivers controls dissenters' minds and bodies for the Establishment's sake. In other words, he forms part of the medicalizing strategy whereby dissent is treated as a disease to eradicate. Through his encounter with Sassoon's narratives (poetic, psychic, traumatic), the doctor evolves from a scientific analyzing and regulating behaviour to a man in crisis. In this sense, unlike Steffens, I contend that Barker questions Rivers, not only from a moral viewpoint, but from a professional one. Or rather, it is the doctor himself who questions his allegiance with Power. He is eventually a *bona fide* father with his patients, not because he overempathizes with them, but because he learns to bear witness to their suffering from LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement". It is a fact that he stammers, a belated effect of a prior trauma. However, his is due to a Freudian oedipal complex from childhood whereas his patients' traumata are war-neurosis processes. Hence, that Rivers' own oedipal complex is eventually transmuted to his rapport with his patients is metaphoric, rather than the effect of the identification between one and others.

Barker's novel enhances the role of poetry in the memorialisation of the Great War in Britain. Sassoon and Owen were famous poets, cultural icons of how the country managed to come to terms with the conflict through a genuine British literary tradition. In *Regeneration* Rivers, Sassoon and Owen make up a triangle of father-son affiliations which addresses some key issues: the difficult task of uttering the war when one is involved in it as victim and/or witness; the painful re-entering into the Symbolic when the oedipal struggle is ambivalent and the act of speaking itself becomes an (im)possibility; the role of poetry as an alternative language to come to terms with the "reality" of war; the opportunities and limitations of psychoanalysis to narrativise and heal post-traumatic stress disorders (formerly shell-shock); and the problematic representation of masculinity when these men are confronted with each others' traumata and with war. To be a WWI warrior in Barker's novel is no longer heroic. Masculinity is queered as a performative role in the hands of the discourses of "truth" and

“lying” and, hence, once the traumatic catastrophe occurs, these men are just vulnerable poets.

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