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Carol Ann Howells

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Abstract

The Wars and Famous Last Words are both historical novels; they are also fictive biography / autobiography, as they are perhaps most importantly stories about writing and reading. Certainly they are 'History as she is never writ', or rather they are fictions that rewrite history in order to give significance to past events by creating patterns which reveal essential truths about human nature that can only be distilled through time and presented through art. This is an essay about the literariness of Findley's fictions, about the enigmas he pursues and about his creative invention within the intertextual spaces made possible by preceding fictional discourses. Both of these novels problematise history in so far as they blur the distinctions between referential fact and interpretive fiction, for though the events — some factual and some fictional — happen at the time of World War I (The Wars) and in the inter-war period and World War II (Famous Last Words), their meaning can only be found 'here', i.e. in the narrative constructs which interpret those events in a different historical context from the originals. In this sense both are readings and rewritings of history, The Wars by a narrator sixty years later and Famous Last Words by a narrator whose writings on the wall of the Grand Elysium Hotel are read in the immediate aftermath of the war (1945) and then retold by the novelist with an even later knowledge of endings. In such circumstances, there is no ultimately authoritative reading of history, or as the narrator in Famous Last Words declares, 'All I have written here is true; except the lies' (p.59).

‘History as she is never writ’: *The Wars* and *Famous Last Words*

The Wars and *Famous Last Words* are both historical novels; they are also fictive biography / autobiography, as they are perhaps most importantly stories about writing and reading. Certainly they are ‘History as she is never writ’,¹ or rather they are fictions that rewrite history in order to give significance to past events by creating patterns which reveal essential truths about human nature that can only be distilled through time and presented through art. This is an essay about the literariness of Findley’s fictions, about the enigmas he pursues and about his creative invention within the intertextual spaces made possible by preceding fictional discourses. Both of these novels problematise history in so far as they blur the distinctions between referential fact and interpretive fiction, for though the events — some factual and some fictional — happen at the time of World War I (*The Wars*) and in the inter-war period and World War II (*Famous Last Words*), their meaning can only be found ‘here’, i.e. in the narrative constructs which interpret those events in a different historical context from the originals. In this sense both are readings and rewritings of history, *The Wars* by a narrator sixty years later and *Famous Last Words* by a narrator whose writings on the wall of the Grand Elysium Hotel are read in the immediate aftermath of the war (1945) and then retold by the novelist with an even later knowledge of endings. In such circumstances, there is no ultimately authoritative reading of history, or as the narrator in *Famous Last Words* declares, ‘All I have written here is true; except the lies’ (p.59).

These texts assert their own fictional space, which is defined by historical context and by other fictional texts to which they refer. It seems to me that the most important referents in both are the names of their protagonists: Robert Ross in *The Wars* and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley in *Famous Last Words*, and it is with these novels as psychobiographies that I am mainly concerned. The proper names attach to figures outside the

novels, yet the novels reinvent the two namesakes giving to each their life stories within the fictions.

The case is more problematic with Robert Ross than with Hugh Selwyn Mauberley who is after all a fictional character created by Ezra Pound. The complicating factor is that *The Wars* appears to exist in relation to other writings about the First World War with its allusions to Sassoon, Owen, Graves and D.H. Lawrence, yet the name of its hero shadows another text to which no overt reference is made. Robert Ross looks a typically Canadian name, as indeed it is, an appropriate choice for the hero of a Canadian war novel. Yet this does seem a naïve reading on our part when we recall that it is also the name of a real historical personage who was a Canadian, though he did not fight in the First World War. (He died in September 1918, aged 49.) That Robert Ross was the son of an Attorney-General in Upper Canada, and he was Oscar Wilde's Canadian lover in the 1880s — possibly Wilde's first homosexual lover if we are to believe Ross himself. Ross was the 'dear Robbie' to whom Wilde wrote from France after his trial and exile, when he claimed that Ross was his only true friend. Certainly the choice of name hints at a homosexual sub-text in this novel, but arguably Ross has even more interesting subterranean connections with *The Wars*. I think it gives us an important clue to Findley's literary enterprise by obliquely pointing to a possible model for his novel — not a war novel at all, but another psychobiography, Wilde's own *Portrait of Mr W.H.* (1889).² Robert Ross was not only Wilde's secret homosexual partner, he was also his secret collaborator on the story of W.H.³

If we look at Wilde's story and at *The Wars*, I think the literary connections will become clear. What I am demonstrating is a cluster of similarities which look like more than coincidental resemblances though it may well be unconscious assimilation by Findley as a reader of Wilde. Wilde's story concerns the search for the identity of the mysterious W.H. (whose initials are all that we have). It is told by a narrator who is haunted by W.H.'s ghost and obsessed by the compelling power of words; it begins and ends — like Findley's — in a library, and the central piece of evidence is a portrait of a young man who rests his right hand on a book which under a magnifying glass is seen to be Shakespeare's Sonnets. In *The Wars* Robert Ross's right hand in the photograph of the Epilogue is seen to be holding something which 'magnification reveals' is 'the skull of some small beast'.⁴ It turns out that the portrait in Wilde is a forgery, so that the real face of W.H. remains a blank — just as Robert Ross has no face at the end but only a mass of scar tissue. The crucial effort of Wilde's narrator is to create a presence in place of this absence, to invent a history

for W.H. — just as for Findley's narrator his biographical subject is a blank which needs to be invented. The narrators in both psychobiographies work by intuitive flashes rather than on demonstrable evidence. In the process of this literary creation W.H. and Ross each becomes a tangible presence in their narrator's minds, for by inventing the histories of their lives, the narrators have recreated (in Wilde's case) the life of the beautiful boy actors in a theatre world which was the perfect expression of an essentially male culture and (in Findley's) the life of the doomed youths who went off to the Great War. And each narrator becomes aware of the power of art to show us passions in ourselves of which we have never dreamed: 'It is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves' (*The Portrait of Mr W.H.*, p.209). Even when the theory of W.H.'s identity is renounced by the narrator, three things remain: the forged portrait in the fiction, Shakespeare's Sonnets, and Wilde's story. Just as whatever view is taken of Robert Ross's heroism, there remain the fictional photographs of Ross, the Great War, and Findley's novel. All of which proves Wilde's theory that physical death or hard fact cannot undermine the perpetuation of man's essence through art. Immortality lies in the imaginative act, the text itself. This leads us directly back to *The Wars* through its epigraph, 'Never that which is shall die' — not if it is perpetuated through art.

So it seems to me that Robert Ross's name signals the kind of fiction that *The Wars* is: within the framework of a historical novel Findley is writing a psychobiography, speculating on how far something as mysterious as a human psyche may be traced and leave its traces through art. *The Wars* is not a reading of history through Wilde, though Wilde's is the secret sub-text on which the portrait of Robert Ross is structured, and it provides a comment on the processes of art which immortalise a man's essence. It is in this sense that *The Wars* is elegy and celebration of heroism beyond the memorial of documentary history.

Famous Last Words on the other hand does read the history of the inter-war period through Hugh Selwyn Mauberley's perspective and is more overtly a fictive autobiography. Findley inherits Mauberley his narrator together with his profession as a writer and his distinctive idiom from Ezra Pound,⁵ and the novel is an elaborate transformation of Pound's poetic sequence in an entirely new historical and narrative context. The intertextual space of *Famous Last Words* is entirely that of Modernism, signalled in the mass of quotations from Pound, the echoes of T.S. Eliot, and indirectly of W.B. Yeats via Auden's poem in Yeats's memory.⁶ Findley's interest in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* as the 'document of an epoch' (Eliot's judgment in his 1928 introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems*) is

shown by his focus on the Mauberley persona as a recorder figure, the 'compulsive witness' of his age, 'recording the lives of those around him, moment by moment — every word and every gesture, instantly frozen in his private cipher' (*FLW*, p.21) with his incriminating notebooks and his final testimonial in the Grand Elysium Hotel, which is the full story of his 'Life and Contacts'.⁷ Indeed, Findley's allusive method parallels Pound's own in *Mauberley*, for as J.J. Espey has shown, Pound's text echoes with his reading of Greek and Latin classics and of French and English poetry of the 1890s, all of which is assimilated into the substance of his own artefact.⁸ Findley's novel is both a reading of Pound's poem and a new invention, an extension and a supplement to it. Pound's text functions apparently as a catalyst for Findley, giving him his central character and a language with which to interpret post World War I history.

It is generally assumed that Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is a persona rejected by Pound, that of the post World War I aesthete whom Pound chose not to become, and the separation of Pound from his fictive persona becomes the initial situation in Findley's text, fictionalised in the farewell scene between Pound and Mauberley at Rapallo in March 1945 as Mauberley sets out for Austria. Indeed, Mauberley's whole existence in the novel is Findley's invention post Pound's 1920 text, a separation which is made plain by the date of Mauberley's earliest diary entry: Shanghai, August 1924. But just as this entry which records Mauberley's meeting with Wallis Warfield Simpson (later to be the Duchess of Windsor) is prefaced by lines from Pound's 'Envoi' (1919), so Mauberley's life story in the novel is pervaded by the language of Pound's poem. Mauberley's characterisation is faithful to Pound's persona for both share the same 'fundamental passion' for words as 'the currency of the human mind' (*FLW*, p.385) (cf. 'This urge to convey the relation ... by verbal manifestations' in 'Mauberley 1920', II). They are both 'out of key' with their times, resisting the pressures of their age, only to find themselves isolated and relegated to the margins of history.

It is fascinating to see how Findley's text has appropriated Pound's images and literalised his metaphors into the substance of the narrative, so that the 'chopped seas' and 'the coral isle, the lion-coloured sand' of imagination become the scenarios for the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's story, and Mr Nixon's 'steam yacht' is refashioned into the 'Nahlin' and that mirror-ship the 'Munargo' by which the Windsors are abandoned in 1943. In a similar way, Mauberley's own activities in the novel are a literalisation of the poem's figurative language: 'his tool/ The

engraver's' becomes Mauberley's silver pencil inherited from his father, finally appropriated after Mauberley's death by the young soldier Private Annie Oakley, and used to write his story on the walls of the four rooms in the Grand Elysium Hotel: 'Every single inch of space had been covered with writing: all of it in pencil. Etched. And thus the smell of plaster dust' (*FLW*, p.51). Pound's image 'eye-deep in hell' is both a metaphorical description of Mauberley's situation as he writes in the prison of the Hotel Elysium and also finds its hideous concretisation in the manner of Mauberley's death in the novel, from an ice pick through his right eye (the manner of death prefigured in Trotsky's assassination, another man whose notebook was burned, *FLW*, p.256). Indeed, eyes are important images in both texts: Pound's 'Yeux Glauques' — 'The skylike limpid eyes' — 'the eyes turn topaz',⁹ and the eyes of Wallis — the Duke of Windsor — the eyeless dressmaker's dummy of Queen Mary — Ezra Pound's 'one mad eye, the left' (*FLW*, p.77) — the alligator eyes of Reinhart Mauberley's assassin — also the eyes of Mauberley's two readers, Lieutenant Quinn and Captain Freyberg.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley's 'true Penelope' features in the novel as Mauberley's main contribution to the action, where Penelope is the name he gives to the secret Fascist plot for world domination around which the narrative is structured. Though the plot is abortive, the name in its reincarnation becomes a foreshadowing of the political implications there in Mauberley's elitist criticisms of his age and which are developed in Pound's later writings. Pound's lines, 'The age demanded an image/ Of its accelerated grimace' in a 'prose kinema' echo in the first quotation of the novel (p.3), while the 'kinema' becomes Mauberley's image to describe his writing activity in 1945:

Mauberley smiled. And what a tale to tell. If I could only tell it, he thought. If there was only time and I could tell it all. Oh well. The journals; the notebooks would have to suffice. Except they were like the title cards of a silent film — without the film itself. (*FLW*, p.35)

But even while creating his 'prose kinema' Mauberley is reacting against the demands of his age as he writes in isolation in the freezing hotel like the stylist in Pound's poem, 'Beneath the sagging roof ... Unpaid, uncelebrated'. He insists on writing his story of 'the sublime':

Maybe he had needed to create another image of the world: innocent and shining, like the one the Duchess of Windsor had intended when she said, 'we are led into the light and shown such marvels as one cannot tell.... And then...' (*FLW*, p.76)

Mauberley's story is decisively rejected as lies by one of his readers (Freyberg) and tainted for his most sympathetic reader (Quinn) because of its truth. As Pound says of such an enterprise, 'Wrong from the start'. And Mauberley writes to the accompaniment of a record of Schubert's piano sonata in B-flat major, 'Schubert's last words' (*FLW*, p.385), a transformation of the grand piano of Mauberley's last poem 'Medallion'.

'At the end of things' Mauberley does give the age its image in his eyewitness account of 'the ultimate face of the age' (*FLW*, p.98) and he pays with his own eye and his death. In the novel, Mauberley succeeds in the very activity which Ezra Pound had declared his Mauberley persona was not fitted to do — though Pound does it himself in the first part of his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* sequence with his judgments on post-War England. In Pound's poem Mauberley becomes an exile, paralysed as a writer and capable only of 'maudlin confession', whereas in the novel this judgment is contradicted. Mauberley's drifting 'beneath warm suns' is given to the Windsors in the Bahamas and the aesthetically sterile 'Medallion' poem is replaced by Mauberley's long narrative which is an amplification of Pound's 'Envoi'. The image of the lady becomes that of the Duchess of Windsor with her dazzling lacquered mask, and Mauberley's story is his tribute of passionate admiration and sacrifice for her through twenty years' devotion — though he too shares the sexual 'anaesthesia' of Pound's Mauberley, and Pound's 'still stone dogs' whose mouths bite 'empty air' is echoed in Mauberley's rueful image of himself as one of the Duchess's faithful dogs.

The fictional narrative is Mauberley's final self vindication and his vindication of the power of the written word, which contradicts Pound's assertion of his limitations. Mauberley's story on the walls is his own epitaph as well as that of his age, and his voice in the novel is a conflation of Pound and his persona — for Pound as historical personage writing his *Cantos* in prison and remembering the past lies like a shadow behind the writer in the Grand Elysium Hotel. Mauberley's last words beginning 'Think of the sea' (*FLW*, p.386) are not only the product of his namesake's 'imaginary/ Audition of the phantasmal sea-surge' but also of Pound's insight into 'the whispers of chaos, fire and anger' within the human psyche (*FLW*, p.77), as they create the shape of a threat which is glimpsed momentarily above the surface of the ocean: 'A shape that passes slowly through a dream. Waking, all we remember is the awesome presence, while a shadow lying dormant in the twilight whispers from the other side of reason: I am here. I wait' (*FLW*, p.396). And Mauberley's testament is not destroyed. Like the ancient hand print in the Altamira Caves, it has been preserved against all the odds to be read after the war

and recorded in the novel: 'All I can tell you of myself and of my time and of the world in which I lived is in this signature: `this hand print: mine' (*FLW*, p.173). His writing remains, to assert the creative artist's importance in shaping the chaos of history into art — though such telling lies beyond innocence, as Lieutenant Quinn, the demolitions expert and also Mauberley's reader, discovers. Mauberley's silver pencil is booby-trapped, and the walls do blow up in his reader's face — metaphorically speaking.

As a story about writing and reading, *Famous Last Words* focusses the central issues of Findley's historical novels. Just as there is an elaborate play within the fiction between predeterminism (in the record of events already enacted by history and the prescriptive details of characterisation and imagery from Pound's poetic text) and the assertion of free will in the choice of fictive elements, so this interplay characterises the historical novelist's activity. In this process of repetition and reinvention, distinctions between fact and fiction dissolve as the emphasis falls not on 'truth' but on 'interpretation' — on the hand print, the signature, the image of human enigma. And the last words here should be Oscar Wilde's:

All Art being to a certain degree a mode of Acting, an attempt to realise one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem. (*The Portrait of Mr W.H.*, p.152)

NOTES

1. Timothy Findley, *Famous Last Words* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1981), p.180. All further references to this novel will be taken from this edition and included within the essay.
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* (Originally published 1921; early version in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, July 1889). Republished in *The Artist as Critic*, ed. R. Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968). W.H. was the dedicatee of Shakespeare's Sonnets, and *The Portrait* is a brilliant game of literary detective work.
3. I was alerted to these possible connections by Professor Ian Fletcher's valedictory lecture on 'Psychobiography and Literary Forgery' delivered at the University of Reading, U.K., in January 1983, when he talked about Wilde's and Ross's collaboration over *The Portrait*. Professor Fletcher cannot be held at all responsible for my speculative connections with Findley's text.
4. Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1977; Penguin Books, 1978). My reference is to the Penguin edition, p.190.
5. Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)* (1920). Quotations in my essay are from *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1968. First published 1928).

6. It is interesting to note that Pound's attitudes to World War I as portrayed in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* bleed back into *The Wars*, as we see on a re-reading of that novel after *Famous Last Words*. Findley's fictive record of life at the Front could be read as a gloss on the lines of 'E.P. Ode pour l'élection de son sépulcre', IV.
7. The name of the hotel itself finds its echo in Pound's *Canto LXXXI*, as the quotation (*FLW*, p.37) and Findley's prefatory note indicate.
8. See J.J. Espey, *Ezra Pound's Mauberley: a study in composition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1955).
9. See Espey, *op. cit.*, p.76.

Timothy Findley

INTERVIEW

Terry Goldie interviewed Timothy Findley at the 'Fiction and Film Conference' at McMaster University, 5 November 1982.

The last time, the main thing that we talked about was The Wars and so, today, I'd like to talk about the film of The Wars. Also, the last time you mentioned the novel that you were working on, which was Famous Last Words. Now that's out, so maybe we can talk a bit about that tool.

All right.

How did you find working on a film of a novel that was so well established? Was it difficult to turn it into a different medium?

Yes, but I think I was helped, Terry, in the way you're always helped by knowing the people who are working with you. Working with Robin Phillips and, ultimately, with the actors the film came first. Of course, there were arguments and there were disagreements, but the film was what mattered.