

TIMOTHY FINDLEY'S THE WARS: FACTS, TRUTH, AND THE MIND

Monica Bottez

Prof., PhD, University of Bucharest

*Abstract:*The paper sets out to demonstrate that although Timothy Findley's *The Wars* is usually discussed as a representative novel of historiographic metafiction it differs from this genre through one important feature, namely the confidence it expresses in the artistic imagination to express truth, whether it coincides with facts or not. The article shows that what makes the novel outstanding is its affecting intensity achieved through Findley's choice of rhetorical devices, particularly his narrative technique, namely the types of narrator and event ordering he used. It analyses in detail the use of a second person metafictional narrator and a third person omniscient one for the imaginary projection that is the result of documentation and empathetic artistic recreation. The author also reveals that the war is not used only as event as in the affectingly/realist front episodes, but explores the way it acquires an archetypal dimension through many cultural and literary allusions. The reader is eventually left with a notion of heroism where fact and truth do not coincide

Keywords: historiographic metafiction, narrators, biography, realism, heroism

The Wars, winner of the 1977 Governor General's Award for English-language fiction, has been acclaimed as one of the greatest novels on the First World War. For achieving this historical evocation Findley has chosen to do the biography of a young man, Robert Ross, who was 19 in 1916 but at the same time to put forth a metafictional comment on the enterprise of writing the past, which makes it a representative work of a postmodernist genre that Linda Hutcheon has called historiographic metafiction. This genre combines literary realism with its new trappings such as "tape recording, transcripts, photographs, movies, historical archives" (Hutcheon 53) with textual self-consciousness "about their medium (as language and as narrative" (Hutcheon 45).

What makes the novel outstanding is its affecting intensity given by Findley's choice of rhetorical devices, particularly his narrative technique, namely the types of narrator and event ordering he used. Part One opens with a Prologue, where the third person narrator seems objective and impersonal. But the first subsection introduces a "you", a persistently recurrent pronoun throughout the novel: "All of this happened a long time ago. But not so long ago that everyone who played a part in it is dead. Some can still be met in dark old rooms with nurses in attendance. They look at you and arrange their thoughts" (10).

At first it seems that the omniscient Narrator of the Prologue may wish to involve the reader by directly addressing him or may even use "you" generically, meaning everyone or anyone, a form of involving the reader used by traditional novelists in the 18th and 19th centuries..

But in the next paragraph "you" definitely becomes a persona: "You begin at the archives with photographs" (11) and the reader realizes that "you" is a researcher who is endeavoring to find documentation on the young man presented in the Prologue, who now gets a name: Robert Ross.

Boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters; cablegrams and clippings from the papers. All you have to do is sign them out and carry them across the room. Spread over table tops, a whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps. The war to end all wars.(11)

The result of digging up facts from the documents stored in the archive(s) can therefore only be fragmentary and lacunar, as there are parts "you know you'll never find" (11). And it is the role of the documentarian researcher's "mind" to find the "meaning" (13) of each fragment and to put together the fragments so as to make a coherent story and a unitary picture. The reader realizes the archives, like the researcher, are "trappings" of fictional realism, but on the other hand they have a

real life correspondence as the author confessed that he actually used the family archive of letters and documents referring to the front life of an uncle

Thus the Narrator discovers “real” photos among his findings but also confesses to being obsessed by pictures that his mind conjures up (like that in the Prologue, which will reoccur later, in the chronology of events. The most important “real” picture is taken just before Robert Ross was arrested in his burning uniform and its description is written in italics (12-13). It is the picture of a blank-eyed deserter, an officer who about a week earlier had shot Captain Leather in retaliation for his having willfully sent 40 horses to their death under a German attack and for having shot corporal Devlin who had not executed his order about the horses. In the picture Robert had also just shot private Cassles who had tried to stop him pass with the 130 horses he was taking off the front line. In order to be sure the thief deserter would be caught Major Mickle had ordered the barn which sheltered Robert and his horses should be set on fire. But the door of the barn had been locked and Robert had not been able to open it in time and had only burst through it after he had been half consumed by the flames. It is this incredible rebellious gesture that the researcher’s narrative will try to elucidate, to find and understand its meaning

And in order to do that he must choose the mode of writing the biography of Robert Ross - fiction or non-fiction. The genre he will use is that of the historical novel, since the man whose biography he wants to achieve lived 60 years ago. Thus, like Fielding (who wrote *The History of Tom Jones*) he will assume the stance of a third person omniscient narrator, even if his omniscience is “selective” (to use Norman Friedman’s taxonomy), that is restricted to access to Robert’s consciousness and mind (Friedman 128-29). Therefore although most critics discuss two narrators in *The Wars*, together with Frank Davey and Linda Hutcheon I think there is only one, but who assumes two narrative stances.

The “you” researcher is also the interviewer of the two persons still alive that actually knew Robert Ross, namely Marian Turner and Lady Juliet D’Orsey, embedding their interviews as first – person narratives in the “you” story.

But the effect of this “you” narrative is that the reader tends to almost mechanically transpose the “you” into “I”, into a protagonist narrator talking to his mirror image, an „I” in disguise, a sort of „first person narrator talking to himself” (Bal 30). The effect is so strong that Mei-chuen Wang speaks about an I-narrator who addresses a researcher as “you” and thus describes the difficulties encountered by the latter in the search for Robert’s past (Wang 132). We can say that a certain ambiguity arises, but the text has a strong direct impact upon the reader, who has the feeling of an /immediate contact with the interpellated persona and also feels the inclination to identify with the addressee of the message.

However, the pronoun „you” occurs even more frequently than that, as it is used with its generic value by the „you” narrator and by the omniscient narrator in his own voice or when quoting the speech or thoughts of characters, as in the following passage:

Bates did not look at the terrain. He looked at Robert. Hare was an unknown quantity—a child in breeches with a blue scarf wound around his neck whose job it was to get them out and back alive. This – to Bates – was the great terror of war: what *you* didn’t know of the men who told *you* what to do – where to go and when. What if they were mad – or stupid? What if their fear was greater than *yours*? Or what if they were brave and crazy – wanting and demanding bravery from *you*?” (Part Three, p 119, italics mine)

Although it is quite clear that “you” generically refers to all soldiers, the reader cannot help feeling included too, and thus sharing the character’s terror of being commanded by a lunatic unaware of reality or intoxicated with the myth of the hero. In the following excerpt, where Robert is in a desperate situation under German fire and is expecting to meet his death, the effect of generic “you” is that the reader feels included and identifies with the protagonist:

Robert lay out flat and started to swim on his belly through the mud...The back of his neck was like a board – waiting for the shot that would kill him. Everyone said *you* didn’t hear that shot. They said if it got *you* it was silent How the hell did anyone alive know that?” (120, italics mine)

The use of the pronoun “we” with a generic value has the same intensifying rhetorical effect on the reader, who feels included and involved in the various actions. Thus, when the researcher refers to Marian Turner’s interview, he says: “She has given (on tape) the only first-hand account *we* have aside from that of Lady Juliet D’Orsey” (PI, 15, italics mine). Here, “we” refers not only to the researcher (or possibly, researchers), but to all people interested in Robert Ross, the readers included.

Likewise, at the end of Part IV, there is a text in italics (therefore foregrounded), which, although coming right after Lady Juliet’s last sentence, has been placed there by the Researcher narrator:

Someone once said to Clive: do you think we will ever be forgiven for what we have done? They meant their generation and the war and what that war had done to civilization. Clive said something I’ve never forgotten. He said: I doubt we’ll ever be forgiven. All I hope is – they’ll remember we were human beings. (p 158)

The passage has clearly had an impact on the Narrator’s vision: in his reconstruction of Robert’s biography he will try to give a picture of what it means to be human, or rather of what it means to be human in the view of various people, and of course he feels included in the general humanity and keeps reminding the reader that he/she is included too. Thus the passage is followed by a direct address to the reader: “So far, you have read of the deaths of 557,017 people, - one of whom was killed by a streetcar, one of whom died of bronchitis, and one of whom died in a barn with her rabbits” (158). It is a statement that clearly illustrates the inhumanity of the Great War in the dry way of statistics. We can also see that, like all postmodernist writers of metafiction, the Researcher narrator of *The Wars* is overtly aware of the production of his text and simultaneously of the twin process of its reception (Hutcheon 45)

In this article “Memories of the Great War: Graves, Sassoon, and Findley”, M.L. McKenzie considers that these writers have established a tradition of war literature in the 20th century that uses a stark realism in depicting the horrors of trench warfare laying emphasis on the psychological effects of combat, but also giving a picture of motivation of the war and of the manner in which it was led. Diana Brydon also stresses that, “the narrator is obsessed as much by the paradoxes of how we know as by the horror of what we know” (76).

Findley’s Narrator creates the historical picture by giving very precise but brief historical and geographical information on the battles and moves in which his protagonist was involved: Kemmel Hill, near Ypres in the flats of Flanders (71), Wytsbrouk near Bailleul (72, 160, 172, 180-1), St Eloi Salient (108), Wipers (172), La Chodrelle (183) even if such a critic as Evelyn Cobley considers that “references to historical reality are neither frequent enough nor sufficiently sustained to characterize *The Wars* as an illustration of Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” (Cobley 98). But we can remark Robert’s absence from Canada’s greatest military moments of the First World War: the successful defense of Ypres in 1915, the Battle of the Somme in 1916, or the capture of Vimy Ridge in 1917. As Wang underlines, this absence foregrounds Findley’s antiwar tendency together with his refusal to endorse the national myth according to which the Great War marks the evolution of Canada from colony to nation, the death and deconstruction it caused being accepted as a tragic expense to be paid on the road to sovereignty (Wang 148).

The narrative of Second Lieutenant Robert Ross’ life in military service begins with the picture (given in the Prologue) of Robert in the vicinity of Magdalene Wood on a mare and with a dog driving 130 horses which he had released from a train abandoned in the tracks because of the German fire. His torn lapels and the fact that he had been wandering for over a week hint at his desertion. It is a picture that the researcher confesses has obsessed him (13), and the aim of his narrative is to understand why some people called Robert a bastard and a traitor, whereas others deemed him a hero. The reader is given the facts of his research but also his imaginative and empathetic recreation of Robert’s consciousness up to his final “mad, redeeming, humane, and futile act” (Moss 109)

Robert Ross was 18 when he enrolled in the army as a consequence of his feeling guilt for the accidental death of his sister Rowena, a hydrocephalic girl of 22 in a wheel chair whom Robert dearly loved and had sworn to himself to protect. Rowena is always associated with the rabbits that she endears and her death causes Robert’s first rebellious gesture: his mother wants him to put the rabbits

to death, and when his sympathetic father calls a man to do it in his place he defends them attacking the man and getting badly beaten (25), a gesture that has a definite anticipatory symbolic value.

Robert's joining the army is an impulsive gesture, as we learn from a picture when he watches the Band playing on the Band Shell in red coats and white gloves "with a dubious expression; half admiring – half reluctant to admire. He's old enough to go to the war. He hasn't gone. He doubts the validity in all this martialling of men. But the doubt isn't articulate. It stammers in his brain"(13). Therefore he is not given to rationalizing actions and ideas.

Yet, he is brave and fiercely loyal to his men. However, his loyalty is most likely weakened by acts of inhumanity, unmotivated cruel aggression he encounters among his people: Captain Rodwell shoots himself when the men of his company force him to watch the killing of a cat. Likewise, if the soldiers' slaughtering rats and mice for food can be rationally justified, "burning them alive in their cooking fires" (134) is pure evil cruelty. Rodwell is their very opposite – he had set up a hospital for injured animals: a toad, a hedgehog and a bird that he carried with him in order to protect them until they got cured.

Another act of violent aggression is perpetrated on Robert himself, he is raped by his own men, possibly his fellow officers, in the common bathrooms of the asylum he uses for accommodation on his journey to the front. After this incident, he symbolically burns Rowena's picture that he carried with him (172) as he can no longer have the picture of her innocence amidst so much wicked violence.

Both Rowena's and Rodwell's association with animals (he was also an artist and in the trenches he drew only pictures of animals in his sketchbook) introduces the motif of nature and its creatures, that runs throughout the narrative. Robert's final identification with the horses and his choice of them over the humans is the central theme of this antiwar novel.

If the narrator Robert encounters acts of inhumanity among his men, he also encounters an act of humanity in an individual enemy. When a sudden gas attack catches him with his men on the bottom of a crater full of freezing water, they have to lie there as if dead for hours. When he finally sits up to survey their surroundings, he realizes that they are being watched by an enemy German soldier on the lip of the crater. The German allows all of Robert's men to climb out of the crater. But just as Robert is leaving, the German makes a quick motion, and Robert shoots him, thinking that the German had been reaching for his rifle. However he is horrified when he realizes that it was only for a pair of binoculars that the German had been reaching, to look at the bird flying and chirping overhead, a chirping that will haunt him everafter.

Robert's final identification with the horses is prepared by a number of images and incidents: his frequent teenager riding of his mare Meg in the company of his dog, his racing with a coyote, his tending the horses on the transatlantic journey on the *S.S. Massanabie*, his racing with the horses when a convalescent at St Aubyns. We can say that Findley presents Robert's fellow-feeling with animals as "part of the human largeness and generosity" and as recognition of "one's kinship with and duty towards all life, a recognition threatened by the 'ethics' of war" (Pirie 74).

At other times, the antiwar attitude is directly and vocally expressed. Thus Mrs. Ross weeps angrily when she hears the Bishop extolling the war at the Christmas service. She remonstrates with her accompanying lady: "I don't understand, I don't. I won't, I can't. Why is this happening to us, Davenport. What does it mean – *to kill your children?* Kill them and then...go in there and sing about it" (54).

Marian Turner is also explicit in her accusations of all the war leaders, both German and Allied, as appealing to the primitive instinct, the aggressive struggle for survival, for food:

The greatest mistake we made was to imagine something magical separated us from Ludendorff and Kitchener and Foch. Our leaders, you see. Well, Churchill and Hitler, for that matter! (LAUGHTER) Why, such men are just the butcher and the grocer – selling us meat and potatoes across the counter. That's what binds us together. They appeal to our basest instincts. The lowest common denominator. And then we turn round and call them extraordinary! (17)

To the already mentioned historical names the narrator makes references to, we can add von Richthofen and von Clausewitz, whose books Robert's fellow soldier Levitt carries with him in the trenches as he finds support in his theories on war.

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The heroic ideal and the glory of war are all masculine values and the names of the fictional characters make symbolic hints at gender values. We should first mention the name of the character who becomes Robert's hero role model Taffler, a name that suggests the phrase "tough" guy. Likewise the name of Captain Leather hints at his complete emotional dryness, his men being simple pawns for him.

The names of the women who loved Robert are also emblematic Lady Barbara shares the masculine ideal of conquest after conquest, and her name obliquely alludes it is a barbarous outlook. Whereas Lady Juliet, her younger sister, shows the absolute love and devotion her Shakespearean literary archetype embodies: she never leaves Robert's side after he is brought back to England in his burnt out state (although after he recovers from his burns, he can never see, walk or make use of his judgment again). The surname of the nurse who tends him after he is arrested is associated with holy life, Virgin Mary and Ann her mother, whereasthe name of Turner makes us think of a romantic streak in her character (after the painter William Turner) as indeed she sees Robert as a hero, because "he did the thing that no one else would even dare to think of doing" (16). It is a definition of heroism where fact and truth do not coincide

It is also worth remarking that, if the name of the archivist is not mentioned, her gender is clear from the beginning. The sensitiveness and empathetic capacity of the documentarian makes the reader feel inclined to think she is a woman too, but we learn he is a man just in the last but one section of Part Five(p188).

The name of Robert Ross himself carries various cultural and linguistic allusions. Thus it reminds the reader of Robert Burns, the great Scottish poet of nature, "ross" (the rough exterior of bark) is itself a part of nature, while Robert Ross was a well-known Canadian journalist and art critic, Oscar Wilde's devoted friend, lover and literary executor. But Timothy Findley drew on a real soldier for inspiration, namely his uncle, Lieutenant *Thomas Irving Findley* or Tif (1895-1933), who served with artillery during the First World War. The family had treasured his letters and war diary and had bequeathed them to the writer. But his nephew, named after him, also often visited the ailing man and listened to his stories. Robert Ross is obviously not Tif, but he shares certain biographical aspects with him, just as the Researcher Narrator of the novel is the writer's literary equivalent or alter ego. In her article Sherrill Grace explores the links between the writer's life and the archive documents Timothy Findley used for his fictional works on the First and Second World Wars As Sherrill Grace tells us (p 24-25) Thomas Irving Findley enlisted in 1915, fought in France, where he was injured twice, and then he was invalidated out of the war in 1918. Like Robert's family, the Findleys were told that he was "missing in action", but he was rescued by French troops and hospitalized. Though his life was saved and he could return home where he married and had a family, he never fully recovered and died at the age thirty-eight.

But reading uncle Tif's first hand testimonies was not enough for Timothy Findley. In order to understand the terrible conditions and excruciating suffering "the soldiers faced waiting days on end in the water-filled, rat-infested trenches of the First World War (Grace 24), he tried spending a cold, wet November night in one of the ditches he dug on Stone Orchard, his farm North of Toronto. Although he could not resist the whole night and retreated to the house before morning, this incident did give him a firsthand experience of what it must have felt like to be in the muddy trenches of the First World War. Here is his description of the flats of Flanders surrounding Ypres:

The mud...Mud must be a Flemish word. Mud was invented here....When it rains (which is most constantly from early September through to March, except when it snows) the water rises at you out of the ground. It rises from your footprints – and an army marching over a field can cause a flood. In 1916, it was said that you 'waded to the front'. Men and horses sank from sight. They drowned in mud. Their graves, it seemed, just dug themselves and pulled them down. (72)

We are similarly impressed by the empathetic detailed recreation of Robert's sensuous stream of consciousness when he has to jump into the crater with his men at the insensible order of the theoretic Captain Leather, when an unexpected German gas attack envelops them:

8:50 a.m... most landed helter skelter on top of one another in the water.

In seconds there was nightmare. All too quickly they discovered they could not touch the bottom. Three of the men could not swim. One man had broken both his legs in the fall....For a

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moment they ceased to be soldiers and became eight panic-stricken men who were trapped in the bottom of a sink hole, either about to be drowned or smothered to death with gas. Eight men and one mask....(124)

1 p.m.

Robert slowly tilted his hand to one side. He had lain completely still for three hours. The back of his neck was numb (127)

It is an episode that testifies not only to Robert's power of endurance, but also to his efficiency. He saves himself and his men due to his knowledge of physics "coming unbidden into [his] mind from a dull winter classroom" (126), namely that piss can neutralize poisonous gas.

As John Moss has stressed, Findley has achieved an unequalled overall picture of "the sheer carnage and waste, the desolation and depravity of corpse piled upon corpse upon corpse, the mutilations and putrefactions of flesh, and always the mud, and the shifting earth, the flames, the gas" (Moss109).

However, the war is not used only as event as in the affectingly realist front episodes referred to above, the war acquires an archetypal dimension through many cultural and literary allusions. The narrator naturally mentions the names of the famous war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, of Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf and of D.H. Lawrence, who was a conscientious objector married to a German woman related to an outstanding military leader.

But I was struck by a recurrent, yet unobtrusive allusion to Joyce. Thus we are told that Mrs. Ross was struck blind at the news of her son being reported "missing in action" "on the sixteenth of June (180) and further that the German attack on Bailleul took place on the same day (181). The sixteenth of June has been called "Bloomsday" on account of the fact that the action of James Joyce's *Ulysses* encompasses the events that happen in the protagonist's life on that single day. Consequently the reader cannot fail to notice that Robert, like Leopold Bloom in the Lying-in Hospital episode, is respectful of the sanctity of life. This episode echoes "The Oxen of the Sun" section in the *Odyssey* where Ulysses' men slaughter the hallowed cattle of the Sun god, Helios, whereas he keeps apart, showing a piety that includes all forms of life.

Moreover the Narrator had already hinted at the famous Greek epic in his comment about the fate of the pistol Robert had asked his father to send him: "Many telegrams and letters were passed back and forth about this pistol. Would it be a Webley or a Colt? – a Browning or a Savage? Its fate, like the fate of Leopold Bloom's bar of soap, became a minor *Odyssey*" (36).

It is noteworthy that it is an inanimate object, not a man, that becomes the protagonist of the odyssey in Findley's novels, but it is an object that perfectly symbolizes all the violence and cruelty of the war. The recurrent allusion to Joyce reveals that the modernist writer's ironic epic had a radiating significance for the author, a significance which is stressed by Dieter Fuchs:

Fusing the cultural memory from the archaic past with a strictly realist presentation of contemporary life, Joyce's *Ulysses* alludes to the Trojan War as an archetypal counterpart of the Great War ... In this respect, *Ulysses* may be considered a satire on the timeless stupidity, complacency and self-destructive disposition of mankind. (Fuchs. "James Joyce's Trojan Hobby-Horse...")

We should also underscore that, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, Findley's novel ends on an affirmative note. It closes with the description of a photograph of Robert and Rowena with Meg. On its back is written: "Look! You can see our breath! And you can" (191). Therefore, through the process of writing the "you"-narrator, that is the researcher, and his imaginative creative mind, together with the reader, through the process of reading, have breathed life into the fictional character of Robert as an unorthodox hero, and have resurrected together a whole historical picture.

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