

A Force of Interruption

The Photography of History in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

That memory is structured photographically in Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977) is a critical commonplace. But, despite a wealth of commentary on the novel's photographic technique, we have yet to grasp fully the interruptive force of its "photo-narration." Part of this critical neglect originates in Timothy Findley's own comments on photography as a generative force in the writing: "I began to get flashes of something, and what it was, was a sentence I put down. 'Robert Ross arrived at Boulogne and got off the ship and walked across the encampment toward the train.' Then the image continued with the number of tents; the picture—it's like a developing picture in the pan, that comes more and more into focus, and more and more into view" (Aitken 80). In another interview given to his partner William Whitehead for the Findley special issue of *Canadian Literature* in 1981, the novelist had as much to say about the visual structure of his novel as he did about its composition: "*The Wars* unfolds as a series of pictures. Pictures and interviews." Of course, he added, the problem was "to find the right pictures and find the right characters to interview" (Findley, "Alice" 15).

In the interview with Johan Aitken, Findley was to offer an extra-textual image of the novel—ignored for the most part in the criticism—that makes the literary text a virtual mutation of a visual medium. This image is all the more telling because it emplots the story as a long avenue of time down which Robert Ross comes riding on a horse past "billboards [set] on an angle on either side of this avenue. Flashing on these billboards are the selected photographs, the images that I wanted to imprint of moments from that war, moments from Robert's life, moments from history" (84). The literary text has yet to be integrated with this extra-textual image in ways that

reveal the larger significance of photography as a force of interruption, which is to say a force of mutation, in the novel.

In the photograph, as in its verbal equivalent, a new phenomenology of time begins to emerge, a phenomenology in which the cyclical experience of daily or yearly time or the linear sense of time as historical continuity, gives way to an atomized sense of time where distance, difference, death, delay, danger, and discontinuity become the rule. In a crucial way, Findley's protagonist, Robert Ross, is distanced by an archival narrator from his contemporaries, and differentiated from his own historical moment by a photographic technique that would sever all continuity between his era and ours, freeing him to come riding down the light rays, in cinematic fashion, into our age. As a book of interruptions, *The Wars* dramatizes a photographic structure of delay that will lead to a belated recognition of the image's latency, its danger, and its discontinuity. But, as a formal expression of writing with light, the novel also embodies this medium that first enabled us to "see" history. *The Wars* asks to be read, in other words, as a text about historicism, about the hidden connections between history and photography, so reminding us of why history as a modern discipline would attend the advent of photography.¹

Camera Obscura

Treating the photographic technique of *The Wars* thematically, critics tend to obscure the philosophical implications of the medium in the novel. John Hulcoop, for example, writes in the special issue of *Canadian Literature* that "Findley's fascination with stories told in the form of pictures (as in picture-books and films) is obvious. Much of his own story-telling has been done in the medium of television, and a great part of the TV script consists quite literally of visuals" (Hulcoop 39). While Hulcoop's subtitle urges the necessity of "Paying Attention in Timothy Findley's Fictions" (22), his essay stops short of identifying photography as the silent protagonist of the novel. Conversely, Eva-Marie Kröller makes photography the antagonist of *The Wars* in an essay published in the same year, arguing that it revolved "around a series of experiences each implying a *camera obscura*" (70). She isolates a series of confining rooms (*camerae*) in the novel, all of which connote "the threatening possession of dark boxes," sharply limiting Robert's perception. Suffering from the inherent violence of "Western frames of thought" that destroy, as much as they confirm, "man's central position" (69) in the world, the protagonist is thus set at odds with this apparatus of a sovereign

Cartesian cogito that enforces its dominance over both the human and non-human world. But to claim that “Robert is a long-distance runner either evading still frames or exploding them once he is trapped in them” (71) is finally to argue that the narrator is his enemy, and to say that Robert is a victim, not the heroic destroyer, of this supposed technology of suppression.

Sensing that it “is the photographic style which accounts for much of the powerful impact of *The Wars*,” Lorraine M. York (1988) focuses more properly on “Findley’s growing awareness” of the “suspended quality of certain moments in our existence” that, in this novel, “accompanies an increasing value for the past and for human memory” (76, 77). Rejecting Kröller’s notion of the “threatening enclosure” of the *camera obscura*, York argues that the archival narrator and soldier are both joined in a “conception of the photograph as the preserver of all that is precious and alive” (84). Much as Robert tries to save the lives of animals amidst the brutalities of war, the narrator makes a narrative “attempt to capture the essence of Robert Ross’ life” (84). Were this the whole of the story—that photography, like memories preserved in narrative, are life-sustaining—the ambivalence about photography that Kröller locates in the protagonist would not be so disturbing. The novel will not allow us to forget that the photograph, in its pre-digital history, must take the form of a negative before being made into a positive print.

Evelyn Cobley does not forget the ambiguous status of photography in *The Wars*, allowing that its documents are all “mediated by a researcher-narrator who interposes himself between the reader and the already technically reproduced reality they denote. This double mediation signals an acknowledgment of fiction-making which the earlier war narratives sought to ward off through documentary guarantees” (108). In this way, Findley escapes the usual trap of combatant narratives that document the horrors of war, only to reproduce “the ideological assumptions of modernity” in its lamentable failure “to deliver the promise of universal human emancipation” (99). As Cobley sees it, “duplication” and “duplicitousness” are the ground of the photograph, which, in Derridean fashion, doom it to “différance” instead of “sameness.” Given its status as a supplement marked by the absence of the subject, the photograph reveals why “Findley should have chosen the theme of death to illustrate this process of sense-making as a process of substitutions” (112). For “neither verbal nor visual images can recuperate what is lost; they can only interminably speak their nostalgia for the traces of the past.” Oddly, Cobley ends by re-inscribing “an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in

speech” (Derrida 264), thus undermining her own deconstructive project.

The first essay to remark the interruptive force of the photography in *The Wars* remains the best. Laurie Ricou’s “Obscured by Violence” (1979), too rarely cited, shows how “the narrator is repeatedly and uneasily trying to establish his distance from Robert Ross” by means of narrative interruptions. “Breaks and pauses, involuntary repetition, and occasional complete stoppage of words,” as he inventories the style, are “characteristic of the stammering interrupted syntax and structure of the novel” (133). Therefore, “The brevity of sections, paragraphs, and sentences catch the fragmentary, but also suggest that the narrator cuts himself off: there is so much that ‘could not be told’” (135). While the narrator may rely on photographs as a major “art form of the Great War, the chief means of remembering that war, as film might be the art form of the Second World War, or videotape of the Vietnam war” (132), Ricou does not regard them as a means of detaching Robert from his own moment; rather, his story “opens stammering” (129), in much the same way that Robert does himself, when doubt “stammers in his brain” (*Wars* 6). If the narrator’s story ends only if and when he accepts Ross as a mirror of himself, distance is then more of a dramatic condition in need of resolution, rather than a property of photography itself. If one were to see, rather, how the narrator’s position echoes that of Robert jogging with a coyote on the prairie, where “Distance was safety. Space was asylum” (32), then the quest of the protagonist would be better aligned with the narrator’s quest. In words borrowed from the narrator himself, “There was nothing to be won but distance” (25) in such a photographic technique.

A Force of Interruption

In his illuminating monograph on Walter Benjamin’s “persistent recourse to the language of photography in his discussions of history” (xix), Eduardo Cadava argues that Benjamin’s concept of the “thesis” is “Like the gaze of the camera that momentarily fixes history in an image. . . . A photograph in prose, the thesis names a force of arrest” (xx). Because Benjamin holds that “historical thinking involves ‘not only the movements of thoughts, but their arrest as well,’” Cadava concludes that, “For Benjamin, there can be no history without the Medusa effect—without the capacity to arrest or immobilize historical movement, to isolate the details of an event from the continuum of history” (59). In his “Theses on the Concept of History,” for example, “Benjamin traces the effects of what he calls ‘the caesura in the movement of thought’” (xx). What Benjamin sees in the instant of a shutter-click is a

“Medusa’s gaze that stalls history in the sphere of speculation. It short-circuits, and thereby suspends, the temporal continuity between a past and a present.” It is, in fact, this “break from the present” that “enables the rereading and rewriting of history” (59). What Benjamin isolates in his “Theses” is “the caesura of the historical event, the separation and discontinuity from which history emerges” (xx).

This “caesura in the movement of thought” is evident in the repeated starts and stops of the opening chapters of *The Wars*. An image of a horse, a dog and a man in the “Prologue” forms a virtual snapshot of immobility before it gives way after six staccato paragraphs to motion: “They rode down the track towards the road to Magdalene Wood.” But no sooner is the horse in motion than it halts, whinnies, and is answered “from inside” an abandoned railway car. Four sentences later, “Robert was riding” again, this time “behind a hundred and thirty horses with the dog trotting beside him. . . . This was when the moon rose—red” (2). Here is where the prologue breaks off and the first chapter—a single paragraph—begins: “All of this happened a long time ago” (3). Such a shift from an eyewitness to a historian is not as complete as it might seem, however, in the move from the past progressive into the past perfect tense. First-person witnesses to events remain in the narrative—if not combatants, at least some “who played a part in it.” But these witnesses won’t say what they have seen: “Ask what happened, they say: ‘I don’t know.’ Mention Robert Ross—they look away. ‘He’s dead,’ they tell you. This is not news. ‘Tell me about the horses, you ask. Sometimes, they weep at this. Other times they say: ‘that bastard!’” “In the end”—a brief chapter is further foreshortened—“the only facts you have are public. Out of these you make what you can” (3).

“You” make what you can out of what every historian must work with—primary sources. While “You begin at the archives with photographs” (3), only a glimpse is given of the bundles of letters Robert sent home from the Front—“All these letters neatly folded and tied” (73) after being “numbered and catalogued and memorized” (153) by his long-suffering mother. Two brief excerpts (51, 71) of this word-hoard are all that enter the record, amounting to no more than a page in a novel of 218 pages. Closing the book on an epistolary narrative that might have recounted events in the first person, Findley eschews the conventions of Great War combatant narratives. (He was born too late himself—1930—to have served in World War I, and not soon enough to have served in World War II.) From the outset, his soldier is thus distanced from us in time and narrative perspective.

A more formal “interruption” then emerges in an archival scene of looking in the next chapter. Composed as a photographic layout—“Spread over table tops, a whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps”—a single paragraph, this tiny second chapter, manages to cram 17 sentences into 14 lines. By its end, we know that the story is going to be made out of fragments, and displayed, as it were, in an “album” of fragmented instants: “As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you’ll never find. This is what you have” (4).

From a theoretical, rather than a formal point of view, what we have is a caesura in the flow of time; the “force of arrest” in the photographic technique literally disrupts the organic continuity of older notions of temporality, whether these be governed by an idea of historical cycles—such as the Eternal Return, or the Great Year—or by a Heraclitean model of “time as a flow, or river” (Bal 7). While the photographic image is “cut from that flow, a frozen moment, or suspension” of flow (Bal 7), it marks “A return without return,” an “eternal return” which “tells us that the photographed, once photographed, can never return to itself—it can only appear in its withdrawal in the form of an image or reproduction” (Cadava 42). Isolating the moment from its context, the photograph breaks the cycle, for “what is repeated is a process of becoming, a movement of differentiation and dispersion—and what is differentiated and dispersed is time itself” (31).

Conversely, since “the photographic event interrupts the present” as a continuous flow, “[i]t interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, one that spaces time and temporalizes space. A force of arrest, the image translates an aspect of time into something like a certain *space*, and does so without stopping time, or without preventing time from being time. . . . Looking both backward and forward.” Cadava continues,

this figure marks a division within the present. Within the almost-no-time of the camera’s click, we can say that something *happens*. For Benjamin, however, for something to happen does not mean that something occurs within the continuum of time, nor does it imply that something becomes present. Rather, the photographic event interrupts the present; it occurs *between* the present and itself, between the movement of time and itself. (61)

By separating the moment from itself, the photographic event actually atomizes time, making it possible to “see” time as a conglomerate of particles. The result is a phenomenology that differs from older conceptions of time as “eternal return” or as linear flow. And since the photographic event “marks a division within the present” (Cadava 61), it “names a process that, seizing

and tearing an image from its context, works to immobilize the flow of history” (xx). More precisely, “in the interruption of its movement,” the photographic event “tears the image to be read from its context. This tearing or breaking force is not an accidental predicate of reading; it belongs to its very structure. Only when reading undoes the context of an image is a text developed, like a photographic negative, toward its full historical significance” (65).

The verbal snapshot of “1915” which opens that über-stylized third chapter of *The Wars* is but one example of this tearing or breaking force in the medium of photography. “The year itself,” which “looks sepia and soiled,” turns remote, as if “muddied like its pictures” (4). While “Part of what you see you recognize,” the images of recruitment parades still bristle with interrupted motion: “Everyone is focused, now, shading their eyes against the sun. Everyone is watching with an outstretched arm—silenced at the edge of wharves and time” (5). This silence, as much as the sepia colour of the images themselves, works to distance us from a scene we contemplate, but in which we do not participate. As readers, we are now firmly detached from the objects of our gaze.

At least until “*Robert Ross comes riding straight towards the camera. . . . There is mud on his cheeks and forehead and his uniform is burning—long, bright tails of flame are streaming out behind him. He leaps through memory without a sound*” (5). This sudden eruption of italics prepares us to see this latter image as existing in another dimension—one that has already been interiorized, or moved into “memory”—if it exists at all on paper (shutter speeds in 1915 making it highly unlikely that an image of Robert’s equestrian leap would come into focus anywhere but in memory or imagination). In fact, the narrator tells us, “*You lay the fiery image back in your mind and let it rest. You know it will obtrude again and again until you find its meaning—here*” (6). “Here” is most likely the page itself, if not “here” in the domain of memory. While a dynamic image arises to challenge a static photograph, the narrator prefers for now to “let it rest.” Another dynamic of narrative can then emerge out of this tension between distance and proximity, between the externalized image and one that has already been interiorized.

Proximity and Distance

A dynamic “oscillation between space and time, between distance and proximity,” Cadava suggests, “touches on the very nature of photographic and filmic media, whose structure consists in the simultaneous reduction and maximization of distance” (xxv). While the photograph appears “to reduce . . . the

distance between people and events, or people and places,” this effect “only enables it to install a greater distance. If it brings people and events or places together at all, it is only in order to keep them apart” (xxiv). This is surely the case in *The Wars* where images of *Thomas Ross and Family* are brought together in 1915 with images of crowds on the home front. On the one hand, the family “stand beside a new Ford Truck” in a picture printed “in the *Toronto Mail and Empire*” (6) trumpeting the family’s donation of an ambulance to a Field Surgery Hospital which will bear their name. If the Ross family is brought close to the public as a model of sacrifice in the cause of “King and Empire,” they also remain distant, their private life veiled by several levels of absence, most notably that of Rowena, their eldest child, who “is not shown. She is never in photographs that are apt to be seen by the public.” Although a “hydrocephalic” (7) child might “taint” the family’s public image, “Robert has her picture on his bureau” (6) in a private expression of fraternal love. His preservation of his sister’s portrait in the sanctum of his bedroom thus links him to the narrator, who already preserves his image in an act of interiorization.

In parallel fashion, the narrator acts in the preceding paragraph to distance Robert from a public absolutely besotted by marching troops and martial music:

A Band is assembled on the Band Shell—red coats and white gloves. They serenade the crowd with “Soldiers of the Queen.” You turn them over—wondering if they’ll spill—and you read on the back in the faintest ink in a feminine hand: “Robert.” But where? You look again and all you see is the crowd. And the Band is still playing—quite undisturbed—and far from spilled. (6)

The narrator’s act of turning a photograph over, wondering if its contents will spill, is both near to and distant from an image of toy soldiers spilled out of a box by a child ignorant of war’s reality. Though in this case, it is not the soldiers, but an image of Robert himself that “tumbles” out of the frame: “Then you see him: Robert Ross. Standing on the sidelines with pocketed hands—feet apart and narrowed eyes. . . . He doubts the validity in all this martialling of men but the doubt is inarticulate” (6). By such means, Robert is both brought closer to us, but also distanced from us by his marginal position in a distant epoch. In effect, he comes to occupy a role already constructed for the reader, where he is a watcher firmly detached from the object of his gaze.

In other ways, as well, the narrator seeks to isolate Robert from his own historical moment, as if to “rescue” him from a time and place uncongenial to them both. To do so, he enlists contemporary eyewitnesses who are able

to speak for the silent images of history he finds in photographs, but who also replicate the operations of photography in tearing the image from its context. Marian Turner, for example, the war nurse who once tended to the burned body of Robert Ross in a field hospital after his desertion, recalls in words the narrator has recorded on magnetic tape, “that nowadays so many people—young people especially—might’ve known what he was all about” (10). Her assessment of the war is far from the common opinion of an era in which Robert Ross was court-martialed: “Looking back, I hardly believe what happened. That the people in that park are there because we all went mad” (10). At the end of the novel, Marian Turner will once again come to the aid of the narrator in his “photographic” project of tearing Robert from his immediate social context and arresting the flow of time:

I’m a nurse. I’ve never offered death to anyone. I’ve prayed for it often enough. But I’ve never made the offer. But that night—surrounded by all that dark—and all those men—and the trains kept bringing us more and more and more—and the war was never, never, never going to end—that night, I thought: *I am ashamed to be alive. I am ashamed of life.* And I wanted to offer some way out of life—I wanted grace for Robert Ross. (215)

While the memories of a Marian Turner bring us closer to the burned soldier, they also illustrate the significance of the temporal maxim she takes from Robert: “Not yet” (215).

Further examples of this tension between proximity and distance appear in the testimony of another eyewitness who, as a twelve-year-old girl, had fallen in love with the mutinous Canadian soldier. As an elderly Lady Juliet d’Orsey now assures the narrator: “You can not know these things. You live when you live. No one else can ever live your life and no one else will ever know what you know. Then was then. Unique” (114). But the intent of her words, like Marian Turner’s “nowadays”—presumably the Vietnam War era in which the novel was published—is meant to establish Robert as the “hero” (10) of the future who looks back on the era of the Great War from the distance of a later age. Both women occupy a position similar to the narrator who, speaking from this later age himself, constructs an image of a soldier whose conformity with his era is kept at a distance, but whose contemporary pacifism is portrayed in extreme close-up.

Difference

For Benjamin the logic of photographic “arrest” leads to a separation of the thing photographed from itself. In effect, there is “a withdrawal that is fundamental to the temporal structure of the photograph.” Indeed, “[t]here can

be no photograph without the withdrawal of what is photographed” (Cadava 10). If what is photographed is infinitely reproducible, then what is reproduced is no longer singular; it “is itself already a reproduction—and as such, separated from itself” (xxvi). This photographic separation of the object from itself is a determining feature of the medium as well for Siegfried Kracauer, a contemporary of Benjamin whose thinking on photography had an influence on his thought. For Kracauer, “the significance of photography lies not with its ability to reproduce a given object but rather with its ability to tear it away from itself. What makes photography photography is not its capacity to present what it photographs, but its character as a force of interruption” (Cadava xxviii). What the photographic image comes to interrupt is the *being in time* of the object, its radical separation from its own future.

That this is the goal of the historical album chapter in *The Wars* emerges in a later sequence of images, from “*Meg—a Patriotic Pony*” to “*Peggy Ross with Clinton Brown from Harvard!!! Nothing in Clinton Brown from Harvard’s appearance warrants three exclamation points*” (7-8). That Robert is supposed to be out of step with his own era is thus demonstrated before his enlistment, when he refuses to fight another man, “Because he *loves me*” (13), as Heather Lawson says, trying to provoke a jealous response. On what authority this scene is recounted, however, is never made clear.

Nor is it clear by what authority the literal sense of Robert’s letters will be denied. The pacifist, or the type, at least, of a more doubtful, questioning warrior is not yet manifest in Robert’s letter of embarkation from St. John harbour: “I’ve written these last few words by lantern light. Green for starboard looking towards the sea. I hope you all can read this—because I can’t. So—adios! As the bandits say. Robert Ross. Your son” (51). The swagger of his concluding formula hardly fits the image of his later actions. Nor does the postscript he writes in a second letter sound like the gun-shy officer who supposedly struggles to shoot a horse with a broken leg:

P.S. Do you think you could send the automatic soon? I want it very much. Battery Sergeant-Major says if you could get a Webley .455 Mark I they’re the best there is. They’re wonderful to fire and they kill at fifty yards. (71)

Irony—or a hypocritical difference between the outer and inner man—fails to explain, since the private letter inverts his tenderhearted actions in the hold of the ship. By reducing his cache of letters to two brief fragments, and by framing his literal words with verbal analogues of photographs, the narrator finally manages to tear the image of an eager enlistee away from himself. The photograph and the man are made to differ conspicuously from one

another. But only when the narrator's reading of events undoes the context of the historical image is his text capable of development, like a photographic negative, toward its "full" historical significance.

The Photography of Time

Roland Barthes—likely the most influential theorist of photography after Benjamin—writes in *Camera Lucida* (1981) that, in an age before photography, people were resistant “to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth.” However, “The Photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this resistance; henceforth the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch. It is the advent of the Photograph—and not, as has been said, of the cinema—which divides the history of the world” (Barthes 88). That history and photography both had their birth in the nineteenth century is no coincidence. Benedict Anderson recalls how “the establishment of the first academic chairs in History” took place in 1810 (Berlin) and 1812 (La Sorbonne); but it was not until “the second quarter of the nineteenth century” that “History had become formally constituted as a ‘discipline,’ with its own elaborate array of professional journals” (194). It was also in this second quarter of the nineteenth century (1827) that Joseph Nicéphore Niepce produced the first “photograph,” a blurred image that he called a “heliograph” and that required eight hours of exposure to a silver plate. After his death in 1833, his partner Louis Daguerre helped to revolutionize this cumbersome process of capturing light emanations. “Daguerre’s photographs were iodized silver plates exposed in the camera obscura, which had to be turned this way and that until, in the proper light, a pale gray image could be discerned” (Benjamin, “Little” 508). For obvious reasons, “The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject (as it were) grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot” (514). Talbot Fox’s invention of the calotype in 1841 finally reduced the twenty-minute exposure of the daguerreotype (Benjamin 528, n.1) to something like shutter speed. Thereafter, “advances in optics” made new “instruments available that wholly overcame darkness and recorded appearances as faithfully as any mirror” (517).

If photography influenced the birth of history as a discipline, it did so because it authorized a new view of time. Both Benjamin and Barthes claim that historicism was necessarily founded on this new epistemology of photography, a medium which was obviously “false on the level of perception,

[but was] true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination” (Barthes 115). Or, “In the wording of Siegfried Kracauer, ‘historicism is concerned with the photography of time’” (Cadava xviii). In Barthes’ terms, the viewer of the photograph gains a position outside of time, unlike the viewer of cinema who remains immersed in its flow. “I don’t have time,” Barthes complains, to think about the images in movies; “in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not *pensiveness*; whence the interest, for me, of the photogram” (55). It is only the force of arrest in the photographic image, and its separation from the subject, that enables a viewer to see what is preserved in the image.

More expansively, Barthes expresses a preference for the static image on the basis of its ontology: “I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an ‘ontological’ desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was ‘in itself’” (3). What he discovers is that, “Like the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, ‘the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style’; but the Photograph breaks the ‘constitutive style’ (this is its astonishment); it is *without future* (this is its pathos, its melancholy); in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic” (89-90).

If cinema speaks in the present progressive tense of images that move in our time, the photograph speaks in “the aorist,” or absolute past of the arrested image, as compared to “memory whose grammatical expression would be the perfect tense” (91). Unlike the past perfect of a completed action, the aorist tense of the photograph suspends the image in a past forever closed to the future. “This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku. For the notation of a haiku, too, is undevelopable: everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion. In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility*” (49). This is the ultimate significance for Barthes of the aorist tense of the photograph: “By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future” (96).

Death

Such is the significance for Findley’s narrator of his penultimate image of Robert Ross which he reports in the *Epilogue*: “Robert is seated on a keg of

water. This is at Lethbridge, in the spring of 1915” (217). In his hand Robert seems to “be holding something alive or made of glass. But the object—once you have made it out—is nothing of the sort. It is white and slightly larger than his fist. Magnification reveals it is the skull of some small beast—either a rabbit or a badger. Robert’s middle index fingers are crooked through its eyes. You put this picture aside because it seems important” (218). Its importance consists in an “Alas poor Yorick” moment of recognition—a true *memento mori*—that telegraphs Robert’s “brotherhood” with the animals, even anticipating his fiery death with the horses. Indeed, in this image of intense immobility, everything is already given; Robert’s image is without future except for the death that awaits him. The past is thus absolute, as if the picture were incapable of further development.

Death similarly shadows Benjamin’s “little history” of photography, from his commentary on the technology’s early requirements to his discussion of the “loss of the aura” in the process of mechanical reproduction. Those portraits, for example, that he reproduces of the pioneering British photographer, David Octavius Hill, “were made in the Edinburgh Greyfriars cemetery” (“Little” 510), a setting that “could never have been so effective if it had not been chosen on technical grounds. The low light-sensitivity of the early plates made prolonged exposure outdoors a necessity. This in turn made it desirable to take the subject to some out-of-the-way spot where there was no obstacle to quiet concentration” (514). Even when photography moved indoors, its association with death could not be dispelled: “The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness by means of its reproduction” (519). For that “strange weave of space and time” that Benjamin defined as the aura of the photographic subject, “the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be” (518), was elided by its mechanical reproduction. “Seeking to eternalize its objects in the time and space of an image,” Cadava enlarges on this analysis of the image’s morbidity, “the photographic present returns eternally to the event of its death—a death that comes with the death of understanding. That the photograph is always touched by death means that it offers us a glimpse of a history to which we no longer belong” (Cadava xxviii).

That we no longer belong to a nineteenth-century cult of romantic heroism is writ large in words the silent icon of Robert Ross is made to speak in his formal portrait:

Oh—I can tell you, sort of, what it might be like to die. *The Death of General Wolfe*. Someone will hold my hand and I won't suffer pain. Because I've suffered that already and survived. In paintings—and in photographs—there's never any blood. At most, the hero sighs his way to death while linen handkerchiefs are held against his wounds. His wounds are poems. *I'll faint away in glory hearing music and my name. Someone will close my eyes and I'll be wrapped around in flags while drums and trumpets-bagpipes march me home through snow. . . .* (48-9)

This risible image of the dead hero—a military volunteer who gets his “romantic” notions “from silent images”—reduces him to a ventriloquist's dummy for an imperial history whose icon is General James Wolfe. In the famous image of his death (1771) created by Benjamin West, a colonial painter from Philadelphia, the subject is composed in the visual language of a Pietà, where the dying martyr is surrounded by a dozen disciples and borne up by loving hands that need not even stanch his wounds. The promise of this image, it seems, is death without dying, another analogue of photographic immortality.

As Cadava explains, “In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him—it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at. The photograph is a farewell. It belongs to the afterlife of the photographed” (13). Nothing more clearly demonstrates this commodification of the soldier-subject in *The Wars* than the words of his photographic afterlife:

Afterwards, my mother will escort her friends across the rugs and parquet floors to see this photograph of me and everyone will weep and walk on tip-toe. Medals—(there are none just yet, as you can see)—will sit beside this frame in little boxes made of leather lined with satin. I will have the Military Cross. *He died fighting for King and Country*—fighting the war to end all wars.
5 x 9 and framed in silver.

In the starkest of terms, the photo-ventriloquist shows how the soldier's image has begun “to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death” from the moment it is first fixed on photographic paper. And so the logic of the larger narrative, its photographic emplotment, as it were, is that Robert will be required to step out of the picture, to shed his uniform, much as the narrator has shed Robert's “uniform” image.

Delay

The isolation of a photographic image in an instant of time, outside a network of relations that would define it otherwise, opens up an “optical unconscious” to Benjamin. As he says in his “Little History of Photography,” it is

“another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.” What the eye sees is of a different order of being than what the camera records; indeed, “we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis” (Benjamin, “Little” 510). In this way, Benjamin makes photography a tool for reading history that is analogous to psychoanalysis as a tool for reading personal histories: “In linking the experience of shock to the structure of delay built into the photographic event, Benjamin evokes Freud’s own discussions of the latency of experience, discussions that are themselves often organized in terms of the language of photography” (Cadava 102). For Benjamin, “It is what is not experienced in an event that paradoxically accounts for the belated and posthumous shock of historical experience” (104). For, in this “structure of delay”—a defining element of photography for Benjamin—the latency that is peculiar to individual psychic experience is also realized as being intrinsic to historical experience.

Once we see this structure of delay in the photographic technique of *The Wars*, we recognize what was always latent in the image of “Robert Raymond Ross—Second Lieutenant, C.F.A. . . . posed in mind and body” in full-dress uniform. As Roland Barthes remarks of this pose before a lens, “I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing.’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (10). Something else appears in the military pose, however, since the image is prefabricated, or socially determined, by martial expectations of heroism. And so the subject of this type of photograph is given over to a loss of self, not only in the technical process of being “objectified, ‘thingified,’ imaged” (Cadava 8) by an instrument of mechanical reproduction, but also in the general social process of conforming to type:

Dead men are serious—that’s what this photograph is striving to say. Survival is precluded. Death is romantic—got from silent images. I lived—was young—and died. But not real death, of course, because I’m standing here alive with all these lights that shine so brightly in my eyes. (48)

Robert’s photographic pose not only signals his withdrawal as a soldier about to embark, or as an image withdrawing from himself, but as an image cut off from all but a photographic development.

Danger

If there is a threat of violence in the technological reproduction of the image—as Benjamin maintained in “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), the essay in which he first described the loss of the “aura” or an art work’s unique appearance in time and space (*Illuminations* 220-23)—there is also a more hopeful form of violence inherent in photography-as-history. “To articulate the past historically,’ Benjamin writes, ‘does not mean to recognize it “as it really was.” It means to seize a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.’ History therefore begins where memory is endangered, during the flash that marks its emergence and disappearance” (Cadava 63). In distinct opposition to the German war-novelist and fascist theorist Ernst Jünger, Benjamin transforms the notion of a “second’ consciousness”—or the cold indifference to pain which is supposedly the result of a photographic subject’s “ability to see oneself as an object” (Cadava 52)—into an idea of the photograph as a “blast” that “shatters the continuum of history’ and in so doing reveals the history hidden in any given work. It discloses the breaks, within history, from which history emerges” (60). The “flash” of the moment in which memory is in danger is a moment for Benjamin in which the movement of history can be arrested, in which history can be thought.

There are many such moments of danger in *The Wars* where a “flash” of memory interrupts the flow of events, making it possible for history to emerge from the break. “There is,” for example, “no good picture of this except the one you can make in your mind,” as the narrator notes in the first sentence of the opening chapter of Part Two. “The road is lost at either end in rain. Robert’s perception of it is limited by fog and smoke” (75). The abruptness of the statement dislocates us in time and space; we only gradually come to see what Robert comes to see with horror—that he has led his men onto a crumbling dike where they barely escape drowning. But the role of the reader, like the role of the narrator in this scene, is to “make” in the *camera obscura* of the mind a picture that will interrupt the action, if not penetrate the enveloping fog. The narrator is even confident enough, in the midst of the suspended moment, to survey the topography through which Robert’s supply convoy has travelled: “At the centre of the world is Ypres and all around the centre lie the flats of Flanders” (75). The “moment of danger” is now extended, but also arrested, in a series of six swift chapters, at the end of which Robert will extricate his convoy from the bottomless morass of Flemish mud.

A similar photographic technique structures the whole of Part Three, in which a crazed superior, Captain Leather, sends a mortar party under Robert's command to take a position in a deep shell crater where they nearly drown again. But they survive a chlorine gas attack because Robert recalls, in a flash of memory from his school days, how urine contains enough ammonia to neutralize chlorine gas, converting it to salt. This mental "flash" in a moment of danger becomes a formal feature of Part Three in which the action is clocked in a series of sub-headings that first interrupt events at "4 a.m." as "The mines went up" and "there was a sort of glottal stop—halfway to nowhere" (121). Soon, the "glottal stop" becomes an *f*-stop of a camera "flash," as at 4.25 a.m. (126), and then again at 5.30 a.m. (127); 6.10 a.m. (128); 7 a.m. (130); 7.30 a.m. (130); 8.15 a.m. (131); 8.50 a.m. (136); 9.30 a.m. (140); 10.30 a.m. (141); 12.15 p.m. (141); and 1 p.m. (141).

As Laurie Ricou said of this formal device, "the parallel between Robert Ross' stammering thought processes and the narrator's difficulty with his story makes spasmodic fear an unmistakable aspect of the narrator's character" (134). But the technique is less personal than historiographical in its motivation; in other words, the narrator's facsimile of a photographic style is what enables him to write "history" at all. Another narrator in *The Wars* has a more personal motive, however, for stopping the action in prose snapshots—the twelve-year-old diarist Juliet d'Orsey, who feels tortured by a scene she had witnessed between her sister Barbara and Robert with whom she is helplessly in love: "I was standing on the third step from the bottom and I think I must already have come to a stop because what happened next is sort of like a photograph in my mind and I see myself in the picture. Robert Ross came out of Captain Taffler's room and the door, as it opened, gave a kind of click like a shutter of a camera" (171-72). Recording in her diary a sense of self-division, the child splits herself into an object who loves without hope and a subject who feels her own belatedness. Later, she will suffer from, but also look back on, such self-division in a scene of adult sexuality: "This was a picture that didn't make sense. Two people *hurting* one another. That's what I thought. I knew in a cool, clear way at the back of my mind that this was 'making love'—but the shape of it confused me. The shape and the violence" (178). As things stand, the child writes, "I feel a dreadful loss. I know things now I didn't want to know." What she finally sees, however, as she "looks" at herself in the picture, is the very child she has ceased to be. The "historian" finds her *self* in the "blast" of a "photograph."

A Posthumous Shock

Although film has likely done more than still-photography to produce shock in its “techniques of rapid cutting, multiple camera angles, [and] instantaneous shifts in time and place,” Benjamin argues in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” “the ‘snapping’ of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were” (*Illuminations* 174-75). In Freudian terms, “[T]he danger of the event renews its demand and opens another path for itself, emerging, symptomatically, as an image of what has happened—as a return of what was to have departed—without our acquiescence or understanding” (Cadava 103).

The concluding pages of *The Wars* ask to be read in these terms. For the novel proper concludes with a photograph “of Robert and Juliet taken about a year before his death” (217). The man who risked life and honour to save a herd of horses from senseless slaughter in the Canadian Field Artillery has been condemned by a military court, his sentence commuted to convalescent treatment in Lady Juliet’s home because “there was virtually no hope that he would ever walk or see or be capable of judgement again” (216). In this last photograph, “He wears a close-fitting cap rather like a toque—pulled down over his ears. He has no eyebrows—his nose is disfigured and bent and his face is a mass of scar tissue. Juliet is looking up at him—speaking—and Robert is looking directly at the camera. He is holding Juliet’s hand. And he is smiling” (217). The photograph would be unremarkable were it not for the tender witness it bears to Lady Juliet’s love. Latterly, it reveals how Robert has been put in the same position as Rowena when, out of love, he made himself his wheelchair-ridden sister’s sole caregiver. Robert’s fate, we recognize in an instant of “posthumous shock,” is contained in the photograph of his sister. Here at last, we see how a “structure of delay” that informs the photograph has structured the narrative all along: Robert has always been “one” with Rowena.

In the “*Epilogue*,” another “posthumous shock” comes from one final photograph of Robert with his sister. For it speaks of the “return of the departed” (Cadava 11) whose image from before the war restores us to the beginning of the narrative. In this temporal hallucination, nothing (and everything) has happened. But it is the addition of Robert’s written word to his own silent image that speaks volumes: “*Robert and Rowena with Meg*: Rowena seated astride the pony—Robert holding her in place. On the back is written: Look! You can see our breath! And you can” (218). The sight of

their breath, and Robert's confirmation of that sight, comes to "animate" (Barthes 20) us in much the same way that Marian Turner and Lady Juliet have animated Robert's memory. That is to say, it is our fate, as readers who "remember" Robert, to inspire his image with our own breath. This is the true latency of history—that it remains to be lived over again.

In what may be his boldest stroke, Findley invents an essayist, Nicholas Fagan, to explain our sense of closeness, and also of distance, from this temporal hallucination that appears in the medium of photography: "This is what he wrote: '*the spaces between the perceiver and the thing perceived can . . . be closed with a shout of recognition. One form of a shout is a shot. Nothing so completely verifies our perception of a thing as our killing of it*'" (218). One sees at last why the whole of the novel has sought to dramatize this oscillation between distance and proximity. For the narrator "verifies" his perceptions of the war, first by "killing" off an old-style warrior, and then by closing the distance with a "shout of recognition" at Robert who is made the "hero" of a new age.

In the end, one can see why those photographs Findley imagined as "flashing" on "billboards" down a long avenue of time did not move; they were irrevocably fixed in their own time. But the "hero" who comes riding down the light rays is not confined to his own historical moment: he could never be "contained entirely in a caught circle, back only in his own time" (84), not if he could be torn from his own context to ride into our future. And so the hero comes to join us in our ever-changing present even as his past is held firmly in check by images of a history that would not finally become us.

NOTE

- 1 In her "'Records of Simple Truth and Precision': Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), Joan M. Schwartz argues similarly that "the defining moments in both the history of modern archives and the history of photography can be traced to the same two-year period in France, 1839-41," because "the nineteenth-century epistemological assumptions upon which both archival practices and photographic practices rested" (3, 5) were identical.

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