

# "BRIGHT AND GOOD"

## *Findley's "The Wars"*

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**I**N A 1971 INTERVIEW with Donald Cameron, Timothy Findley attempted to articulate the theme which obsessed him in his first two novels. "There's always someone," he reflected, "who must do insane things in order to clarify what, for want of better words, is bright and good."<sup>1</sup> This same idea receives its most powerful treatment in his 1977 novel, *The Wars*. Here the device of a story-within-a-story is used to illustrate how a personality transcends elemental forces even while being destroyed by them, and how the value of past experience is a function of the skill with which we recreate it imaginatively, transcending the chaos of time and history. As Findley's narrator realizes, "People can only be found in what they do." His problem in *The Wars* is to understand the actions of Robert Ross, a young Canadian officer, who when caught up in a German offensive during the Great War, tries and fails to save one hundred and thirty horses from being killed. Robert's failure leaves him horribly burned, and in many ways is simply the inevitable outcome of the pattern of futility which characterized his brief life. But if the narrator tends to view his subject in naturalistic terms, as a helpless child overwhelmed by a world charged with sinister forces, he simultaneously reveals a conflicting tendency to see Robert as a tragic hero who dares to challenge the dark necessity of his fate. Almost in spite of himself, the narrator, through his poetic imagination, transcends the limits of his bleak deterministic vision. In the process, Robert's struggle is raised to mythological proportions as a metaphor of fate and man's place in the universe, so that an apparent defeat is turned into a triumph. Indeed, "tragic" is not too strong a term to describe *The Wars*, for, as Richard Chase explains, in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*:

What generates significance in a tragedy is the resistance which a culture and the hero who is its type are able to offer to forces finally beyond human control. And the resistance must be active; it must bring the contradictions of experience to rest, even if at the moment of defeat, in a newly confirmed awareness of man's power of universally significant moral action.

By his positive efforts to save the horses, Robert Ross is able to offer a significant resistance to the horrors around him — so much so that, some sixty years later, people are still alarmed and fascinated by his actions. In the words of one character, he is "un homme unique": "Not your everyday Sergeant York or Billy Bishop.

... But a hero nonetheless. You see, he did the thing that no one else would even dare to think of doing."

It is the tension between what I will call "naturalism" and "tragedy" which gives *The Wars* its disturbing power, both as the poignant history of an individual, and as a metaphor of man's conflict with his fate. To show how the narrator resolves this dialectic, it will be useful to examine the opposing tendencies within the novel, beginning with its naturalistic aspects. I will argue that the narrator, haunted by Robert's fiery sacrifice, finally comes to perceive his life as a tragic journey marked by his progressive refinement and destruction by the basic elements: earth, water, air, and fire.

**F**INDLEY USES THE PERSONA of an intrusive narrator to convey his story to the reader. Living long after Robert's death, the narrator must reconstruct the past out of the raw data of history — letters, clippings, reports, interviews, and photographs. It is the photographs which reveal the human dimensions behind the mere facts, and which the narrator finds most deeply moving. The mass of written records at his disposal is simply words. The photographs show people, the particular moments of their lives captured forever, "5 x 9 and framed in silver." Thus, the narrator begins his search for Robert Ross at the archives with "Boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters; cablegrams and clippings from the newspapers." "All you have to do," he comments, "is sign them out and carry them across the room. Spread over table tops, a whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps." Out of these fragments he must reconstruct the story of Robert Ross, and then make that story imaginatively accessible to his readers. Occasionally a particular event eludes him, and he gains our confidence by admitting his limitations — "There is no good picture of this except the one you can make in your mind." In general, however, he does perceive a pattern emerging from the fragments, which he implies by the circular structure of his history. He begins his account with the events just preceding Robert's final act of defiance, and then later repeats these same events almost exactly, shortly before his conclusion. This circular structure parallels his efforts to discover the real Robert Ross out of the circle of events surrounding him: "These are the circles — all drawing inward to the thing that Robert did." Moreover, the structure suggests his conflicting perceptions of Robert, the circular pattern implying not only that no progress is made, but also that Robert's life is part of a continuum including the eternal, cyclic processes of nature.

A cyclic structure precluding progress is characteristic of determinism, a materialistic view of life implicitly denying freedom of choice. This concept of nature as a vast, aimless machine is one that obviously disturbs Findley, for it appears conspicuously in his first two novels. A passage in his first novel, *The Last of the*

*Crazy People* (1967), foreshadows his concerns in *The Wars*, written ten years later: "As far as heaven was concerned, it was cold and clear, and in Hooker's brain, the stars there made a noise like the humming of electrical machines, and in the whole sky, everything whirled in circles but drifted without plan." In this cold, mechanistic universe, individuals are perceived as mere puppets, their lives bleak and meaningless episodes in the equally meaningless spectacle of Fate. The inevitable effect of this conception on fictional characters has been expressed best by Emile Zola, in his preface (1868) to *Thérèse Raquin*: "I chose characters completely dominated by their nerves and their blood, deprived of free-will, pushed to each action of their lives by the fatality of their flesh."<sup>2</sup> Often Robert Ross does seem to be simply a creature of "nerves and blood," as he shuffles through his daily routine in an almost catatonic stupor. Thus, we can understand the prostitute's exasperation when he becomes incapable of even speaking to her: "'You're the most serious person I ever met,' said Ella. 'In my whole life I never met a man who didn't say nothin'. 'Cept acourse the Swede. But his tongue was cut out by the In'ians.'" The scene of Robert's departure for the army is an even more tiresome example of the more lifeless aspects of his character. Standing before a large puddle in a pouring rain, he is unable to decide what to do:

Staring down expressionless, he watched as his reflection was beaten into submission by the rain. . . . Then Robert closed his eyes and made his choice. He stepped down into the puddle and stood there.

How could he move?

Rowena [his sister] had been buried the day before.

This scene is also typical of Robert in that he is frequently strait-jacketed by the oppressive limitations of his family, even when they are an ocean away. In this he could be any one of Zola's characters — pawns to the multiple compulsions of heredity, environment, and the pressures of the moment.

In the Darwinized universe of *The Wars*, heredity becomes a variant on evolution within the human realm. The narrator emphasizes that Robert's family is *the* determining influence on his life: "Shuffle these cards and lay them out: this is the hand that Robert Ross was born with. Mister and Mrs. Ross — Peggy and Stuart — rabbits and Rowena." Certainly, the deck is heavily stacked against Robert, for the Ross family is in the tradition of what Findley has called "Southern Ontario Gothic"<sup>3</sup> — a family in a state of decline reminiscent of Faulkner's Compsons and Bundrens. An ineffectual father, a brooding, alcoholic mother, and a hydrocephalic sister all combine to limit Robert's potential. Mrs. Ross recalls Robert's habit of falling down as a child, foreshadowing his more serious falls during the war, and his inability to save Rowena's rabbits from his mother's death sentence anticipates his later failure to save the horses. Although mother and son are alienated, a peculiar symbiotic relationship exists between them, for she alone understands what the war will do to her son. In a brilliant scene early

in the novel, she enters the bathroom while Robert is bathing: "Mrs. Ross — closing the toilet seat — sat down. She used the sink as an ashtray, carefully rolling the ashes off along its edge and watching them fall down the porcelain slopes like mountain climbers tumbling to their death. She shivered." As Robert approaches his confrontation with fire and death in the war, Mrs. Ross progressively deteriorates, until *she* is being pushed about in her dead daughter's wheelchair. The dark bedroom where she sits brooding parallels the dark room where Robert is raped; she is blinded by alcohol, he by fire. Even if Mrs. Ross is unable to affect her son's decision to enlist, she does have a profound influence on his view of human relationships. She tells him, "no one belongs to anyone. We're all cut off at birth with a knife and left at the mercy of strangers. You hear that? *Strangers.*" Reflecting the mother's words, there are no happy male-female relationships in Robert's world, and sex is always depressing, when it is not actually disgusting. The characters are isolated, cut-off from each other, as suggested by the imagery of windows. When Robert leaves for overseas, Mrs. Ross does not say good-bye: "Instead, she waved from behind the glass and she watched her boy depart. . . ." Similarly, when Robert leaves England for France, Barbara does not speak to him: "Instead, she stood at the top of the stairs and watched him from behind the glass."

These lonely characters exist in equally bleak environments, of which London in 1916 is typical: "It was like a tunnel through which you walked not knowing your destination. Everyone remained a stranger. At night — the Zeppelins came. There was a sense of silent menace." The numerous parallels between Canada and war-ravaged Europe emphasize that the war is merely the occasion, rather than the cause of Robert's destruction. Everywhere, it seems to be raining — a heavy, unwholesome rain that brings no promise of renewal. Everywhere, too, there are terrible fires: the fires burning in the Ross factories, the fires destroying the Parliament Buildings, the fires turning Flanders into a holocaust. "Horses fell with their bones on fire. Men went blind in the heat." As Robert moves through this fearful world, his immediate environment becomes increasingly claustrophobic, changing from the relative freedom he enjoys on the prairies (as shown by his run with the coyote), to the oppressive squalor of the voyage overseas, to the deadly enclosure of the trenches. Eventually he can no longer even dream, much less run free: "All he wanted was a dream. Escape. But nobody dreams on a battle field. There isn't any sleep that long. Dreams and distances are the same." It is not surprising that people remain "strangers" in these circumstances, for even the simplest action becomes difficult.

Like a child, Robert usually is shown responding to physical forces and the pressures of the moment, rather than acting on the basis of any elaborate plan. Thus, his visit to the brothel is not a success: "Robert had ejaculated coming up the stairs. His body hadn't waited for his mind. It did things on its own."

In a much more important episode, Robert manages to kill a German in spite of his paralyzing inertia:

What happened next was all so jumbled and fast that Robert was never to sort it out. He fell. He turned. He saw the German reaching over the lip of the crater. Something exploded [Robert's pistol]. The German gave a startled cry and was suddenly dead, with his arms dangling down.

Here, Robert doesn't "do" anything. "Something" explodes, and a man is dead. The narrator further emphasizes Robert's child-like qualities with the motif of boys' books which appear frequently throughout the novel. Robert is unable to kill a wounded horse until "he remembered that somewhere in *Chums* — as a boy — he'd seen a picture of a cowboy shooting his horse behind the ear." Later, at Harris's funeral, he doesn't quite know how to behave, being unable to recall a precedent — "not even in *Chums* or Joseph Conrad."

Robert's childish helplessness is stressed further by his affinity and even identity with animals, which are presented throughout *The Wars* as the passive and innocent victims of man's fury. Two of Findley's comments from his interview with Donald Cameron help to illuminate this motif: "I have a motto, which is 'Make peace with nature, now.' I really believe that we're at war with nature, and we have declared war on a defenceless enemy. . . . Perhaps man is almost done evolving. And this in fact is the subject of my next novel."<sup>4</sup> (The next novel Findley published after this interview was *The Wars*.) Unfortunately, Findley allows his narrator to belabour these two points. Rampant animal imagery seems to appear on every other page, and the human characters are hustled up and down the evolutionary ladder with rather excessive haste. The dog and the horse on the first page, the rabbits in Rowena's cages, the mystic communion with the coyote, and the terrified horses on the ship (to name only a few of the *early* references to animals), all prepare the way for the introduction of the gentle Captain Rodwell, whom Robert meets in the trenches. An illustrator of children's books in his civilian life, Rodwell now operates a miniature "hospital" for injured animals, keeping a bird, a rabbit, a hedgehog and a toad in cages under his bunk. Only the toad manages to survive, but not until numerous parallels are made between Rodwell's animals and Rowena's rabbits, and between frightened animals in general and the soldiers cowering in their trenches. The whole message is pounded home by Rodwell's sketchbooks: "In all of them — on every page, the drawings were of animals. Of maybe a hundred sketches, Robert's was the only human form. Modified and mutated — he was one with the others." The affinity between animal and human becomes most pronounced in times of crisis, and particularly under the stress of sexual desire, as the novel's various violent and unpleasant sex scenes attest. Animals also inevitably appear in the photographs which the narrator examines. In one of these, Robert is holding a frail white object — the skull of some small creature. This skull may well symbolize his

destiny, for it is one of several similar images of the frail and the delicate. Devlin, for example, collects fragments of stained glass. "The fact is, I'm devoted to fragility. Glass has a certain fineness and brittleness that a man with my bones appreciates."

But although there are many delicate objects, animals, and people destroyed in the novel, there are, at the same time, others who endure and even flourish. Lady Juliet, for one, is a survivor: some sixty years after the war she still enjoys her gin and cigarettes. There is also the cat which Marian Turner remembers:

I remember the strangest sight when the raid was over. I'd been hiding under a bed and when I crawled out and stood up I looked down the rows of platforms where the tents had been and there, at the edge of the step, sat a pure white cat we'd had as mascot. It was cleaning its paws! Serenely cleaning its paws. Well . . . life goes on — and a cat will clean its paws no matter what.

This image of serenity amidst holocaust is suggestive of the narrator's tendency to take a transcendent view of Robert's life, a view that co-exists with his bleak, deterministic vision.

**D**ETERMINISM IS A distinctive feature of the naturalistic novel, which chronicles the disintegration of character under the overwhelming pressures of heredity and environment. In Zola's view, the narrator of such a novel should approach the role of a scientist rather than that of an artist: "I am simply an observer who sets down facts."<sup>5</sup> Yet even Zola was forced to admit that such an ideal condition was impossible, for, unfortunately, the narrator could not be eliminated readily. "Certainly," he wrote gruffly, "a work will never be more than a corner of nature *seen through a temperament*"<sup>6</sup> (emphasis mine). In their critical introduction to naturalism, Lilian Furst and Peter Skrine summarize Zola's dilemma: "Certain aspects of Naturalist theory, notably the ideal of total objectivity and the 'determined' view of man, quickly proved untenable in practice. The eye of the observer was that of an artist, and his experimental material was the human being in all his irrationality."<sup>7</sup> Thus, as the narrator of *The Wars* ponders his photographs and sifts through his facts, he allows his imagination to intrude and to create new pictures and events beyond those actually existing:

Robert Ross comes riding straight towards the camera. His hat has fallen off. His hands are knotted to the reins. They bleed. . . . He leaps through memory without a sound. . . . 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.

"Here" is the imagination, where the "truth" of Robert's life — if it is to be found at all — will be discovered. The narrator's imagination tends to insinuate mythical and poetical images into what would otherwise be a matter-of-fact history. Moreover, as shown by the five-part structure of *The Wars*, and the

allusions to Euripides and Greek mythology, his imagination is inclined towards tragedy, and this predisposition is strengthened by what his sources tell him of Robert. Lady Juliet, his most important informant, remarks, "The thing is not to make excuses for the way you behaved — not to take refuge in tragedy — but to clarify who you are through your response to when you lived." Following Lady Juliet's cue, the narrator comes to see Robert not as a puppet who merely disintegrates, but as a man who exercises his mind and will in a heroic but losing struggle against overwhelming circumstances. These circumstances, or forces, are embodied in the four elements — earth, water, air and fire.

Robert's heroic stature is emphasized by the contrast between himself and Rodwell, Levitt, and Taffler, three officers who all succumb without a struggle to the same forces which Robert attempts to defy. Rodwell kills himself when he is unable to prevent shell-shocked soldiers from roasting little animals alive. Levitt, who places pathetic faith in Clausewitz to see him safely through the war — "the whole war can be carried out as a serious, formal minuet" — goes insane during a massive artillery bombardment. Robert is quite obviously different from these two characters, but his relationship with Captain Taffler is more complex, and more interesting. Resembling "a *Boy's Own Annual* hero," Taffler is already wounded in France and returned to Canada before Robert even enlists. It is not surprising, therefore, that Robert makes Taffler his idol, "the model he could emulate." The two men first meet on the Alberta prairie, where Taffler, accompanied by his horse and dog, is throwing stones at a row of bottles. The encounter ends when Taffler leaves to kill rattlesnakes. This seemingly innocuous episode haunts Robert for the rest of his life, for it often appears that he will be compelled by fate simply to relive Taffler's experiences. Horses and dogs follow Robert everywhere, and he breaks china and glass in times of stress. When he is forced to shoot a crippled horse during the voyage overseas, he begins to hallucinate: "*Snakes. Snakes. Rattlesnakes.* Its mane was a tangle of rattlesnakes." Similarly, both men are involved in violent homosexual encounters; both have affairs with Lady Barbara. But when the two men are badly wounded, the pattern is broken. Taffler loses both arms and tries to kill himself by rubbing the stumps to make them bleed. Although Robert is horribly burned, however, he develops a peculiar serenity, refusing Marian Turner's offer of death. As she remembers, "He might've said 'Yes.' But he said 'Not yet.' *Not yet.* There, in those two words, in a nutshell — you have the essence of Robert Ross. And perhaps the essence of what it is to be alive. *Not yet* has been my motto ever since . . . and here I am." The distinctive quality which enables Robert to attempt to save the horses, and to endure his resultant suffering, is something Findley calls "moral momentum." This phrase appears in his first novel, *The Last of the Crazy People*, in a scene where a character knows something is dreadfully wrong, but is unable to correct it:

She heard the crash upstairs and the voices, but she could not gain the moral momentum to intervene.

Years, and ancestors, leaned in against her.

She thought, "Maybe we should all die. Maybe we should all just be satisfied to die."

In contrast to Rodwell, Levitt, and Taffler, Robert has the moral momentum within himself to overcome his inertia and resist the cumulative pressures around him.

Robert's latent power is evident from his earliest childhood, for although the narrator's world-view is thoroughly Darwinized, his imaginative recreation of Robert's family life includes an underlying myth of Adam and the fall from Eden. As one reviewer has commented, Robert's relationship with his sister is an important key to his character: "Though we have only brief glimpses of her, they are deftly arranged to suggest that a special, world-excluding innocence is shared by the two, an innocence symbolized by the animals they cherish."<sup>8</sup> Thus, even during one of his worst moments in the trenches, Robert takes pains to save a rat from drowning — a meaningless gesture perhaps — but he cannot help marveling, "*here is someone still alive*. And the word *alive* was amazing." In addition to sharing his sister's compassion, Robert has another, more mysterious strength, as symbolized by his long-distance running. Instinctively as a child he heads for the open spaces of the horizon, and his last act as a soldier is to leave the battlefield, release the horses, and ride for freedom. He justifies this action by claiming its essential sanity: "[Captain] Leather is insane," said Robert flatly. "It cannot be called disobedience to save these animals." His ability to see through the bogus morality which would demand the animals' destruction is a quality he inherits from his mother, whose point-of-view, in Findley's phrase, is "hyper-realistic."<sup>9</sup> Like Robert, Mrs. Ross is associated with the elements — she takes pleasure in rain and snow — and like Robert, she rejects the mindless optimism which prolonged the war and produced men like Captain Leather. "What does it mean," she wonders, "*to kill your children?* Kill them and then . . . go in there [church] and sing about it! What does that mean?" Mrs. Ross's insight, Rowena's compassion, and Robert's running are all signs of the power which eventually enables him to reveal who he is by his resistance to the war and his endurance of his wounds. Before he can make his testament, however, he must first be refined by a ritual confrontation with the elements, concluding with his ordeal by fire.

**T**HE ELEMENTAL NATURE of Robert's journey through the war is emphasized by the inscription on his gravestone — "EARTH AND AIR AND FIRE AND WATER." Corresponding to the hierarchy associated with the four ele-



ments, Robert's major ordeals occur in distinct stages. First, he almost drowns in the mud at Ypres — trial by earth and water. Next, he barely survives an attack of poison gas — trial by air. Finally, he is horribly disfigured in the burning barn — ordeal by fire. The significance of this progression can be understood if we consider the traditional symbolism of the elements. As explained by J. E. Cirlot, the elements correspond to the three states of matter, plus the agent which enables them to change states: "Earth (or solids), water (or liquids), air (or gas) and fire (the temperature which brings about the transformations of matter) have been conceived in the West from pre-Socratic days onward as the 'Cardinal Points' of material existence, and, by a close parallel, also of spiritual life."<sup>10</sup> In this hierarchy earth and water are regarded as passive, and air and fire as active. Thus, just before Shakespeare's Cleopatra dies, she declares, "I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life." The true hero, and particularly the tragic hero, tends to transcend even air, and to approach the condition of fire, the symbol of the life-process, where, as in a vast conflagration, the whole forever consumes and renews itself. St. Paul suggests this latter idea in a striking image in his epistle to the Hebrews — "our God *is* a consuming fire." Fire, therefore, is the agent of transformation and regeneration, the ultimate stage of the hero's quest. Before it can be reached, however, a sacrificial purification is the necessary intermediate stage. This is why Robert Ross must first undergo his ordeal by the lesser elements.

Robert's first two ordeals are anticipated by earlier events in his life. His near drowning at Ypres is foreshadowed by his run in Alberta with the coyote, which ends (harmlessly) in "a rendezvous with water," and by his voyage overseas, where drowning is an ever-present threat: "In the wind it was minus forty. The only thing they were told about the boats was not to fall out. There was no survival in the water. You died as soon as it reached your skin." These two episodes imply the contrasting connotations of water as a symbol. In its positive characteristics water is the necessary life-force, as emphasized by Harris, who reminds Robert, "We are the ocean — walking on land." Thus, Harris thinks that water is man's proper element, and of all Rodwell's animals, only the toad survives, safe in its pail of water. But when water stands revealed in its destructive aspects it becomes the biblical "water of affliction" (1 *Kings* 22:27) — a force of death and annihilation. At Ypres earth and water combine to trap the unwary, and Robert almost drowns in a sea of mud. In this realm of the dead and the sinister crows who feed on them, immersion in water brings no renewal — men simply disappear into the earth. When Robert is rescued at the last moment, the description implies that the experience has somehow stripped him of some of his human qualities: "A hand fell on his shoulder. Robert yelled and grabbed at it. Bones and claws. It drew away. Robert shuddered. Birds." We are not surprised, therefore, when he reaches the place of his next ordeal by swimming "on his

belly through the mud," signifying that he is, indeed, approaching a more primitive state. His ordeal by air occurs when he is caught in a gas attack while setting up a forward mortar position. By this point, the narrator has already made clear that even the air at Flanders is not to be taken for granted. Introducing Poole, Robert's batman, he remarks, "He'd been assigned to Robert two days after Robert's arrival — his previous officer having been killed when he'd stepped outside one evening 'for a breath of air.' The breath of air had blown his head off." The air becomes still more threatening during the gas attack, which Robert survives by covering his face with a urine-soaked handkerchief, and lying face down in the mud. The episode is filled with imagery of childhood, suggesting that Robert is continuing to regress from his adult state. When the attack is over, he lies completely motionless for three hours. "Then he rolled over with his arms stuck out above his head. He looked like a child about to make 'an angel' in the snow."

By the time Robert is ready to disobey orders the process of reversion and refinement is almost complete: "His body was completely numb and his mind had shrunk to a small, protective shell in which he hoarded the barest essentials of reason." He shoots Captain Leather for preventing his attempts to free horses from a bombardment, tears the lapels from his uniform, and leaves the battlefield. It is only now that he is ready for his final ordeal, the confrontation with fire.

The events occurring between Captain Leather's death and Robert's capture are the most difficult for the narrator (and for the reader) to accept, for if it is understandable that Robert shoots his insane superior officer, it is quite another matter for him to kill Private Cassles, the soldier who attempts to prevent his escape with the horses. This second killing involves Robert in a terrible contradiction — in the very act of defying violence he himself commits a murder. His actions ironically "prove" the novel's epigraph, Clausewitz's assertion that "In such dangerous things as wars the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst." Robert's decision to save the horses is an "error," because in the unreal context of the war, horses simply exist to be killed, and no one should be surprised when they die. Robert's first error leads to his second, the killing of Cassles. Yet as Lady Juliet observes, it is a terrible thing to be unsurprised. She quotes a statement by Siegfried Sassoon, "I still maintain that an ordinary human being has a right to be horrified by a mangled body seen on an afternoon walk," and comments, "So what it was we were denied was to be ordinary. All our ordinary credos and expectations vanished. *Vanished*. There was so much death." Robert's efforts to save the horses are his declaration on behalf of the ordinary, but an insane gesture given the war's logic. Thus, when Robert and the horses are finally surrounded in a barn, Major Mickle decides that because Robert must be mad, he must dispense with both mercy and reason. "That he did so," the narrator comments, "puts the state of his own mind in

question — for what he did cannot be interpreted as being less ‘mad’ than what Robert had done in taking the horses and deserting the battle.” Mickle sets the barn on fire, destroying the horses and badly burning Robert. It is Robert’s last words which seal his fate. “We shall not be taken,” he says, indicating to Mickle that he has an accomplice. To the reader, however, Robert reveals that he has passed beyond the boundaries of the human, and is at last ready for his final ordeal.

Three earlier events in Robert’s life foreshadow his fiery sacrifice. When he is in Kingston, Ontario, on his way to enlist, he is both fascinated and terrified by the locomotive of his train: “The *fire horse*: that’s what the Indians called it. Robert looked to one side from under the peak of his cap, hoping that no one had seen him flinch from the steam or stepping back from the fire.” Symbolically, fire is an instrument of testing — “the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (1 *Corinthians* 3:13) — and at this early stage of his journey Robert is not yet prepared to be tested by the flames. But as he moves closer to his fate, he meets Devlin, the collector of fragments of stained glass. One of these fragments depicts St. Eloi, the patron saint of smiths and metalworkers: “He was working at a forge and held a gigantic ‘butterfly’ in a pair of tongs. The butterfly was rather grotesque and one had to assume that it was such. It was shown as having just been recovered from the flames, in a white hot state.” This grotesque butterfly is the poignant image of what Robert will become when he is pulled from the burning barn, blind and crippled and disfigured beyond recognition. Shortly after the stained glass episode, Robert meets Captain Villiers, who is the *human* symbol of his fate. Villiers was trapped in a fire and his vocal cords destroyed when he swallowed the flames. As Lady Juliet tells the narrator, “Nothing was left of him, you know. Nothing but nerves and pain and his mind. No voice — no flesh. Nothing. Just his *self*.” Fire, then, reduces Villiers to his essential self, suggesting Aristotle’s belief that “the soul is a kind of fire or heat.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, fire sears away Robert’s flesh, leaving little more than his “self” or “soul.” After surviving his elemental ordeals he reaches a plateau beyond the stress and conflict of life, for the last picture taken of him shows him horribly scarred, yet “smiling.” He appears to have arrived at what Yeats called “the condition of fire,” where “is all music and all rest.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the narrator’s history of Robert’s journey ends quietly, with one last snapshot from an extraordinary life: “*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.’”

Robert’s triumph is paralleled by the narrator’s. Out of his piles of documents and conflicting testimonies he clarifies the meaning of Robert’s self-destruction and reshapes his life into a coherent whole. In doing so, he transcends a purely mechanized account of his subjects as some crippled animal, for he is most deeply

moved not by abstract Heredities and Environments, but by people in the daily tragedies of their lives. Thus, he comes to see Robert as a man whose yearning for what is "bright and good" conflicted with all the dark and destructive impulses of which the Great War was a most ignoble emblem. More visionary than historian, he imaginatively recreates the life behind the facts of history, and fashions out of his material a prayer against despair.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Donald Cameron, "Timothy Findley: Make Peace with Nature, Now," in *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, Part One (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 55.
- <sup>2</sup> Emile Zola, "Preface" (1868) to *Thérèse Raquin*, quoted by George J. Becker, ed., *Documents of Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), p. 159.
- <sup>3</sup> Graeme Gibson, "Interview with Timothy Findley," in *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972), p. 138.
- <sup>4</sup> Cameron, pp. 50-51.
- <sup>5</sup> Zola, "Naturalism in the Theatre" (1880), in Becker, p. 197.
- <sup>6</sup> Zola, p. 198.
- <sup>7</sup> Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, *Naturalism* (1971; rpt. London: Methuen, 1978), p. 53.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Peterman, "English Canadian Fiction in 1977," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14, No. 1 (Spring 1979), 95.
- <sup>9</sup> Gibson, p. 140.
- <sup>10</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 91.
- <sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *De anima* (1.2.404), quoted by John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 207.
- <sup>12</sup> "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" (1917), in *Mythologies* (1959; rpt. New York: Collier, 1969), p. 357.

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