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“It could not be told:” Making Meaning in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*

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Canadian Timothy Findley’s novel *The Wars* is unusually concerned with how human beings make meaning through the shaping conventions of language and visual perception, and with those dimensions of experience our ruling conventions seem incapable of controlling. The novel’s opening scene introduces this interest through its fascination with what “could not be told”.¹ While war novels traditionally stress the unspeakable horrors of war, Findley’s novel moves beyond this now familiar rhetoric to focus less on the disjunctions between war and peace and more on their continuities. The problem is not to find a language which can articulate the experience of war but rather how to circumvent the established rhetoric of the genre, which determines what can and cannot be told. Pierre Macherey’s technique for revealing “the inscription of an *otherness* in the work” provides the theoretical model for my approach here. In *The Wars*, what “could not be told” is indeed the “determinate absence which is also the principle of its identity”.²

Two scenes in *The Wars* establish a context for my argument. In the countryside outside Bailleul, Robert becomes embroiled in a comic scene of mistaken identities due to language problems. The Flemish peasant thinks Robert has stolen his cows; Robert thinks the man must be mad because to Robert’s English ears he appears to be speaking gibberish. Robert remains blind to the irony of his own self-justification: “*Je ne parle pas français! Je suis canadien!*” (p. 73).³ As an English Canadian he assumes it is natural he can only speak one of his country’s two official languages, conveniently forgetting that the word Canadian originally referred only to the country’s French-speaking inhabitants. The peasant also refuses to make distinctions: he sees no difference between an

English-speaking Canadian and an Englishman. To him, they are all “*Maudits Anglais*”, even when officially the English are his country’s allies. This unproductive interchange reminds us that nothing can be communicated without a shared language and a common frame of reference. Every novel depends for its intelligibility on its readers’ knowledge of other novels and the conventions which enable them to operate. *The Wars* is especially self-conscious about its reliance on literary conventions, even as it expresses some frustration with the limitations they impose on what can be said.

For the exchange also reminds us of how language may be used as often to erase as to make distinctions. The single word “Canadian” disguises divisions within the country and the original fact of conquest on which that apparent unity is based – a fact the text reminds us of obliquely through references to pictorial and literary depictions of General Wolfe at Quebec (pp. 49 and 59). The ironies multiply when Lady Barbara speaks of Wolfe winning Robert’s country for “us”, meaning the English (p. 108).⁴ Instead of disputing her claim to suggest that Canada was won ultimately for the Canadians, and now belongs to no one but them, Robert chooses to dispute instead her implication that the leader rather than his soldiers won the war. As a colonial, he rejects the Englishwoman’s elitism; yet as an officer, he is inevitably identified with it. In a novel as class-conscious as *The Wars*, it is a fine irony indeed that shows Robert, appointed an officer solely on the basis of his family connections and with no experience of soldiering, identifying with soldiers, and in opposition to their leaders.

This irony is made explicit when Robert is assigned to lead Corporal Bates and his men to take the crater: “This – to Bates – was the greatest terror of war: what you didn’t know of the men who told you what to do” (p. 119). Significantly, Bates links this helplessness to that of being born and trusting one’s parents, as if to suggest that both states are equally natural. The logic of the apparent illogic of assigning power on the basis of class rather than experience is further confirmed by the ensuing action in the crater. Robert’s academic knowledge saves the men in a situation where their practical experience was apparently of no use. Yet what prompts Robert’s memory is not the official classroom explanation, but rather the memory of a forbidden word – “piss” – for the uttering of which Clifford Purchas had been dismissed from the classroom. They are saved by a word that “could not be told”, that was banned from formal recognition because it threatened to undermine what were seen as civilized distinctions between what should and should not be said.

In these scenes, the surface meanings – to be “Canadian” means

to be unable to speak French; “us” includes Canadians in the category of British; the officer always knows best, like a father – are undercut by the “unconscious” of the text, which reveals their silent contradictions. These contradictions expose the repressed histories of oppression and relations of domination that the language of what can be said denies.

My second framing scene makes a parallel point about seeing. The narrator describes what is apparently a photograph of the ocean, in which can be seen a small white dot, labelled with the question: “WHAT IS THIS” (p. 15). The narrator assumes that “this” must be an iceberg, but the mystery posed by the failure on someone’s part to make a similar identification draws attention to the ways in which the human imagination relies on labelling to differentiate between experiences, thus enabling us to “know”, to focus what would otherwise be simply the blur of a reality continually in flux. The iceberg itself, of course, provides an ideal analogue for a novel in which much of the greatest significance remains hidden from view.

Findley foregrounds the problematic nature of both “telling” and “showing” in these scenes, to draw our attention to the question of how we know anything, and to remind us that what we do not see (the bottom nine-tenths of the iceberg for example) may be as important as or more important than what we see. Similarly, what cannot be told may prove more important than what can. Even more frightening than the void of what could not be told is the tyranny of all that is too easily told. In keeping with its self-proclaimed status as “serious” fiction, *The Wars* repeatedly mocks the simple formulas of popular fiction, of boys’ adventure tales that deny altogether the existence – of what could not be told. Yet even more dangerous, particularly for the Canadian writer working within Anglo-American traditions, are the more subtly distorting conventions of a serious fiction whose telling seems so comprehensive and logical as to be irresistible. These conventions establishing what can be said form the visible tip of the iceberg. My reading of *The Wars* focusses attention on the nine-tenths of the iceberg whose story cannot be told by conventional proprieties of telling.

The poetics of narrative fiction formulates the differences between “story” – a succession of events – “text” – a discourse which undertakes their telling – and “narration” – the process of their production.⁵ This article discusses the interaction between text and narration in an effort to understand the method of *The Wars*, focussing on its obsession with what “could not be told” – the limitations, even treacheries of language – and its turning to visual images to circumvent, or at least complement, the limitations of telling.

The “story” of *The Wars* that we can abstract from the text is deceptively simple. Robert Ross, a Toronto teenager in a well-to-do family when the First World War breaks out, decides to enlist when his hydrocephalic sister Rowena accidentally falls to her death in the family barn. Sent to the prairies for training, he discovers a hero in the ex-football player turned soldier Taffler and experiences an abortive sexual initiation in the whorehouse called Wetgoods. He makes friends with Harris on the voyage over to England. Coincidentally, they are both confined to hospital on their arrival, Harris by pneumonia, Robert as a result of an accident in the hold when he was compelled to shoot an injured horse. Here Harris dies, is cremated, and Robert scatters his ashes in the company of Taffler and his mistress, Lady Barbara. Sent to the front, Robert gets lost and almost drowns in the dikes (in the opening section of Part Two), experiences an air attack (in the opening section of Part Three) and a gas attack immediately afterwards (pp. 122–26). Then Robert is sent back to England. Here he meets Lady Juliet, Lady Barbara’s twelve year old sister, who falls in love with him, and he has an affair with Lady Barbara. Sent back to the front once more, Robert is raped by a gang of men he never sees in the baths at Désolé. Seven days after his return, Robert is working with the supply wagons, when the stables at Battalion Signals are attacked. In trying to save the horses, he disobeys and then shoots Captain Leather. Eventually, he and one hundred and thirty horses and a dog are trapped in a barn, which his own troops set alight in order to drive him into the open. He is badly burned and taken into custody. His nurse Marion Turner offers him a death he refuses. Eventually he is court martialled, returned to Lady Juliet’s care, and several years later he dies.

Such a bald paraphrase summarizing events clearly does no justice at all to the experience of reading *The Wars*, and inevitably distorts in the re-telling. It is not the story as such, but how it is told that matters. The order of the telling is emotional rather than chronological, and we are entirely dependent for the telling on the teller – the anonymous researcher working in the archives, sorting through the debris of the past in an effort to discover a pattern that makes sense for him. The archives, a combination library and museum, provides the framing space in which the telling of this story takes place. “You begin at the archives with photographs” (p. 11). You end there too, approximately 180 pages later. The archivist closes her book as darkness falls; the researcher bundles his fragments back into neat little piles; we readers close this book – its pages holding the shape those fragments have assumed under our joint effort of attention.

What can be told, then, is the story of the narrator’s struggle to

discover and tell Robert's story. Robert's story exists only in the narrator's re-telling; as soon as we attempt to re-tell it ourselves it becomes yet another story.

The text, the discourse that undertakes the telling, places itself carefully in historical context, making reference to events and people that we know had independent existence outside the text; yet the effect of this placing is to undermine rather than reinforce any ideas that history, conventionally understood as an objective discipline, can provide a satisfactory telling of what could not be told – the paradoxical task the narrator of *The Wars* has set himself. *The Wars* resembles an historical novel in that it attempts to recapture the essence of an earlier period, at least partially through reference to actual historical events and persons, but it is unlike an historical novel in that its approach is basically anti-historical. It focusses less on the period of the first world war than it does on the relation of the researcher to his historical data. The fragmentary nature of his material leads him into speculation and invention to fill the gaps in historical knowledge. Yet even the information he does have reminds him that objectivity is always a myth. Every photograph reveals only one angle of vision. Every letter has a message to send, which may disguise or distort what the sender perceives to be the truth. Every witness sees things differently: when eye witnesses testify, we find the records are most contradictory. Therefore, instead of arranging his fragments of the past in an immediately obvious chronological pattern, this researcher shuttles his readers back and forth between the past and the more distant past, between Europe and Canada. The movement of the text, like the rhythm of Robert's mind when confronted by something he can't deal with – “stop, stop – forward – stop” (p. 62) – or the rhythm of his movements to free himself from the entrapping mud – “In and out in and out in and out” (p. 80) – or the rhythm of the earth exploded by mines – “Forward. Back. Forward. Half-back” (p. 110), suggests that the mind moves more naturally in this rocking motion round a fixed point than in the straight lines of historical or narrative progression. “These are the circles – all drawing inward to the thing that Robert did” (p. 101).

Here in the archives, above the swirling pool of the story, part of what has been lost – Robert Ross and the time he inhabited – may be found, though the finding will always be partial: “As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you'll never find. This is what you have” (p. 11). What we have are fragments of an age – snapshots, portraits, maps, letters, cablegrams and newspaper clippings – and the narrator's faith that “one thing leads

to another” (p. 10) and that “the corner of a picture will reveal the whole” (pp. 10–11). These assumptions enable him to construct a text that proves them valid. Thus Robert’s childhood seems to explain his later life, and each isolated scene repeats the narrator’s obsession with piecing together a coherent picture that makes sense of what threatens to be meaningless. The entire novel is a series of concentric circles eddying around Robert’s obscurely motivated saving of the horses and the imaginary vision of his burning flight that haunts the researcher. Thus the core of the novel is a fictional event that appears to relate less to particular historical circumstances than to something the text presents as universally human. Far from being a world-historical individual in the Lukacsian sense, then, Robert is presented as a figure of mythic dimensions, though whether he is meant to be admired or pitied is unclear.

As if in response to this dilemma of what could not be told – Robert’s significance – the initiating image of Robert with the horse and dog, like so much of the book, presents itself as a visual phenomenon rather than a verbal one (though ironically it can only be conveyed verbally in a novel). It works spatially rather than temporally, tending to arrest time rather than advance it, thus confirming its mythical over its historical importance. These narrative techniques appear to reflect the researcher’s own desire to reverse time, to unearth the past and make it live again. The photograph of Robert holding the fragile animal skull near the novel’s conclusion comments on this aspect of the novel’s achievement – what Robert Kroetsch would call its archaeological enterprise.⁶ From this perspective, both the past and the text are like archaeological sites, composed of layer upon layer of implication, a multiplicity of potential meaning, in which, paraphrasing Benjamin, Kroetsch sees the word ‘site’ becoming a triple pun, indicating the physical place of the text, its location in this book; but also suggesting the two alternative spellings of this sound: “‘sight’” as in what the text makes us see, and ‘cite’ as in its intertextual play with other texts. Findley’s novel ‘sites’ itself in each sense of this pun. Its citations, both overt and covert, of other texts create its densely layered texture. As in *Lady Juliet*’s favourite books, the meanings made by Findley’s text tend to undermine themselves as one reads more deeply into them. *The Wars*’ heavy reliance on photographs seems to privilege visual images over language – yet *The Wars* is nothing but words. *The Wars* pretends that much of its writing transcribes speech, as if speech were somehow more authentic than writing – yet *Lady Juliet*’s ‘speech’, as caught by the tape recorder, is itself a reading of her own writing. Writing remains primary.

These two spatial images for the organization of the text – Lady Juliet’s of the series of concentric circles and Kroetsch’s of the archaeological site – are complementary rather than contradictory. Each suggests that the novel moves tangentially through space and time, and that instead of providing a simple story “line”, it layers narrative in a pattern of repetitions in which each succeeding event seems uncannily to reflect the others as if in a distorting mirror.

The outer layer is that “fiery image” that “will obtrude again and again until you find its meaning – here” (p. 13), in the pages of this book. The narrator implies that “meaning” – an interpretation that can explain this enigma – will literally explain it away, kill its force, so that while part of him longs to be free of its haunting, to lay it to rest, another part of him seeks to defer that meaning, that death of mystery, so that he can revel in exploring its strangeness. Like Robert Ross, he says “Not yet”. He wants to know, to close “the spaces between the perceiver and the thing perceived”, (p. 191) but he also wants his story to live, and knows it can only live through what cannot be told, in what cannot be labelled and thus dismissed, in the spaces between.

The researcher uses the second person to speak of his efforts to make sense of his story, bridging the gap between writer and reader through his use of the ambiguous “you” because his endeavour depends for its success on our collaboration as readers. At the simplest level, we must discern the chronology that links the story’s events through time. But we are also encouraged to try to make sense of the story’s events – to participate in its narration, its production of meaning, by searching for cause and effect relationships, by finding logical connections between disparate events, by making everything mean something. Lurking just beneath the surface throughout this novel there is always the terror of what “could not be told” (p. 9) – of meaninglessness – and beneath that the fear of meanings too easily made, of conclusions drawn from unexamined assumptions. Hence the troubling ambiguity of all the novel’s silenced voices: the Swede whose tongue has been cut out by Indians; Jaimie Villiers whose voicebox has been destroyed by fire; Battery Sergeant-Major Joyce “whose voice whistled up his throat and came out through his nose” (p. 62) because of a bungled operation during the Boer War; Robert after the fire, for whom “it was almost impossible . . . to speak” (p. 188); Lady Barbara, who can watch but not speak to her series of war-mangled ex-lovers; Mrs. Ross who dares not speak out against hypocrisy in church; Stuart Ross who refuses to speak of Robert at all; and the parody of these in Captain Ord, who claims “the privilege of having lost his voice” (p. 58) in order to escape

from the reality of the troop ship into the juvenile fictions of G. A. Henty. Hence too all the silenced lives, the empty statistics of war.

Conventional history can no longer be told.⁷ The historian’s objectivity, like the researcher’s, is a myth. Any telling silences alternative versions. Neither can we tell what we have no words to name, or what our society has identified as taboo. We have already seen how Canada’s foundations on conquest – of the French but also of the Indians – remains unspoken. Although Robert says goodbye to his father in Montreal, French-Canadians are absent from this text. Indians appear as the shadow of a threat – they have cut out the big Swede’s tongue in some distant past; they appear as “ghosts through the frosted glass” (p. 46) as Robert’s train to the future rushes past them, leaving Robert puzzled as to why he can’t acknowledge their presence: “Why should the Indians not be greeted standing by the railroad track? But nobody moved” (ibid.); Tom Longboat is Robert’s first hero, but although Findley wanted to have Robert and Longboat meet, the text refused to allow that meeting: “that man had to retain his mythic distance”.⁸ Longboat, like Robert, retains his distance through silence.

Polite society does not speak of its foundations on brutality. Neither are individuals permitted to speak of the needs society cannot meet. No one mentions Robert’s mother’s drinking (p. 24). Robert cannot speak of why he cannot satisfy the prostitute nor of what he sees through the hole in the wall at Wetgoods, nor of his rape at the asylum, because these are experiences that cannot be told in his culture. In contrast, although Lady Juliet finds it difficult to speak of her discovery of Robert and Barbara making violent love, she writes of it in her diary, repeating again and again the single phrase, “I don’t know why. I don’t know why” (p. 157). Her writing frees her from the terrible silence of what she terms “a picture that didn’t make sense” (p. 156), whereas Robert remains forever trapped in his silence. Juliet escapes through writing; Robert escapes through running and through violence. Findley speaks with awe of his character’s remarkable resistance to speech: “he didn’t have a voice . . . He can’t say anything and, in the end, of course, he’s got to *do* it, it must be *done*”.⁹ Acting replaces speech; the shot, the shout (p. 191).¹⁰ What makes Robert’s vision through the hole in the wall at Wetgoods so horrible is the way it transforms Robert’s means for escaping communication with others – running and horseback riding – into a violent parody of communion, in an image from which he cannot escape. Because he cannot say what he saw he must continue to live with its memory.

Rowena represents another area of institutionalized silence. As a hydrocephalic, she is excluded from official family photographs; her

society cannot deal with the challenge to its control that her infirmity represents. By condemning her to invisibility, it hopes to obliterate any reminder of its own fallibility. For Robert, Rowena contains further dimensions of taboo and the violating of taboo. He insists on recognizing her, placing her photograph on his bureau, yet this transgression of the rules of polite discourse masks the deeper violation his closeness to her represents. As his first definition of the mother, and the first object of his love, Rowena appears to arouse incestuous desires in Robert.¹¹ It would be too reductive, however, to see this area of silence as providing a definitive meaning for the complexities of this novel. It merely suggests further areas of repression, of what Robert cannot begin to speak about and so cannot begin to deal with. Cut off from language, he is condemned to listen or to act, on instinct alone.

Language assumes rationality; it assumes logical connections between words within a language and connections between words and things that we all recognize even if in themselves the connections they draw seem arbitrary. *The Wars*, however, deals with a state of affairs that questions these assumptions. During the First World War ordinary common sense is suspended; nothing makes sense anymore. Rational and irrational, mad and sane, ordinary and extraordinary, natural and unnatural, good and bad – all seem to have become confused. Yet this novel suggests that, far from causing this confusion, the war merely reveals what has existed all along. It expresses the violence and the irrationality that always existed in repressed and in institutionalized forms, now given free rein. “The wars” that compose our civilization reveal themselves most starkly through war, but they are always there, though difficult to articulate because our language for them is so limited. What Robert Kroetsch calls “the coercion of a ‘sane’ speaking”¹² denies Robert the language to speak of what he knows: to question the conventions of honour his girlfriend Heather wishes him to observe (p. 19), and to question the conventions of war he sees as equally absurd. But what Robert cannot say, the text of *The Wars* does, through similes that point out the parallels between the Signals Office and the Stock Exchange (p. 115), the enthusiasms of the high school football game and those of war (p. 165), the mindless dynamics of the factory conveyer belt and those of war (p. 175), the unthinking discipline of school with that of war (p. 29), the mechanical prostitution of the whorehouse and the crazy dance of war (p. 40).¹³

The Wars, therefore, develops a fictional language of images and patterns of repetition and substitution to tell “what could not be told” in ordinary language. Lady Juliet suggests the procedure, commenting on her story of her sister Barbara’s jealousy of something she

couldn’t understand – the love between her brother and another man: “If you substitute the war for Clive in that story . . . well, I’m sure you get my point” (p. 102). Similarly the reader may substitute key elements of the novel – the dynamics of the war, or of the family unit – in many of the superficially random scenes and stories the novel throws up out of the whirlpool of its collective memory, in order to see the researcher’s “point” – that everything can be connected after all. Western culture is founded on violent competition and fears forms of cooperation not based on coercion. Even rebellions against this dominant culture tend to express themselves in its terms.¹⁴

The Prologue establishes the first set of images that assume greater complexity as the narrative develops, to show the elements of this scene recurring in various configurations throughout. We see a horse standing, a dog listening, and Robert on his haunches watching, all of them by railroad tracks that stretch back to a town and forward to a wood. There is a warehouse on fire. Robert is burned and his nose is broken. All three – horse, dog and man – are lost. All three communicate instinctively, without the ambiguous intercessions of language. They seem to come together naturally “as if both dog and horse had been waiting for Robert to come for them” (p. 9). At this point, the reader too is lost. We do not know where or when this scene is occurring, or who is describing it to us. It is waiting for us just as the animals were waiting for Robert – to come to it and through our attention grant it significance. Even the narrator’s knowledge is uncertain. He describes what he sees (in his mind’s eye), but is reduced to speculation about the causes behind the scene. Much cannot be told. Lost characters, lost certainties, lost directions, are balanced by the effort of watching and listening to relocate oneself and find what is lost. There are tracks leading to a destination here, just as there are conventions of writing and reading we could follow, but they may not lead to where we wish to go. This opening image is the outermost circle, the circumference that draws us into the eddy of *The Wars*.

The horse and dog become constants in Robert’s experience, appearing as Meg the pony and Bimbo the dog (to whom Robert even sends field cards from the front (p. 70)), and at the scene of Robert’s sexual testing, waiting outside Wetgoods (p. 38). A dog alone greets Robert when he arrives in Kingston, trying to decide whether or not to go ahead with his decision to enlist (p. 20), but the horse shadows this scene in the form of the train which prompts Robert to recall that the Indians named it a “firehorse” (p. 18). Robert runs with a dog-like coyote on the prairies and with a group of horses in England. Why is Robert continually linked with animals, and with these two in par-

ticular? Margaret Atwood's assertion in *Survival* that Canadians' "identification with animals is the expression of a deep-seated cultural fear"¹⁵ – a fear of extinction as a nation at the hands of the United States, and a fear of the extinction of the instinctual within themselves – suggests one possibility, encouraged by Robert's thinking in the crater that "Anyone in hiding was an imitation animal" (p. 127). But the horse and dog are already domesticated animals, who do not need to hide to survive. Their dependence on man reminds Robert that his actions will always have repercussions for others. Their recurring appearances reinforce the narrator's belief that Robert cannot escape the childhood influences that have made him what he is. We are never told explicitly what horses or dogs mean to Robert or to the narrator, but we do learn to associate them with certain incidents and emotions – with childhood security, especially as evoked by Rowena; with the loss of childhood security, as evoked by Rowena's death, in the barn while Stuart plays with the pony; with inarticulate innocence and with compassion (also evoked by Rowena, and the animals and characters – Harris and Rodwell – who recall her); and with the illusory freedom of escaping social constraint.¹⁶

In a conversation with William Whitehead, Findley uses the analogy of animals to describe the work of writing fiction:

What you have to do is go with your characters into the void – and help them find their way home. Does this make you think of lost animals? It does me. And the first thing you have to do with a lost animal is discover a mutual language.¹⁷

Here Findley's emphasis is on the creative effort of identification with the other, whether it be animal or fictional character, assumed by the writer in the act of writing. But his analogy may be applied even more suggestively to the imaginative entry into the text that each reader must make. Georges Poulet advances a remarkably similar metaphor for thinking about the relations between book and reader:

Books are objects. On a table, on shelves, in store windows, they wait for someone to come and deliver them from their materiality, their immobility. When I see them on display, I look at them as I would at animals for sale, kept in little cages, and so obviously looking for a buyer. For . . . animals do know that their fate depends on a human intervention, thanks to which they will be delivered from the fate of being treated as objects. Isn't the same true of books?¹⁸

Books and animals both embody the paradox of a silent speaking and a begging to be delivered from their status as mere objects. Just as Robert cannot resist the animals' appeal to "lead them home", to give them

meaning by claiming them, so we readers, like Poulet, cannot resist the novel’s appeal to enter its silence (what Findley calls its “void”) and make it meaningful.

The outer circle of the Prologue with its silent encounter between man, horse and dog, and between this image and the reader, pulls us in toward the more complex circle of the family. In this text, that like a lost animal begs to be “read” and so given a meaning to make it at home in our world, the family is the kernel closest to the absolute centre which is the mystery of Robert’s identity. Rowena forms Robert’s first contact with another. A perpetual child in a world of flux, she alone does not change. Yet ironically it is her death that first introduces Robert to loss, just as her face had first introduced him to life (p. 14). Irrationally, Robert blames himself for her death because he was masturbating when he should have been watching her. No one else blames him. Everyone knew Rowena’s death was overdue, and Stuart is more clearly to blame. Nonetheless, like Dunstan Ramsay in Robertson Davies’ *Fifth Business*, Robert assumes the guilt for the intrusion of suffering into his world, linking Rowena’s literal fall with his metaphorical fall into solitary sexual knowledge, and opposing sex – a losing of oneself to oblivion – against watching, paying attention, assuming responsibility for others. The rest of Robert’s life can be seen as an attempt to compensate for that momentary lapse of attention that he connects with Rowena’s death. It may also be seen as an evasion of “growing up” in a world where maturity is equated with a violent insensitivity to others.

Robert’s first experience of death and guilt leads to his first experience of the irrationality of authority when his mother insists that Robert must now kill Rowena’s rabbits. Readers are always puzzled by this incident, because as Robert points out killing the rabbits “can’t possibly make any sense” (p. 22). Yet this seems to be precisely the point. Life doesn’t make sense, although we are constantly trying to deny this insight by inventing connections to explain the inexplicable. Thus Robert prefers Rowena’s death to be his fault rather than simply an accident, something meaningless. Similarly the narrator prefers to see the killing of the rabbits as the enactment of revenge (p. 25), although this too seems an unsatisfactory explanation. The bathtub scene between Robert and his mother suggests that all explanations of human motivation remain partial at best. Robert’s brain stutters when confronted with his mother (p. 26), because many of his feelings are too complicated to be told. Some meanings can be suggested, however, through Robert’s almost total silence in the face of his mother’s barrage of words, and through images like those of her ashes tumbling down the incline of

the porcelain sink, and of her cigarette squashed on the floor, “torn beyond recognition” (p. 28). In Simone Vautier’s words: “Soldiers may be tempered in the furnace of war; they are made in the everydayness of the family hearth.”¹⁹ Robert’s mother does not believe in the initiation she forces here, yet is not yet prepared to rebel because her belief in her own intuitions is even weaker than her belief in establishment values.

Meanings are also implied through the novel’s numerous citations of other texts. Mrs. Ross’s “We’re all cut off at birth with a knife and left at the mercy of strangers” (p. 28) echoes Blanche duBois’ famous cry in *A Streetcar Named Desire* that she has “always depended on the kindness of strangers”, thus implying that the culture being rejected here is the isolating violence of western patriarchy. When *Huckleberry Finn* surfaces during the farewell scene in the Montreal train station, with an unidentified voice (is it Mrs. Ross’s or the narrator’s?) quoting, “Come on back to the raf, ’ Huck honey”, Robert’s rejection of civilization is further qualified by its divergences from Huck’s. Unlike Huck, Robert is lighting out for old rather than new territory. He has been west before he goes east and learned that freedom cannot be found in a flight from culture into nature. The raft of family security had afforded him an illusory idyll, broken by Rowena’s death, and comparable to Huck’s illusory idyll with Jim. Robert continues to seek some private world, like Huck’s raft, where he can live according to his own ideals of respect for all life, but he finds it, if he finds it at all, only in an abdication of the life he sought to uphold.

Far from portraying “culture-as-enemy”,²⁰ *The Wars* knows that “culture” is all there is. Even nature can only be known through culture. But culture is not a monolithic structure. There are many cultures, as Robert the colonial moving in English circles knows only too well. *The Wars*’ citations of other texts establish its location between warring cultures, pointing out the inadequacies of stereotypical formulations, as in the satire of Clifford Purchas’s reading (p. 58), which fails him under fire, and suggesting possible analogues for its own challenging of such conventions. Lady Juliet’s remarks that Mrs Woolf is her “idol” (p. 149) and that *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are her favourite books (pp. 154–55) suggest that her fondness for subtleties and ambiguities are likely to be reflected in her own accounts of events, just as the researcher’s analogy between Robert’s gun and Leopold Bloom’s bar of soap in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (p. 36) implies his own awareness of complex mythical structures. This citation immediately precedes the story of the whores of Lousetown, perhaps implying that the Wetgoods scene might be read at least partially as a Canadian version of Joyce’s

Nighttown. The nightmare of Lousetown, of men taking pleasure in violent sexual encounters that imitate the engagements of war, is reversed in the erotics of warfare played out on the battlefields of France, and repeated in the false asylum of Asile Désolé, where Robert, the watcher of that first scene, becomes the victim of the second.

Although Conrad is only mentioned explicitly in connection with the inadequacies of adventure fiction for boys (pp. 56, 107), his *Heart of Darkness* lies behind *The Wars*, as an enabling structure (and silenced “thematic ancestor”) that has been radically modified in the rewriting.²¹ Where Kurtz is a voice, Robert is a silence. Kurtz embodies what can be told, however ambiguously: “The horror, the horror”; Robert, what cannot be told but must be endlessly deferred: “Not yet”. Like Kurtz, Robert remains an ambiguous figure. Apparently the chosen nightmare for *The Wars*’ three narrators as Kurtz was for Marlow, Robert’s most memorable (and last recorded) words contain the possibilities of both a yes and a no to life.

Like Kurtz, Robert reveals the irrational heart of European rationality and the violence masked by western civilization. Both men identify part of themselves with what their civilization terms the Other. But Robert’s affinity with native Canadian Indians and with animals redeems him in the narrators’ eyes where Kurtz’s affiliation with the Africans condemns him. *The Wars* registers several shifts in perspective from Conrad’s time to its own. Conrad wrote when Europe was the unquestioned centre of all Western values, judging anything foreign from its own assumption of superiority. Findley writes when Canada may be taken as the centre of Canadian values. Ironically, his Canadian view of Europe repeats Conrad’s European view of Africa. The Canadian must journey to Europe to find his “heart of darkness”. The shift in perspective from Conrad to Findley reflects the shift from a late nineteenth century that could still speak with some confidence of the necessity for a belief, to the late twentieth century, in which the only remaining belief is a questioning of all belief. As Robert Kroetsch says of the Canadian heritage:

We have Conradian complexities in which Marlow has lost all of his confidence. The voices threaten to override the voice. The moral and intellectual and emotional complexities refuse the coercion of a “sane” speaking.²²

The Wars refuses the coercion of a “sane” speaking by foregrounding what “could not be told” throughout its telling. Robert, the novel’s central character, refuses that coercion through reverting to an “insane” speech – speaking of himself, the dog and the horses as a collective “we” – but ultimately through retreating into silence. Robert

fails to realize an alternative to the culture he rejects but his last directly reported speech provides a direction. Wars depend on clear distinctions between “us” and “them”; *The Wars* breaks down those distinctions, first through questioning Lady Barbara’s confident belief that Wolfe won Canada for “us” (for all the British; for the British upper class only; or for the British and the Canadians? one wonders) and then through Robert’s redefining of an “us” that includes animals while excluding his official allies outside the barn.

Bailleul, appropriately, is known as “the last place in civilization” (p. 72). Journeying beyond civilization into the chaos of war – into another “heart of darkness” – Robert also moves beyond the reach of language, of the shaping forces that structure meaning for us. He smashes the mirror after his rape just as he had smashed the other mirror in the whorehouse. The mirrors lie; they cannot show what has happened to him. Mimetic structures reflect an incomplete vision of reality. What they do not reflect is more important than what they do. Yet the broken shards of the mirror are no more accurate. Robert’s gesture may also be read as a refusal to see what he has become: as an evasion, rather than a seeking, of truth. He will not recognise who he is because such self-knowledge would be too frightening.²³

In his efforts to free himself from all the lies embraced by those who run the wars, Robert moves beyond language into silence, just as his mother back home in Toronto, in her rejection of the same justifying lies, moves into blindness. They become icons of accusation, but what they accuse is a part of themselves: our inability to face what “could not be told”. Robert and his mother refuse easy explanations but they also finally refuse engagement. The researcher assumes the task of seeing and saying what all this waste might mean. Recognizing the limitations of his medium, he seeks to circumvent them by drawing attention to them. Mirrors, photographs, water jugs, watches, words – all frame, define, and so cage the flow of life, but they also enable us to make sense of our experience. Without them, it becomes unseeable and so unsayable. Without them, we are like Robert, confronted by the angry Flemish peasant and totally at a loss as to how to proceed when deprived of a common language. Without them, we are like the first viewer of the photo of the iceberg, unable to see what the photo is meant to represent. The challenge *The Wars* meets so well is that of adjusting these frames so that we see a series of patterns superimposed upon each other, with each new frame exploding before it can rigidify into the fixity of a single angle of vision.²⁴ *The Wars* thus simultaneously both makes and resists meaning, remaining true in its telling to its knowledge of all that cannot be told.

NOTES

- 1 Timothy Findley, *The Wars*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, p. 9. All further references will appear in my text.
- 2 Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, pp. 79–80. Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, establishes the characteristic rhetoric of fiction depicting the First World War. For a fuller analysis of the “intertextual space created by all other war texts” as a context for understanding *The Wars*, see Coral Ann Howells, “‘Tis Sixty Years Since: Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* and Roger McDonald’s *1915*”, *World Literature Written in English*, 23, 1, Winter 1984, p. 131. This essay is also valuable for pointing to a homosexual subtext in *The Wars*, an area of silence I do not discuss here. However, the comparison with *1915* is less valuable than comparison with Martin Boyd’s *When Blackbirds Sing* or David Malouf’s *Fly Away Peter* would have been.
- 3 He is also blind, of course, to what only his future can reveal – that he himself is doomed to be similarly misinterpreted and judged mad for acting in accordance with principles not recognized by the ruling orthodoxies of his time and place. This scene provides a comic and apparently benign version of what will later be presented as Robert’s tragedy.
- 4 For a thorough analysis of the significance of Benjamin West’s painting in Canadian history and literature, see Laurie Ricou, “Never Cry Wolfe: Benjamin West’s *The Death of Wolfe* in *Prochain Episode* and *The Diviners*”, *Essays in Canadian Writing*, No. 20 (Winter 1980–81), 171–82. Ricou points out that “West’s painting is the definitive representation of the central military fact in Canadian history” (p. 174); ironically it “is an outsider’s view and an expression of imperial ambition” (p. 177) that nonetheless shaped Canadian popular mythology.
- 5 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, London & New York: Methuen, 1983, p. 3. For further discussion of these issues using a different terminology, see John F. Hulcoop, “‘Look! Listen! Mark My Words!’ Paying Attention to Timothy Findley’s Fictions”, *Canadian Literature*, 91, Winter 1981, pp. 22–47. For the most thorough analysis to date see Simone Vautier, “The Dubious Battle of Storytelling: Narrative Strategies in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*”, in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature* eds. Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik, Edmonton: NeWest, 1985, pp. 11–39. This essay came to my attention too late for me to incorporate its sophisticated distinctions between what it calls the I-narrator, the you-narrator, the impersonal narrator, the scriptor and the implied author into my discussion of the researcher and the text.
- 6 Shirley Neumann and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, Edmonton: NeWest, 1982, (pp. 167–68). Kroetsch’s “archaeology” seems closer to conventional use of the term that it does to that introduced by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972, although both are interested, along with Findley, in questioning the document and in treating discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 49). Foucault’s assumption “that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers . . .” (p. 216) and his discussion of prohibitions linked to sexuality and madness, are especially relevant to Findley’s concerns in *The Wars*.

- 7 In this respect, Findley's approach seems similar to that taken by Hayden White in "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation", in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, especially pp. 134 and 143.
- 8 Johan Aitken, "'Long Live the Dead': An Interview with Timothy Findley", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 33, 1981–82, p. 82.
- 9 Aitken, "'Long Live the Dead'", p. 82.
- 10 For a fuller discussion of this dimension of the novel, see Laurie Ricou, "Obscured by Violence: Timothy Findley's *The Wars*", in *Violence in the Canadian Novel Since 1960*, eds. Virginia Harger-Grinling and Terry Goldie, St. Johns: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981, p. 136.
- 11 This area of silence in the text is fully articulated in the movie version, in which Robert asks Rowena to marry him.
- 12 *Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 155.
- 13 For a different reading of these similies, see Lorraine M. York, "'A Shout of Recognition': 'Likeness' and the Art of the Simile in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*", *English Studies in Canada*, 11, 2, June, 1985. Where York sees Findley recasting the "inconceivable" realities of war in the "guise of the familiar" (224), tying "this foreign condition to a stable, familiar state of being" (225), I see these similes performing the opposite function of forcing the reader to see the familiar states of being as themselves disguised states of war; hence in part the title, "the wars". *The Wars* documents wars between the classes, the sexes, and the coloniser and the colonised as well as Europe's so-called Great War.
- 14 This concern with establishing connections borders on determinism. Once Robert has chosen Taffler as his model, his fate uncannily follows that established by his predecessor. Robert takes over Taffler's mistress, suffers a homosexual attack similar to that he had watched Taffler endure, and returns from war horribly disfigured, as Taffler had before him. Although Robert is incapable of escaping these patterns because he cannot articulate them, the text – through its ability to incorporate multiple perspectives and to reverse time sequences – does suggest that the determinism to which Robert fell subject may be eluded by others, such as the readers of this text, if they pay attention to its lessons.
- 15 Toronto: Anansi, 1971, p. 79. Findley's most recent novel, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), makes his sympathetic central characters' identifications with animal victims much more clearly a creative alternative to western patriarchy.
- 16 It should be clear by now that this writer disagrees with those critics, like Gilbert Drolet, who see Robert as a "free spirit". See Drolet's "'Prayers Against Despair': A Retrospective Note on Findley's *The Wars*", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, No. 33 (1981–82), pp. 148–155. On the contrary, Robert is defined by his family, his class, his education and his nationality; his efforts to define himself can only be made within the terms already established by these constraints. *The Wars* explores the dimensions they allow: between what can and cannot be told, between what can and cannot be done. Even in freeing the horses, Robert is imitating an earlier action rather than initiating one on his own. (See Robert's letter to his parents describing an Irishman's desertion with a stolen horse (p. 51)). Even the act that defines him is not original. Everything is already written. There is no beginning. Simone Vautier makes some interesting comments about the ways *The Wars* not only intimates that beginnings and endings may be illusory but are also "a convenient way . . . to obscure violence" (p. 33).

- 17 Timothy Findley, “Alice Drops Her Cigarette on the Floor . . .”, *Canadian Literature*, 91, Winter 1981, p. 16.
- 18 “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority”, *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972, p. 56.
- 19 “The Dubious Battle of Storytelling”, p. 28.
- 20 Critics like Dennis Duffy over-simplify the novel’s vision when they define it simply as a vision of “culture-as-enemy”. *The Wars* asks whose culture is friend, whose enemy and answers identifying humane as well as animal alternatives to the dominant culture that has created the wars. While I agree with Duffy that *The Wars* rejects “modernity”, I do not equate “modernity” with “culture” nor does *The Wars*. Where Duffy seeks authority and therefore finds the ending of *The Wars* “weak”, I join with Simone Vautier in celebrating the way in which *The Wars* succeeds in projecting a “decentred worldview” (p. 35) that questions the authority of ending. See Dennis Duffy, “The Rejection of Modernity in Recent Canadian Fiction”, *Religion/Culture: Comparative Canadian Studies*, eds. William Westfall et al., *Canadian Issues: Association for Canadian Studies*, vol. 7, 1985, pp. 260–73.
- 21 Pierre Macherey writes of a work swerving from its “enabling model” (p. 50) and of *Robinson Crusoe* as the “thematic ancestor” of modern myths of origin (p. 240) in *A Theory of Literary Production*. In a similar way, I see Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as the thematic ancestor of contemporary myths of cross-cultural encounter. Interesting parallels between Conrad’s novel and Findley’s emerge, for example, when one compares the framed setting on the Nellie with the framed setting in the archives, and the curtain of fog lifting and dropping on the dikes (p. 79) with the shutter lifting and dropping on Marlow’s river (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 56. Of course, as the initiator of an ambiguous gesture, Robert also recalls Conrad’s Jim.
- 22 *Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 155.
- 23 In an article on Findley, “A Devotion to Fragility: Findley’s *The Wars*”, forthcoming in *World Literature Written in English*, I pursue this theme in more detail. Findley provides some support for this reading, while discussing his play *The Paper People*. See David Gardner and Timothy Findley, “On *The Paper People*”, *Canadian Drama*, 9, 1, 1983, p. 61. Here Findley says: “I don’t believe we’ve ever been searching to see who we are. I think we’ve been avoiding seeing who we are . . . We do know who we are and we don’t like it and we don’t know how to get away from that person . . . We had all rather stay in adolescence . . .” The Canadian identity cannot be named, not because it is nebulous, but because it is unpalatable.
- 24 Here I paraphrase the title of an important early article on *The Wars*. See Eva-Marie Kröller, “The Exploding Frame: Uses of Photography in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 16, Fall/Winter 1981, pp. 68–74.

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