

“THE PERFECT VOICE”

Mauberley as Narrator in Timothy Findley’s “Famous Last Words”

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IN *Famous Last Words*,¹ Hugh Selwyn Mauberley spends his final days writing on the walls of the Grand Elysium Hotel his eyewitness account of the activities of famous people, including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Charles Lindbergh, Rudolf Hess, and Joachim von Ribbentrop. In an attempt to keep Mauberley from telling what he knows about the cabal and its members, Mauberley is tracked down and killed by Harry Reinhardt, the cabal’s enforcer. Because Mauberley saw too much and knew too much, Reinhardt drives an ice pick through Mauberley’s eye into his brain. Having silenced the source, Reinhardt then burns Mauberley’s notes, unaware that Mauberley has already turned the notes into a full narrative on the walls in rooms across the hall. As a result of Reinhardt’s oversight, when the American army arrives, Lieut. Quinn and Capt. Freyberg are able to read Mauberley’s writing on the wall, and the novel’s reader is able to read along with them.

Yet there are a number of problems with Mauberley’s narrative. Mauberley is supposedly writing as an eyewitness, and for many of the events, such as the episode in China with Wallis or the *Nahlin* cruise or the trip to Spain with Isabella Loverso, he could conceivably (in fictional terms) have been an eyewitness or even an eyewitness/participant. In a few scenes, such as the discussion between Wallis and Ernest Simpson concerning arrangements for their divorce, his presence is cumbersome and unlikely but again conceivable.

For a number of scenes, however, there is no pretence that Mauberley was present as an eyewitness, and no attempt is made to account for Mauberley’s knowledge. For example, we have the private meeting of King Edward VIII with his mother, Queen Mary, at Marlborough House; the conversation at Naully between Lindbergh and Edward Allenby; Hess’s flight to Britain and his treatment by Reinhardt; the attempt to kidnap the Duke and the Duchess while they are in Portugal; the conversations in Berlin between Walter Schellenberg and Ribben-

trop; the bedroom scenes between the Duke and the Duchess as well as those between the Duke and the mannikin of Queen Mary. In the narration of these scenes, the perspective shifts from the first person to the third person,² and we might think that they are actually narrated by the outer narrator rather than by Mauberley.

By the outer narrator is meant the narrator who narrates the entire novel, from the first page to the last. Imbedded within the outer narrator's narrative is the inner narrative, the one supposedly written on the walls by Mauberley. This inner narrative is essentially an account of the cabal and its members, starting with Wallis and Mauberley in China in 1924 and effectively ending in 1943 with the murder of Sir Harry Oakes and the failure of the Windsors to escape Nassau aboard a submarine.

The outer narrative covers events from March through May of 1945. This narrative is told to us by an unpersonalized omniscient narrator who relates the story of Mauberley's flight from Italy to the Grand Elysium Hotel in UnterBalkenberg, his act of writing on the walls, his dealings with Kachelmayer and *die weisse Ratte*, his murder by Reinhardt, the arrival of the U.S. Seventh Army, the discovery of Mauberley's body, the reading by Quinn and Freyberg of what Mauberley wrote on the walls, and finally the evacuation of the American troops from the hotel. In addition, the omniscient outer narrator provides both a type of prologue, presenting the suicide of Mauberley's father in 1910 (1-2), and epilogue, summarizing events which occurred after the close of the novel's action (394-95).

Theoretically, the inner narrator (Mauberley) narrates the entire inner narrative, while the outer narrator simply incorporates this inner narrative unchanged into his larger, encompassing narrative. In practice, the split between the inner and outer narratives is not so clear because, as mentioned above, parts of the presumed inner narrative seem to be told by the outer narrator. We might at first think that the outer narrator in relaying Mauberley's narrative to the reader uses his privilege of omniscience in order to fill in or supplement Mauberley's narrative, as he does in the epilogue at the end when, after the death of Mauberley, he tells the after-history of the characters in Mauberley's story. But this explanation breaks down when we realize that Lieut. Quinn reads the entire inner narrative. The Windsor tour of Germany in 1937 is recounted in the omniscient third person (146-47), yet we are told that for Quinn, "The German tour and all it implied had been quite an alarming read" (148). The intimate scene of the Duke and the Duchess in their stateroom aboard *Excalibur*, including the Duke's dream (242-52), is apparently read by Quinn who is so affected by what he has read that he then dreams part of the dream himself (254). Mauberley takes no part in the July 4 garden party in Nassau, and the account is written from an omniscient perspective, yet at one point in the outer narrative we are specifically told that "Mauberley was working in a corner etching the story of the Spitfire Bazaar"

(293). In addition, Quinn is able to reread Aunt Bessie's pronouncement about the conflagration: "*Fire, Quinn read again, is the one true terror and the only thing in hell I can't endure*" (289).

We might explain Mauberley's use of the third-person perspective and its accompanying omniscience by saying that Mauberley is writing fiction, just as Findley in telling about Mauberley is writing fiction, but this explanation, while essentially true, also causes problems and cannot be accepted without modification. We cannot, for example, dismiss all of Mauberley's narrative as fiction for the simple reason that much of it is historically factual. One does not invent a story which just happens to coincide, detail for detail, with historically verifiable facts. Also, within the logic of the novel's action, Mauberley is not tracked down and killed in order to keep him from writing fiction. The cabal, with its powerful backers, fears the revelation of the truth not the invention of lies.

Because Mauberley confesses that "all I have written here is true; except the lies" (59), we might at first think that the shifts in point of view mark shifts from fact to fiction and back again, but a comparison of the material told by Mauberley in the first person and the material supposedly told by him in the third person does not reveal essential differences in degrees of factuality. The third-person narratives are neither more nor less historically accurate than the first-person narratives: the Spitfire Bazaar (third person) never took place, nor did Isabella Loverso's trip through Spain (first person), but the *Nahlin* cruise (first person) did, as did the Windsor tour of Germany (third person). Obviously, we are not expected to place more credence in material presented through one type of narrative stance than in material presented through another, to view one as fact and the other as fiction.

It might seem that, after the various experiments in metafiction, inconsistencies in point of view no longer matter, that anything goes, but as Patricia Hough has pointed out, unlike aleatory writing, "Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them."³ For much of its impact, from the opening scenes depicting Mauberley fleeing from Estrade and her knife to the scene in the inner narrative in which Reinhardt forces Mauberley to lick Sir Harry Oakes's blood off Reinhardt's hands, *Famous Last Words* relies on the reader's acceptance of the conventions of traditional realistic fiction. Estrade, Mauberley, and Reinhardt must exist for the reader as real, albeit fictional, characters (through the conventional suspension of disbelief) for the reader to experience vicariously first Mauberley's panic and fear when he realizes that he is being hunted by Estrade (important in creating reader identification with Mauberley), and then later Mauberley's repulsion with himself as Reinhardt forces him to recognize that in being willing to use people like Reinhardt to achieve his goals Mauberley has become as bloodthirsty as his agent. Accepting fictional conventions, the reader accepts Mauberley, a fictional character, as an eyewitness to or even as a participant in a number of events, even though some of these events, such as the murder of

Oakes, are not invented or fictional. But having granted that fictional convention, the reader expects (another fictional convention) consistency and plausibility within the first convention.

Why then the violations of the conventions — the inconsistencies, the shifts in points of view? In recounting how the novel was written, Findley himself has provided a possible explanation. According to Findley, he had written endless drafts and gone through “five whole modes” before he hit upon the character of Mauberley. He immediately realized that he “had found the perfect voice to narrate the story.”⁴ But finding the perfect voice rather late in the creative process necessitated a great deal of rewriting and revision. For a number of scenes, including the memorable one at Marlborough House when the King and the Queen Mother discuss Wallis without ever mentioning her, it was obviously impossible to incorporate Mauberley as a plausible eyewitness or even as a plausible hearsay witness.

Some readers might feel that the novel as it now stands is a compromise, that Findley, refusing to accept that the story he wanted to tell could not be told by the narrator he wanted to use, nevertheless insisted on attempting to transform an omniscient third-person narrative into a first-person narrative. Yet, when Findley speaks of his “discovery” of Mauberley, it is clear that Findley believes that the use of Mauberley as narrator, rather than creating problems, made *Famous Last Words* jell, that Mauberley — the “perfect voice” — enabled him, in his own words, to bring the other characters “home.”⁵ Findley did not have to use Mauberley as the putative narrator of the entire inner narrative; he could have split the telling of the inner narrative between Mauberley and the omniscient outer narrator. But he chose not to, and an understanding of the implications behind that choice deepens our thematic understanding of the novel as a whole. Rather than succeeding in spite of the inconsistencies in point of view, *Famous Last Words* in good part succeeds because of them.

SUSAN LANSER HAS NOTED that it is not accidental that the term *point of view* refers both to the angle of observation and to the manner or attitude of viewing, for an author’s use of point of view reflects not only technical choices but ideological ones as well, since “technique is never wholly independent of ideology.”⁶ The importance of Mauberley as Findley’s main narrative voice can hardly be overstressed. In many ways, Mauberley is as important to Findley and to *Famous Last Words* as Marlow is to Conrad and to *Lord Jim*.⁷ Through Mauberley’s perspective and Mauberley’s voice, Findley is able to express his own vision and to say, both directly and indirectly, what Findley wants to say.

The first and perhaps the most immediate function that Mauberley performs for Findley is to personalize the perspective, and thus lessen the distance between the reader and the characters in the novel. The people that Findley writes about are not in themselves especially attractive people, at least not as Findley portrays them. Charles Lindbergh, for example, apparently condones the elimination of his friend Edward Allenby after Allenby rejects Lindbergh's offer of membership in the cabal. Wallis, having lost the throne of England when David in her absence abdicated, is determined to regain power and position at any cost, while the Duke of Windsor, a weak man stunned by the effects of his own abdication and dominated by his wife and mother, seeks escape in drink and fantasy. Lindbergh and the Windsors are fascists or at least willing to use fascism to gain what they want. Because, except for a few groups of neo-Nazis, fascism today — at least as an official, acknowledged programme — has neither social nor political acceptance, the North American reader is thus distanced from the novel's characters not only by time but also by ideology.

One of the main themes of the Quinn/Freyberg interludes involves the them-versus-us split. Freyberg, traumatized by what he found at Dachau, cannot believe that he has anything in common with the people who conceived, built, and ran the concentration camps. Freyberg's way of dealing with the situation involves turning all Germans, all Nazis, all fascists into "them" — a separate species, fundamentally different from us. The evil is then outside, not within, not even potentially within us.

Lieut. Quinn seems, at first, to be much more perceptive and intelligent than Freyberg. He knows that Mauberley, because of his pro-fascist articles, has been designated a traitor (and thus one of "them") by Freyberg and other officials. But Quinn is also aware of Mauberley's literary achievements, and he feels there must be some explanation for Mauberley's fall from grace. For Quinn, "it wasn't good enough to say 'he was one of them.' It didn't help Quinn understand how Mauberley, whose greatest gift had been in the value of the imagination, could have been so misguided as to join with people whose whole ambition was to render the race incapable of thinking" (47-48).

When Ezra Pound was imprisoned after World War II, many admirers of his poetry felt that the action showed the pettiness and the lack of cultural appreciation typical of Americans in general and of the American government in particular. Freyberg certainly would want himself grouped with these "petty" Americans and with those who objected in 1949 when the Library of Congress awarded the first Bollinger Prize for Poetry to Pound. From the beginning, Freyberg is convinced that Quinn will find some way to excuse Mauberley (and those like him). As Freyberg tells Quinn, even if Mauberley tells the truth in his narrative, "in the end, he will apologize. And in the end, because he has apologized, you and twelve million others will all fall down on your knees before these walls and you will forgive him'" (54).

In part, Freyberg is right. Quinn does believe that Mauberley was simply “misguided” (48), and he begins his reading of the writing on the wall biased in Mauberley’s favour, “absolutely certain he would exonerate Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. . . . It was a question of interpretation, and this was Quinn’s forte” (58). In Freyberg’s view, any forgiveness, any exoneration of those responsible would make a mockery of the agony endured by millions of inmates in concentration camps.

Yet Quinn is not looking for excuses as much as for explanations. He wants to *understand* Mauberley and the reasons for Mauberley’s actions. If Mauberley had been a crude, insensitive thug, his fascism would not have been so disturbing, but Mauberley and his circle were members of the social, political, and cultural élite of the western world. Far from seeing Mauberley as one of “them,” Quinn identifies with Mauberley and is honest enough to admit the identification. In addition to sharing Mauberley’s artistic interests, Quinn also shares some of Mauberley’s personal traits. Like Mauberley who wears a succession of white suits, Quinn is personally fastidious: “His hair was always combed; his breath was always peppermint fresh and the moons always showed on his fingernails. Even when he had dysentery, his underwear was always clean” (39).

LIKE ELIOT, POUND, YEATS, D. H. LAWRENCE, and other writers who were attracted, at least temporarily, to fascism or fascist ideas, Mauberley is what Findley has termed a “thinker.” In an interview with Barbara Gabriel, Findley commented that the inclusion of Mauberley significantly changed the emphasis of the novel:

Now, the issue of *Famous Last Words* was the whole question of how artists can ally themselves with the great horrors of their time. How could writers advocate what Hitler was about? . . . These were the questions I found I had to come to grips with though this was not the book I set out to write. What was Ezra doing there — or any of these people?²⁸

Mauberley and other artists like him are disturbing to us because they do not allow us to dismiss fascism as an aberration confined to a particular group or nationality clearly separate from us. Instead, they bring fascism within our circle, to “us.” While readers might not identify with British royalty or with a twice-divorced American woman from the fringes of Baltimore high society, a certain amount of identification is inevitable when a reader encounters a writer. Anyone reading a serious novel presumably finds value in literature. Thus, the artist turned fascist clearly affects us as readers even if, like Quinn, we are not artists ourselves. And, as indicated in the interview with Gabriel, Findley as a writer, in using Mauberley as one of his narrative voices, became involved in the problem of the fascist/artist.

To narrate through Mauberley, Findley had to see through Mauberley's eyes and had to try to imagine how someone who was not basically evil or stupid could become part of an evil movement.

Findley has commented that he found Mauberley especially appropriate because Mauberley is "Pound's alter ego, a failed classical poet."⁹ Although some critics, including Stephen Scobie, feel that Mauberley in his narrative "skirts very conveniently around the issues of how and why he became involved with Fascism in the first place,"¹⁰ the explanation is actually presented in the novel in terms of Mauberley's character — his passivity, his tendency to drift, his desire to be part of the "in" group — and, more important, in terms of Mauberley's classicism. It should be remembered that the Mauberley that Findley took over from Pound was not as yet a fascist (Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* was published in 1920). Instead, Findley took Pound's Mauberley (as Findley understood him), gave him parents, and projected him and his characteristics into the 1930's and 1940's, and in this projection Findley has Mauberley, like Pound, turning to fascism, but for somewhat different reasons. Mauberley's classicism is revealed in his desire for order and for a new leader. In his well-known essay entitled "Romanticism and Classicism," T. E. Hulme, the anti-Romantic English metaphysician and Imagist poet who influenced the young Ezra Pound, defines the classical viewpoint as entailing a belief that man is a "fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant" and that "it is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him." The romantic outlook, on the other hand, sees the individual as "an infinite reservoir of possibilities" which require the "destruction of oppressive order" to fulfil their potential and produce "Progress."¹¹

According to Hulme's analysis, in classicism "part of the fixed nature of man is the belief in the Deity."¹² For Mauberley, the classicist, it is necessary to believe in some type of Supreme Being, but for Mauberley, the Modernist, the man of his generation, belief in a supernatural God is impossible. Mauberley writes a series of articles for the London *Daily Mail* calling for a "new kind of leader — not the leaders we have" (93). As a result, he is recruited by Isabella Lovero into the cabal which is moving through and beyond fascism to a type of superfascism, with a leader beyond Mussolini or Hitler. (Ironically, the first leader the cabal picks is the weak ex-Edward VIII of England, but presumably he is chosen as a figure-head.) On the basis of the same *Daily Mail* articles, Mauberley is verbally attacked by a drunken yet perceptive Edward Allenby who tells Mauberley: "'You're some kind of pilgrim looking for a faith.'" Unfortunately, Mauberley has "'started looking for it under rocks'" (88).

Mauberley needs something to believe in, something to give his life purpose and meaning. Before leaping to his death, Mauberley's father had cried out, in the classical spirit (and in accord with the indictment of modern society expressed in Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*), against the "raucous and wilful repudiation

of civilization by industrialized America" (67). Belief in tradition and humanism alone was not sufficient to sustain him, and he died "the enemy of progress" (67). Mauberley's mother, on the other hand, went insane because she could not accept imperfection, could not accept what to a classicist is reality, that is, the limited and imperfect nature of man.

In different ways, both his mother and his father are broken by life. Seeking for something to believe in that will keep him from committing suicide or going insane, Mauberley drifts towards fascism. He drifts because, unlike a romantic who finds self-definition within, Mauberley is essentially weak and passive, wanting others to set the rules and to define him. A follower, Mauberley has an excessive admiration for strength, and strength for him is normally associated with sharply defined sexuality (which he lacks). Immediately after his encounter with Allenby in the café, Mauberley watches a group of Mussolini's Blackshirts celebrating the Italian victory in Ethiopia. With their "inordinate display of strong white teeth," the Blackshirts exude "an aura of masculinity" (90-91). Mesmerized, the homosexual (or asexual) Mauberley watches, and when a young Blackshirt passes his table Mauberley wants "desperately to follow him" (91). Although Mauberley does not physically follow the young Blackshirt, he goes with him spiritually, "And knelt before his strength. And his victory" (91).¹³ Mauberley does not become a fascist solely because he was a classicist, but his classicism, combined with his other character traits and with the temper (or temptations) of the time, makes fascism seem attractive to him.¹⁴

Findley reduces or blurs the separation between them and us not only by the conventional means of the empathetic narrator but also through the employment of a variety of metafictional effects. For instance, when we are reading what is supposed to be Mauberley's narrative and notice that the narration has shifted from the first person (with all of the restrictions associated through verisimilitude with it) to third person (and the omniscience conventionally given to this point of view in fiction), we wonder if we are reading Mauberley or the outer narrator. Since, regardless of sophisticated theories of narrative voices and personae, in practice an omniscient narrator is almost automatically associated in the reader's mind with the author (and is actually called the "authorial narrator" by some critics¹⁵), what we really wonder is whether we are reading Mauberley or Findley. Because of this uncertainty, we tend to associate Mauberley with Findley, and vice versa. Mauberley, in effect, becomes Findley's alter ego.¹⁶

THIS IDENTIFICATION (or confusion) of speakers parallels the method that Findley employs throughout the novel. What at first seems straightforward and clear-cut is on reflection frequently shown to be complicated and

ambiguous. For example, the inner narrative, scratched in the plaster of the walls of the Grand Elysium Hotel by Mauberley with a silver pencil, is obviously intended to remind us of the biblical writing on the wall in the Book of Daniel. According to the biblical account, Belshazzar and his guests are in the midst of a great feast, happily drinking wine and praising the gods of gold and silver, when suddenly, "In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote" (Dan. 5:5; quoted in *FLW*, 52). Because neither the king nor any of his counsellors can read the writing on the wall, let alone interpret it, the prophet Daniel is called in.

Findley repeats the allusion to Daniel 5 in the presentation of Lorenzo de Broca. In his plane *Icarus*, de Broca flies over the Windsors' garden party in Nassau, dropping pieces of paper bearing an anti-fascist slogan while writing in the sky the words which Daniel had read on the wall, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" (*FLW*, 287), and which Daniel had interpreted to mean "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it" (MENE), "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting" (TEKEL), and "Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians" (PERES OR UPHARSIN).

The biblical parallels are numerous and pointed, and at first we might think that we are intended to view Mauberley's writing on the wall and de Broca's writing in the sky as modern-day versions of the hand that wrote on Belshazzar's wall and thus as condemnations, approved by the implied author, of the fascists and fascist sympathizers who were never forced to accept responsibility for their role in the events of the 1930's and 1940's. In good part, this perspective is correct, but at the same time that Findley is condemning the fascists (rather easy to do in the 1980's), he is also presenting through his fiction reflections on the human process of interpreting evidence, forming judgements, and dispensing retribution. The biblical allusions serve to emphasize ironic contrasts as well as similarities.

In the Bible, the hand that writes on the wall is either the hand of God or a hand that is writing on God's behalf (perhaps the hand of a recording angel). In either case, it is a supernatural hand expressing an absolute and ultimate judgement. There is no possibility of the judgement being faulty or subjectively limited. The hand speaks for God, and what God knows is absolute truth. In addition to being omniscient and infallible, God is also omnipotent; thus, the retribution announced on the wall is inescapable: although Belshazzar generously rewards Daniel for his reading, Belshazzar is slain that night and his kingdom is divided. In *Famous Last Words*, Lorenzo de Broca also makes a judgement, and on the bright green papers that he dropped from his plane he pronounces sentence: "DEATH TO FASCISTS EVERYWHERE!" (285). Unfortunately, in making his protest against fascists in Allied camps, de Broca unintentionally is the cause of a fiery conflagration in which a number of innocent people, including children, are killed, while the two chief

fascists at the fête, the Duke and the Duchess of Windsor, escape unharmed. In short, fiery retribution comes from the sky, but coming from a human source it does not necessarily land on the guilty.

Similarly, neither Mauberley nor his account offers exact parallels to the biblical writing on the wall. While the hand in the Bible states, without giving reasons, that a judgement has been made, Mauberley, the “compulsive witness” (21), is more intent on presenting evidence which will allow others to make judgements than in passing judgement himself. In March 1945, with his world collapsing around him, Mauberley feels compelled to tell, as honestly as possible, what he has witnessed, even though he was not always the innocent bystander and much of his testimony is self-incriminatory. Unlike de Broca and the biblical hand, Mauberley does not stand apart, judging and condemning others while he himself is excluded.

If Mauberley’s writing on the wall is to reveal a judgement, the judgement must come from those who read and interpret the writing, not from Mauberley. It is in this role as a reader and interpreter that Lieut. Quinn, who is pointedly known only by his last name (39), is compared, frequently ironically, with his biblical counterpart, Daniel. As Daniel, famous for his interpretive powers, was brought in by Belshazzar to read the writing on the wall, so too Quinn, the demolition expert who believes that interpretation is his forte (58), is brought in by Freyberg to read Mauberley’s narrative. Unlike Belshazzar, however, Freyberg can read the writing on the wall himself, and Freyberg is not impressed with Quinn’s interpretive powers. Even before he reads the writing, Freyberg is certain he knows what it says, and he is equally certain that Quinn will misread the writing. Freyberg insists that Quinn read the writing because Freyberg believes that Quinn will learn something — something that Freyberg already knows — from what is on the wall.

Although initially we as readers tend to empathize with Quinn while rejecting the candy-bar chomping Freyberg, as the novel progresses, we gradually realize that Freyberg is neither as dense nor as insensitive as we first assumed. Freyberg’s perspective, while different from Quinn’s, is not necessarily wrong or invalid. Quinn emphasizes understanding, and he recognizes that Mauberley’s narrative is a type of confession indicating repentance; Freyberg, on the other hand, responds with passionate moral indignation, asserting that in light of the corpses piled at Dachau an apology is not sufficient. For Freyberg, atonement is necessary. But the problem for Freyberg (and for us) is: after Dachau, what atonement is possible?

Quinn at times is perhaps a bit too much like Mauberley for our comfort. Freyberg cannot understand why Quinn’s heart, if it goes out to anyone, “goes out to all these people” in Mauberley’s narrative, people who, in their selfish preoccupations, never considered thinking about others (154-55). Although Freyberg seems to have little or no aesthetic sense, Quinn frequently seems to be excessively concerned with the aesthetic, valuing it over the human. For Quinn, Mauberley’s scarf and the two halves of the broken Schubert record are what are worth salvaging when the

American army evacuates the Grand Elysium Hotel; for Freyberg, it is the collection of badges taken from the corpses at Dachau.

Quinn is not a modern-day Daniel, and we cannot blindly rely on him to tell us how to interpret Mauberley's writing on the wall or the events of the twentieth century or any other century. Daniel was a prophet, inspired by God; Quinn is simply a fallible human being like the rest of us. Without divine help, we all must read and interpret subjectively, as do Quinn and Freyberg. We can, perhaps must, believe in our own interpretations, but it is a matter of faith rather than of certainty. We cannot be certain because we can never, without supernatural intervention, have in real life an omniscient perspective or absolute knowledge.

We can, however, have this type of perspective and knowledge in fiction. Fictional narrative omniscience has long been described as a godlike point of view, not only because the omniscient narrator knows everything but also because according to fictional convention the narrator's knowledge is absolute, beyond question, incapable of being wrong — in short, totally authoritative. The omniscient narrator not only knows all the facts but also judges or evaluates these facts correctly. As Wayne Booth has pointed out, if we want to understand the story that follows, we frequently must "accept without question" the author's statement summarizing the moral nature of a character even though in real life we "could never trust even the most reliable of witnesses as completely as we trust the author."¹⁷ Nevertheless, unlike God, an omniscient narrator has limits to his or her omniscience. An omniscient narrator can speak authoritatively only because the narrator is seen as speaking for the author (as is evident in Booth's identification of the narrator with the author), and because the people and events the narrator is presenting have no existence outside the mind of the author. Being invented or fictional, the characters and events are whatever the author/creator wants them to be or says that they are.

In *Famous Last Words*, however, people such as Charles Lindbergh, Charles Bedaux, Rudolf Hess, Walter Schellenberg, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Sir Harry Oakes, and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor have existence outside the mind of Findley (as do many of the events recorded in the novel). For these people, it is possible for even a supposedly omniscient narrator to make mistakes, to tell lies. In the epilogue, for example, when it is clearly the outer narrator who is speaking and not Mauberley (he is dead), the narrator tells us: "Count Galeazo Ciano was shot by a firing squad in Berlin — 1944" (394). The historical Ciano was indeed shot by a firing squad in 1944, but the execution took place in Verona, Italy, and not in Berlin, Germany.¹⁸ Whether or not Findley deliberately included this mistake is not clear, but what is clear is that a mistake of this sort could not be made by a truly omniscient narrator. Nor could there be a mistake if the statement concerned a fictional person. We cannot, for example, question the statement, made on the same page, that Alan Paisley, a fictional being, died in 1954. Paisley has no existence outside the novel; Ciano does.¹⁹

ONE OF THE OBJECTIONS to the term *third-person point of view* involves the observation that in reality only a subject, only an “I,” can narrate. Thus, in what is called a third-person narrative, we actually have an “I” narrating, but the “I” is not a character within the narrative and consequently does not ordinarily refer to itself by using first-person pronouns.²⁰ When reading a first-person narrative, we normally are acutely aware of the possibility of subjectivity, bias, and distortion. In the third-person point of view, the “I” is hidden, and hence we tend to accept this perspective as objective and factual. To remind us of the subjectivity of his own reading of historical figures, Findley not only uses the omniscient point of view, which is totally inappropriate when presenting historical people, but he uses the omniscience blatantly, calling our attention to it by presenting notably intimate scenes and clearly private thoughts. He then further emphasizes the artificiality, the essentially fictional nature, of this point of view by giving this omniscience to Mauberley who could not possibly have omniscient or absolute knowledge of historical personages — any more than Findley could.

Although, as Hayden White, among others, has noted, facts do not tell their own story and histories (or historical narratives) are actually “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences,”²¹ most historians employ a very authoritarian (almost omniscient) narrative voice. For example, the following excerpt, chosen almost at random, exemplifies the type of narrative voice frequently employed in historical accounts. The author, a German, is describing Joachim von Ribbentrop:

It was his great desire, which he pursued beyond the limits of the ridiculous, to appear himself as “a man with a strong face.” Hence the forced toughness which he assumed; the artificial, screwed-up pose of the statesman filled with cares for the future; the laboriously furrowed brow; in short all the Caesar-like grimacing which, in all his highfalutin obtuseness, so often verged towards *buffo* comic opera. . . . The vanity, the provocative self-assertion and continual self-dramatisation, were merely the reverse side of his very ordinary personality.²²

Although this view coincides with the views expressed by virtually all of Ribbentrop’s peers in the German hierarchy, it is nevertheless a reading, an interpretation of Ribbentrop, and one that we assume Ribbentrop himself would not have seen as valid. Yet the reading is presented authoritatively. The historian tends to speak with as much assurance as an omniscient narrator.

Findley presents Ribbentrop as a much more intelligent character, one to be taken much more seriously than the person suggested in the excerpt above, because for his story — as opposed to the historian’s story — Findley needed a serious character. Avrom Fleishman has noted that the peculiar energy of the historical

novel resides in its retelling of “history in order to make a truer story than has been written by historians.”²³ Without quibbling over whether *Famous Last Words* should be classified as an historical novel or simply a “novel of the recent past,”²⁴ we might agree that Findley was obviously motivated by the belief that he had something to say about certain famous people and their involvement with fascism, something which could be better said through the medium of fiction than through a straight historical account. Whereas the historian is expected to stay within the known facts, Findley wanted the freedom to deviate from facts; he wanted to be able to follow the advice he quotes from Ezra Pound at the beginning of Chapter Five: “End fact. Try fiction” (218).

Findley clearly believes that he has given fair and honest portraits of Lindbergh and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, even though he involved them in a number of invented scenes, in events which never existed anywhere outside Findley’s imagination. Indeed, Findley has asserted that in his fictional projections he never had his historical characters “anywhere they couldn’t be.”²⁵ Nevertheless, Findley is quite aware that he is writing fiction, not only in the conscious creation of invented scenes and the conscious distortion of known fact, but also in his understanding and interpretation of the characters. Speaking of his presentation of Wallis, for example, he has said: “. . . the more I wrote her the more she became mine. Something about her seemed to be inside me, to come from inside. There’s no question, all of this comes from inside you.”²⁶ The Wallis in *Famous Last Words* is Findley’s Wallis, just as the Wallis in the numerous books written about her is actually the production of the respective authors. Findley touched on this point later in the same interview when he rhetorically asked, “How do we know that Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* isn’t a work of fiction?”²⁷ The real question should be, “How are we to know how much of Boswell’s *Life* is fiction?”

If Findley had written the inner narrative solely in the omniscient perspective, he would have, of necessity, been seen to be acting in a godlike manner, passing a type of final judgement on the historical characters, much as the hand in Daniel passed final judgement on Belshazzar. As it is, Findley is able to use the omniscient perspective to present a number of scenes which a realistic first-person narrator would not be able to present. At the same time, because this inner narrative is supposedly told by Mauberley, the conventions surrounding first-person narrative are violated, thus highlighting the artificiality of the omniscience.

In addition, Findley makes no attempt to trick the reader into believing, even momentarily, that the inner narrator might, like the obscure Adela Rogers St. John (268), turn out to be real or that Mauberley’s narrative might be the authentic account of an actual eyewitness. As a character borrowed or taken over from another author, Mauberley emphasizes the fictionality of the novel in a way that it would be hard to duplicate. With Mauberley’s fictionality never in doubt, Findley, by intermixing Mauberley’s voice with the authorial narrative voice, can

within the novel itself emphasize the fictionality of the authorial voice and its supposed objectivity and omniscience. Because Findley is dealing, in good part, with historical figures, this emphasis on the fictional nature of the authoritative omniscient perspective is essential. Like historians, Findley believes that his presentation of the past is essentially true, but unlike historians, he has felt free to interweave fictions with facts, and unlike historians, he has acknowledged — within the text — the fictionalization that is inherent in interpretations. Accepting the inevitability of a degree of subjectivity and thus of fictionality in our perceptions and our evaluations of others, Findley uses fiction to show that the bigger fiction is the denial of this subjectivity: the pretence that we can know and judge others with godlike objectivity and certainty.

NOTES

- ¹ Timothy Findley, *Famous Last Words* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Co., 1981). All page numbers given in parentheses refer to this edition. Pagination unchanged in Penguin paperback edition.
- ² In light of the numerous distinctions and terms that have evolved from contemporary studies of point of view, it perhaps seems both inaccurate and naïve to use the term third person to describe a narrative stance, but in doing so I follow the lead of Susan Lanser in *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 157 ff.; and, for many of the same reasons: the terms first person and third person are convenient and still have meaning for the majority of us, while more precise terms, such as Gérard Genette's homodiegesis and heterodiegesis, do not enjoy ready recognition and frequently, because of their precision, tend to stress certain aspects while excluding others. Perhaps the term that comes closest to the vague inclusiveness of third person is Gerald Prince's unrestricted (or unsituated) point of view (*Narratology* [Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982], p. 51), but even here there are problems involving possible implications suggested by the words unrestricted and unsituated.
- ³ *Metafiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 18.
- ⁴ Timothy Findley, "Alice Drops Her Cigarette on the Floor . . .," *Canadian Literature*, 91 (Winter 1981), 16.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *The Narrative Act*, pp. 16-18 and *passim*.
- ⁷ There are a number of parallels between *Famous Last Words* and *Lord Jim*, including the use of imbedded narratives, the portrayal of characters who feel compelled to tell their stories, the focus on the fictional audience's reaction to the stories, and the concentration on the them/us theme. In addition, like Lord Jim, Mauberley wears white suits and probably for similar reasons — to set himself off from others, to show that he is not besmirched by the dirt that sullies the bodies and souls of the average person.
- ⁸ Barbara Gabriel, "Masks and Icons: An Interview with Timothy Findley," *Canadian Forum*, 65 (February 1986), 35.
- ⁹ Quoted by Beverley Slopen in "Findley and the Wordsmiths," *Quill & Quire*, 47 (November 1981), 17.

- ¹⁰ Stephen Scobie, "Eye-Deep in Hell: Ezra Pound, Timothy Findley, and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 30 (1984/85), 225.
- ¹¹ T. E. Hulme, in *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read (1924; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 116.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ¹³ As John F. Hulcoop has pointed out ("The Will To Be," *Canadian Literature*, 94 [1982], 119-20), this issue can be approached in terms of Susan Sontag's analysis of "fascist aesthetics." According to Sontag, unlike communist art which emphasizes utopian morality, "Fascist art displays a utopian aesthetics — that of physical perfection." See "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 6, 1975, p. 26.
- ¹⁴ The connection between conservative politics, traditional religion, and the classical perspective has been made most succinctly by T. S. Eliot, one of the high priests of Modernism, who in his Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1928) described his own viewpoint as "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (p. ix).
- ¹⁵ See F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (1979; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁶ See Scobie, pp. 216-26, for a helpful commentary on doubling and the use of mirror images in the novel.
- ¹⁷ *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 3-4.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini: A Study in Power* (New York: Hawthorn, 1964), pp. 615-17.
- ¹⁹ In the same passage, Findley's omniscient outer narrator asserts that "Charles E. Bedaux was murdered in his cell at Key Biscayne in Florida in February of 1944" (*FLW*, 394). That might be true — the circumstances surrounding Bedaux's death are somewhat peculiar — but the official report states that Bedaux died of a self-inflicted overdose of sleeping pills. See Frances Donaldson, *Edward VIII* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), pp. 329-30.
- ²⁰ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (1972; Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 244. Similarly, F. K. Stanzel distinguishes between first-person narrators who belong "totally to the fictional realm of the characters of the novel," and authorial narrators who exist "on a different level of being from that of the characters." See *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 4-5.
- ²¹ "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), p. 82.
- ²² Joachim C. Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich*, trans. Michael Bullock (1963; London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), p. 178.
- ²³ *The English Historical Novel* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1971), p. 10.
- ²⁴ Kathleen Tillotson uses this term for novels set twenty to sixty years in the past. See *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1954; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 92.
- ²⁵ Bruce Meyer and Brian O'Riordan, "The Marvel of Reality: An Interview with Timothy Findley," *Waves*, 10.4 (1982), 7.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.