

Pat Barker's Trilogy

Bernard Bergonzi

Regeneration Trilogy by Pat Barker. Viking, 1996, £18

The separate parts of Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (*Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*) came out between 1991 and 1995 and have since been brought together in a single volume. Each of them won high praise from reviewers as they appeared and *The Ghost Road* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1995. One can see why. The trilogy contains a great deal of strong and expressive writing, skilful construction and persuasive presentation of character. The narrative takes one forward steadily and compellingly through the three volumes. But despite these many successful aspects I find something unconvincing about the whole work, and in this essay I shall try to discover why.

The First World War continues to fascinate readers of history and fiction; this was apparent in *Birdsong*, Sebastian Faulks's bestselling novel of 1993. Like many other writers, Barker is drawn to the mythicized appeal of the "war poets", and particularly the Sassoon-Owen-Graves connection. Faulks took the epigraph to *Birdsong* from a passage of Tagore that Wilfred Owen quoted in one of his last letters to his mother, and the recurring emphasis on tunnelling in his novel recalls Owen's "Strange Meeting" (which provided the title of an earli-

er - and very fine - war novel, Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*, published in 1971). Siegfried Sassoon is one of the principal characters in Barker's trilogy, as is W.H.R. Rivers, the neurologist who treated him when he was sent to Craiglockhart Military Hospital in 1917, supposedly suffering from shell-shock. Robert Graves, Sassoon's brother-officer, has a minor walking-on part, and Owen, whom Sassoon met at Craiglockhart and crucially influenced, a rather larger one. Other marginal figures taken from real life are Rivers's colleague Henry Head and Robert Ross, a friend of Oscar Wilde and later of Sassoon. But the other characters are invented, notably the central, enigmatic figure of the young officer Billy Prior. Barker has undertaken a bold and ambitious exercise in the imbrication of history and fiction.

The first volume opens with a famous occasion in the mythology of the war poets, Captain Siegfried Sassoon's manifesto of July 1917 against the continuation of the war. He was already something of a hero, an intrepid fighter at the Front, known as "Mad Jack", who had been awarded the Military Cross. But he had decided the war was no longer justified and made his public statement in the hope of being court-martialled. The authorities avoided any such embarrassment by deciding that Sassoon was suffering from "shell-shock", a move in which Graves, his younger but more worldly-wise friend, was instrumental; Graves privately agreed with Sassoon's sentiments, but believed that such a personal act of rebellion could achieve nothing and would have disastrous consequences for Sassoon. At Craiglockhart he was treated by Rivers, supposedly to restore his nerves but in effect to persuade him to give up his protest and return to his military duties. Rivers had every sympathy with Sassoon, but as a serving officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps he could not support his anti-war stance. Eventually Sassoon agreed to return to active service though without abandoning his convictions, deciding that he belonged with his men at the Front.

A lot of *Regeneration* is taken up with the discussions between the two men. Sassoon wrote about his wartime experiences several times over: in his poems, in *Sherston's Progress*, in *Siegfried's Journey*, and in his *Diaries 1915-1918*, first published in 1983. As a result Barker has plenty to draw on in presenting him as a character in her novel. He comes across plausibly, though he lacks the immediacy and vitality of the actual writer of the *Diaries*. Rivers, by contrast, is a shadowy figure, about whose life much less is known. He was born in 1864 and was something of a Victorian polymath, with two separate careers. He

trained as a physician and became a pioneer in the developing science of neurology. But he was also a pioneer in anthropology, going on expeditions to Papua in 1898 and Melanesia in 1908. It is the latter role which has ensured Rivers's place in intellectual history, as suggested by Auden's lines, "Malinowski, Rivers, / Benedict and others / Show how common culture / Shapes the separate lives...". On the outbreak of war in 1914 Rivers was once more in Melanesia. He returned to Britain, joined the Medical Corps and resumed his earlier role as a psychologist and neurologist. It was in this capacity that Sassoon met him at Craiglockhart; he was to devote an admiring chapter to Rivers in *Sherston's Progress*. Rivers never married and before the war he lived, seemingly contentedly, the life of a bachelor don at St John's, Cambridge. Such information as is available about him can be found in Richard Slobodin's study of his life and work, *W.H.R. Rivers* (1978), which I was led to by Barker's reference to it (each of her three volumes has a useful note on sources). Since comparatively little is known about Rivers, she has had to invent more in dealing with him, though she has drawn on his published writings and his unpublished papers at Cambridge. One piquant detail from Slobodin's account which Barker expands is that Rivers's family were friends of Charles Dodgson - aka Lewis Carroll - and that his sister was one of the little girls in whom Dodgson was keenly interested. His father was a speech therapist, concerned with the treatment of stuttering and stammering, and Dodgson was one of his patients. Barker draws on this situation in her retrospective account of Rivers's childhood; as she shows, he himself was a stammerer throughout his life.

The discussions between Rivers and Sassoon about war and duty, life and death, have a certain dry intensity, suggesting a Platonic dialogue or other quasi-dramatic form. They are set off by descriptions of life among the officer patients at Craiglockhart, which are often grim and occasionally humorous. The familiar figures of the war-poet mythology are carefully manipulated, as they might be in a viewer-friendly historical reconstruction on television:

Sassoon arrived late to find Graves sitting by himself in the bar.
"Sorry I'm late".

"That's all right. Owen was keeping me amused, but then he had to go. Somebody coming to see the printer".

We see Sassoon talking about his war poetry with Owen and going through an early draft of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" at Owen's invitation, proposing changes which, as Barker points out, can be

traced in Jon Stallworthy's edition of Owen's poems and fragments. This is very neat, a word which several times occurred to me when considering Barker's fictional use of her source material. Insofar as *Regeneration* draws on historical figures and situations it is a tight narrative, which might have lent itself to some form of dramatic presentation. There is even a classical unity of time, from Sassoon's arrival at Craiglockhart in July 1917 to his departure in November; the setting, too, is largely restricted to the hospital and the nearby city of Edinburgh and its surroundings. This is true, at least, of the patients; Rivers, desperately over-worked, takes a brief leave in London and Suffolk.

Regeneration would have worked quite well as a novel of limited aims, a fictional recreation of historical events at Craiglockhart during those few months of 1917. But Barker is more ambitious, and the focus of her ambition is the invented and curiously dominant figure of Billy Prior. He is introduced as a patient of Rivers, a second lieutenant of twenty-two, who has been so traumatized by his experiences at the Front that he suffers from terrible nightmares and has temporarily lost the power of speech. It is evident from the beginning that he is an outsider; he is the son of a working-class family in Salford, a clever scholarship-boy who has managed to acquire a commission in the wartime army, but who is consciously at odds with the shared public-school attitudes and background of Rivers, Sassoon and Graves (though not, significantly, of the grammar-school boy Owen, with whom Prior is shown as having affinities). Billy recovers his voice and his health improves under the careful treatment of Rivers, whom he comes to respect, but he is not a co-operative patient; he is rebellious, class-conscious and generally bolshy. In Jacobean drama he would have been known as a "malcontent"; early in their acquaintance Rivers thinks of him as "a little, spitting, sharp-boned alley cat" and as "a bit like the boys you saw on street corners in the East End". On a trip into Edinburgh he picks up a girl munitions-worker in a café. Her name is Sarah Lumb and she proves to be intelligent and articulate as well as attractive; she is already a victim of the war, since her boyfriend is dead, accidentally killed by British gas. Barker's presentation of Sarah and her lively, raucous friends is very well done; she has a sure touch when she is dealing with working-class women. Billy and Sarah begin a tender relationship, which develops into an affair. They hope it will lead to marriage if he survives the war. But Billy is a more complex case than Sarah suspects, for he is bisexual and cheerfully

promiscuous.

Billy Prior is the central character of *The Eye in the Door*. After leaving Craiglockhart he is given a desk job in London, as an intelligence officer with the Ministry of Munitions. One of his tasks is to investigate an underground network of pacifists who are allegedly sabotaging the war effort and harbouring deserters. He already knows several of them from his life before the war in Salford. Billy is divided between duty and old affections, and the sense of division is strengthened by his lapses into a fugal state, when he has no memory of what he does; in one of them, he later learns, he has arranged for the arrest of a leading war-resister who had been his closest friend at school. Billy's situation has affinities with Sassoon's, and *The Eye in the Door* has an epigraph from that classic of divided personality, Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The strands of intrigue, deception and betrayal are well handled, in the grim, gripping manner of the modern spy thriller. Billy sees Sarah when he can, and their love deepens. He makes a new acquaintance in Major Charles Manning, who is desk-bound after being badly wounded. Manning is a smooth public school product with influence in the military hierarchy; he is a married man with two small children, but he is really a homosexual, and the two men go to bed together soon after they have met in Hyde Park. It could have happened, certainly, but such casualness seems implausible in 1918, given the punitive attitudes of civil and military law at the time.

Billy Prior has the qualities of a well-realized fictional character; he is substantially "there" on the page with a life of his own, but with some of the intriguing opacity of such characters. I cannot, though, really believe that he belongs in an historical novel about the First World War. This objection has already been made by Ben Shephard in an acute article about the trilogy ("Digging Up the Past", *TLS*, 22 March 1996) to which I am indebted. He is writing a book about the history of military psychiatry and is particularly critical of the way Barker deals with the rudimentary psychotherapy of that time. He complains that she interprets shell-shock and other forms of disturbance in fashionable but over-simple terms derived from two fairly recent books, Eric Leed's *No Man's Land* and Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady*. Barker takes what one reviewer approvingly called a "very female view of war", and Shephard complains that it distorts the clinical complexities of the historical situation. I shall not pursue this aspect of Shephard's critique, though it is worth drawing attention to his

defence of Lewis Yealland, an army doctor whom we see in *Regeneration* curing a soldier of mutism by a crude combination of bullying and electric-shock treatment; he is presented as an awful contrast to the humane and gentle Rivers. Shephard comments, "To Barker, he's a classic medical villain, the authoritarian male consultant, relying on class and position to cow his patients into submission - and back to the war. In reality, he was a medical primitive: an inexperienced young Canadian who was taken on to the wartime staff of the neurological hospital at Queen Square and revealed a talent for treating hysterical patients...". Shephard says that however crude Yealland's methods now seem, they did cure people, and he accuses Barker of distortion by omission: "Pat Barker, after lifting pages wholesale from Yealland's graphic account, omits the climax where the cured patient says, 'Doctor, Doctor, I am champion. Why did they not send me to you nine months ago?'" There is, as Shephard says, an element of feminist special pleading in the trilogy, though this does not in itself affect its quality as fiction; significantly, of the eighteen writers of favourable reviews cited on the covers of the Penguin editions (some of them having reviewed more than one volume), twelve are women.

Shephard denies that Billy Prior is a credible character, whereas I think he is - as a literary creation, but not as a figure in the history in which Barker presents him. Shephard accurately describes him as "an assemblage of attributes - working-class, grammar-school, officer, bisexual, embittered about war, yet determined to return to it. His class attitudes are those of a confidently stropky grammar-school boy of the 1950s, worlds away from the likes of Wilfred Owen and R.C.Sherriff who emulated, rather than mocked, public-school officers." In this respect Billy recalls the English Angry Young Men, while his bisexuality, his cool hanging-loose to the world, align him with the American beats and hipsters of the 1950s and 60s. In the idiom of that era, he is AC/DC, swinging either way; "I do anything" he smilingly tells Manning after their first sexual encounter. When Rivers sees in Billy an "incongruous mixture of effeminacy and menace," I am reminded of the young Mick Jagger. Billy dominates the trilogy, but he does so like a visitant from the future in some work of science fiction or magic realism. The point is not that people could not have been bisexual or bitterly class-conscious eighty years ago, but they could not have thought or spoken about these things in the terms that Barker gives to Billy. The novelist deals in representations as much as realities.

Pat Barker has impressive literary gifts but little sense of the past, notwithstanding the conscientious research she has carried out on particular aspects of the period: in the writings of Rivers, Sassoon and Owen; in Sheila Rowbotham's study of the war-resisters; and in the bizarre scandal and panic provoked by a half-mad MP called Pemberton Billing who claimed to possess a list of 47,000 perverts and degenerates among the leaders of society who were doing the Germans' work for them. Some of Barker's anachronisms are irritating though minor, as when she twice refers to people consuming candy-floss at seaside resorts in 1917-18; I am sure that candy-floss didn't exist in England that early - the first citation of it in the 2nd edition of the OED is in an American context in the early 1950s. There are several references to air-raids on London; they certainly took place, by Zeppelins in 1915-16, and by Gotha bombers in daylight in the early summer of 1917 and on moonlit nights in the autumn of that year. They caused some casualties and a lot of alarm but insignificant material damage by the standards of later wars. Barker makes them more extensive than they were, and when Billy Prior reflects on the experience of walking past bombed sites as though they were a commonplace he seems to be in the wrong war, the Second rather than the First. So does another character who refers to the siren sounding; in the earlier war maroons rather than sirens were used to warn of air-raids (information which I acquired, not by intensive research, but by listening as a boy to an aunt describing life in London during the Great War).

Barker's historical failures, though, are more serious in the realm of ideas and consciousness. In her presentation of Billy's thoughts and feelings there is what Shephard calls a frequent falsity of tone. An instance occurs early in *Regeneration*, when Rivers is asking Billy what it felt like to be under fire; after some hesitation he says it felt "sexy". As someone remarked to me before I read the book, this sounds jarringly wrong for 1917. Barker has a good ear for speech; she writes fluent and authentic-sounding dialogue, but her ear is only for present-day speech. Wanting to give the flavour of soldiers talking she puts in plenty of slang and obscenities, but my sense that several of these words are too early for the period was confirmed by a brief lexicographical check; they include "goolies", "brown hatter", to "brown-nose", and "johnny" as a word for a condom. Taken individually these errors are trifling, but cumulatively they reflect Barker's deafness to historical nuance. Shephard complains that Billy refers familiarly to

Freud at a time when hardly anyone in England had read him and when few of his writings were available in English. Similarly, when Billy says in conversation with an imprisoned pacifist, "I don't see how you can derive that from a Marxist analysis", he is handling the intellectual small change of 1968 rather than of 1918.

Admiring readers might regard these objections as mere quibbles, to be dismissed with an unanswerable "So what?" But they nevertheless raise important questions about the nature of historical fiction. In an absolute sense, of course, the historical novel is an impossible undertaking, since the author can never escape from his or her own time; Scott's knights and clansmen are acting out a high Romantic scenario, and *War and Peace* is informed with nineteenth century ideas about historical determinism. But great historical novels exist, and *War and Peace* is one of the greatest. Tolstoy was, incidentally, much closer in time to the Napoleonic wars than Barker is to the First World War; he immersed himself in the period and took prodigious pains to get things right, but errors of chronology still crept in; Mary McCarthy, taking a severely purist view, once remarked that it would have been an even greater novel without them. Most readers would be more tolerant; to err in details is merely human, and what is important is for the historical novelist to possess and convey a convincing sense of the past; in L.P.Hartley's memorable phrase, that foreign country where they do things differently. Tolstoy's principal characters are invented, but he brings in historical figures like Napoleon and Kutuzov at the edges of the story. Novels set in the past have often been written about actual people, in a way that overlaps with the more imaginative forms of biography. If the author has an implied contract with the reader, as is suggested by the theorists of reader-response criticism, then in the case of such fiction it is likely to allow the author to invent where little or nothing is known, but to respect such facts as are available. There is a very different kind of writing, which starts in history but transforms it into jokes or fantasy, as in *1066 and All That*; or, to take more elevated and canonical instances, the games with several centuries of English history in *Orlando*, or the obsessive fantasies about the final months of the Second World War in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Pat Barker is writing an unusual and demanding kind of historical novel, which combines the different modes I have just described, in that she mixes invented characters with "real" ones, not on the margins but at the centre of the action. In presenting Rivers and Sassoon she has to stick to the documentary evidence, though allowing herself

a certain freedom, particularly in the case of the shadowy Rivers; with Billy Prior, everything is invented, and he is a figure from our time rather than theirs. Inevitably fact and fiction tend to merge; Barker's Craiglockhart is unlike the historical Craiglockhart of 1917 in that it contains the fictional Billy as well as the actual Rivers, Sassoon and Owen. The effect is a little like those films where computer-generated figures interact with live performers; the fictional characters may acquire an additional reality, but conversely the "real" ones come to seem rather less real in ways I find slightly disturbing. They are not, after all, men from a remote historical past; Sassoon died in 1967 and Graves only in 1985. Barker often seems impatient with the restraints of history. As I remarked, in places she seems to confuse the First World War with the Second, and in her vivid account of the pacifist resistance to the war she may have had in mind the resistance to the Vietnam War in the United States in the 1960s. This is suggested by the references to "safe houses" for fleeing deserters (another anachronism; the *OED* gives no citations for this phrase before the 1960s), and to helping them escape to Ireland, just as American draft-resisters went to Canada. This latter detail is puzzling, since during the First World War Ireland was part of the United Kingdom (unlike in the Second, when, apart from Ulster, it was independent and neutral), so on the face of it deserters would not have been safe from arrest there, unless the fact that conscription was not applied in Ireland gave them a special status, which seems doubtful. The war-resisters as Barker describes them were a courageous and persecuted group, but they were still a tiny group whose views were shared by very few of the population, whether in uniform or not; there was certainly no movement in Britain comparable to the large-scale resistance to the Vietnam War in America.

As I have said, Barker is a very neat writer, particularly in the skilled and assured way in which she manipulates motifs and symbols. Rivers, in treating Billy, traces the source of his trauma to a horrific incident in the trenches when he picks up the eye of a soldier who has just been blown to pieces by a shell; he says "What shall I do with this gob-stopper?" This phrase is linked in his memory to the actual gob-stoppers he bought as a child at a sweetshop in Salford. The image of the eye recurs when he is talking to the pacifist prisoner in her cell, where the spy-hole in the door forms the centre of a large painted eye (whence the title of Barker's second volume). Later Billy attempts to turn the tables on his therapist, whose childhood had had its own

traumas: "Prior, told that Rivers attributed his almost total lack of visual memory to an event in his childhood that he had succeeded in forgetting, had said brutally, 'You were raped or beaten ...Whatever it was, you put your mind's eye out rather than have to go on seeing it. ...'"

In *The Ghost Road* there is a convergence of themes and topics, and Rivers's anthropological activities provide a new dimension. Barker inserts substantial passages based on his unpublished account of his stay among the Melanesians in 1908. They contain some of the best writing in the trilogy but I think there are too many of them, perhaps because Barker succumbed to the fascination of the material. She sets up a parallel between the state of these supposedly savage peoples and Europe before the war. Their lives have become drained of significance since the colonial power banned the headhunting that once had a central ritual significance in their culture: "Head-hunting had to be banned, and yet the effects of banning it were everywhere apparent in the listlessness and lethargy of the people's lives. Head-hunting was what they had lived for. Though it might seem callous or frivolous to say so, head-hunting had been the most tremendous fun and without it life lost almost all its zest. This was a people perishing from the absence of war." Switch to Europe, 1914. The parallel is evident and indeed rather overstated, but no doubt Barker is anxious to ensure that the contemporary novel-reading audience doesn't miss the point. The Melanesians were much preoccupied by ghosts, and so are the English soldiers, conscious of the dead all around them. Several of Barker's characters think they see ghosts or other apparitions.

Billy Prior extricates himself from his intelligence work, which he has found increasingly difficult and distasteful, and despite his nervous condition successfully applies to return to the Front, where he finds himself in the same unit as Owen; Billy observes, "Owen for some reason is known as the Ghost. Evidently when he disappeared into Craiglockhart - and I suspect didn't write to anybody because he was ashamed (I didn't either) - they concluded he was dead." One of Owen's last poems is called "The Kind Ghosts" and in Barker's narrative he and Prior are potential ghosts.

The trilogy moves to a strong conclusion, covering the final weeks of the war in the autumn of 1918. There is a rapid alternation between Rivers's memories of Melanesia, his present life at the Empire Hospital in London where he is attempting to heal the shattered victims of war, and extracts from a journal that Billy embarks on when he returns to

the Front. He and Owen are both killed in the bloody attempt to cross the Sambre and Oise canal on 4th November 1918, one week before the Armistice. The real and the fictional characters are united in death. But even in life Barker has implied parallels between them, culminating in a sentence in a letter which Billy writes to Rivers on 2nd November, "My nerves are in perfect working order," which is very close to Owen's words in a letter to Sassoon in October and repeated in one to his mother: "My nerves are in perfect order" (a phrase which appealed to the young Auden, who quoted it more than once). There are a good many literary echoes in the trilogy, like the notable one in Billy's journal entry for 3rd November: "Loos, she said. I remember standing by the bar and thinking that words didn't mean anything any more. Patriotism honour courage vomit vomit vomit. Only the names meant anything. Mons, Loos, the Somme, Arras, Verdun, Ypres." Here Billy is anticipating - or Barker is half-remembering or simply lifting - a well-known passage from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: "There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity ... Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene besides the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." Such echoes may be inadvertent, but Billy's use of Owen's words is close enough to seem deliberate - Barker is usually very conscious about her effects - and I am not sure how it should be interpreted.

The Regeneration Trilogy reflects the prevailing strong interest in the First World War, and in its own way has continued and enlarged it. This interest does, I think, have two quite different aspects, the historical and the literary-mythic. Historiographical debates continue about all aspects of the war, strategic, tactical, political, diplomatic, social. There are interpretations and reinterpretations and revisions of opinion about such things as the status of Haig and other war leaders, and the reasons why the war began and why it ended in the way it did. Finality or agreement is never likely to be reached, but historians have to produce evidence to support their arguments. In contrast, there is the essentially mythic approach of novels like Barker's and Faulks's. Such works may draw in detail on historical scholarship, but their perception of the war, being mythic, is fixed, static and a-historical. It is nevertheless deeply rooted in the national consciousness, nourished by the theatrical popularity of *Oh What a Lovely War!* and the generations of school students who study the war poets in English Literature

lessons. The assumption is that the Great War was a pointless blood-bath, kept going for no real reason by stupid politicians and bellicose generals who could quite easily have ended it if they had wanted to. Life in the trenches was unbroken horror, most of the soldiers were opposed to the war, and their opposition was given voice by the protesting poets, particularly Sassoon and Owen. Historians will disagree with many, perhaps all, of these ideas, regarding the Great War as a matter of great tragic complexity that resists neat formulations. It is, incidentally, curious that Sassoon and Owen have achieved such a mythically representative status. Their anti-war stance was courageous but shared by very few, even among the poets who had been in action, and, as they knew, it was undermined by their own willing return to the Front; they were poets of immense talent and, in Owen's case, elements of greatness, but as homosexuals who didn't much like women, both marginal figures in their respective cultures, Sassoon a rich, idle Cambridge dropout and Owen a failed clergyman, they were at some remove from the main currents of English life.

The ideas I have outlined inform Barker's fiction, although in much subtler form. One certainly gets the impression from it that life at the Front was an unbroken sequence of violent episodes, involving death, ghastly wounds, mutilation, dismemberment, madness. Those things were all there, in terrible abundance, as the records show. But for many soldiers the trenches could be quiet for long periods of time, when the biggest danger was boredom. The camaraderie of the Front had its compensations in the face of danger and horror, though readers would get little sense of this from Barker's narrative. This may be because she focuses on a small group of talented but highly-strung officer-poets, Graves, Sassoon, Owen, to whom is added the fictional figure of the disturbed subaltern Billy Prior. The writings of those who went through the war as private soldiers give a more varied and nuanced account, as in the work of David Jones and Ivor Gurney in his war letters. Barker's mythic bias is why she is not very interested in getting her history right; she is more concerned in establishing a connection between the myth and certain preoccupations of the present time: gender roles (her principal male characters are partly or wholly homosexual, though Shephard says there is no reason for believing that Rivers was), feminism, psychotherapy, false memory syndrome, the sexual abuse of children (which Billy Prior had suffered from a seemingly friendly priest). Perhaps she believes, in the fashion of high modernist mythopoeia, that all wars, whether the First World

War, the Second or the Vietnam War, are ultimately the same war. On the last page of *The Ghost Road*, Rivers, struggling to stay awake at dawn in a hospital ward, has a sudden visitation from Njiru, the crippled medicine man and exorcist whom he had known in Melanesia; in the London of 1918 he is a ghost or hallucination, but the superimposition of a primitive past on a mundane present makes a deft conclusion. It is the kind of effect we are used to from *The Waste Land* and other modernist monuments.

Barker skilfully keys into and exploits what I have called, in a shorthand way, the war poets myth, as it already exists in the consciousness of contemporary novel readers. This, combined with her very considerable gifts in unfolding a narrative, writing dialogue, and setting up metaphorical and thematic parallels, is more than enough to explain the success of her trilogy. But there may be more skill than conviction underlying it. I read it with admiration but also with unease, provoked by the sense that for this author the past isn't all that foreign, one doesn't need to learn the language, and basically they do things there much as we do them here.