Meta(Hi)Story: *Timothy Findley's Famous Last Words*

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Although Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* speaks of Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas* as "the representation . . . of Classical representation,"[1] Linda Hutcheon, in "Poetics of Post-modernism?" suggests that the fascination with *Las Meninas* continues for readers of postmodern fiction because it provides a "visual analogue of metafiction's inscription of the enunciative act: we look at a painting of a painter looking at us."[2] That is to say, the manipulating relationship between the position of the producer and of the receiver (which together form the enunciative act, or in other words, reflect a discursive situation) is actually inscribed, or placed, within the text itself. Thus, not only does *Las Meninas* represent the producer at work, it also "presupposes the viewer's presence and then plays ironically with it" (PP 37). This "play" is a familiar technique of much postmodern fiction which insists that we recognize that the producer and the receiver and the relationship between them must be understood within specific historical, social, and ideological contexts.

Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* [3] provides an excellent means by which to clarify the position of the postmodern author, a position, as Hutcheon points out, which is still very much one of discursive authority. I agree with Hutcheon in stressing postmodernism's emphasis on "the interactive powers involved in the production and reception of texts" (PP 34); that is, the author-function, who operates within larger cultural discourses, produces a text which manipulates (overtly or covertly) a reader-receiver. In the metafiction of postmodernism, this producing position is often given form through the narrator-author inscribed within the text, who openly acknowledges to the reader his or her presence and his or her power of manipulation. The result is often an insistence that the reader be aware of her complicity in determining any "meaning" from the text. This is not to say that together the narrator-author and reader work to discover a meaning that is *within* the text: the postmodern author insists that the reader recognize that together they determine meaning. My emphasis is on the challenges presented, and thus, the possibilities made available, to the reader. Such challenges and possibilities are evident in *Famous Last Words*, which, like *Las Meninas*, inscribes the position of the producer

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[1] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. of *Les Mots et Les Choses* 1966 (rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 16.

[2] Linda Hutcheon, "A Poetics of Postmodernism?," *Diacritics* 13:4 (Winter 1983) 37. Subsequent references to this article will be given parenthetically in the text as PP.

[3] Timothy Findley, *Famous Last Words* (New York: Dell, 1981). Subsequent references to *Famous Last Words* will be given parenthetically in the text as *FLW*.

and receiver within its text, and thus functions as the type of metafiction I call meta(hi)story. Meta(hi)story manipulates the reader by conflating historical "fact" and "fiction," to insist that the reader accept her position as not only receiver, but also as joint producer in the telling and retelling of history. This term is, in a sense, related to Hayden White's concept of metahistory. White, too, posits historiography as a poetic construct: the historian works within a "metahistorical" paradigm which exists on a poetic, or linguistic level, and which determines what, for that historian, constitutes historical explanations.[4] My term, meta(hi)story, is meant to indicate that this particular brand of postmodernism not only insists that history is a construct, is story, but also that these texts comment on themselves both as history *and* as fiction.[5] Hutcheon calls this particular strain of postmodernism "historiographic metafiction."

In *Famous Last Words* the postmodernist Findley has usurped the modernist Pound's Romantic creation, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, who tells a story which he defines as history but acknowledges to be much fiction. The power wielded by the narrator-author (represented by Mauberley) is concurrently thrust upon and shared by the inscribed readers (represented by Lieutenant Quinn and Captain Freyberg) who together must determine the meaning of the text. Mauberley is still "out of key with his time," and thus, is surprised to find himself playing the role of messenger within an international cabal--involving Charles Lindberg, Edward VIII and Wallis Warfield Simpson, and an assortment of top Nazi officials, British statesmen, and international businessmen and financiers--which actively manipulates the events of the time, those of World War II. Within the sphere of Findley's text, Mauberley becomes a historian, a messenger through time, who scratches a "lost" version of (hi)story on the walls of two suites in an Austrian hotel in 1945. Mauberley recalls the events of this cabal while he waits to be murdered, precisely because he has this (hi)story to tell and the means with which to tell it. When an American troop finds the dead Mauberley, Lt. Quinn and Capt. Freyberg become the readers of the "writing on the wall." Lt. Quinn hopes that the text will expiate Mauberley; Capt. Freyberg expects it to damn him.

In short, Findley places us in the postmodernist position, once removed: we not only watch the position of the enunciating entity, the narrator-author (Mauberley) write, but we also see our own position as reader represented, as we watch the readers, Quinn and Freyberg, read. In the process, we are asked to think less about the modernist view of history as a matter of perspective, than of the postmodernist view of history, as a construct: that is, history as something that is manipulated first by the teller, and then by the receiver. Just as importantly, we think about which (hi)stories become possible within certain historical, social, and ideological contexts, as well as the factor of chance involved. We think of the (hi)stories written only to disappear (as the walls on the

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[4] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[5] Cf. Dennis Duffy, in his "Let Us Compare Histories: Meaning and Mythology in Findley's *Famous Last Words*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 30 (Winter 1984-85).

hotel are to disappear at the end of the novel, to be defaced or blown up). *Famous Last Words*, like *Las Meninas*, indicates that ultimately it is the position of the producer (the teller, the painter) that becomes visible in a constructed representation: what is reflected is primarily a function of who does the reflecting, from what angle, from what position. The question meta(hi)story raises, then, is not what is the "true" history, but rather, *who* presents *what* history, and *who* reads and interprets it? We not only watch the postmodern narrator-author write; we are also made aware that the writer is writing quite consciously for us. The narrator-author challenges the reader to participate in creating the picture. And the reader must comply, if only in the attempt to make sense of the text.

This touches on the position of who presents and who receives, but what about the *what* that is presented. In *Famous Last Words* we watch Mauberley writing on the walls, and his subjects are most specifically the focal point of the cabal, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (the former King Edward VIII and the woman who would be Queen, Wallis Warfield Simpson.) But we see the subjects of Mauberley's work only in the background, as if through a glass, darkly; that is, we see the hazy outlines of two individuals that have made it into the history textbooks. The point *Famous Last Words* makes is that our understanding of these figures pales in comparison to a hidden story such as Mauberley could give us. But reading the story on Mauberley's walls is only a transitory accident: only by chance do we hear of the Windsors' involvement in a cabal that contains names such as Hess, von Ribbentrop, Paisley, and Lindberg. In *Famous Last Words* Findley suggests just one of an infinite set of possibilities or stories that will never be known.

Findley's point is *not* that here is a possible "true" revelation. Quite explicitly, his doubly fictional Mauberley begins his engraved walls with: "All I have written here is true; except the lies" (*FLW* 59). Still, *Famous Last Words* moves beyond the truism that history is story, that any telling requires the perspective of a teller, and thus, the capricious or manipulative selection of detail to be related. Findley's is also a discussion of the elements of power and chance contained in any discourse; his work reminds us that the concepts of history and fiction can never be severed because both are discourse and that discourse constitutes and is constituted by a web of power relations. As Hutcheon states: "discourse constitutes more than a repository of meaning; it involves both the potential for manipulation--through rhetoric or through the power of language and the vision that it creates--and also the possibility (if not permissibility) of evasion of responsibility through silence" (*PP* 41). Findley asks us to think about the power of discourse from the direction of the story that gets told: if the writings on the wall alter our perception of history, and thus, of reality, the writer has taken on great authority. On the other hand, it is the nature of postmodern discourse, as seen in Findley's text, to simultaneously assign responsibility to the reader. A paradox emerges: the writer takes control and manipulates the reader into the position of taking on responsibility.

From another perspective, however, chance becomes the element of power. Chance allows Mauberley's walls to be read before they are defaced; chance prevents them from being further made known. Mauberley notes the arbitrariness of how chance and bias determine what is to be remembered: "So this is history as she is never writ, I thought. Some day far in the future, some

dread academic, much too careful of his research, looking back through the biased glasses of a dozen other 'historians,' will set this moment down on paper. And will get it wrong. Because he will not acknowledge that history is made in the electric moment, and its flowering is all in chance" (*FLW* 180).

But the chance stories that unexpectedly come the reader's way may not alter the "truths" the reader "knows" anyway. Quinn reads the walls, wanting to believe that Mauberley (the ProFascist) is ultimately without guilt, and after the reading, says that the walls prove nothing. Freyberg, who expects to find justification for his career in vengeance, does. They read the same walls; their views are unchanged. Neither has learned the modernist lesson--that truth may be a matter of perspective; certainly, neither is ready for the postmodernist lesson--that the question is really one of available truths or stories, and the suppression of untold stories.

I repeat, however, that the themes of power and chance are never far from each other. Although it is chance that makes Mauberley's variation of history available to the readers Quinn and Freyberg, the interpretation of that history is then contested between the viewpoints, the ideologies, of these readers. Just as a representation reflects most clearly the representer, it also incorporates the receiver. Findley presents readers for Mauberley's walls other than Quinn and Freyberg; he also "presents" us. And our capacity for recognizing the perspectives is tested as we attempt to take control. We see a picture of the history that Hugh Selwyn Mauberley tells that Mauberley can't see. As readers we study the relationship between reader and narrator-author within the text of *Famous Last Words* in order to fill in for ourselves what is missing from the text. And the image that develops is not of a true history that is represented, but rather of the producer and receiver of (hi)story. Thus, to understand the manipulations of narrator-author and reader within the text we read, is to understand Findley's and our role in reading *Famous Last Words*, and ultimately to come to a greater recognition of the roles of power and chance in the presentation, reception, and perpetuation of any discourse, including one that calls itself "history."

Thus, a mirror of *Famous Last Words* should reveal Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and the subjects of his text, and also the readers Quinn and Freyberg, as well as the enunciating position held by Findley, and finally, the receivers, us. The (hi)story that we see in Mauberley's text provides another version of the hazy (hi)storical figures that make the journey through time, losing and replacing bits of themselves in the process. These figures, or representations, reflect little of their actuality within their contemporaneous time frame; rather, they apprehend our perception: the figures in the texts of history wait for our ever-shifting interpretation. Meta(hi)storytellers do not change history or the telling of it--they simply insist on its multiplicity, in great part because of the receivers' complicity in its determination.

My point is that, on one level, the image that the reader has in front of her while reading *Famous Last Words* is just that vague representation of historical figures which has been given to us by our traditional history. On a deeper level, however, is what our "reflection" *should* incorporate. That is, we should be able to reflect upon a text that is itself a reflection of the shared enunciative relationship of the position of an enunciating entity (here, occupied by Findley,

and exemplified in *Famous Last Words* by the inscribed narrator-author, Mauberley) and the receiver (here the reader, we , and in *Famous Last Words*, the inscribed readers, Quinn and Freyberg). These observing functions (of the enunciating entity, of the receiver/reader, of (hi)storical figures which make up the topic of the text) come together in meta(hi)story, with the acknowledged center positioned forever outside of the text, that is, of the represented history. This is meta(hi)story's insistence: that the originating subjects cannot be incorporated or repeated as they were, that a dim and manipulated representation is all that is possible.

But we need to go beyond remarking upon how this jointure between the narrator-author of meta(hi)story and the reader takes place in the production of the text, to the possibilities inherent in this mode of presentation. Meta(hi)stories indicate that we can only be given certain information at a certain time, and that this limitation rules out the possibility of arriving at an ultimate "truth." In presenting obviously manipulated versions, meta(hi)storytellers call attention to the manipulation and caprice behind any presented story. The "overt, self-conscious control by an inscribed narrator-author figure . . . demands, by its manipulation, the imposition of a single perspective, while *at the same time* subverting all chances of its attainment. Such defamiliarization and distanciation combine with a general shift of focus from the epistemological and ethical concerns of modernism to the ontological puzzlings of post-modernism (what is art? life? fiction? fact?) to allow for (potentially) a greater ideological self-awareness in literature" (PP 35-36).

Such self-awareness does not make texts ideologically innocent. Rather, the attempt is to disallow the reader the illusion of a past or a history as *the* past or *the* history, and this is precisely because the texts insist on their own capriciousness, as they overtly manipulate "fact" and "fiction." Meta(hi)story is thus a potentially powerful mode of fiction, for, as Hutcheon points out, "to change the way one reads or perceives may be the first step to changing the way one thinks and acts" (PP 36). Meta(hi)story doesn't tell us how to think about a certain event; rather, it says "that's one way of looking at things, now here's another, and another, and another." It suggests to the reader that since she is complicit in her readings, it may be time to learn to read again, and to learn to recognize that, while reading, she is participating in discourse. Meta(hi)story's contribution is not to denounce ideological perspectives, but to increase our awareness of the necessary manipulation behind each perspective. What is not compatible with the manipulation and vision of meta(hi)story is the presentation of a viewpoint without simultaneously calling that point of view into question. Meta(hi)story comes with a warning and a challenge. The author warns the reader that this story, like all others, will be skewed. And then she challenges the reader to stay aware of the skewing, using the skewed tale toward an acknowledged end.

Famous Last Words as meta(hi)story urges us to look outside our traditional responses for truth, more specifically, to question (hi)stories that come with the tag of truth, with a sense of completion; but ultimately, it warns that we must act at some point, cognizant of the limits of our knowledge. To remain silent, not to act, is to fail to heed the ominous tone at the end of Mauberley's, and Findley's story:"Think of the sea . . Imagine something mysterious rises to the surface on a summer afternoon--shows itself and is gone before it can be

identified . . .By the end of the afternoon, the shape--whatever it was--can barely be remembered. No one can be made to state it was absolutely thus and so. Nothing can be conjured of its size. In the end the sighting is rejected, becoming something only dimly thought on: dreadful but unreal. Thus, whatever rose towards the light is left to sink unnamed: 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* 396).