

U.T. XIV. 1992-1993. Págs. 93-100.

ROBERT ROSS: A MAN OF NATURE IN *THE WARS*

Dolors Collellmir

Universitat Rovira i Virgili

Within the lite production of the Canadian novelist Timothy Findley, *The Wars* occupies a special place. The theme of war haunted the author's mind for years. By writing a novel out, carefully and conscientiously, Findley could organize his thoughts, express his feelings, and attempt to carry out what could be considered a kind of moral duty.

Timothy Findley was born between the two great world wars (in 1930) and grew up perceiving something of the tragedy and destruction that those wars brought about. One of his earliest memories is the image of his Uncle Tif dying slowly of injuries received in the First World War. During his adolescence, Findley learned more of that war and its terrible consequences by reading the letters that his uncle had sent home from Europe. Those letters became, as he himself declares, his favorite and most precious readings.¹ On the other hand, his father's eager participation in the Second World War originated in him a feeling of abandonment or rejection that added to his awareness of the cruelty of wars.

Findley mentions Uncle Tif in the dedication of the novel, and indeed, it was to a great extent Tif's story that he wanted to reconstruct and tell in novelistic form. Findley used a number of facts and details from his uncle's letters when writing *The Wars*, but he did not limit himself to just that since he

¹ David MacFarlane, "The Perfect Gesture" (qtd. in *Profiles in Canadian Literature*, Wilfred Cude, Dundurn Press Ltd., 1982) p. 84.

also wanted to transmit the anger that those letters contained.² That anger and Findley's feelings have produced a novel which causes great sympathy and a novel which stirs controversy.

The narrator-researcher of the novel revises Robert Ross's story to find answers to questions concerning him and his behaviour. We indirectly learn of the strong need that the narrator feels to go over Robert's story when Marion Turner, Robert's nurse, says, "Oh, I quite understand why you feel it must be told" (16). To reconstruct Robert's story, the archaeological method has to be applied because there are only some fragments left from the past (photographs and documents found in archives and two first-hand testimonies recorded on tape). Since the story happened long ago, ambiguity, incompleteness, and contradictions are to be found. Therefore, to be able to fill the gaps and to find "the truth" of it, the narrator-researcher has to use imagination while the reader tries to be very alert to all the clues that both author and narrator provide him.

The reader immediately identifies with the narrator and feels involved in the research. The researcher's point of departure are the archives. There, he has access to many pictures of the protagonist with his family and friends and others which show different moments of Robert's life as a military officer. The contemplation of those photographs all together causes him to feel so excited at one point that he says: "A whole age lies in fragments underneath the lamps" (p. 11).

The archival documents tell us basically about Robert's actions and the narrator is convinced that, "People can only be found in what they do" (p.11). But Lady Juliet warns him not to be carried away just by behaviour because: "The greatness of people lies in their response to the moment in which they lived" (p.104). Lady Juliet also remembers her brother's words when talking about what his generation and that war had done to civilization: "I doubt we'll ever be forgiven. All I hope is - they'll remember we were human beings" (158).

² David MacFarlane, p. 84.

Therefore, as readers, we cannot judge Robert's behaviour in a simplistic way, as an act of madness or of heroism. Nor can we consider him a hero or a monster, but rather we should study him as a complex and contradictory human being who lived an extraordinary period. In this way, the reconstruction of Robert's life leads up to the human tragedy in the classical sense.

The careful process of writing this novel seems to confirm a need of giving form to a story which had been dwelling in the author's mind for many years. Timothy Findley has used numerous devices to convey the novelistic truth in all its intricacy. Archetypal symbols and situations are combined with postmodern narrative techniques. Before the opening of the novel, we find two epigraphs which introduce both the philosophical mood of the novel and its crucial dilemma. The first epigraph attributed to Euripides reads, "Never that which is shall die." This powerful statement tells us of the difference between the essential and existential qualities of being and proclaims a need for immortality. The second epigraph written by the Prussian military theorist von Clausewitz says:

"In such dangerous things as war the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst."

This death-life dichotomy becomes the leitmotif of the novel and the plight that some of the characters, especially the protagonist, have to meet. We become aware that, in wartime, man's predicament outruns him since life and death sometimes overlap.

All the horses and mules were either dead or were dying... "If an animal had done this--we would call it mad and shoot it" and at that precise moment Captain Leather rose to his knees and began to struggle to his feet. Robert shot him between the eyes." (p. 178)

Since the archives cannot provide enough information to understand Robert's paradoxical behaviour, the researcher tries to contact people who knew Robert personally. It is through the testimony of two women that we get to

know about his personality, feelings, and philosophy of life. One of these women is Robert's nurse, Marion Turner; the other, Lady Juliet d'Orsey, is the woman who loved him and remained with him until his death.

It is through Lady Juliet that we learn that Stuart, Robert's brother, is alive but refuses to speak to the researcher. As Lady Juliet feels proud of Robert, she cannot understand Stuart's attitude: "It's as if Robert did something evil" (100). There are also some surviving soldiers who knew him, though their testimony is unreliable since they appear to be mentally deranged or senile. Their reactions were either to weep or to utter something like "that bastard" (p.10).

Before going to the war we know Robert as an athletic and sensitive young man who undergoes some traumatic experiences. He feels guilty for the death of his hydrocephalic sister Rowena because she falls from her wheelchair and dies while he is in his bedroom engaged in masturbation. He had considered himself her guardian and he failed. After her death his mother cruelly and illogically wants him to kill the rabbits that belonged to Rowena. In this way we see, very early in the novel, how killing, love, loyalty and sex are mingled. All his subsequent experiences will involve these ingredients. The discovery of Captain Taffler's sado-masochistic homosexual activity is especially traumatic since Robert, while training to become an officer, had chosen him as a model. In the ship which transports him to England he, as the officer in charge of the horses, is the one who has to kill an injured horse. Hence, he is again forced to kill against his will. It is described as follows:

He took his aim. His arm wavered. His eyes burned with sweat.

Why didn't someone come and jump on his back and make him stop?

He fired.

A chair fell over in his mind. (65)

This image of a chair falling is the recurring image of his sister Rowena falling from her wheelchair and dying.

Once in Flanders his own life is in danger. First, when he almost drowns in mud and on another occasion when he is brutally raped, presumably by fellow officers. After this aggression he burns some possessions, including the picture of his sister Rowena. We read: "This was not an act of anger but an act of charity" (p.172).

We see this as an example of an act of violence framed in human dignity. Paradoxically, destruction is seen as the only way to preserve the purity and decency of people and things.

The information that Lady Juliet gives concerns mainly his physical appearance and his personality. In this way we learn that he was a very "private man" and that he had "a great deal of violence inside" (153). Some of this information is very intimate but she reveals it because she considers it relevant to understand Robert. She even tells of Robert's affair with her sister Barbara describing a scene that she witnessed in which violence and sex mix once more:

Barbara was lying on the bed, so her head hung down and I thought that Robert must be trying to kill her. They were both quite naked...Robert's neck was full of blood and his veins stood out. He hated her. (156)

In the novel it is said that Robert Ross is "a scholar and an athlete" (p.15). That is, he is both a man of thought and a man of action. As a man of action, he is capable of acting "on the spur of the moment," as happens when he shoots Captain Leather; and because he is a man of thought, he can also doubt and delay action. When Robert is taken to hospital badly burned and under arrest, the nurse who takes care of him, Marion Turner, offers to help him die. Robert's answer to her offer is, 'Not yet.' As his nurse says, he might have said 'No', he might have said 'Never', he might have said 'Yes', but he said

'Not yet' (189). Marion Turner says admiringly: "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" (p.189).

Action, or rather, the appropriateness of taking action, the decision to take action or not, can be said to determine the moral quality of men, and to choose between carrying out an action or not is part of man's anguish. In Robert's case, then, it is not only his killing of Captain Leather that we should take into account and analyse but also his decision not to take his life after being badly burned and considered a traitor. Robert is very much in favor of life, but he cannot bring natural justice (saving the horses) without being involve in crime (killing Captain Leather). He, like many other heroes in literature, seems to be the agent of a supreme power and at the same time its victim.

The life-death dichotomy, which pervades the novel, is also reflected in the photographs that the researcher finds in the archives. Two of the most revealing photographs are described in the epilogue of the novel. The first one, having a group of guns as background, shows Robert holding the skull of a small animal. This picture, in traditional pictorial iconography, is a "reminder of death," while the second picture, in which Robert is holding Rowena, can be regarded as death-defying because it even captures their breathing.

*Rowena seated astride the pony - Robert holding her in place.
On the back is written: "Look! you can see our breath!" And
you can. (191)*

Thus the leitmotif of the novel is life-death, but the novel is framed in the notion of on-going life. It starts with Euripides' epigraph "Never that which is shall die," and ends with a photograph which is presented, using the words of the critic Lorraine M. York, as a "preserver of life."³

If the use of photographs has evidently enhanced awareness of discontinuity and fragmentation, the use of symbols contributes to the final

³ Lorraine M. York, *The Other Side of Dailiness* (ECW Press, 1988) p. 86.

meaning of the novel and to our understanding of the role of its protagonist. As the Canadian critic and scholar W.J. Keith says, through the interconnection and repetition of some dominant symbols such as fire, water, and horses, Findley expresses: "the complex interaction of power, violence, and sexuality as they manifest themselves under wartime conditions"⁴

But, if we focus on the scenes in which animals appear and think of what they mean to the protagonist, we may find the clue to understanding Ross's behaviour and further meaning to *The Wars*. Animals such as horses, dogs, a coyote, birds, crows, and several small animals are present in all types of pleasant and disagreeable situations throughout the novel to remind us of several things. We notice that some characters reveal themselves more authentic in their relationship with animals than with other human beings. We see that soldiers and officers in the novel can behave brutally with each other or they can be sadistic towards animals, but their most outstanding manifestations of human decency are also addressed to animals. When Robert is involved in the war, he feels alone and abandoned. The only expressions of solidarity that he receives come from animals, and nature in its widest sense ends up being the only point of reference that Robert has.

Back in Canada, Robert had had a model, Longboat, an Indian marathon runner. When he goes to war he tries, in vain, to find a new model among the officers. As time passes, therefore, Robert retreats more and more from the world of war, which for him is the paradigm of moral desintegration, and identifies more and more with nature. Towards the end of Robert's period at the trenches, one of the officers, Captain Rodwell, on being transferred, leaves a sketchbook with Robert.

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. (p.138)

⁴ W. J. Keith, *Canadian Literature in English* (Longman, 1985) p. 170.

In the novel we read, "What had Rodwell meant by this?" (138). It is clear for us: Robert belongs to the natural world, he is part of nature. Therefore, when he tried to save the horses, he was defending LIFE, not just human life. He acted also as a true Canadian, in the way an Indian would have acted. It is also Rodwell who says: "Any man whose love of horses is stronger than his fear of being an absurdity is all right with me" (90).

But we still can find more evidence of this total integration in nature if we consider the opening scene in which Robert Ross appears together with a black mare and a black dog. If we analyse it from the standpoint of symbolism and in the frame of myth following Cirlot's study of symbols, we see that this image given at the onset of the novel foreshadows future events. For instance, the sudden appearance of a horse was considered by the Greeks as an omen of war. In other cultures, such as the British and the German, the horse has been thought to be an omen of death. On the other hand, we also know that the dog is the companion of the dead on their "Night Sea-Crossing." This same scene reappears towards the end of the novel in a context that enables us to appreciate Robert's situation more dramatically. On the other hand, at that crucial moment the reader is also better prepared to interpret its symbolism more fully. The composition of animal-man-animal represents the union of man with nature, and it denotes triumph.

Robert's action—trying to save the horses and killing Captain Leather—seen as a confrontation between reason and emotion, can be considered a resolute act of treason or heroism, or a revelation of inexplicable madness. But, after analysing the symbolic meaning of these images we can confirm that Robert's decision was in fact based on and guided by his choice to follow the law of Nature instead of following the laws of war. And in this frame he definitely transcends and he is triumphant.