

# Pictorial Images and Recorded Interviews: Tools for Narration with Reference to Timothy Findley's Novel *The Wars*

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**Abstract:** Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977) is an investigation of the underlying ideological assumptions about the writing of history before the rise of the postmodern questions about history. This article is concerned with how the author has employed the biographic form of his protagonist's story by juxtaposing it with anameless researcher's collection of information about him and investigation into related historical documents as a metafictional device to problematize the writing of biography and history as mimetic representation. The focus will be on the narrative strategies used to blur the distinction between biography and history.

**Keywords:** Timothy Findley, *The Wars*, narrative techniques, history writing, biography

Narrative techniques provide deeper meaning for the reader and help the reader use imagination to visualize situations. Narration has several meanings attached to it. In the broadest sense, it encompasses all forms of storytelling, be it fictional or not; personal anecdotes, crime and historical narratives, all fit into it along with other non-fictional narratives. Narratives exist in various forms like biographies, anecdotes, short stories, novels etc.

Timothy Findley, used different types of narrative techniques in his novels. In his first novel, *The Last of the Crazy People* he shifts in his viewpoints. Nightmarish dreams and flashbacks occur in plenty and each incident is narrated along with its date and time of occurring. *The Wars* makes use of an innovative narrative technique. The story of Robert Ross is narrated by a research scholar who collects all information from photographs, manuscripts, newspaper reports and recorded interviews. *Famous Last Words* is a meta fiction in which the protagonist himself is the writer who writes the novel inside the four walls of his room in a hotel. *The Telling of Lies* is a murder mystery which is solved towards the end of the novel.

Integrating elements of factual history with the world of fiction, *The Wars* approach the issue of historical representation from a metahistorical perspective that sanctions for alternative visions of historical events and epistemological and ontological querying of historiography. Linda Hutcheon celebrates *Famous Last Words* as a classic example of historiographical metafiction because it exhibits an excruciating postmodern self-reflexivity while simultaneously remaining grounded in social, historical, and political realities (13). As for *The Wars*, winner of the 1977 Governor General's Award, she mentions it as an illustration of how postmodern metafiction writers, with their self-conscious recourse to mimetic devices such as photography, cinema and tape-recording, resurrect reading as a dynamic and creative act that is essential in the production of meaning (46-51).

*The Wars* is the story of Robert Ross' early adulthood. Born to an opulent Rosedale family, Ross feels responsible for the death of his invalid sister. The trauma of her death impels him to leave home and join the Canadian field armaments. In France, he endures the horrors of French

warfare, is wounded and upon returning to the front, commits an act that is at once treason and life affirming deed of heroism and love. Ross disobeys an officer and shoots him in an effort to rescue one hundred and thirty horses from a certain death.

Robert, the protagonist of *The Wars*, begins with protests against the killing of life forms. He is against the killing of his sister Rowena's rabbits, but her death drives him to the war field, where he takes up his profession as a soldier. He moves from rejection to the acceptance of killing life forms. Towards the end, he again protests against the massacre of living forms and sacrifices his own life. The novel is constructed around the voice of the narrator, an unnamed researcher who works on letters, photographs, interviews and clippings to put together Robert Ross' life. Letters and photographs are the important structural devices. Kroll sees the photograph as a means for Findley to explore the limits of art in giving the truth to his reader; that is, exactly as the camera brings out the experience.

The novel has a narrative relationship between the First World War and the experience the combatants had. The novel consists of many shocking images passed over to the reader. Findley accomplishes to pull the reader into the narrative itself, so that the reader manages to feel an impact upon him/her-self about what is read. If it was not for this categorical adeptness as a concrete genre, the novel would not have been as prosperous as it is now. Withal, something that avails the book be so triumphant, there is the fact that Findley never inundates the reader with an exorbitant quantity of gruesome details about the World War I. Instead, he breaks the book down to avail the reader calm down from everything that is transpiring.

Findley presents the information that makes up the book as a narrative culled from an archivist's research, photographs, and the accounts of Marian Turner and Lady Juliet d'Orsey. By utilizing multiple perspectives, Findley demonstrates that the war affected everyone around it in different ways, and withal that the truth of his main character, Robert Ross, is elusive. The readers are involved in the process of denuding who Robert was and judging what he did. Findley does not provide a clear indictment or acquittal of Robert's actions. By utilizing multiple voices in the story, Findley is able to capture the "fog of war" and how war can be obscure, confound, and perplex already complex matters. Additionally, the utilization of multiple voices to tell the story, avails Findley eschew some of the more established rhetoric of the genre. It sanctions the novel to emerge as a unique account of war that captures not just what transpired, but how it felt to those involved.

The prologue and the first sections build two narrative strands and set the pattern of how they relate to each other within the novel. The two strands are connected through their common focus on Robert but separated from each other in time and space. The prologue introduces Robert in a scene given out of context, but subsequently his story, narrated impersonally

after section 4, obeys chronology. This narrative strand is mainly set in 1915-16. The first three sections present the second strand, set about sixty years later, in which the I-narrator addresses a researcher as “you” and describes the difficulties encountered by the latter in the search for Robert’s past. Both remain anonymous throughout the novel. What makes this narrator intriguing is that when narrating what the ‘you’-researcher is doing in the archive, the I-narrator repeatedly makes comments on the photographic documents and inserts Marian Turner’s first-hand account of Robert. She and Lady Juliet are the only witnesses willing to talk about him, and the transcripts of their taped interviews become one of the I-narrator’s primary documentary sources. The narrative pattern established here in Part I will be repeated until the end of the novel.

In regarding the two stories as told by different narrators and the “you” as a researcher other than the I-narrator, Vauthier multiplies the narrative layers in *The Wars* but leaves the connection between the three unexplored. Davey identifies the first person and third person narrative voices as spoken by one narrator, who is also the researcher addressed as “you,” but he fails to take account of Findley’s motivation for deliberately splitting the text into two narratives and creating a “you” for the I-narrator to speak to. For him, these narrative layers produce “little effect on the text overall” (116). Although Davey’s reductive reading of the otherwise densely layered texture remains questionable, his suggestion of one narrator with two narrative voices provides clues as to why Findley juxtaposes two narrative strands and has the I-narrator keep addressing the ‘you’-researcher.

At first glance, it is the first person narrative that at the outset strives to establish the authenticity of the impersonal narrative. After the prologue, the I-narrator opens his narration with “All of this happened a long time ago. But not so long ago that everyone who played a part in it is dead. Some can still be met in dark old rooms with nurses in attendance” (3). A number of witnesses survive. Despite their refusal to talk about Robert, they confirm that he exists. The unavailability of first-hand accounts forces the anonymous researcher to turn to archives: “In the end, the only facts you have are public” (3).

Photographs, whose authority originates from the presumption of veracity and immediacy, are perfect documentary evidence used to support factuality. For the I-narrator, they are miniatures of reality, mirroring an age and its historical transition. When poring over the snapshots of 1915, he comments on the changes in women: in one photograph, they “still maintain a public reticence” (4) but in another they “abandon all their former reticence and rush out into the roadway, throwing flowers and waving flags” (5). He pays close attention to the attire: “Here for the first time, the old Edwardian elegance falters. Style is neither this nor that—unless you could say it was apologetic” (4). His comments suggest that the viewer must own knowledge about one age and its change so as to be able to identify them in pictures. Therefore, it is not that photography provides knowledge but that it “activates an already existing stock of knowledge” (Cobley 109).

The resort to documentary sources in the first person narrative engenders paradoxical effects that result in a tension with the impersonal narrative. On the one hand, the accumulation of photographic archives and eyewitness accounts, as well as the inclusion of historical figures like Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, aim to reinforce a sense of factuality and to ensure the reliability of Robert’s story in the impersonal narration. On the other hand, authenticity is simultaneously undermined in that the way they are amassed and treated by the I-narrator apostatizes their shortcomings as

documentary evidence. Moreover, with the I-narrator addressing the you-researcher, presenting archival material and reporting the perpetual research, the first person narrative shatters the immediacy engendered in the impersonal narrative, exposing the existence of an interpreting consciousness, which culls and arranges the details to reconstruct the past (Cobley 104).

*The Wars*, as a collage, is an apt comparison of visual arts and his appeal to sense of sight in his writing. He uses, photographs, snap shots etc. to enrich his novel. By mixing history and fiction, the documentary and imagination, Findley opens up the concept of war, showing the battlefield and treaty hall of traditional history. The novel is an imaginative search for the private realities behind the public documents. Just like the war, the novel breaks down barriers between people whose jealousy guard their separate existence. Findley attempts to open the eyes of the readers to the evil, the capacity to inflict and endure pain that people try to hide from each other and themselves. Privacy is a luxury of peaceful times, when one can isolate oneself in their rooms and minds, certain that life is rational and orderly. For the author, war is a cataclysm in which secrets are revealed, where private becomes public.

#### Primary Source

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