

Structural Violence and the Refusal of Recognition in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*

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The notion of violence will perhaps forever remain antithetical to the notion of peace. This is understood in no greater capacity than in war — when a pulsation of violence, variable in strength and speed¹ (Clausewitz) disrupts the rhythm of peace. And yet, what precisely *is* violence? And what does it mean to achieve peace? Johan Galtung, the founding father of peace studies, sought to address such questions in his 1969 essay, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” where he distinguishes between direct violence — physical, visible harm, like murder — and structural violence — the systemic forms of oppression, such as racism, homophobia, and toxic masculinity. Peace, Galtung argues, requires addressing both forms of violence. In the 1990s, as the Cold War drew to a close, scholars brought “renewed attention to research on topics such as sanctions, peacemaking, the concept of a culture of peace” (Stephenson). It was in this academic atmosphere that Pat Barker wrote *Regeneration*, a novel concerned with how visible forms of injury engage with hidden forms of psychological trauma. Throughout the novel, Barker employs the minor character Willard to stage a confrontation between direct and structural violence, where physical injury represents direct violence and psychological injury represents structural violence. Through Willard’s immobilized body, Barker exposes the stagnant nature of a society that recognizes physical violence yet refuses to acknowledge its deep-rooted ideological violence — in this case, toxic masculinity. Willard’s refusal to acknowledge toxic masculinity as the root of his paralysis ultimately forecloses his psychological healing, a reflection of how neither the individual nor the nation can recover without reckoning with the structural violence that shapes their suffering.

¹ Notably, in the version of *On War* edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, the definition of war is “thus an act of **force** to compel our enemy to do our will.” In nearly every other version of *On War*, the quote reads, “War therefore is an act of **violence** intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will” (Clausewitz, trans. Col. J.J. Graham).

Barker immediately establishes Willard as a site of contradiction: masculine yet emasculated, physically vulnerable yet emotionally guarded. Willard's contrasting characteristics complicate one's ability to cleanly register his personhood:

Willard lay face down on his bed, naked. His thighs and buttocks were trenched with purple scars, some just beginning to silver. These injuries had been sustained when his company was retreating across a graveyard under heavy fire, and several tombstone fragments had become embedded in his flesh. 'You want to try it,' he said. 'Lying two months on your belly in a hospital with *Requiescat in Pace* stuck up your arse.' This remark was ostensibly addressed to the orderly, so Rivers was able to ignore it. (111)

The introduction of Willard through Doctor W.H.R. Rivers's perspective renders Willard vulnerable; with a mere downward glance, the doctor digests the patient's most intimate parts. Yes, Willard's physical position is nothing but emasculating²: he is immobile, unable even to return Rivers's gaze as he lies "face down," he is stripped to his bare "thighs and buttocks," and his crude scars are exposed as a spectacle. Yet even in this posture of humiliation, Willard resists psychological vulnerability through dialogue. He addresses the "you" without reservation, weaponizing sarcasm as a means of reclaiming authority. He also speaks before Rivers, dictating the tone of the conversation and thereby increasing his power within the doctor-patient relationship. He further declares his own cause of paralysis, noting that "there's still the injury to the spine" (111) to position himself as a figure of authority, performing the role of diagnostician to claim epistemic control over his condition. Moreover, Willard's initial remark to "you" is directed at the orderly rather than at Rivers. Willard does not instantly challenge the man who holds institutional power over him; instead, he first targets the individual over whom he can assert social dominance. Through the clash between Willard's physical immobility and his attempt to grasp social control, Barker constructs Willard's body as a site of dissonance, where his need for psychological dominance is at odds with his positioned emasculation.

² Merriam-Webster offers two definitions of emasculate: one, to physically deprive of procreative power, and two, to intangibly deprive of strength, vigor or spirit — an interesting reflection of direct and structural violence operating in tandem.

Barker explores this dissonance while building the correlation between psychological injury and structural violence through Willard's preoccupation with cowardice. Rivers tells Willard outright that there is no injury to the spine (112), and the narrative reinforces that numerous doctors have reached the same conclusion. There is, evidently, a medical reality: Willard's condition arrives not from a spinal injury but from a psychological injury — from fear of war, perhaps, but more explicitly, from fear *of* fear. Willard believes that not wanting to “go back” to war is “tantamount to an admission of cowardice” (112), and cowardice is something he “won’t” accept. The fear of death, for him, reads not as a natural bodily response but as a moral failure for a man. To acknowledge psychological injury would therefore mean confessing emotional weakness, and within the rigid framework of toxic masculinity, emotional weakness equates to one's loss of power. His embodiment of toxic masculinity is so intense, however, that Willard cannot even permit the idea of once having possessed fear in battle. In turn, he is left stuck, both physically and psychologically. His mind cannot allow fear into his consciousness, yet his somatic fear of war remains. The only consequent solution that preserves his masculinity — and allows him to ignore his emotional wound — is the continued insistence that his paralysis results from physical injury.

Crucially, though, Willard's entrapment within the structural violence of toxic masculinity is deepened by his own propagation of it. In numerous instances, Willard's emasculation occurs only in relation to an attempt to prove his masculinity. When the orderly tries to help him to his back, “Willard waved him away” (111). This, however, leads to his “heaving and twisting,” where he drags “the wasted legs over, though they followed the bulk of his body, passively, like slime trails after a snail” (111). With grotesque diction, Barker offers a clear example of structural violence at work. Willard denies assistance in an attempt to preserve independence. He

clings to a model of masculinity that equates self-sufficiency with strength, but in reaching for the performance of control, he intensifies his degradation. The animalistic imagery accentuates the absurd weakness of his body; his legs are compared not even to an animal but to the inanimate secretion of an animal. Barker thus illustrates toxic masculinity as a cyclical system in which the ideology that Willard upholds is also the force that leaves him further emasculated.

A similar pattern occurs when Rivers assists Mrs Willard in pushing Willard up a hill. As Rivers ponders, “for some extraordinary reason Willard had got his wife to push him as far as the gates, despite the downward slope” (119). This illogical act becomes legible through a feminist lens. Willard feels little shame in having his wife push him, as a woman’s caretaking falls well within gender norms. Furthermore, he exercises his dominance by dictating his wife’s actions, forcing her to unnecessarily push him downhill. However, Rivers upends Willard’s assertion of power when he gives Mrs Willard “a hand,” making Willard’s face appear like “curdled milk” (119). Willard’s discomfort upon Rivers’s assistance reveals that what truly unsettles him is not immobility but emasculation. His dependence upon a man threatens the masculine identity he has built upon heteronormativity. Likewise, it is when Rivers is massaging Willard’s calves that Willard calls Prior “one of those” (137). When his grasp of heteronormativity slips, Willard must reassert psychological control by reinforcing — or retreating into — the structural violence of homophobia. This recourse to homophobia exposes the fragility of the masculine identity he seeks to defend. The more threatened Willard feels, the more violently he clings to the system that confines him — and the more violently he clings, the more paralyzed he remains in being unable to admit the psychological cause of his condition.

Willard’s body therefore becomes the novel’s most striking metaphor for the paralyzing effect of ignoring the ideological violence that sustains war. His upper body is “massively

powerful” (111), but his legs are as docile as “slime.” Barker presents a clear visual metaphor: above the surface, Willard does not suffer from physical injury. However, below the surface, he is rendered inanimate, weakened by sexism, homophobia, and toxic masculinity — all forces that make him unable to register his own injuries as psychological and thus prevent him from true healing. Barker articulates this metaphor almost outright: “It was extraordinary the impression he created, that mixture of immobility and power. Like a bull seal dragging itself across rocks” (112). The bull seal evokes masculine force — large, dominant, loud — yet the animal also connotes foolishness and absurdity. Furthermore, the rocks are a harmful terrain, suggesting that the very ground Willard moves upon — his cultural assumptions of masculinity — is jagged and destructive. In attempting to carry forth life by “dragging” himself to an elbow via brute strength (112), Willard continues only to injure himself in all manners. Barker hammers the point in her description of Willard’s face: his bone structure “was strong to the point of brutality,” though “Rivers suspected he had never been remarkable for depth of intelligence” (112). Willard’s harsh exterior is destabilized by a weak interior. His body thereby dramatizes the immobilizing consequence of sustaining psychological injury.

It is, however, through Rivers’s express dislike of Willard that Barker elucidates her critique of the public’s refusal to confront the ideologies that perpetuate violence. Barker, of course, already establishes Willard as “unintelligent,” but Rivers’s distaste for him only clarifies as the novel progresses. After over 80 pages without any mention of Willard, Barker reintroduces his character with a brutal straightforwardness: “Willard was walking at last” (220). The syntax is direct, but the context is scarce. One does not witness the moment Willard relearns how to walk; in fact, one does not even get to witness Willard walking. This jump in narrative molds one’s inclination that Willard’s recovery is surface-level. Whereas Barker portrays numerous

conversations between Rivers and Priors where Prior expresses an openness to Rivers's methods of recovery, she includes no such scene of Willard: "Willard himself was exasperating. All Rivers's efforts to inculcate insight into his condition, to enable him to understand *why* he'd been in the wheelchair and how the same outcome might be avoided in the future, were met with a stare of glass-eyed, quivering respect" (220). The phrase "glass-eyed" captures the vacancy of Willard's "healing." He displaces the labor and result of recovery onto Rivers without undertaking any self-examination, and it is this absence of "insight" that frustrates Rivers. Furthermore, Willard's "quivering respect" mirrors a soldier's respect for his captain; through this imagery, Barker depicts Willard's literal and metaphorical return into the same militaristic and hierarchical conditions that first caused his paralysis. Ironically, his inability to reckon with a fragile masculinity ultimately returns him to a place of utter subordination, compared to previously, when Willard sought control, self-diagnosing his paralysis³. Indeed, without acknowledging his fear of fear, Willard relearns to walk only to continue "dragging" himself across the "rocks" — across the landscape of toxic masculinity that will inevitably further his shame.

Barker exaggerates the absurdity of Willard's "recovery" through the use of italics. Willard "*knew* his spinal cord had been broken. He *knew* Rivers had hard reconnected the severed ends" (220). Of course, nothing Willard *knew* was true. With dramatic irony, Barker again demonstrates the "unintelligent" nature of how Willard overwrites what he struggles to accept — fear — with what can easily be grasped. This rewriting reflects the broader masculine impulse to impose coherence through force: when identity is threatened, one must restore a comfortable reality through the weaponization of structural violence. Barker thus suggests that

³ Like how "Yealland silenced the unconscious protest of his patients by removing the paralysis" (Barker 238), Willard silenced his own protest by walking, returning himself inevitably to war.

Willard's lack of "insight" is not passive ignorance but an active rejection and reconstruction of truth. Moreover, the falsity of his newly-constructed truth is clear: "Indeed, after observing Rivers acknowledge on a particularly sizzling salute, Brock was heard to murmur, '*And for my next trick I shall walk on water*'" (222).

This critique of the public's active denial of structural harms crystallizes in the end of the novel, when Barker contrasts Willard to a truly physically incapacitated man. In a scene almost parallel to the introduction of Willard, Barker writes:

Rivers's corridor acquaintance was just inside the room, lying face down on his bed, buttocks in the air, presumably the only position he was capable of maintaining. It couldn't be said he added to the desired impression of tidiness, but the nurses had done their best. (225)

By placing Willard beside a man whose paralysis is absolute — a man who is a victim of *both* direct and structural violence — Barker retroactively illuminates how much potential Willard had possessed in working toward true recovery. The unnamed patient lies "face down" with his "buttocks in the air," yet this is the "only position he was capable of maintaining." When Willard lay "face down," he was still able to look "across his shoulder" (111). Willard, then, once possessed the physical and metaphorical possibility of *looking* for "insight into his condition" (220). For the unnamed man, however, the *only* option to walk again — and thus regain a sight that is not his mattress — is through brute electric force. As seen with Callan, however, the attempt to heal a body through force only ever perpetuates more harm. Conversely, Willard had the opportunity to address emotional vulnerability as a means to heal both psychological and physical wounds. His failure to do so ultimately reflects a grim, yet realistic, truth: the society will continue to suppress recognition of forces like toxic masculinity, sexism, and homophobia⁴ to preserve its fragile identity built upon these very forms of structural violence.

⁴ What I presume are a significant portion of the "insecurities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed" (1, Siegfried).

Perhaps, however, Barker had foreshadowed this conclusion when Rivers wielded toxic masculinity as a tool to “heal” Willard. Rivers’s choice to converse with Mrs Willard after he noticed “Willard’s fury at being stranded like this” highlights an attempt to emasculate Willard into healing. Rivers participates in the toxic-masculine mindset of harming another into success, even feeling “good” about how “the more furious he was the better” (119). The word “good” carries immense weight, revealing Rivers’s embodiment of structural harm: he feels pleasure in asserting control via emasculation, even if his end goals are pure. Barker therefore suggests that healing built upon humiliation can never function — that structural violence can never undo structural violence. Indeed, following that moment, a Matron who “observed the entire incident ... evidently disapproved” (119). Distanced from the toxic masculinity animating the exchange, she perceives the failures of Rivers’s logic of healing.

Willard’s fraudulent recovery thus conveys a haunting admonition: without confronting its forms of structural violence, British society will remain as psychologically wounded as Willard, even after WWI ends and physical battle ceases. Yes, the nation and its citizens remain entrenched in the same systems of ideological harm that paralyzed Willard in the first place. Barker crafts Willard as an unintelligent, ignorant character to underline the faults of a public that refuses to acknowledge such hidden forms of violence. Moreover, Rivers’s frustration with Willard further mirrors peace scholars’ frustrations in failing to compel the public to address national psychological traumas, both during and post the Great Wars. Rivers, after all, was unable to offer Willard a successful solution for addressing his psychological wound. In this sense, Willard’s “recovery” urges readers to imagine, if not partake, in an alternative mode of healing, one grounded not in denial or domination but in deliberate recognition of hidden wounds. Without such recognition, peace can be only as stable as Willard’s legs.

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