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# **A Return to the Forbidden Zone:**

## **Reading Pat Barker's *Life Class***

**Keiko KAWACHI**

### **The World of the *Regeneration* Trilogy**

Pat Barker (1943-) is highly acclaimed as one of the best contemporary British writers who fuse fact and fiction to create the world of historical novel. In the *Regeneration* trilogy Barker successfully depicted the First World War by means of putting into her novels both historical and fictional people. *Regeneration* (1991) represents patients and staff at the Craiglockhart Hospital near Edinburgh, where soldiers injured in the battle front are sent. The patients consist of historical war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Robert Graves (1895-1985) and Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and fictional soldiers, namely Billy Prior and David Burns and a few others. The novel starts with Sassoon's 'A Soldier's Declaration' entitled "Finished with the War" which actually appeared in July 1917. Sassoon is sent to the hospital to be cured because his declaration was considered as irrational protest against the government. *Regeneration* shows various kinds of symptoms of shell shock: soldier-patients are suffering from mutism, paralysis, stammering, nightmares, insomnia and lost memories. The doctor who takes care of the patients is Dr W. H. R. Rivers (1864-1922). Rivers is "the distinguished neurologist and social anthropologist" who finally

decides to send back Sassoon to the battle field at the end of the novel.

The second work of the trilogy *The Eye in the Door* (1993) concentrates on Billy Prior whose horrific experiences in childhood days, together with devastating and cruel experiences in the battle front, have made him mentally unbalanced and split his wholeness as a man. Prior represents soldiers who come from the working class and climb up the ladder of courage and manliness at the battle front to become an equal of soldiers who come from the higher social class. He is thus torn between loyalty towards and the memory of the working-class community from which he comes and comradeship and strong bond with the fellow fighters who share the horror of living death of the war. When he is ordered by the Ministry for Munitions to destroy a group of anti-war protestors who come from the same working class as he does, his inner split becomes deep and sharp enough to chase himself to the boundary of sanity and madness. Equally Prior is sexually divided: he is bisexual making love both to a working-class girl and to a married officer. The cause of his split self is described in detail and this subtle depiction tells us that he cannot easily free himself from this tragically entangled situation.

The third fiction of the trilogy *The Ghost Road* (1995) which won the Booker prize of the year shows Dr Rivers's past experience in Melanesia as an anthropologist. Rivers remembers a headhunting tribe which gradually perished after they were prohibited from fighting a war. For them headhunting was the object which they lived for. The absence of war destroyed the tribe. Rivers argues within himself the possibility of war being a regenerative function in Melanesia. This may be a degenerate and decrepit idea, however, fighting in the battle front may have a regenerative force for some soldier patients who are haunted by the abstract ghosts born out of the memories of the First World War.

The penultimate scene is the vivid description of the death of Prior

and that of Wilfred Owen; both of them have returned to the battlefield to fight with fellow soldiers. The novel ends with Dr Rivers who having dealt with variegated tragedies of young soldiers and the ghosts these patients saw is now haunted by the spectres and is visited by a Melanesian witchdoctor Njiru.

As seen from the above, the entire trilogy covers just seventeen months from Sassoon's declaration in July 1917 to the deaths of Prior and Owen in November 1918. This seventeen months, however, conveys striking images of the war: each image is deftly superimposed on the other to rend the trilogy multi-layered world. The amalgam of history and fiction alone enables this world to appear.

### **The World of *Life Class***

In this novel Pat Barker deploys the phases of the First World War which were not described in the trilogy. Analyzing this fiction by referring to the *Regeneration* trilogy will certainly show the way of creating a new historical novel.

Fictional and historical people:

The novel starts in a life-drawing class at an art school called the Slade in 1914. Male students and female students respectively attend their life class for "even the Slade, scandalously modern in most respects, segregated the sexes when the naked human body was on display." As this description shows, in 1914, the sense of value of the traditional Victorian era and that of the Modern age were both present. In the trilogy the poet-soldiers are foregrounded whereas in *Life Class* young artists studying at the Slade play main roles. Paul Tarrant who comes from the working class is able to enroll this art school because his grandmother left him a legacy. Elinor Brooke, daughter of a rich

doctor, is making effort to be recognized as an artist especially by her own family who are inclined to regard painting as frivolity. Kit Neville, the only son of a socially advanced intelligent couple, is already becoming famous as a promising artist even though he has been expelled from the school. Paul and Kit are both attracted by Elinor but Paul becomes enmeshed in sexual charm of Teresa Halliday who works as a model at the Slade. These young people often gather at the Café Royal to drink and discuss. "This was another England" free from the dark shadow of the coming war. They are fictional figures even if they have models in many biographies of artists who were at the Slade around 1914. The main historical figures who populate the novel are Professor Henry Tonks (1862-1937), Augustus John (1878-1961) and Lady Ottoline Morrell (1873-1938) who also appeared in the trilogy. On the whole these historical people do not play roles as important as those undertaken by the fictional people present in the trilogy. Henry Tonks who was trained as a surgeon and taught anatomy to medical students was invited to the Slade. He appears as the teacher of life drawing under whom the young protagonists study. Augustus John is their "great" senior who often visits the Café Royal. Lady Ottoline Morrell who presents herself in the latter half of the novel allures Elinor into her society.

England in 1914:

Deeply mesmerized by Teresa, Paul's life is filled up with sexual desire for this beautiful model. And their intimate relation becomes more ominous and more fatal as darker becomes the shadow of her husband Jack sneaking and stalking around her. Paul wants to be an artist for being an artist means the very opposite of the life he previously led in the area of the ironworks, however, he neither has time nor control

of his own life to concentrate on painting. On the other hand Neville's pictures are in the Grafton Gallery; the three studies of the Underground convey "the sensation of the noise." The noisy paintings eloquently describe Neville's image of England.

Invited to Neville's place, Paul is surprised to find that Kit, the painter of the "mature" pictures, is "a spoilt child" under the strong influence of his parents. Kit's father, Colonel Neville is a correspondent who has faced danger in "every corner of the world" and he maintains a strong opinion that "the effeminacy of the Oscar Wilde years should be stamped out." Kit under the influence of his father seeks a strong and manly England. This is the reason why his paintings, including those of the Underground, show the noisy energy of urban industrial landscapes. And Elinor wins the scholarship with the picture of a female nude for which Teresa modeled. Only Paul has not painted anything worth showing to his fellow artists. His whole time and energy have been spent for Teresa. It is when he is violently attacked by Jack Halliday that Paul realizes that the whole of the past year was a complete waste of time:

Hanging round the Café Royal with a beautiful model on his arm, spending too much, drinking too much, turning in work that would have disgraced a schoolboy. What did he think he was doing? His time at the Slade was ending in failure — and he deserved to fail.

*(Life Class 71)*

To make a new start Paul decides to paint something honest. This will be one last try. Teresa who was also beaten by Jack leaves Paul and her set of friends at the Slade. Her last words to Paul were "You don't love me. If you love anybody, you love Elinor." Paul feels defeated and

he accepts this defeat to start creating honest works of art.

The First World War breaks out:

The *Regeneration* trilogy shows the last part of the four-year war but this novel describes the very first part of it. Kit Neville who has been aware that the war would break out through the information from his father soon decides to join the Belgian Red Cross and starts training to be an ambulance driver. He attends a first-aid course and a vehicle-repair course in the morning and the rest of the time “he is painting the war, the regiments, the searchlights, the guns on Hampstead Heath.” Elinor’s brother Toby is willing to enlist but is opposed by his father who wants his son to finish the medical school. And a friend of hers, Ruthie is thinking of becoming a volunteer nurse. Another friend from the Slade, Catherine Stein of whom nobody ever thought as German before the war is now deeply worried that her father may be interned as a man from an enemy country. Paul’s step-mother opens the bandaging class. Everybody in no time becomes patriotic and tries to find his or her part to play in this national crisis. Everybody is excited and seems to be “caught up in history.”

Paul and Elinor feel left behind for they cannot readily react to this situation. Paul who has been in bed with pneumonia makes up his mind to enlist but is not accepted because the medical officers wrongly diagnose him as tubercular. Although it is not what he really wants to do, Paul applies to the Belgian Red Cross as Neville did. He must do something or he must “look as if he were doing something.” And while waiting for the reply from the Red Cross Paul attends a first-aid class. In his letter to Elinor he honestly confesses that “I’ve no desire to kill or injure anybody, but if I could wave a magic wand and be out there now, I wouldn’t hesitate.” He wants the adventure as Toby probably does.

Wishing to escape from the conflict between her father and brother

and to safeguard Catherine from hatred and animosity among English people, Elinor rents a tiny cottage with this German friend. They, however, are soon “thrown out” because people do not want to have a German in their neighbourhood. Elinor is shocked to face this very “un-English” manner. She resents the way the war takes over all their lives. There is no longer “another England” where young artists are free to create their own worlds respectively. Everything they think of appears to be trivial in comparison with the war.

The battle front versus the home front (1):

Paul Tarrant is working as a male nurse at the field hospital near the battle front in Belgium. Here everything stinks: creosote, bleach, disinfectant, soil, blood, and gangrene. Paul has been working for six months when a new volunteer, Richard Lewis arrives. Both of them want to become the ambulance drivers but there is no extra position for drivers so they take care of the wounded soldiers who are carried into the hospital from the battlefield. As mentioned before Paul was not accepted as a voluntary soldier because of his illness and Lewis does not enlist because he is a Quaker, which sect does not allow any violence. They want to be active and energetic in the reality of war as if to compensate for their absence in the battlefield.

Paul and Elinor write to each other to report his /her life. Her letter informs that her brother Toby has eventually gone off to officer training and that her mother has taken to bed.

I'm the one who isn't doing anything important, you see. Rachel's (=Elinor's elder sister) pregnant, Toby's in the army, Dad's got his work. All I've got is painting, which doesn't matter and specifically doesn't matter now. You'd be amazed how



many supposedly intelligent people think of art as some frivolous [*sic*] (sorry, can't spell it!) distraction from things that really matter. By which of course they mean the war the war the war.

(*Life Class* 148)

Here Elinor describes the situation of the home front where things that are not related to the war are thought as frivolous and made light of. The Slade is also in danger of losing its glamour as a distinguished art school because students are "dropping away." She goes on to regret the distance between the home front and the battle front which prohibits them from experiencing the war together.

I think what gets in the way is the sense that whatever we do here is so much less important than what you're doing over there. I can't imagine your world. You can pop your head back inside mine any time you like, it hasn't changed much, though now it must feel like a doll's house to you. Is she still going on about that? you think. But that was ages ago – decades. (*Life Class* 149)

Elinor's world is degraded by her own feelings of irritation and loneliness and the absence of understanding fellow artists. The home front, however, is not free from the influences of the war. Elinor sees more and more soldiers with missing limbs who make her feel ashamed for being what she is; "a girl they might once have asked to dance."

She realizes the place where she lives is no longer a detached and peaceful space but a marginal space of the battle front even if there is still a distance from where Paul is.

Paul rents a room of his own in Ypres which is near from his hospital but has never been bombed. He wants to paint when he has free time

to spend and his happiness is "almost painful" to devote himself to painting, which is completely opposite to his work at the hospital. There he is now working as a good dresser whose main duty is to wind bandages around amputated stumps. He asks Elinor to visit him to this forbidden zone, Ypres. The forbidden zone is a place where civilians other than residents are not allowed to set foot in and is a marginal space of both the home front and the battle front.

Elinor borrows a nurse's uniform from Ruthie and departs for the forbidden zone. This adventure scene reminds us of Katherine Mansfield's (1888-1923) autobiographical story "An Indiscreet Journey" written in 1915. In the story a young woman travels alone through the forbidden areas to meet a lover fighting at the front.

On her way Elinor meets a group of volunteer nurses heading towards Belgium and travels with them. She is amazed to find out that these girls needed the war to feel free and that this kind of freedom she herself experienced every morning as she walked into the Slade. Elinor for the first time in her life learns that she comes from the social class where women are able to enjoy their freedom and that she has been selfish to deplore the plight she has been living through.

In the forbidden zone:

Elinor severely criticizes Paul when he tells her that he is sketching the patients he meets at the hospital. Here her opinion on painting is concretely introduced. She believes that handicapped soldiers are not proper subject for art and that the pictures of them would be "an arty freak show" on the wall of a public gallery. She maintains that artists should choose as their subjects the things they choose to love. They must not choose things imposed on them from the outside. Paul who does not want to argue with her just says that "Patients. That's what I

see [. . .]. They're there, the people, the men. And it's not right their suffering should just be swept out of sight." Paul wants to be honest as an artist. Their points of view differ but they love each other and it is in this forbidden zone that they make love. It is worth noting that it is when Paul talks about his traumatic memory of his dead mother that Elinor asks him to make love to her.

Paul's mother was mentally disordered and taken care of at home. It was when she stuck a pair of scissors in Paul's neck that his father decided to hospitalize her. Eventually she committed suicide at the hospital when Paul was fourteen. Elinor is moved by the sad story of his destructive childhood and tries to fill up a void in his heart. She acts as Paul's fellow artist, his lover and his pseudo mother. And she also represents the home front. The forbidden zone temporarily becomes feminized space for Elinor's presence is clearly and strongly foregrounded.

It is while she is having dinner with Paul and Lewis that Ypres is heavily bombed and shelled for the first time. The next morning Elinor leaves the damaged town. Hurrying to the station, she notices little private things such as wallpaper, counterpane, chamber pots, sofas, bed and bedspread are scattered around and she regards this disorder as "indecent."

At the same moment, she brings herself to watch and see this plight as "important and meaningless." Ypres is no longer a safe and quiet feminized space: it has become a endangered forbidden zone.

I (Elinor) thought seeing you out there would make you feel closer, but it seems to have had the opposite effect. It feels as if you're in the belly of the whale and I'm out here on dry land.

*(Life Class 193)*

As the letter above shows the distance between the battle front and the

home front is not shortened. So is the distance between Paul and Elinor. The latter describes the life of the home front in England where some drastic changes have appeared. There are Belgian refugees in town. Her mother is now back to her bandaging class, her brother Toby is in the army, her father is busy with his head-injuries unit, her sister Rachel says the baby is her war work and her husband Tim is in the War office. Everybody is engaged with war work and only Elinor “preserves an iron frivolity.” She seems to be fighting a lonely battle, which is not subsumed into the real war England is undergoing.

Paul reports on the situation of the battle front by telling her his experience of going to the front line itself in an ambulance. What he confronts and sensitively bemoans is the overwhelming state of the land.

This will sound heartless, and perhaps it is, but close to the front line where the land on either side of the road is ruined — pock-marked, blighted, craters filled with foul water, splintered trees, hedges and fields gouged out — I realized I felt the horror of that landscape almost more than I feel for the dying. It’s a dreadful thing to say, I know — a flaw in me — but the human body decays and dies in some more or less disgusting way whether there’s a war or not, but the land we hold in trust. (*Life Class* 198)

Having seen a number of dying soldiers at the hospital Paul is probably getting callous and numb towards the awful and nauseating conditions of human bodies. He, however, has maintained a strong and profound belief in the land as the stable axis of all the existences. He acquires the severe and pitiless knowledge that nothing is invulnerable in the violent and relentless reality of the war.

The battle front versus the home front (2):

Richard Lewis and Paul Tarrant are eventually given posts as ambulance drivers and they feel relieved to participate in the real battle instead of working as male nurses at the field hospital. Elinor is happy to know that they are satisfied with the way the things have turned out. On the contrary she herself denigrates herself saying “ my doings are terribly trivial compared with yours. . . .it’s like looking through the window of a doll’s house, isn’t it?” She has already described her feelings using the same phrases. The repetition of them per se express her fear of being left alone and her suffering that she alone cannot positively cope with the war. But there enters into her life a strong-willed person with great influential power, namely Lady Ottoline Morrell.

Elinor who has been fighting a lonely war is soon captivated by her. She is aware that Lady Morrell is the one that draws her soul out of her body and that “ it’s a kind of cannibalism.” She, however, cannot free herself from this attractive entrapment. Her letter to Paul exhibits the complicated state of her mind.

Ottoline kisses me now whenever we meet and introduces me and shows me off and I spend most of my time feeling inferior—and trotting out my little tale about being in Ypres during the bombardment, and a tale which has grown so stale in the telling that even I no longer believe it happened. I do miss you so much, but it gets harder and harder to keep you in my mind. You’re like a ghost almost, fading in the light of dawn. (*Life Class* 216)

Elinor plays the role of a story teller telling tales of the war to the people of the home front. The more she tells the story, the more blurred it becomes and so does the memory of Paul. The existence of Lady Otto-

line Morrell erodes not only Elinor's present life but also her past time spent with Paul. She now takes her German friend Catherine with her to the Thursday night parties held by Ottoline, where people enjoy dance and music.

Paul is also losing Elinor. To him she seems ghost-like. "I've lost the sense of your voice, the way you move. I always see you sitting still somewhere, more especially in the window at the Slade." Both of them know well that they are losing each other. But they never stop painting respectively following what their minds command. Elinor sold two pictures; the one shows the mother and baby and the other depicts some schoolgirls in a park. The first picture is drawn from the inspiration she gained when she saw a woman breastfeeding her baby. The second one is painted on the basis of her sketches made in Ypres. Paul paints honestly as he made a pledge before: one picture shows "a gowned, masked, capped, gloved figure, standing by the bed of a man with gangrene, getting ready to do one of those awful hydrogen-peroxide dressing." This is not a self-portrait but it vividly creates a space of the battle front. The other picture shows "a young man who had had the whole jaw blown off by a shell." The subject of this picture is what Elinor persistently opposed. Their attitudes as artists towards the war are antagonistic and this antagonism produces a distance between the two painters. The pictures of Paul and those of Elinor are strikingly different even if both of them express the realities of the people living through the war.

Back to England:

When Paul and Lewis were on their way to the front line by ambulance they were heavily bombed. Lewis died on the spot and Paul was seriously injured in the leg. He spends his convalescent days in England,

which means that Paul moves from the battle front to the home front. He readily notices that the home front is filled with hatred and animosity towards Germany. He goes to see Tonks who is now working in a hospital. When he shows his two pictures to his former professor at the Slade, he promises Paul to do what he can for them. The professor who was a very strict critic of his pictures now recognizes Paul's achievement.

Paul visits the Café Royal and there he meets Kit Neville who was taking care of wounded German soldiers in Ypres. Neville's pictures which depict the scenes of the battle are very popular among the English and "the great war artist", Kit Neville, is now a member of Augustus John's coterie. Paul also meets Elinor at the Café Royal. She is a regular member of Lady Ottoline's parties, which means she is regarded as a "full-blown conchie( conscientious objector)."

They make love but for Paul, "every gesture, every caress, every kiss" is heavy with pain and this fact makes him feel they are saying goodbye. The truth is Paul is not able to find the space of his own in his country or in other words in this home front. He does not feel the sense of belonging. He remembers Lewis in his grave, the ambulance crews working till late at night and the staff at the field hospital. Paul is thinking of going back to the forbidden zone and to the battle front which he can reify as the space of his own.

In the *Regeneration* trilogy the soldiers are suffering from mental illnesses caused by shell shock and there is Dr Rivers who through generous and careful interviews endeavours to cure the patients. Dr Rivers functions not only as psychoanalyst but also as father of young soldiers. The absence of this father figure makes *Life Class* less subtle in that there is not depicted any intensive conflict between father and son or that of doctor and patient: the sensitive interaction between curer and

the cured. Instead, however, the conflict of artistic viewpoints is sharply described. The trilogy proposes the theme of space through the movement of the soldiers between the battle front and the hospital whereas *Life Class* foregrounds the same theme of space by describing artists working as male nurses moving between the home front and the battle front. Pat Barker's keen interest in history of the First World War creates the world where history and fiction are deftly fused. Every person in these war novels tries to find the place which he/she can justify as his/her own to fully express their own inner world.

Answering the interview by Alden Mudge, Barker says that she remains fascinated by the generation of young artists whose lives were so dramatically altered by the First World War and that she will get back to work on another novel about this period. Her next novel may propound a new theme of this dramatic phase of the history.

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