

THE DRAGON IN THE FOG

“Displaced Mythology” in “The Wars”

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IN TIMOTHY FINDLEY’S novel *The Wars*, Robert Ross, soon after arriving in Europe, finds himself leading a line of horses through thick green fog. The foul smell of the air puzzles him, but Poole, his batman, detects the odour of chlorine that has soaked into the ground.

The smell was unnerving — as if some presence were lurking in the fog like a dragon in a story. Poole was quite correct; the ground was saturated with gas. Chlorine and phosgene were currently both in use. Mustard gas was still to come.

This matter-of-fact chemical information is typical of the novel’s verisimilitude. An almost documentary realism seems to seduce the reader into accepting the authenticity of the account. By mentioning “a dragon in a story,” however, the narrator teases us with a glimpse of another, more truly seductive influence. Behind the elaborate realism of *The Wars* hides the beguiling shape of myth and legend — the dragon that lurks in the fog.

Northrop Frye finds the essential principles of story-telling in mythology; those structural principles are “displaced” from mythology to literature. What kind of displaced mythology would we expect to find in Findley’s novel? *The Wars* is a work of irony; in it we see the attempt, as Frye says in *Anatomy of Criticism*, “to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence.” He goes on to say, “As structure, the central principle of ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways.” A dragon’s proper home, of course, is the world of romance; if he can be displaced into the world of “unidealized existence,” perhaps other aspects of his homeworld have made their way with him. Following this lead, I intend to examine *The Wars* as a “parody of romance.” Readers of Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Secular Scripture* will recognize my enormous indebtedness to those texts, which I use as handbooks to romantic convention.

Adventure is the essential element of plot in romance, and in a naive form romance can be the story of a hero who dies in the glory of combat or who undergoes a series of exciting adventures and always comes back for more, like a comic book hero. There are plenty of children in the novel who see war this way.

They range from Robert's younger brother, thrilled to announce at school that Robert would receive the Victoria Cross, to boys arriving at the front, exhilarated by the "heaven-sent chance" to become men. A picture of Robert in his new uniform seems to say that "death is romantic": "I'll fade away in glory hearing music and my name." But Robert's actual death is not heralded by music and all these innocents will find a world of "unidealized existence" confronting their naive romantic expectations. Exciting storms at sea described in the *Boy's Own Annual* must meet the stomach-churning reality of an Atlantic crossing.

The true romantic hero begins in innocence and journeys in quest of knowledge. A wise old guardian may supervise the initiation, as do Arthur's Merlin and Dante's Virgil. Robert's innocence lies in the fact that killing is "a foreign state of mind" for him. He needs "someone who could teach him, by example, how to kill" and thinks he has found such a person in the legendary Eugene Taffler, an older man who has already journeyed to war and back; ironically, this nearly mythic figure turns out to practise sexual perversions and later attempts suicide. Another guardian spirit for Robert's innocence is the "ablest man" on the S.S. *Massanabie*, the decent and understanding Battery Sergeant-Major Joyce. When Robert must destroy an injured horse, the B.S.M. leads Robert through the darkness down to the hold of the ship, like Virgil leading Dante into hell. Finally, however, both Virgil and the B.S.M. can only step aside and let their protégés stand alone.

Robert's initiations and loss of innocence remind us that we expect life to have four seasons — youth, maturity, age, and death — but part of the horror of *The Wars* is the realization that this natural cycle has been drastically accelerated. We expect young men in romances to face challenging ordeals and life-changing epiphanies, but in this novel too many men face dead-end ordeals and learn too much too soon. We see this in the constant emphasis on the childishness of the characters: "men" whose average age is nineteen, some of whom do not yet shave and whose voices still waver, who promise their mothers not to drink and who soil their pants in moments of crisis. The experience of the twelve-year-old Juliet d'Orsey reflects all these men-children facing too much too soon. She discovers Robert and her sister making violent love: "I know things now I didn't want to know." Juliet's trauma symbolizes the whole world's experience of the war, and the profound loss of innocence delicately colours all her recollections, just as the recovery of a lost Golden Age typically haunts romance.

IN ONE PHASE OF ROMANCE we may see experience assaulting the integrity of the innocent world, symbolized by a "beleaguered castle." In the midst of the unfathomable horror of the trenches, there is in fact a "beleaguered

castle" — the "Stained Glass Dugout," an "inordinately civilized place" with books, a plaster angel surrounded by candles, an animal hospital, and pieces of stained glass. Devlin, the "gentle as a lamb" man who collects the glass, does so because he is "devoted to fragility," the real fragility being, of course, not the glass but rather sanity, decency, and innocence.

A variation of the innocence theme appears in the hero's pure love for a damsel — love, like adventure, being one of the keynotes of romance. In one version, the hero leaves a chaste lady, his adventures, and returns to marriage. In another form, often focusing on a sister or daughter figure, the journey ends in virginity. The chastity of the latter quest may thinly disguise a latently incestuous relationship; the chaste love of brother for sister may represent a lost Golden Age but may also hover near a moral taboo (virtue being most admirable when closely pressed by temptation).

In the case of Robert Ross, the catalyst for the story is his love for his sister Rowena; "Rowena," we may remember, is the name of one of the heroines in *Ivanhoe*. Robert often remembers her in critical moments of the war. She represents a lost happy time: he remembers her with her rabbits, or the idyllic sound of lapping water as they vacationed at Jackson's Point. When she dies, it is because she falls out of her chair, and the words "fell" and "fallen" occur so often after her death that it is hard not to hear a suggestion of the biblical Fall of Man from innocence. Robert feels responsible for the fall because he was locked in his bedroom "making love to his pillows" instead of caring for Rowena. Perhaps here we see the sense of being close to a moral taboo in the brother-sister relationship. In any case, it is his responsibility for the fall that drives Robert out of his "innocent" Golden Age, forcing his perilous journey through the world of experience.

Just as the young man of the quest has an older man guiding his journey, there may also be a mother-figure who waits at home for the hero to finish his wanderings. Where there are both a young and an older woman, the older may become polarized into the sinister stepmother of folktale who may also dimly suggest incest. In such figures, we see the outline of Robert's alcoholic mother, irrationally and cruelly insisting that Robert should kill Rowena's rabbits because he loved Rowena. We may even detect the incest theme as she comes into the bathroom while Robert bathes. There is a hag-like description of her as she sits on the toilet and uses Robert's childhood as a weapon against him. It is partly she who turns the Golden World of this novel into a kind of prison-paradise from which Robert has to escape.

The mention of incest reminds us that loving relations can be twisted into demonic form. Robert may be trying to recover the remembered Golden World with his sister, but the world of experience twists this urge into sinister shapes. One of his first adventures occurs in the brothel at Lousetown, where the prosti-

tute is a death-image: "Her shoulders were naked bones and her eyelids were painted black." It is appropriate that Robert takes a deathly prostitute, for the sister whom he truly loved has died and he now heads in quest of romantic death. In the next room is more demonic eroticism: Eugene Taffler engages in brutal homosexuality, foreshadowing the rape scene later in the novel and the agonized sexuality that Juliet d'Orsey stumbles upon. Barbara d'Orsey, on one level, is a witch/harlot figure, going from man to man, leaving each as he becomes disabled, but her character is also tangled up in another romantic convention. As her brother Clive explains, Barbara acts out of obsessive fear because everyone she has loved has died. Thus her behaviour symptomizes not promiscuity but desperation. In a way, Barbara is the princess terrorized by the dragon — war — who keeps devouring the princes. Until the right prince comes along and ends the rule of the dragon, she is under its spell.

Figures of romance polarize themselves into opposites. Just as the heroine finds her opposite in the siren or witch, so also the dragon finds his opposite in friendly animals, particularly the faithful and devoted horse and hounds. As makers of old cowboy movies well knew, the horse who gets the hero to his quest naturally has a special role. The most cursory reading of *The Wars* reveals the intimate link between Robert and horses. His true companions on ship are the horses and as he rides along the collapsing dike in the fog, he trusts his horse to find its own way, endangering himself only when he leaves the horse. Of course, one of the most riveting scenes is the climactic episode, previewed on the opening pages of the novel, in which the knight (Robert) meets with his trusty horse and hound (maybe a Labrador retriever) and rides off: "It was as if both dog and horse had been waiting for Robert to come for them." Animals conventionally help the hero, but in *The Wars* one measure of a man's compassion is his willingness to help animals; thus Rodwell shelters animals and Robert's act of defiance takes the form of releasing endangered horses.

Romances often begin with a knight riding off into a forest after an animal, an image which is never very far from metamorphosis, the changing of the hunter into an animal. Near the beginning of the book, Robert goes for a long run with a coyote. The two enjoy a special communion, both drinking from a river in the prairie. Robert becomes oddly identified with the animal as he crouches "on his haunches" watching it. When confined to barracks for two weeks, he sits like a caged and lonely animal on the roof and stares across the prairie, "wishing that someone would howl." Metamorphosis, or the union of human and animal identities, is an important theme in *The Wars*. Taffler plays at being a horse in the brothel, a demonic version of Robert's identification with horses. Rodwell's sketchbook includes mostly animals, but also Robert's form, "modified and mutated" to look like the others. When trapped in a barn with runaway horses, he identifies himself as one of them, and this dooms him, for when he calls, "We shall not

be taken," Major Mickle thinks Robert has an accomplice and authorizes a full attack. Metamorphosis in romance often indicates a lowering of human identity as the hero obscures the signs of original identity and joins a lower world of animals. In *The Wars*, it is a lowering in the sense that the humans are trapped and frightened like the animals, but the fellow-feeling with animals is also part of the human largeness and generosity of characters like Rodwell and Robert. To recognize oneself as an animal is to recognize one's kinship with and duty towards all life, a recognition threatened by the "ethics" of war.

The changing of humans into animals occurs specifically in those romances concerned with the descent of the hero, and *The Wars* is primarily the story of a journey into a lower world, although there are points of ascent. Ascents in romance typically involve an epiphany at a mountaintop, tower, or staircase. Since the ascent reverses the Fall of Man, it is not surprising that the goal is often a new Eden, a *locus amoenus* or "beautiful green world." In *The Wars*, the ironic ascent is up the stairs of the whorehouse in Lousetown. It is indeed a "green world," with a potted fern on the landing, "sweet rose perfumes" (to mask the smell of horse manure), and lilac wallpaper in the bedroom. Robert indeed has an epiphany, but it is a vision of depravity; through a hole in the wall he sees the bestiality of Eugene Taffler, reminding us that this ironic ascent is really a descent.

A more subtle image of ascent occurs when Robert and his men climb into a giant crater to cut gun beds. It is hard to find images of upward movement in the flatlands of Europe, and the crater is most obviously an image of descent, but Findley gets double service from this crater by making it an ironically inverted mountain. Robert crawls around the crater "like a mountain climber," heading for an object that turns out to be a ski pole. We are never told why a ski pole would be there; ski poles belong on mountains and there are no mountains for miles around — that is, unless the crater itself is a symbolic mountain. As the men clamber out of the crater, they might as well be mountain climbing, with the "sound of falling debris" and the treacherous slipping backwards, "sliding in the snow." At the top of this climb is a vestigial *locus amoenus*, for in the midst of all the mud is a singing bird and an enemy soldier who has laid aside his weapon in order to watch the bird. At the peak, Robert shoots the soldier and then has a devastating epiphany: the man he has killed had no intention of killing him.

IMAGES OF DESCENT ARE, of course, richly elaborated and to prepare for descent, one needs a talisman, such as a golden bough. For Robert it is his pistol, which gives him the "ritual edge in authority," not so much from the enemy as from his own men in the nightmare world they enter.

The hero on his way to the underworld must follow a special "path" which may become subverted into an image of lost direction, such as the labyrinth or maze, often with a monster at its centre like the Minotaur. Thus, in the passage cited earlier, Robert loses his way, finds himself on a crumbling dike, and senses a "presence" in the fog "like a dragon in a story." Another maze image occurs as he returns to Bailleul for the final catastrophe under "a daze of blazing light and sweat," realizing he has gone "over two hundred miles in circles to get there" when it "should have been about a quarter of that." This late stage of the quest may also be characterized by the ravaged waste land, abandoned buildings, and the town deserted in fear of the monster. Appropriately, Bailleul is called "the last place in civilization." Around it are "a great many ruined farm houses," one of which becomes the refuge of Robert and the horses. It also has an asylum called "Asile Desolé, which means desolated or devastated refuge," where the traumatic rape scene occurs.

The lower world is dark and wintry. As Robert embarks in the dead of winter, he sees figures outside the train window, "frozen in their places," "ghosts through the frosted glass." Passing through Toronto for the last time, he realizes that his world is changing; in the dark he cannot find the "uncomforting shapes" of his memory and he asks, "Where, in his dark, was the world he'd known and where was he being taken to so fast there wasn't even time to stop?"

The lower world is a form of hell, a night world, a subterranean world where the shapes of animals swarm upon the hero. Thus we see the hellish S.S. *Masanabie*, hot, dark, and airless, divided into levels like Dante's Inferno, officers at the top and, at the bottom, the grotesque hold full of manure, flies, rats, the pounding hooves of rearing horses, and an injured horse with a mane like a "tangle of rattlesnakes"; when Robert shoots it, "all hell" breaks loose. Similarly, Flanders is a plain of contaminated mud and water, "dung and debris and decaying bodies," where breezes carry the infernal "smells of smoke and ashes." The thick, evil-smelling fog is "full of shapes that waved their arms." At the bottom of the night world we find a parody of communion, the cannibal feast. When Rodwell, who knows the identity of human and animal natures, sees soldiers eating rats and killing a cat, he knows he has reached the cannibalistic bottom of the night world and he commits suicide. More than anything else, hell is full of dead people, and surely our main impression of the battlefield is that it is a world full of corpses. At times this vision of hell frankly becomes a vision of the Apocalypse, as when flame-throwers unleash fire storms, men explode from combustion, horses rear "with their bones on fire," and the earth is "seared and sealed with fire."

Earth and air are man's natural elements. The romantic hero journeying to another world must pass ordeals of the other two elements, fire and water, just as Dante must pass through a ring of fire and the river of Eden. Once one passes

the ordeals of the two alien elements, one deserves Robert's epitaph: "Earth and Air and Fire and Water." (Incidentally, it may also be that the twentieth century has added ordeal by air, in the form of gas attack, and ordeal by earth, in the form of collapsing dugouts.)

The whole area of the battlefield is "well below sea level" and the men fight in "a shallow sea of stinking grey from end to end" where men and horses drown in mud. Robert's ordeal by water comes when he slips off a dike and nearly drowns. It becomes important to find ways of living with water. Robert appears to love Harris, who tells stories about feeling at home in water, and Rodwell's toad survives a gas attack by staying in a pail of water: "It was a matter, Rodwell had said, of your element. The toad has a choice."

The world of fire can be a destructive world of malignant demons, such as the enemy's fire storms, but it can also be a cleansing purgatorial fire. Both connotations apply to Robert's ordeal by fire in the burning barn. It shows the stupid destructiveness of the war world; it is also a gateway by which Robert rises to a higher level of heroism.

The journey to the underworld is a journey to the land of death. When Robert magnificently bursts out of the barn, clothing on fire, "bright tails of flame . . . streaming out behind him," we may recognize the solar myth of the god who travels through darkness and death but returns like the sun in the morning. The important point about this kind of mimic death is that the hero does go on living afterwards, having come close to or through the chasm. Robert's exaltation as a sun-god may be ironic — after all, he finally dies of his burns — but the life-assertive statements that appear throughout the book insist that there is still triumph in Robert's end: the epigraph from Euripides, for example — "Never that which is shall die" — or Rodwell's last letter to his daughter — "Everything lives forever" — or Robert's reply to the nurse who, "ashamed of life," offers to help him die:

'Not yet.' *Not yet.* Do you see? He might have said 'No.' He might've said 'never.' He might've said 'Yes.' But he said '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" are the words of a man who has been profoundly educated by his journey to the lower world. He fully knows the presence of death and he holds onto life. Knowledge of death feeds this human impulse to survive. When the hero fights the dragon to get at the secret treasure hoard, the real wealth is a wealth of wisdom, which is often wisdom about death, which is to say it is about the fertility of the land, as in the Grail legends. Robert, near the end of the novel, sees himself as an (ironic) fertility god. In dragon-ravaged Europe, he looks into a mirror: "He'd thought he would stand and see himself like a god in the glass."

Instead, he sees a death-image, a "scare crow" with "shadows round the sockets of his eyes." Then, with "a sudden vision of obliteration," he lies down and masturbates, thus becoming a futile fertility god, "the cold, wet blooming of four hundred thousand possibilities — of all those lives that would never be — on his fingertips." Despite this futility, Robert *is* in some way a fertility god, for his "not yet" epitomizes the human will to survive. As Nurse Turner says, "*Not yet* has been my motto ever since . . . and here I am," to which her sister adds, "No dear . . . here we *all* are."

DEATH THREATENS human identity. Thus, an alternative way of seeing this quest to understand death is as a "fable of identity." The original fall from Eden fractures human identity apart from what it should have been. From that point the hero must descend into a world of alienation until ready to ascend to a reintegrated harmony. The opening scenes of romance often show the hero becoming a different person, as is the case with Robert when he stands in a daze at the Kingston train station a few days after Rowena's death, making the fateful decision to join the army and leave the Golden World. (Symbolically, of course, he has no choice: his link with the innocent world died with Rowena and he stands at the station on Good Friday, a day for descents.) When Lewis Carroll's Alice leaves behind one identity, she exchanges it for a looking-glass reflection of herself, mirrors and pictures that alter identity being common romantic motifs. (We may remember the mirror-smashing scene that begins Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.) Similarly, Robert looks down into a puddle which foreshadows the watery world of the trenches but is also a mirror that shows his new military identity: "his reflection was beaten into submission by the rain." The decisive moment arrives when he steps into the puddle and stands there. Identity-distorting mirrors appear again, along with pictures, in that other place of initiation, the brothel: "Directly opposite the door, there was a wall that was covered with paintings of Odalisques and mirrors, so the first thing you saw was yourself, intermingled with a lot of pink arms and pale breasts."

Although there may be a metamorphosis, a change of name, and a change of costume, the hero never completely forgets his original identity. Robert gets a uniform and a new name, "Robert Raymond Ross — Second Lieutenant, C.F.A.," but this new man will be haunted at climactic moments by the memory of the Robert Ross who listened to the lapping water at Jackson's Point with his sister. The quest of the hero is to reintegrate his identity, to become like the Old Testament God, who can say, "I am that I am." There is hope for salvation as long as there is a thread which connects him to his earlier identity, as in the myth of Theseus, whose return from the labyrinth is made possible by the thread which

connects him to the outside. Indeed, Robert's trick of involuntarily remembering his earlier life at key moments literally saves his life during the gas attack, when an image of a science experiment comes "unbidden into Robert's mind from a dull winter classroom long ago."

In the final ascent, the hero's identity is re-established by removing the costume that concealed it. In Robert's case, this is his officer's uniform; after the radical step of freeing the horses, he tears the lapels from his uniform and leaves the battlefield. Freeing the horses (like Moses leading his people out of Egypt) is truly radical because it returns Robert to his roots. No longer the man who follows Captain Leather's foolish orders, he returns to the kind of fellow-feeling with nature that Rowena and her rabbits exemplified. Rodwell kills himself because he finds that those feelings cannot survive in war, since war is based on destruction of one's fellow creatures. Robert, however, finds a way out of the underworld, a way to survive: a radical act of individuality. The act leaves him physically scarred, of course, but heroes from Oedipus on have known that mutilation is often the price of great wisdom. Although the individualizing act, saving the horses, returns Robert to a full compassion for life, it necessitates the destruction of life — the killing of Captain Leather. This paradox is what Frye calls "a return that achieves its recreation by a creatively negative act." Nurse Marian Turner sees this paradox:

You see, he did the thing that no one else would even dare to think of doing. And that to me's as good a definition of a 'hero' as you get. Even when the thing that's done is something of which you disapprove. He was *un homme unique*. . . .

Unfortunately, "creatively negative" acts do not stand up well in the courts. One of the motifs of romance is the trial founded on a mistaken or narrow-minded charge or a wrong identity; the hero escapes by revealing his true identity. The Robert who shot Captain Leather was a man making a desperate last gesture to pull himself out of the lower world of war in order to recreate his own identity. Once that identity is recreated, he is no longer the same man. Thus, Robert's trial is, in fact, the trial of a "wrong identity" and it is poetically appropriate that he be tried "*in absentia*" and allowed to return to St Aubyn's for convalescent treatment.

The return to St Aubyn's is, of course, a return to Eden. As romance moves to a world of original identity, the symbolism of the garden of Eden reappears; a few excerpts from the first description of St. Aubyn's countryside will easily show its Edenic quality:

The countryside is the most beautiful in the world. . . . Spring, in this region, has no equal anywhere. The fields are filled with black and white cows — the river-banks are spread with yellow flowers — larks fly up in endless song — and the rain, when it falls, is soft and warm. [Roads wind] past the naked swimmers in the ponds and deposit you at inn yards where the smell of ale and apples makes you

drunk before you've passed the gate. It is an old world — comforting and safe. . . .

St Aubyn's itself is an abbey and has been the family seat of the d'Orseys since the year 1070. . . . It sits in the middle of a park, surrounded by lawns, and . . . deer would come out of the nearby forest and wander through the flower beds. . . .

Robert can never return to his first Eden: Rowena and her rabbits are dead. The last picture taken during his life shows, however, that Robert has achieved a new Eden. Juliet d'Orsey loves him; they are together in St Aubyn's; he holds her hand and "he is smiling." Juliet, who even as an old woman maintains a child's wisdom, becomes a substitute for Rowena.

This identification is made even more clearly in the epilogue. We see one more picture which echoes the earlier picture of Robert linked to Juliet, and this is "the last thing you see before you put on your overcoat":

Robert and Rowena and 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.

The hero brings the end of his quest in line with the beginning; the circle closes.

By this point, the reader may be wondering to what extent we need to be consciously aware of this romantic quest pattern. Frye answers this question in *Anatomy of Criticism*, when he discusses the cycle of the solar myth as it appears in literature:

The hero does something which we may or may not, as we like, associate with the myth of the sun returning at dawn. If we are reading the story as critics, with an eye to structural principles, we shall make the association, because the solar analogy explains why the hero's act is an effective and conventional incident. If we are reading the story for fun, we need not bother: that is, some murky "subconscious" factor in our response will take care of the association.

In any case, it is clear that while *The Wars'* realistic details generate part of its appeal and effectiveness, the way in which those details are given imaginative impact goes beyond the effects of verisimilitude. We demand that historic and geographic "facts" be given a "shape" to contain them. The situation of the narrator in this novel mirrors this fundamental issue in fiction: he has only a few photographic images which, by themselves, say little. His task — "your" task — is to take those few facts and pictures and find their meaning. To find the meaning of the pictures, to discover the imaginative impact of realistic details, the story-teller must be a master of the basic principles of story-telling — principles which give shape to human experience, and which are as old as myth and legend.

