

"LOOK! LISTEN! MARK MY WORDS!"

Paying Attention to Timothy Findley's Fictions

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*"It's all an attempt not to say what you don't want to say.
You've achieved art when you cannot be misconstrued."*

(TIMOTHY FINDLEY, in *Conversation with Graeme Gibson*)

IN AN AGE OF STRUCTURALIST and deconstructive criticism it may be salutary for the critic to begin by reminding himself of the dangers of misconstruction — despite that cunning cartographer Harold Bloom (author of *A Map of Misreading*) who insists that “[t]here are no interpretations but only misinterpretations.” Susan Sontag, in a famous essay, inveighs “against interpretation,” wittily dismissing it as “the revenge of the intellect upon art.” She calls upon commentators to recover their senses: “to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.” The function of criticism, says Sontag, should be “to show *how* [art] *is what it is*, even that *it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.” Having defined “the aims of interpretation” and demonstrated its “validity,” E. D. Hirsch reasons that “[u]nderstanding (and therefore interpretation, in the strict sense of the word) is both logically and psychologically prior to criticism.” Interpretation is “the construction of textual meaning as such; it explicates . . . those meanings and only those meanings which the text explicitly or implicitly represents.”²

Conceding that “nothing in the nature of the text itself . . . requires the reader to set up the author’s meaning as his normative ideal,” and that the reader of any text may easily “construe meanings . . . different from the author’s,” Hirsch nevertheless believes — and he professes his “simple belief” in the sometimes overzealous accents of an academic Savonarola — that “a text means what its author means” and that the “interpreter’s job is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning” — namely, the “verbal meaning” which the author “has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs.” *Verbal meaning* Hirsch defines as “the content of the author’s intention . . . the author’s verbal intention,” a somewhat slippery definition compelling him to reticulate a casuistical net in order to keep what he’s caught in his critical hold. To fulfill his proper function, the interpreter must be able to reconstruct “the author’s subjective stance” (meaning “his disposition to engage in particular kinds of intentional acts”), must be able

to describe the horizon which defines the author's intention as a whole (meaning the boundary which separates "meanings of which he was explicitly conscious" as he wrote from meanings of which he was only implicitly conscious. Hirsch rejects as a contradiction in terms meanings of which an author was unconscious).³

That Hirsch should look with disfavour on a large number of current critics and critical schools is not surprising. His commendation of Frye is cautious; his condemnation of Barthes is peremptory. Barthes' expansive outlook on writer, text and reader is antithetical to Hirsch's strait and narrow view of the reader as reconstructor of the author's verbal intentions. The "goal of literary work," says Barthes in *S/Z*, "is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. . . . This new operation is *interpretation* (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it." The "text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds," and "the more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it. . . . If we want to remain attentive to the plural of a text . . . we must renounce structuring this text in large masses . . . no *construction* of the text: everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure."⁴

Bloom, Sontag, Hirsch and Barthes can be taken to represent the cardinal points on the critical compass I shall carry with me on my expedition into the relatively unexplored territory of Timothy Findley's fictions. Findley himself would obviously acknowledge the validity of Hirsch's viewpoint, not only because he believes that art, in order to be art, must be invulnerable to misconstruction,⁵ but also because he admits that his "biggest problem" as a writer is the fear of not having made himself clear: "I'll write the same thing into a novel several times so that by the time I've got it said, I've said it eight different ways . . . I don't trust enough — either myself or the reader."⁶ One result of Findley's anxiety is that the critic coming fresh to his work will, almost inevitably, respond like Tzvetan Todorov who begins his essay on Artaud by wondering "if it is not superfluous to interpose an exegesis between [Artaud's] text and his readers," since "Artaud said what he 'meant' so well and so abundantly." If we agree with Todorov that a "docile commentary, whose limit is paraphrase, is scarcely justified with regard to a text [or texts] whose initial comprehension does [do] not raise excessive difficulties,"⁷ then we must align ourselves *with* Susan Sontag and *against* interpretation. On the other hand, if, like Barthes, we want to remain "attentive to the plural of a text" — and *attention* is a key to, a crucial term in any attempt to understand (or interpret) Findley's work — we are bound to offer readings which were not necessarily a part of the author's conscious verbal intentions (explicit or implicit) as he wrote, and which (as Bloom explains) are likely to be misreadings or misinterpretations of the author's *intentions*, though not of the *text* as it stands (or is plurally constituted).

The plurality of Findley's texts, as in all texts, derives not only from the galaxy of verbal signifiers which "signifies ceaselessly and several times," and so creates the complexities of *mythos*, *ethos*, and *dianoia* (to borrow from Aristotle those terms Frye has proved so useful); the plurality derives equally from those aspects of the signifiers which (Sontag would say) appeal less to the intellect than to the senses: namely, *melos* (the element of sound analogous to the music in opera), *opsis* (the element of spectacle analogous to sets, costumes, lighting and the moulding of movement on stage in opera), and *lexis* (the element of texture, diction, or literary style which is analogous to the *tessitura* of a particular role in opera, or to the singing style — say *bel canto* as distinct from *verismo* or music-drama). The importance of sound, spectacle, and style to a full appreciation of Findley's fictions, whether they be scripts intended to be *listened to* on the radio, scripts intended to be *seen* on television, the movie-screen, or the theatre-stage, or whether they be the texts of short-stories and novels, cannot be overemphasized. His work compels the critic to recover his senses (*see* more, *hear* more) by making direct appeals to the viewer-listener-reader through sight, sound and style: these are what force us to pay attention — to look and listen and mark his words. And the need to pay attention, together with the learning how and why we need to pay attention, is an important theme in all Findley's fictions.⁸

THEN THE CURTAIN RISES on the garden of the old Insane Asylum at Britton, Ontario — the setting of Findley's first stage-play, *Can You See Me Yet?* — the audience is forced to look and listen:

The garden is empty. The sound of a radio rises in the wings; someone is singing "Where or When," by Rodgers and Hart. Thwack! A large wooden croquet ball rolls across the stage. A dog barks off stage.

The first character to enter is Doberman, a patient who thinks he's a dog and, like man's best friend, is dumb (until the last minute of the play when he utters a single word twice and stops the central character from killing herself). The second entrance is Enid's. Hearing the dog barking off stage she says, "Yap-yap-yap. Morning, noon and night. *Listen* to 'im. YAP-YAP-YAP-YAP! Wouldn't you think he'd lose his voice?" (italics mine). Having commanded Doberman (and, by implication, the audience since it, like the dog, cannot speak) to listen, she says, "You shouldn't stare at the sun. . . . That's how people go blind. *Mark my words*: blind as a bat" (italics mine). Edward and Clare enter and sit down to play cards. Instantly, Enid interrupts: "Stop! I want attention!" The men ignore her. In the distance, "*the sound of a fire engine is heard approaching.*" Enid shouts, "THE SKY IS FALLING!" Edward tells Clare to "Pay no attention," but Enid persists: "Listen to me. Listen — there's something terrible hap-

pening." Other patients join the group; a scene breaks out and their nurse, Alma, enters, trying to calm things down by promising a surprise. "*Watch out!*" Franklin exclaims. "Miss Alma is going to surprise us" (*italics mine*). At which point Enid resumes her bid for attention, screaming "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" Alma strikes her. Moments later, Annie enters and announces that something has happened, down by the gate: a dog has been killed. Enid says, "I told you! I warned you! But — oh, no, no. No one listened."

Long before the significantly named central character enters at the beginning of Scene Two, Findley has already made his point. He has made us look at an empty stage, listen to various sound effects, and to Enid's imitating a yapping dog and then shouting. We have heard the repeated imperatives; seen a number of characters behaving oddly and, presumably, tried to figure them out, just as we have tried to follow the non-sequential conversation of the madhouse inmates. Finally, we have been given the explicit warning, "I told you! . . . But . . . No one listened." The fact that Findley withholds Cassandra's name for five or more minutes after she first appears makes its ultimate revelation even more pointed. If we have been listening to what Enid tells us, marking her words, watching out, taking her warning seriously, then we shall certainly not need to have the significance of Cassandra's name spelled out for us.⁹

Edward, who plays Cassandra's father in the psychodrama she acts out with the other inmates, and with Alma, says to his daughter, "You haven't changed, Cassandra. Still a question. Still a riddle." The question she embodies is the same as the play's title, a question she asks three times in the course of the drama's fifteen scenes. It is a question Findley poses in all his fictions, from "About Effie" to *The Wars*. It must, therefore, be crucial. So is the riddle. Like the play, which unfolds on two levels (Cassandra's recognition and acceptance of and by her fellow inmates; the psychodrama in which she re-enacts her family relationships from childhood on), the riddle is twofold: Who is the "me" of the play's title-question? or, from the subjective view-point compelled by the psychodrama, Who am I? And, *Is* anyone there to see me? or, from the personal point of view, *Who* is there to see me? Both question and riddle clearly relate to a central concern in Findley's work: Does anyone *care enough* to pay me any attention? And if so, *Who* cares enough? And, Do they care enough to see me and accept *me as I am*?

Ontological insecurity¹⁰ — together with the sometimes desperate search for a loveable and therefore acceptable identity — is a constant feature in the variable worlds of Findley fictions. In his first short-story, "About Effie," the insecurity of the young narrator, Neil Cable, is displaced by his acute anxiety about his ability to make the reader identify Effie if and when he meets her:

I don't know how to begin about Effie, but I've got to because I think you ought to know about her. Maybe you'll meet her one day, and then you'll be glad I told you all this. If I didn't, then maybe you wouldn't know what to do.

The “main thing,” Neil continues, “is to watch out for her.” If the reader meets an Effie (and the name is uncommon), “take a good look because it might be her.” She lacks easily identifiable physical characteristics, “but the way you’ll know her is this: she’ll look at you as if she thought you were someone she was waiting for, and it will probably scare you.” (*Waiting*, which creates suspense and heightens anxiety, is another recurrent feature of Findley’s fictional world.) The best way to “introduce” Effie so as we shall not forget her is obviously to tell her story; but even when he’s finished telling it, Neil is still uncertain about his achievement. “So you can see what I mean. It still worries me. And that’s why I want you to be sure — to be *sure* — to recognize her when you see her.”

Similarly, in his second-written story, “Harper’s Bazaar,”¹¹ the insecurity is again displaced from the main character, eight-year-old Harper Dewey, to his beautiful, alcoholic mother whom he comes to identify with her jewels, which she sells for liquor, and whom he tries to pin into place forever by selling liquor-laced lemonade in order to make enough money to replace his mother’s jewellery. He has been told in a letter from his father (killed in World War II) that “his ‘Duty’ [is] to obey his mother and always ‘to love her more dearly than all the earth, dearer still than your own dear life.’” But she dies anyway, even though Harper runs away from home and spends the night in a tree “to make my mother take attention.” Says Bertha Millroy, the Dewey’s maid, “I guess we just didn’t pray enough. . . . We went and lost her, Harper. . . . We went and lost her to the Lord.” Gradually overwhelmed by “the deep quiet of loneliness,” “the loneliness of an adult, the loneliness defined by remembrance,” Harper is confronted by

Nothing.

That was all he could grasp. Nothing. Everything was over — everyone went away — and finally you went away yourself.

“Nothing, as experience,” according to R. D. Laing, “arises as an absence of someone or something. No friends, no relationships, no pleasure, no meaning in life. . . . The list is, in principle, endless. Take anything and imagine its absence.”¹² Laing distinguishes very carefully between “the absence of relationships, and the experience of every relationship as an absence”: the difference is that “between loneliness and a perpetual solitude, between provisional hope or hopelessness and a permanent state of despair.” He goes on to point out that, in a world without meanings, values, sources of sustenance or help, “man, as creator, must invent, conjure up meanings and values, sustenance and succour out of nothing.” But the fate of the creator, says Laing, “after being ignored, neglected, despised, is . . . to be discovered by the non-creative.”

There are sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable.

In *The Last of the Crazy People*, as the title suggests, Findley moves closer than in the two preceding stories to the characters and setting of *Can You See Me Yet?* What “pleases me most about my work as a novelist,” Findley has stated in the Gibson interview, “is my own awareness of having that special twisted view which is a dependence on the insane people to do sane things. The ultimate sanity comes from the insane, I believe. Now — be careful! What I mean is — we call the *sane* ‘insane.’ In fiction you have to heighten this, treat it symbolically.” In *Crazy People*, Findley moves closer to his own confrontation with the kind of nothingness that Harper Dewey glimpses, that R. D. Laing sees as a symptom of ontological insecurity, and that Hooker Winslow, eleven-year-old protagonist of Findley’s first novel, faces in the novel’s Prologue and obliterates in its Epilogue.

The structure of this first novel is clearly significant: from the Prologue to the Epilogue, Hooker is waiting, alone — “a perpetual solitude.” The intervening chapters form a single, extended flashback, a “loneliness defined by remembrance.” The dawn described in the Prologue does what Findley says fiction must do; it heightens, by symbolizing, “the dawn of a hope so horrible . . . that it is unendurable.” The light (and maybe what “we” call sanity) begins to break in Hooker’s mind when he hears his aunt talking to his father about his brother, Gilbert: “They’re going to hold a shotgun over your son, and you just sit there!” This prompts Hooker to steal the pistol that belonged to John Harris (killed in World War I): “When Gilbert needed a gun, it would be there . . . for him to use when he got in trouble. Then Gilbert would know that he had thought of him kindly.” Gilbert, however, commits suicide (a “sudden, apparently inexplicable” suicide), and Hooker, attending the inquest, hears the verdict: “Death by his own hand” — presumably “while of unsound mind.” His father is mortally shamed by Gilbert’s suicide: “One of us has killed himself. . . . It’s like having a bloody gun at your head all the time.” By which point in the novel, Hooker has already seen the light (his mother is a psychopathic recluse; his father is figuratively impotent; his aunt lives in the past; his brother is mentally handicapped; and Hooker suspects that he himself is homosexual): “I think that we are crazy people,” said Hooker. “Like those crazies in the asylum. We have a crazy mother, don’t we? . . . It’s like a whole list of crazy people, and we’re the last of them.” His brother’s suicide is all the confirmation he needs. He holes up in the loft of the stable (which is where we leave him waiting in the Prologue): “Somehow, in the *stable*, they would have to come to *him*” (italics mine). His family will have to search for Hooker. When they do, in the Epilogue, he guns them down and is committed to an insane asylum. Iris, the Winslow’s maid and Hooker’s closest companion, is told it’s best to think of him dead — another of those “sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible . . . it is unendurable.” As Findley explained to Gibson, with reference to a story he heard of a child who killed one of his parents, his sister and someone

else staying in the house: "I was thunderstruck by what I considered the beauty . . . of his statement when someone . . . said to him: Can you tell me why you did it? He said, Because I loved them so. And for me, that's all he needed to say."

Any attempt to reconstruct Findley's "subjective stance" in relation to a number of given texts returns the attentive reader to his preoccupation with loneliness. As a child, he confesses to Cameron,

I had no interest in other children, maybe because I was often sick and had no tie with what other kids were doing. . . . I spent a lot of time with the maid, or just plain by myself, so it got that I sort of feared other kids. . . . Nothing but surface communication. I was sent to boarding school during the worst part of the war . . . my brother got sick . . . I was left there all by myself and my mother could hardly ever come to see me. Dad was at war and I just felt — abandoned.

But the loneliness was not confined to his childhood. Asked by Gibson if he enjoys writing, Findley replied that he loves it but hates "all the other stuff that goes with it," meaning loneliness. Though he alludes to Mann's *Death in Venice* because it shows that loneliness has its positive side, Findley concludes that "loneliness perverts":

I wouldn't attempt to say anything more than loneliness perverts, and this is very disturbing, very upsetting and you have to go through that to be a writer . . . the way you live very often cuts you off from people that you shouldn't be cut off from. . . . You're intellectually lonely: no one — hardly anyone "understands" you, because your whole life — maybe I should say your whole existence is an intensified searching — not for your own identity — but for your *work's* identity.¹³

LIKE HARPER DEWEY and Hooker Winslow, James Reid Taylor, principal character in *The Paper People*, a film-script written for television in 1967, has an unhappy childhood, was "a lonely boy" born about "eight friends behind everyone else."¹⁴ Taylor, a contemporary artist who expresses "with increasing violence . . . his distaste for contemporary life," is the subject of a TV documentary being researched and written by Janet Webb, a fictional TV producer. Janet's "filmic inquiry" — the containing subject of *The Paper People* — is a quest for the identity of Jamie Taylor as revealed in his work: his "work's identity." Jamie's current mode is to make life-size and lifelike models of his friends out of *papier-maché*, and then to burn them ritualistically, reducing both his art and his paper people "to ashes — the ultimate symbol of emptiness." Janet, in the course of compiling her documentary, uncovers important aspects of Taylor's life he would prefer to keep secret but which she insists on including. He reacts by calling her a killer: "I knew you were a killer the moment I laid eyes on those cold, cold hips of yours." Like Hooker, and "[l]ike to the Egyptian thief at point of death," both Jamie and Janet "kill" what they love. The search

for and assertion of identity — even the work's identity — results in its extermination: self-consciousness paralyses the self. The quester is left feeling unattended to in innominate loneliness; or, if the critic is quester, he is left to face his own failure and the fact that, as Wordsworth warns, "We murder to dissect."

Not coincidentally, one of the major sequences (entitled "BANG-BANG") in *The Paper People* includes a discussion of the sniper in the tower on the University of Texas campus who shot fifteen and wounded thirty other people. Janet asks why anyone must be killed, "Why kill at all?" "To make a statement," answers one of Jamie's friends, "... what other *new* way is there to express something?"

TONYA: You're setting up killers as artists.

MARCO: Or artists as killers . . .

WILFRID: . . . Suicide and assassination are the new art forms. . . .

MARCO: . . . All you have to do is look at *In Cold Blood*.

HAROLD: (DREAMILY) Yes, — and those nurses in Chicago, — and Austin, — and Dallas! They're all sort of pointless, unless the point is to say something.

JAMIE: With style.

When Janet objects, reminding them that human lives are at issue here, Marco, who has seen one of Janet's documentaries in which she exposes a distinguished neuro-surgeon as an alcoholic, says, "I've seen you assassinate in your quiet lady-like way!" Suicide, homicide and/or assassination, real or figurative, are not uncommon events in Findley's fictional world over which hangs the "allure of violence" which is also seen to hang in the air over Cheeverland, his satirical model of the United States.¹⁵ After he has seen Lee Harvey Oswald shot, on television, Hooker asks Gilbert what "assassinate" means. "Usually it's killing for a bigger reason than plain ordinary murder," Gilbert explains. "Like Kennedy and Abe Lincoln and the Archduke Ferdinand. . . . [T]hey decided . . . if they killed the Archduke, that would make something happen. Cause attention and division." James Reid Taylor burns his paper people in public; the "fires are what draw public attention to him and, thus, Janet's interest in putting his world on film."

Of the many images people use to describe "ways in which identity is threatened" — being buried, drowned, dragged down into quicksand — that which "recurs repeatedly" (according to Laing) is fire:

Fire may be the uncertain flickering of the individual's own inner aliveness. It may be a destructive alien power which will devastate him. Some psychotics say in the acute phase that they are on fire, that their bodies are being burned up. A patient describes himself as cold and dry. Yet he dreads any warmth or wet. He will be engulfed by the fire or the water, and either way be destroyed.

This last sentence is immediately relevant to Robert Ross in *The Wars*, who first

fears death by drowning and finally dies as a result of injuries sustained in fire; but Laing's observation illuminates more generally the recurrence of fire as event, image and symbol in Findley's fictions.

Gilbert Winslow slams his Jaguar into a tree and is instantly immolated: "Gilbert, on fire, lay back like Peter crucified, hooked by his feet to the cross of the motor car, his arms spread out in a hopeless gesture." The first sequence in *The Paper People* (described entirely in terms of visuals without any dialogue) is a junkyard in which James Reid Taylor's *papier-maché* doll of Tonya is being burned; fire is what draws the public's attention to his work; with fire he reduces both art and life to ashes, "the ultimate symbol of emptiness" — of nothingness. For Ruth Damosch, in *The Butterfly Plague*, 1938 "had been a year of fires. Real fires, imaginary fires, symbolic fires. All burning — all eating — most of them conjuring death." The first fire is a small fire on Topanga Beach, where she lives. By the time she finds it, it is only embers: "There was nothing sinister in the fire at all." But she removes from the ashes "a small piece of blue material" which turns out to be a *memento mori*, the remains of a bathing suit belonging to a girl whose naked body is later washed ashore: the first of many deaths, violent and pacific, in Findley's second novel. The second fire provides the climax and conclusion to the novel's first book: the fire in Alvarez Canyon, due north of Santa Monica, a tourist beauty-spot "known around the globe," and proclaimed "'Paradise'" by the visiting public. Approximately forty acres in area, Alvarez Canyon is a cunning mixture of natural and artificial: "In order to preserve the atmosphere of Paradise in all weathers, some portions of Alvarez were quite unreal. The plants in these places were made of specially treated fabrics and rubber. Thus when elsewhere the acacia leaves were falling they did not fall down in Alvarez." But Paradise is lost at the end of Book One, totally destroyed by fire: "The sanctuary was to become a charnel house." Standing outside the gates of Paradise — their poses a "[s]tillness in the holocaust" — Ruth, her mother, father, brother, and several other characters, turn back to watch the terror, panic and suffering of all the animals trapped inside the sanctuary, "fleeing mindlessly in concerted directions, not knowing what death was, but smelling death — not knowing what fire was, but being burned. Some turned back into the furnace. Some others crept into the flaming trees. Some attempted impossible flight into the sky":

Naomi said, "They will all die."

And Ruth said, "Pay attention." . . .

"Pay attention. Listen. Watch. Attention. . . .

In the ghettos of Paradise, four thousand creatures had perished.

Against a wall. . . .

Surely someone was there to see it and to pay attention.

Clearly, the fire in Alvarez Canyon is proleptic; in its flames Findley prefigures

the fate of the Jews in the German crematoria (the dream of a pure and perfect Aryan race and the evils of Naziism being, of course, a central subject in this novel). Near the end of *The Butterfly Plague*, Ruth sets fire to her dead brother's house wanting to raze to the ground the softly seductive, sweetly dangerous dreams of impossible perfection her brother's life has housed. And the final chronicle in this novel composed of seventeen separate chronicles is entitled "The Fire Chronicle." "We know that history repeats itself." In September of 1968, Ruth's orphaned daughter, Lisa, meets the son of another character on Topanga Beach. They smell smoke. "Fire is dangerous," says Lisa. They go to look for it. "This makes an interesting conclusion," says the narrator. "As always. And thus, this chronicle is over — the last of the chronicles of the Butterfly Plague. The first of the Fire Plague. And . . ." [Findley's ellipsis]. Though the novel stops after one more sentence (which tells that Lisa and the boy don't find the fire), the ellipsis after the additive conjunction invites the reader to anticipate another story chronicling the Fire Plague, which is precisely what Findley's third novel is and does. But between *The Butterfly Plague* and *The Wars* comes the long short-story, "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye," which has little directly to do with fire until the very last sentence.

Two epigraphs precede "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye," one from John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (in response to which this story was written)¹⁶ and another from Nicholas Fagan's *Essays and Conversations*. Fagan suggests that Cheever's fictional world is so true-to-life and all-absorbing that people have started forsaking New York, New Jersey and Connecticut in order to "take up residence inside his books . . . they've foundered in this place called Cheeverland." Findley's story (which cannot be summarized because it has no plot) creates a Lilliputian model of Cheeverland located somewhere on Long Island, with a view of the Sound and the sight of William F. Buckley Junior's home on the far shore. The cast of characters is extensive, including another in the significant series of Findley maids, and a young man "innocent of all experience save imagination. . . . Call him Ishmael. . . . He has come a long way to Cheeverland, from Toronto." He has come to the house of Arthur and Alicia Anderson ("on their way up in the world of television") because they want to turn his novel, *Blackwater Falls*, into a "'Film of the Week' (not the same as a FILM)." Ishmael stays in the maid's old room. "After the events in Memphis [in 1968] a meeting was held [of the blacks in Cheeverland regarding those who worked as live-in servants in white folks' houses] and the decision was made to move out. It was one thing to work there and to eat there, but quite another to sleep there, and so their bedrooms . . . were abandoned." Clyde, lover of Rosetta, the Anderson maid, is a leader of "this movement" among the blacks, and he persuades Rosetta to carry a gun. On Saturday morning, his second day in Cheeverland, Ishmael wakes and hears a "distant narrative of fire and lemonade": Rosetta is telling Alicia about "a fire

in the night, downtown, and even now the soldiers and the firemen are sifting through the ashes for the victims." Apart from references to Professor Dinstitch, another character who, as a younger man, helped to invent the atomic bomb, Findley lets fire drop until the final sentence which reads: "On Monday Rosetta comes up coatless in the morning, but the fires have moved up before her and these pages already burn." The revolution, it seems, has already started, and the illusory pseudo-liberal world of Cheeverland browns and crumbles in the reader's hands. Feeling the heat, he drops it, watching it (Findley's art, and life itself) reduced to ashes, ultimate symbol of nothingness.

THE WARS begins and ends with fire (even though it is also full of images of water, earth and air, a fact to which the inscription on Robert Ross's gravestone alerts readers) :

Robert Ross comes riding straight towards the camera. His hat has fallen off. His hands are knotted to the reins. They bleed. The horse is black and wet and falling. Robert's lips are parted. He leans along the horse's neck. His eyes are blank. 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 the memory without a sound. The archivist sighs. Her eyes are lowered above some book. There is a strand of hair in her mouth. She brushes it aside and turns the page. 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.

The "fiery image" of Robert burning on horseback, "tails of flame . . . streaming out behind him," is carefully paralleled by a watery image of Robert, after he has nearly drowned, swimming on horseback, "almost submerged with his clothes flowing back. . . . Pegasus."¹⁷ Both images are simultaneously elemental and mythical; and attention is drawn, directly or indirectly, to both aspects of both images; directly, in the single-word sentence "Pegasus"; indirectly, with reference to the "fiery image" of Robert, which has to be seen in its chronological context at the end of the novel, the four final sections of Part Five beginning, "Here is where the mythology is muddled." What is important, quite apart from what these images signify in relation to the plot (*mythos*), to Robert's character (*ethos*), and to the thematic content of the novel (*dianoia*), is the fact that in both cases the narrator compels the reader to look at the image (*opsis*), and to hear how the image sounds (*melos*), and carefully to mark his words (*lexis*). From first to last, the unspecified narrator of *The Wars* makes his presence felt,¹⁸ addressing the reader, directing the reader's attention, compelling him to mark the narrator's words in a particular way (one may even wonder, at moments, if the unspecified narrator is not a personification of Findley's anxiety about being misconstrued, about not making himself clear, about trusting — or not trusting — the reader).

"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." The deictics are tricky since we cannot be sure if the "you" is really reflexive — the narrator as fictional researcher hypothesizing someone engaged in the same process as himself — or whether he is addressing the reader directly and casting him in a role parallel to the narrator's own. Similarly, the adverb "here" may refer specifically to an *imaginary* photograph (since, so far as we know, no photographer is present to take pictures when Robert breaks out of the fired barn) which the narrator is describing; or, if the "you" is addressed to the reader, "here" could mean "in this image, in this passage of this novel" — or "in this image, in its proper context in this novel." The shades of difference in meaning are complementary rather than contradictory. Clearly, the attentive reader now knows that whatever "meaning" (the "author's verbal intention") he is to take from the novel inheres in this "fiery image" — even though the reader must remain attentive to the plurality of the text, aware that everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, that the "fiery image" is only one of the several ways in which the same story is told, simultaneously and sequentially; and is itself a microcosm of the single story which is projected in other elements and *mythoi*, severally and at the same time.

When Robert tries to save the horses at the end of *The Wars* (an action which involves the killing of Captain Leather which, in turn, compels him to become a deserter, to shoot Private Cassles and, in some eyes, to become a renegade horse-thief) he fulfills the proper function of a soldier which he wrongly attributes to the unnamed soldier in the early scene in which Teddy Budge is called in to kill Rowena's rabbits after her death. When Robert sees Budge, it takes him "thirty seconds to emerge from his pain and to realize why Teddy Budge was there." Robert turns to the soldier and yells "something like: 'you bastard! Bastard! What are soldiers for?'" The young man's question obviously expects the answer, "To protect the defenceless," not "To kill." *That* answer is something Robert has to learn ("What he wanted was a model. Someone who could teach him, by example, how to kill"). Ironically, his action at the end of the novel repeats the unknown soldier's in the very attempt to do what the latter did not do: protect the defenceless (horses). Robert's final acts are, therefore, open to interpretation, both negative and positive. As the researcher-narrator discovers, when he interviews World War I veterans, and asks about Robert, "they look away." Others weep when he says "Tell me about the horses." And yet others say "that bastard!" Marian Turner states simply: "My opinion was — he was a hero . . . he did the thing that no one else would dare to think of doing." Juliet d'Orsey, who falls in love with Robert when she is only twelve, and who looks after him after he's wounded until he dies, asserts neither *hero* nor *bastard*. She says:

"So what it was we were denied [in the war] was to be ordinary.¹⁹ All our ordinary credos and expectations vanished. *Vanished*. There was so much death.

No one can imagine. These were not *accidents* — or the quiet, expected deaths of the old. These were murders. By the thousands. All your friends were . . . murdered.”

The death of Captain Leather is, then, no different from that of Clive d’Orsey, died July 1st, 1916, in the Battle of the Somme; or of Rodwell who walks out into No Man’s Land and blows his brains out; or of Clifford Purchas, shot in the back as a deserter; or of the friendly German sniper whom Robert shoots in a moment of panic; or of Robert himself who dies of wounds sustained while performing what he has thought the duty of a soldier ought to be.

In the same way, the “fiery image” is open to both positive and negative interpretations. For the disinterested reader of fiction, it is striking evidence of Findley’s imagination; for those who enjoy projecting themselves into fictional worlds, the “fiery image” is a beautiful, Phoenix-like metaphor for the spirit of self-sacrifice embodied in Robert (and all those like him); and for the hope of a whole generation that believed it was fighting the war to end all wars, a hope reduced to ashes in the prolonged and senseless front-line slaughter but resurrected repeatedly in the human heart because it *is* human. For those whose view of human nature is less optimistic (and Findley’s view, as revealed in interviews if not in fictions, inclines to be less optimistic),²⁰ the “fiery image” may well suggest what Laing sees as the recurring image for the threatened identity of the psychotic in the acute stage. This negative interpretation is certainly supported by other aspects of the text, quite apart from the fact that, just before he shoots Leather, Robert’s anger rises to such a pitch that he fears he is “going over into madness”; and Major Mickle, responsible for arresting Robert, decides that he is “plainly . . . dealing with a man gone mad.” Juliet d’Orsey links Robert with Eugene Taffler and Jamie Villiers: all three become the lover of Barbara d’Orsey who “‘had a taste for heroes and athletes. She enjoyed the spectacle of winning.’” Ironically, Taffler, Villiers and Robert are all losers; all suffer extensive injuries in battle. Taffler, the David-like stone-thrower, loses both his arms and tries to kill himself in hospital. Jamie, like Robert, dies of his burns. Robert first sees Barbara when, with Taffler on her arm, she visits Villiers in the hospital where Robert is keeping vigil at Harris’s bedside. The visit is brief.

When they’d gone Robert could feel the man in bandages [Villiers] ‘screaming’ and the sensation of this silent agony at the other end of the room was so strong that Robert had to go and get one of the nurses. . . . She told him the man had been trapped in a fire and his vocal cords destroyed when he’d swallowed the flames.

Later, Juliet comments on her sister’s visit to Villiers:

“Her silence in Jamie’s presence. Was it cruel? Of course it was. Not to let him hear her voice. Nothing was left of him, you know. Nothing but nerves and pain

and his mind. No voice — no flesh. Nothing. Just his *self*. Later, as you'll see, this forms a sort of pattern . . . well — a very definite pattern." [Findley's ellipsis]

(Here, again, the narrator through Juliet directs reader-attention, compelling us to mark these words in a particular way: to look for a specific pattern.) Robert, like Villiers, is reduced to nothing, to nerve, pain, mind — his *self*, essenced in two words "‘Not yet’": "according to the medical testimony — there was virtually no hope that he would ever walk or see or be capable of judgement again." The narrator describes another photo of him, "taken about a year before his death. 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. . . . Robert is looking directly at the camera."

"*Robert comes riding straight towards the camera*": here, near the beginning of the book, the circle is opened. By the end, "Robert is looking directly at the camera": here the circle is almost closed. "These are the circles — all drawing inward to the thing Robert did." Robert died, his life

obscured by violence. Lawrence was hurled against a wall — Scott entombed in ice and wind — Mallory blasted on the face of Everest. Lost. We're told Euripides was killed by dogs — and this is all we know. The flesh was torn and scattered — *eaten*. Ross was *consumed* by fire. These are like statements: '*pay attention!*' [First two italics mine.]

The narrator instructs the reader how to pay attention: "You begin at the archives with photographs. Robert and Rowena. . . . Boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters; cablegrams and clippings from the papers. All you have to do is sign them out and carry them across the room . . . a whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps. *The war to end all wars*. . . . You hold your breath." You look at the images and listen to the narrator. A series of pictures of 1915: the "year itself looks sepia and soiled." Then comes April, Ypres and six thousand dead. "This is where the pictures alter — fill up with soldiers — horses — wagons. Everyone is waving either at the soldiers or the cameras. More and more people want to be seen . . . want to be remembered." Troops marching down Yonge Street, Sir Sam Hughes taking the salute. Then the "fiery image" of Robert (imagined, in italics); then a series of family photographs: "*Thomas Ross and Family . . . Rowena . . . Mother and Miss Davenport . . . Meg — a Patriotic Pony . . . Peggy Ross with Clinton Brown*." A picture of the ocean, taken on a trip to England, with a small white dot which is "clearly . . . an iceberg" (conjuring thoughts of 1912 and that archetypal Canadian image, the *Titanic*).

Two more photos, one early, one late, and the circle is completed. The early one was obviously taken at the end of Robert's training, before he embarked for England:

Robert Raymond Ross — Second Lieutenant, C.F.A.

He is wearing his uniform. Nothing yet is broken down. . . .

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. . . . *He died for King and Country* — fighting the war to end all wars.

5 x 9 and framed in silver.

The last picture was taken even earlier and returns us to the beginning: “begin at the archives with photographs. Robert and Rowena”:

The archivist closes her book. . . . It is time to tell us all to go. . . . You begin to arrange your research in bundles — letters — photos — telegrams. This is the last thing you see before you put on your overcoat:

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.

Just as early and late are transposed (the last thing you see is what you began with), so are life and death (Robert standing there alive in his uniform long after he has died); but Robert's death is “not real” because, of course, his life is only imagined (as a novel by Findley). What never really lived can never really die. He exists in a continuous fictional present and only in a series of images — some fiery, some watery, some earthy (Robert in the whore-house, in the dugout), some airy: “‘Look! You can see our breath.’” And the attentive reader *can*, if he uses his imagination (Pegasus); if he remains attentive to the text's plurality, has marked the narrator's words with care, he will also understand that the visible breath of Robert and Rowena, which makes them appear so lifelike, is simultaneously an image of death. “‘Be quiet,’” says Robert to his men, trapped in the crater under the eye of the German sniper, “and as he said it, he saw in front of them the dreadful phenomenon that could give them all away. His breath.” “‘Birth I can give you — but life I cannot,’” his mother tells Robert just before he joins up. “‘I can't keep anyone alive. Not any more.’ . . . This was the last time they breathed in one another's presence.”²¹ “Rowena and his father and his mother and the whole of his past life — birth and death and childhood. He could breathe them in and breathe them out.”

Harris, dying of pneumonia, “said the strangest things. . . . Strange and provocative. Robert didn't know, sometimes, what to do with Harris's sentences: where to fit them in his mind, or how to use them.” Having drawn attention to Harris's strange sentences, the narrator makes the reader listen more carefully:

‘Then I'd slide. Like a seal. Out of the air and into the water. Out of my world and into theirs. And I'd stay there hours. Or so it seemed. I'd think: *I never have to breathe again*. I've changed. It changes you.’ . . . And in his sleep his hands would move . . . as if he dreamt of swimming — or of ‘breathing’ in the other element. . . . ‘In that place — there — in *that* element — somehow I was safe —

even from choking. . . . But once I'd landed on the shore . . . I nearly died. In the air. . . . in the air . . .'²²

Lying in his bunk, in the dugout, listening to his batman's harsh breathing, Robert is reminded of Harris," — and that was the last thing he needed reminding of" (since Harris has died). "All he wanted was a dream. Escape. . . . Dreams and distance are the same. If he could run away. . . . Like Longboat" [Findley's ellipsis]. Longboat, the Indian marathon runner, is Robert's childhood hero, and he himself is really "a long distance runner." During training at Lethbridge, Robert runs every night by himself. Running, he loses all sense of time. "There was nothing to be won but distance." "Distance was safety. Space was asylum."

From the Prologue until the antepenultimate section of the novel, Robert is on the run (just as Hooker is waiting), trying to put a safe space between himself (his self) and all that threatens destruction. Dreaming of distance, he runs toward asylum; but, like Cassandra's, in the final scene of *Can You See Me Yet?*, Robert's airy dream is dashed or drowned in the mud, destroyed by fire:

Brothers and sisters: there should be a place to go for safety: asylum, and there's not. There is no safety — none for love, or for the mind. . . . I've failed. I couldn't make a place for safety. I should be asylum, and I'm not. . . . Why can't I help? Why can't I get beyond the fire? . . . The world is ending all around us, and we need each other now. And yet there is no sanctuary. Nowhere. None. In all the world. In all the width and breadth and depth of the human heart — where there is room for sanctuary — there is none. I know, because there is none in mine.

In order to know what nothingness is, says Laing, take anything — distance, safety, sanctuary, asylum — and imagine its absence. Even the old asylum at Britton offers no sanctuary. As Alma informs us, in September of 1939 (ominous and symbolic date), it "was destroyed by fire. Cassandra Wakelin died. But . . . she did not die alone. As she had lived." Equally ironic is the fact that, when Robert, near the end of the book, goes to the *Asile Desolé*, where mad Van Gogh was once an inmate and where, in the war, the officers are allowed to take a bath, he is raped by a gang of men he assumes are "crazies" but who turn out to be "his fellow soldiers."

Cassandra cries out that she cannot get beyond the fire. Earlier in the play, like a psychotic in the acute phase, she has declared "I am fire." At Verdun, the Germans used a new weapon, the flame-thrower: "Men . . . carrying tanks of fire on their backs . . . spread the fire with hoses. Water burned and snow went up in smoke. Nothing remained." A silent image, Robert leaps through the memory as a human torch on horseback. Beyond the fire, he is nothing. He is made one with the elements (like the tormented Empedocles whose final leap takes him under the volcano); but the elements themselves, in the infernal world of the wars, suffer unnatural changes and become one: the air is "filled with a fine, grey powder" that turns into mud; men and horses "drowned in mud"; the only

water lies "out in the marsh beyond the flaming hedgerows"; gasoline spreads "through the town in rivers of fire."

Fire storms raged along the front. Men were exploded where they stood — blown apart by the combustion. . . . Wells and springs of water were plugged and stopped by the bodies of men . . . who had gone there for safety. The storms might last for hours — until the clay was baked and the earth was seared and sealed with fire.

FIRE, ASSERTS GASTON BACHELARD, is "a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything" — and everything; "it is one of the principles of universal explanation."²³ Certainly, a reading of *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* provides a most provocative commentary not only on the "fiery image" in *The Wars*, but also on the phenomenon of fire in all Findley's work. In addition to making the predictable examination of "Sexualized Fire" — "the connecting link for all symbols" — Bachelard comes in his "Conclusion" to identify fire with imagination which "works at the summit of the mind like a flame." "*You lay the fiery image back in your mind . . . until you find its meaning — here*" in the mind, in the imagination, that realm to which the winged-horse, Pegasus, transports us.²⁴ And it is here, in the imagination — with its creative and destructive powers, its complex processes and seemingly simple productions, its instrumentality in enabling the individual to perceive and comprehend, or to distort and run away from, reality — that we confront the primary concern of Findley's imagination, just as (in the works of the greatest writers) narrative is the ultimate theme of narrative, and literature is the first (but not only) context in which to understand the nature of literature.²⁵

What Frye says of "the dislocations of narrative" in *Tristram Shandy* is equally true of those in *The Wars*: "they take our attention away from *looking at* the external situation" — i.e., the story — "to *listening to* the process of its coming into being in the author's mind"²⁶ — i.e., the imaginative process or discourse. In other words, the almost continuous presence of the narrator in *The Wars* — even in Part Three in which the sections are dated and clocked, rather than simply numbered, so that we are made to feel the narrator was also an eye-witness to these events, documenting or logging them as they occurred — keeps pulling the reader's attention away from what Frye calls "the internal fiction" which is of "primary interest" in the fictional modes, and making him refocus on the external fiction, the relationship established by writer with reader, which "cuts across the story" and is of primary interest in thematic modes of literature. But Findley's "writer" or "narrator" demands a great deal from his relationship with the reader, commanding him to look and listen simultaneously: the story of Robert Ross is shown as a series of photographs or pictures (with which we can do nothing, if not *look at* them); but, at the same time, the narrator is busy

telling us about the Archives, the archivist, his progress as a researcher, his methodology, his interviews with Marian Turner and his taping sessions with Juliet d'Orsey, all of which we must *listen* to.

Findley and his narrators are, in some ways, reminiscent of Woolf and at least one of her characters: Bernard in *The Waves*. (Allusions to Woolf appear in "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye." In *The Wars* she appears as a character, a friend of Clive d'Orsey. Juliet records in her diary that "Mrs. Woolf is my idol.") Bernard, who distrusts "'neat designs of life,'" speculates on his problems as a would-be novelist: "'But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it.'" Findley's story, "Losers, Finders: Strangers at the Door," opens with what appears to be a lyric poem (and Woolf's fictions, in particular *The Waves*, have frequently been called "poems" or "lyrical novels") :

Some lives
are only seen
through windows
beyond which
the appearance
of laughter
and of screaming
is the same.

The second section continues: "2 . . . there are no beginnings, not even to stories. There are only places where you make an entrance . . . and either stay or turn and go away." The final section reads: "18 . . . nor are there endings. Even to stories. There are only places where you exit from another life. Or turn again and stay. Not knowing why" (Findley's ellipses).

Beginning his summing up in *The Waves*, Bernard says, "'in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story.'" But, tired of stories and neat designs of life, he looks for some new form of narrative "'more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then.'" What delights him is the confusion of cloud-formations, ever changing, always in motion :

"Of story, of design, I do not see a trace then.

But, meanwhile, while we eat let us turn over these scenes as children turn over the pages of a picture-book . . . and I will add, for your amusement, a comment in the margin."

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, instructions as to how a "scene" or "sequence" should be shot, from what angle, what distance, what the individual "frame" (or picture) should include, what

objects should be prominent, how the sequence should be separated from or attached to what follows, and so on. In fact, he won more recognition in Canada for his work on *Whiteoaks of Jalna* and *The National Dream* than he did for his first two novels. That *The Paper People*, one of his most important TV film-scripts, should be a TV film about the making of a TV film only intensifies by dramatizing Findley's profound interest in the pictorial modes of narrative. He has also written a film-script for the National Film Board, worked as a script-writer in Hollywood, and is currently engaged in translating *The Wars* into a film-script. *The Butterfly Plague*, set in Hollywood in the first three decades of this century, is very much a novel about movie-making and the impact of the "talking pictures" on people's private lives and political dreams.²⁷

But *The Butterfly Plague* is cast in the form of "chronicles" by a chronicler who is anything but unobtrusive and effects a reader-response very similar to that effected by Part Three of *The Wars*. The fourth chronicle of Book Two is entitled "The Chronicle of Evelyn de Foe," one of the new-wave Hollywood starlets. Even the minimally attentive reader is bound to think at once of the Diaries of John Evelyn, and of Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, a literary forerunner of the year of the butterfly plague recounted in Findley's second novel. Like Bernard, Findley's narrator (and Findley himself as author of TV scripts) turns over scenes like the pages of a book and directs his audience's attention to the pictures by providing comments in the margin. These comments pull attention away from the story — which every picture tells — and redirects it to the imaginative process by which that story comes into being in the story-teller's mind. Even in his plays, which have strongly literary texts,²⁸ Findley's thematic concern is largely with looking, as the title *Can You See Me Yet?* indicates. *John A. — Himself!*, the title of his second play,²⁹ is equally indicative of Findley's preoccupation: namely, the desire to rescue Sir John A. Macdonald, first Prime Minister of Canada, from the great mound of public myths, legends and stories beneath which the private individual has been buried — a passionate desire to make the audience look at and see the man *himself*. And he accomplishes this aim by resorting to many more *spectacular* theatrical effects than he employs in *Can You See Me Yet?*

LIKE WOOLF, AND LIKE OSCAR WILDE (alluded to in *The Last of the Crazy People*, where he is also quoted, and in *The Wars*), Timothy Findley is a stylist in the same way that Sheila Watson (*The Double Hook*) and Marian Engel (*Bear*) are stylists, but that Robertson Davies (*Fifth Business*) and Margaret Atwood (*Lady Oracle*) are not. "In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential."³⁰ Frivolous though Wilde's epigrams may often appear, their truthful-

ness is taken seriously and fruitfully applied to literary issues by perceptive critics like Frye and Sontag.³¹ Wilde, a true descendant of another great aesthete, Schiller, believed that "Art begins with abstract decoration,"³² which explains why he declares that "art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril." Only "the superficial qualities last"; and "only shallow people . . . do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." Style *is* surface and surface *is* symbol; style is what makes the imagined world visible in Findley's fictions, enabling us to see and therefore understand. Style is what Frye calls "ornamental speech" (as distinct from "persuasive speech," the other arm of rhetoric) which "acts on its hearers statically, leading them to admire its own beauty or wit." Developing a mature style takes time; and the chances are that, in risking the venture of style, a writer (like Wilde and Woolf) may well be accused by hostile critics of literary affectation, of sacrificing profound substance to superficial artifice. Findley has inevitably suffered this fate. Arguing that some subjects "have a built-in intransigence to literary treatment," Michael Taylor, reviewing *The Wars*, reasons that, because Findley "realizes he's dealing with intractable material, . . . he camouflages the fiction of his story by pretending that the novel is a species of historical document."³² At the same time that he accuses Findley of disguising fiction as history, Taylor illogically explains Findley's failure in *The Wars* by referring us to "the clipped, portentous style" and the fact that this "Hemingwayesque style pitches over into sentimentality."

Nice work if you can get it — but few of us can, both have our critical cake and eat it. In the first place, Findley's style is not like Hemingway's, which may be "clipped" but, if clipped, is not "portentous." In the second, Findley's very conscious development and deployment of style draws attention to the fact that what we are reading *is* fiction, just as his narrative dislocations compel acknowledgement of the imaginative process by which the fiction is brought into being. From his earliest story to his most recent novel, Findley has worked toward perfecting a style that is unmistakably his own — a marvellous mixture of the lyric and dramatic that can be put to narrative purposes. A simple example from "About Effie" comes at the end of a scene in which the mysterious maid tells Neil Cable about the man she's waiting for to come and carry her off. A thunderstorm is in progress, which precipitates Effie's telling about the man: "There has to be thunder, or he won't come." The scene ends as follows:

And it rained and it rained and it rained.
But there was no more thunder.
That was over.

The short sentences and abbreviated paragraphs are characteristic. They function in a number of ways: they isolate actions, events, thoughts, emotions, images, or whatever Findley wants to focus on; by isolating an "object" and forcing the

reader to focus on it in a single sentence (which may be a single word — “Pegasus”), in a single paragraph, the reading process is slowed down and becomes like a replay (in reverse) of the writing process. When the process is slowed down, the reader’s attention is intensified (as in the crucial scenes of Wagner’s music-drama, as in arias in general). The movement is clearly toward that *stillness* (or *status* as Kenneth Burke calls it in his *Grammar of Motives*) which characterizes the lyric poem. This is one reason why Findley, at his most characteristic, is less like Hemingway than like Woolf.

At its most exaggerated (as in “Losers, Finders: Strangers at the Door”), Findley’s style may well prove off-putting (or even offensive) to those who pride themselves on plain-speaking, who prefer Bacon to Lamb, Austen to C. Brontë, Huxley to Carlyle. The concentrated passages of repetition, alliteration, compound epithets, self-conscious puns (often very funny), internal rhymes, line-breaks, and diverse typographical devices are all guaranteed to draw a great deal of attention to themselves. In “Losers, Finders,” published in 1975, Findley was undoubtedly testing himself, stretching his style to extremes to see just how much strain it could take, before embarking on *The Wars*. At its most effective, as in *The Wars*,³⁴ it still draws attention to itself, but this is precisely what Findley wants since his major thematic concern is the necessity of getting attention and the dangers of both getting and failing to get it. In *The Wars*, the stylistic devices are less obtrusive because more subtly paced and varied, and because the style itself wholly absorbs narrative and dramatic purposes as well as achieving a lyric intensity in the expression of moods, emotions and states of mind.

Speaking of style, Frye states that in “all literary structures we are aware of a quality that we may call the quality of a verbal personality or a speaking voice.” Sometimes, when this quality is felt to be “the voice of the author himself, we call it style: *le style c’est l’homme*.” In the novel, however, the author has “to speak with the voice of the internal characters . . . and sometimes dialogue and narrative are so far apart as to divide the book into two different languages.” The suiting of style to “internal characters or subject” Frye calls “decorum”; and drama he defines as “epos or fiction absorbed by decorum” — or a suitable style. Much about Findley’s style may fairly be called *dramatic*; it has been shaped by his writing of many dramas for radio and television, as well as for the stage; by his dramatization of both fiction (the *Whiteoaks* series) and non-fiction (*The National Dream*); and by his early career as an actor. But Findley’s theatrical and dramatic talents tend toward the operatic, toward music-drama, a combination of words (or lyrics) and music — and spectacle on a grand scale which, in terms of writing, *is* style. Even suicide and assassination, the new art forms according to Jamie Taylor and his friends, should be undertaken “with style.” Certainly, opera goes in for life, love and, above all, death, on a grand scale (the fiery

finales of *Die Walküre* and *Gotterdammerung* have a certain Findleyesque quality about them).

The ultimate irony of Findley's operatic style, his dramatic and often violent stories, his preference for what Browning calls "the dangerous of things" — that borderland between sanity and insanity, between the beautiful and sinister, between political issues and private problems, between social satire and psychological exploration, between dramatic spectacles and lyrical revelations, between story-telling pictures and silent images, between prose and poetry — is that, while Browning believed the lad astride the chimney-stack was a sure attention-getter whom we "must watch" (in contrast to lads who "walk the street / Sixty the minute"), Findley has rarely (if ever) received the kind of attention he merits. He has, rather, been largely ignored by reviewers and critics alike. He has, like the Cassandra of Canadian novelists, too often spoken without being listened to. This is a sad irony since, again and again, his fictions display the disastrous consequences of not paying attention — consequences that involve not only those who, like lonely children, are never loved enough to be seen and heard, but also those (like the Trojans) who have never cared enough to look or listen or mark Cassandra's words. Iris Pengelli, the psychiatrist in *Other People's Children* (a TV drama written in 1978),³⁵ works with autistic children who live alone "in their ultra-ordered private worlds": "These are all "my children." . . . All of them — *look* — are wearing masks. Anger. Fear. Hatred. Single emotions dominate their whole lives'" (*italics mine*). Dr. Pengelli has a favourite, Jeremy, whom she cannot reach; he starves himself to death. But, as a favour to a friend, she also works with Erin Foley, a teen-ager whose mother has died, who has been raped by her father, and lived most of her young life in foster-homes. In one of the last sequences in the drama, Pengelli confronts Erin: "Look at me," she says. "Tell me what you see." Erin answers, "An old woman." Pengelli presses, "But who?" "You," says Erin, refusing to name names. Two sequences are superimposed in the final minutes of the teleplay. Erin, looking in a mirror as she makes up her face, recalls the first sequence in which she was arrested. A policeman is asking her name, age, address, and demanding identification:

ERIN: (VOICE OFF)

Me. Okay? I'm here ain't I? You got to know where I come from? I was found in a brown paper bag.

FREEZE FRAME.

HOLD.

PENGELLI:

Tell me what you see.

The FREEZE FRAME MELTS and becomes the PHOTOGRAPH of EILEEN MARY [Erin's mother] holding ERIN as a BABY — with FOLEY [Erin's father] standing with them. SMILING.

ERIN: (V.O.)

Me.

HOLD.

FADE OUT.

The prerequisite for any answer to the question, "Can you see me yet?" is that the asker know and be able to acknowledge self. The prerequisite for any answer to the question, "Can we see Findley yet?" is that the asker be able to *see* and *hear* Findley, and be willing to *mark his words*. And name names.

NOTES

- ¹ Since Findley's work has been paid little serious attention and is less known than it deserves to be, it seems reasonable to provide the following basic checklist of his writings to date. Unfortunately, even after consulting with Mr. Findley (who has been most generous in taking time to answer my questions and furnish me with information), and with the CBC, it has not been possible to track down details of all the scripts written for radio. Major scripts for television are listed since Findley insists that "television scripts are important to me as a writer — especially if I am given freedom in subject matter and style (as opposed to being commissioned to write a particular story for a particular series). I look upon *Other People's Children* and a mini-series of three ninety-minute dramas called *Songs* (currently in progress) as [as] important as any of my fiction work" (letter to John Hulcoop, June 4th, 1980). The article itself reveals the importance of Findley's work for radio (audiences who listen) and for television (audiences who look) in relation to his plays (audiences who look and listen) and to his prose works (readers who mark his words). The list is in chronological order, each item briefly classified in terms of form.

"About Effie" (short story), *Tamarack Review*, 1 (Autumn 1956); "War" (short story): *CBC Anthology* (1957/58?); "T. E. Lawrence" and "Sherwood Anderson" (scripts for radio), CBC (early 1960's); *The Last of the Crazy People* (novel) (London: Macdonald, 1967); *The Paper People* (film script for TV), CBC (1967); *The People on the Shore* (drama script for radio) CBC (late 1960's or early 1970's); *The Butterfly Plague* (novel) (New York: Viking, 1969); *Don't Let the Angels Fall* (film script), NFB (1969); "ERA" (short story), *Cavalier*, 20, No. 6 (April 1970); "Gold," "River Through Time," and "Missionaries" (scripts for radio), *CBC Ideas* (1971-73); "The Journey" (script for radio, winner of the Armstrong Award), CBC (1971); *Whiteoaks of Jalna* (7 scripts for TV), CBC (1971-72); "Sometime, Later, Not Now" (short story), *New Orleans Review*, 3, No. 1 (1972); *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (interview with Graeme Gibson) (Toronto: Anansi, 1973); *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (interview with Donald Cameron) (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973); "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye" (short story), *Tamarack Review*, 64 (November 1974); "The Book of Pins" (short story), *New Canadian Stories* 74 (Ottawa: Oberon, 1974); "Losers, Finders: Strangers at the Door" (short story), *New Canadian Stories* 75 (Ottawa: Oberon, 1975); *The National Dream* (8 scripts for TV, with William Whitehead; winner of an Actra Award), CBC (1975); *Can You See Me Yet?* (play), produced at the National Arts Centre (1976) (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1977); *The Wars* (novel, winner of the Governor-General's Award and the City of Toronto Book Award) (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977); *The Newcomers, 1832 and 1911* (2 drama scripts for TV), CBC (1978-79); *John A. — Himself!* (play), produced at Theatre London (1979); *Dieppe 1942* (script for TV documentary, with Wil-

- liam Whitehead), CBC (1979); "Harper's Bazaar" (short story), *Exile*, 7, Nos. 1 & 2 (Autumn 1980); *Other People's Children* (drama script for TV), CBC (1980); *Songs* (3 drama scripts for TV), CBC (1980); *Famous Last Words* (novel) (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1981).
- ² Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London and New York: Oxford, 1973) p. 95; Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1966), pp. 3-14; Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 209-10. See also Hirsch's *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976).
- ³ The narrowness of Hirsch's "subjective stance" on this issue is perhaps best illustrated by reference to the interdisciplinary conference held in 1981 at the University of California at Davis on "The Literary Unconscious," at which Jonathan Culler delivered a paper on "Textual Self-Consciousness and the Textual Unconscious."
- ⁴ Translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 4-5. Compare Barthes' "everything signifies ceaselessly and several times" with Michael Riffaterre's discussion of *parallelism*, "the basic relationship underlying poetry. Of course, since language is a system made up of several levels superimposed one on top of the other . . . parallelism manifests itself on any level: so then, a poem is a verbal sequence wherein the same relations between constituents are repeated at various levels and the same story is told in several ways at the same time and at several times in the same way." "Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's *les Chats*," in *Structuralism*, edited with an Introduction by Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 189.
- ⁵ See Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi [1973]), p. 130.
- ⁶ Donald Cameron, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 54.
- ⁷ *The Poetics of Prose*, translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 205.
- ⁸ Though pure speculation, it is possible that Findley's preoccupation with the necessity of paying attention may have been reinforced in the course of his career as both actor and dramatist by the remembrance (conscious or unconscious) of the most famous line in Arthur Miller's 1949 play, *Death of a Salesman*: "Attention must be paid."
- ⁹ In view of Cassandra Wakelin's failed dream of going to China and becoming a missionary, it may be relevant to remember that her Greek prototype broke her word to Apollo. When he tried to seduce her, Cassandra asked Apollo for the gift of prophecy as the price of her sexual favours. Having received the gift, she refused her favours. Apollo spat in her mouth (or licked her lips) and so rendered her gift a curse: no one would listen to her or pay her any attention.
- ¹⁰ See R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 39-61.
- ¹¹ But not published until 1980.
- ¹² *The Politics of Experience & The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 32.
- ¹³ See also Cameron, pp. 52-53: "The lack of security is that you're sitting alone and you can't verify anything that you feel with anyone. . . . You can only consult yourself on these matters. No one in the whole world understands you as you are in the process of creation. There's no way anyone *can* understand, because you can barely understand yourself."

- ¹⁴ *The Paper People* was telecast on December 6th, 1967. I have worked with a photocopy of the author's own script, for which I thank him.
- ¹⁵ "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye," *Tamarack Review*, 64 (November 1974), 26.
- ¹⁶ "What Cheever should you read? All of him! Or, more practically, *Bullet Park*. My story's epigraph is taken from it, and the story is a response to it. Cheever is the American writer I most admire, next to Thornton Wilder." Timothy Findley, in a letter to John Hulcoop (4 June 1980).
- ¹⁷ Earth and air are similarly paralleled. While men die in the mud — "Their graves, it seemed, just dug themselves and pulled them down" — an officer is killed when he steps outside "for a breath of air." The breath of air had blown his head off."
- ¹⁸ Christopher Scott provides a splendid example of the reader who does not read carefully enough (or pay the text close enough attention) but who is allowed (by his editors) to sit in judgment on current Canadian writers. In his review of *The Wars*, Scott informs us that the narrative is "arranged by a present day 'archivist' (*she* is never named, and *is unimportant* to the story as such)" *Books in Canada*, 6, No. 8 (October 1977), 8-9.
- ¹⁹ "Robert looked along at Captain Rodwell. He too was strange. (We're all strange, Robert thought. Everyone is strange in a war I guess. *Ordinary* is a myth.)" See also what Marian Turner says: "'Well. It was the war that was crazy, I guess. Not Robert Ross or what he did. . . we all went mad. . . I've been through it all, you know. . . — the whole of this extraordinary century — and it's not the extraordinary people who've prevailed upon its madness. Quite the opposite. Oh — far from it! It's the *ordinary* men and women who've made us what we are. Monstrous, complacent and mad.'"
- ²⁰ See the interview with Gibson, pp. 125-26, 142-46; and the interview with Cameron, pp. 50-51, 57-59, 60-62.
- ²¹ Note the ambiguity of the two verbs here: *to breathe* followed by an adverbial phrase; *to breathe in* followed by a noun-phrase, object of the verb.
- ²² This whole passage, describing Harris's progress towards death, is worth comparing with Pratt's seminal poem, "Silences," with Margaret Atwood's "This is a photograph of Me," Phyllis Webb's "A Tall Tale" and the section of D. G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* entitled "The Sleeping Giant," partic. pp. 19-22.
- ²³ *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, translated by Alan C. Ross, and with a Preface by Northrop Frye (1964; Boston: Beacon, 1969), p. 7. This book was originally published in France in 1938, at which time, as Etienne Gilson points out, it caused quite a stir among scholars. It was the first of Bachelard's many famous books, the "ultimate import" of which had not, in 1963, "been fully realized." See Gilson, in the "Foreword" to Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), pp. xiii-xix.
- ²⁴ Significantly, Pegasus, meaning "of the wells" (and alluded to in a single-word sentence — *The Wars*, p. 82 — in a passage quoted above, the passage that provides the water parallel to Findley's "fiery image") was fathered by Poseidon on the Medusa. The Medusa, in turning people to stone with her terrible stare, is a dramatization of what Laing, in his chapter on "Ontological insecurity," calls "petrification," one of the "three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure" — the other two being "engulfment" and "implosion." Laing defines the term as a "particular form of terror, whereby one is petrified." Fire reduces art and life itself to ashes. Ashes are, for Findley, the ultimate symbol of emptiness (*The Paper People*, Introduction), and an overwhelming feeling of emptiness is what those who suffer implosion experience.

- ²⁵ "Ultimately, the narrative has no *object*; the narrative concerns only itself: *the narrative tells itself*" (Barthes, in *S/Z*, p. 213). "The theme of the *Odyssey* is the narrative forming the *Odyssey*, it is the *Odyssey* itself" (Todorov, in *The Poetics of Prose*, p. 63. See also pp. 72-73). "In all literary verbal structures the final direction of meaning is inward. . . . Whenever we have an autonomous verbal structure, we have literature" (Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957, p. 74). "Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music" (Frye, p. 97).
- ²⁶ *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 267. Italics mine.
- ²⁷ For a more extensive analysis of *The Butterfly Plague* see my entry on Findley in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, to be published by B.C. Research and the Gale Publishing Company.
- ²⁸ The distinction alluded to above is that made by Artaud between theatre based on a written text, in which the director and actors feel it their obligation to reconstruct the dramatist's text, and theatre not based on such a text: what Artaud envisaged as "the theatre of cruelty." See *The Theatre and Its Double* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970).
- ²⁹ Written for William Hutt who played the title role in the London Theatre production, directed by Peter Moss, which opened on January 31st, 1979. I have worked from a photocopy of the "SCRIPT AS PERFORMED ON OPENING NIGHT."
- ³⁰ *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, with an Introduction by Vyvyan Holland (London: Collins, 1966), p. 1205.
- ³¹ Frye, *Creation and Recreation* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980); Sontag, "On Style" and "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation*.
- ³² See also, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, translated with an Introduction by Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965), pp. 124 ff.
- ³³ *Fiddlehead*, 118 (Summer 1978), pp. 172-74.
- ³⁴ See, for example, the first forty pages of Part One; the first twenty pages of Part Three, which recount Robert's attempt to establish a gun-emplacement in the crater; and Section Five in Part Five, which describes Robert's traumatized reaction to the gang rape.
- ³⁵ I worked from a photocopy of the "SECOND DRAFT — SEPT. 25, 1978."

AT THE BACK OF OUR MINDS

John Barton

This is for those who are at peace
with failure
who have achieved a complete
incompleteness
and live without form