

## Robert Ross and the Value of Dehumanization

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In Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, the lives of animals shape Robert Ross's identity in the war by constructing his sense of morality. This leads Robert to value dehumanization and reject faith in humanity. Valuing dehumanization is counterintuitive because we typically see it as humans becoming machine-like or bestial. In this essay, however, I am going to use dehumanization in a positive sense to describe the alternative, life-affirming value-system that Robert learns from animals. Valuing dehumanization is also counterintuitive because the traditional chain of being positions humans as superior to animals and puts their intelligence above that of animals. Yet, the novel shows that animals are not only equal but superior through Robert's experiences. The moral value of dehumanization is portrayed through Robert's valuing of instinct and life, innocence, and belonging. Throughout *The Wars*, the rejection of faith in humanity for its immorality is demonstrated through the violence and destruction of war.

Animal instincts are what have kept Robert alive during the war more than anything. There are numerous occasions when Robert knows something bad is about to happen simply because of animals reacting: "It was odd. Robert looked up. There should have been birds... Then he heard a rush of wings. Something exploded... Robert ducked as a whoosh of air threw him forward" (179). Robert can prepare himself for the dangers ahead simply by paying attention to the animals surrounding him. And even when animals are not around, he engages within himself his own animalistic instincts. During one of his nights in the dugout, Robert cannot manage to fall asleep. This is not because he isn't tired; in fact, he is exhausted. His body will not allow him to sleep because it knows what will happen if Robert is left unaware: "sleep was dangerous. The animal memory in you knew that. No matter what your mind said, your body didn't listen. Part of you stayed awake" (91). By using second person narration, this passage seems almost like a conversation Robert is having with himself, potentially with his own animal instincts. And he knows that these instincts are right and will keep him alive.

The incredibility of life itself is what Robert learns from animals and leads him to value dehumanization. Robert trusts animal instincts to keep him alive because he appreciates life so much and therefore sees in

animals the wonder of life. As Robert treks through the crater that was once a trench, he finds that not one of his men survived the explosion. On his way back to base, he sets a rat free from a hole in the ground: “Robert wondered afterwards if setting the rat free had been a favour—but in the moment that he did it he was thinking: *here is someone still alive*. And the word *alive* was amazing” (114). Amongst all the death and destruction of the moment, an animal has survived. It is relevant to note that Robert states that “someone” and not “something” is still alive; this shows that Robert holds animals on the same level as, if not higher than, humans.

Epigraphs are used in literature and poetry to illustrate an important theme in the author’s writing. In this novel, the epigraph is a quotation from Euripides: “never that which is shall die.” This is very similar to Officer Rodwell’s letter to his daughter that, along with the toad, Robert becomes responsible for. In this letter Rodwell writes: “I am alive in everything I touch... Everything lives forever. Believe it. Nothing dies.” (135). Therefore, a concept revealed through the novel is that life itself has greater power and meaning than death and that it exceeds death simply by a fact of existence. This is a very profound concept, and it is one that Robert continuously connects to animals. The life of his beloved older sister Rowena is reflected in the life of her rabbits, and when she dies, they are killed too. Robert feels happy and at peace whenever he spends time with horses because to him they are *alive*, separate from the death and sorrow he is surrounded by. An example of this is when he is riding along the road at night:

Now he was back in the saddle—almost asleep—and the guns had fallen quiet. The rain beat down in squalls and there was hardly any light. The only sound was the falling rain and the grinding of the wagon wheels. All at once, Robert’s horse shied and refused to proceed. Robert was jarred into wakefulness. (182)

When Robert dismounts his horse, he sees Clifford Purchas—a soldier he went to school with—dead, sprawled out face first in the mud. Robert is so at peace on his horse he nearly falls asleep, but when he is forced to get off, he is once again jolted into the horrors of war. Robert sees dehumanization as positive because to him animals represent life transcending death.

To Robert, animals are also the embodiment of innocence. They are simple creatures, free from sin. This is why he always feels the need to protect them. Since childhood, Robert has loved and been the guardian of Rowena, who herself was innocent. This is why, whenever an animal is harmed, he is reminded of her and her innocence, and when an innocent

person is harmed, he notices the animals surrounding him. When he is required to kill an injured horse on the ship, his mind immediately goes to the death of his sister: "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" (60). His first inclination is to protect, not kill, an animal, which is why he is inwardly pleading for someone else to step in and make him stop. Another significant scene that illustrates the link Robert has between innocence and animals is the shooting of the German soldier. Robert kills the German because he thinks the soldier is reaching for a gun, when really he is trying to get out his binoculars. As awful as his mistake is, Robert realizes something else:

It was even worse than that. Lying beside the German was a modified Mauser rifle of the kind used by snipers. He could have killed them all. Surely that had been his intention. But he'd relented. Why? The bird sang. One long note descending; three that wavered on the brink of sadness. That was why. It sang and sang and sang, till Robert rose and walked away. The sound of it would haunt him to the day he died. (131)

Robert is haunted by this act because of the innocence of the eighteen-year-old boy he kills. The bird above crying out in sorrow echoes the sadness of both this killing of an innocent and a loss of Robert's own innocence.

Robert's process of dehumanization also comes from the belonging he finds with animals and likewise the associations of animals with the people he belongs with. Whenever Robert is with animals, he feels comfortable and at home. We first see this in his encounter with the coyote. Robert has no worry whatsoever that the animal will attack him, or that he will get lost in following it. He follows until they reach their destination, which is, as Findley puts it simply, "safe" (27). Later on in the novel, we get to see where Robert goes in his mind when he dreams of home: "when he fell on his bed, fully clothed, he fell through a clouded countryside of small white barns and cows in yards and he slept to the sound of the water lapping his father's feet and of nightingales in an unnamed wood" (167). Robert's "happy place" is filled with cows and birds and excludes human creatures.

The people Robert feels at home with also have a connection to animals. I have already mentioned the connection to Rowena, so I will turn to the others. Rodwell is his fellow officer and friend who runs an

unofficial veterinarian hospital in the trenches. This demonstrates that both Rodwell and Robert share an obligation to care about these creatures and protect them. Rodwell also draws Robert in his sketchbook: “in all of them—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” (138). Rodwell makes the visual connection between Robert and those he really belongs with in the drawings. Barbara D’Orsey is Robert’s lover for a short period, and while the sex itself is not portrayed as particularly intimate, they do have a moment of comfort together. Just after seeing Taffler, they exit the room: “they were very tense. Then Barbara turned and took Robert’s hand. She leaned against his side. At first, he didn’t seem to know what to do—but finally he put both his arms around her shoulders and held her for a very long time with his chin on top of her head... Everything they’d done was like a dance between two birds” (155). Their one very emotionally close moment is compared to bird courtship, which is what birds do to recognize each other for compatible mates. Finally, Harris is the soldier that Robert genuinely loved, who passed away from pneumonia. Harris understands completely Robert’s sense of belonging with animals because Harris, too, feels acceptance in the animal world—specifically, at sea: “out of the air and into the water. Out of my world and into theirs... They aren’t any friendlier—the fish, you know. But they accept you there. As if you might belong, if you wanted to. It’s not like here” (93). They both feel as though they belong with animals, and thus they belong together as well.

In his article “Bugging With History: Sexual Warfare & Historical Reconstruction in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*,” Shane Rhodes argues that “[Findley’s] portrayal of male war relations seems based on violence and predation” (Rhodes 45). I would like to argue that it is not male, but *man’s* (as in human) relations in war that are based on violence, and this is the reason Robert simultaneously rejects faith in humanity. Robert sees that in war, human qualities are lacking in morals. They do unthinkable acts of evil: “A: men would not do such things and, B: they could not. Then they did” (Findley 132). Murder to the extent of the First World War was appalling, and yet it was committed by people just like us. When officer Levitt reads his excerpt from *Clausewitz on War*, he cites: “Clausewitz says the true basis of combat is man to man” (87). Though in the context of the book Clausewitz is referring to man versus artillery, I would argue that Findley is suggesting that all war really is the fighting and murdering of humans by other humans and that all war does is reveal the soldier in man.

All of the sexual acts in *The Wars* are also extremely violent. Robert compares Taffler and the Swede having sex to David and Goliath. Robert's own sex with Barbara is described similarly by Juliet: "I knew in a cool, clear way at the back of my mind that this was 'making love'—but the shape confused me. The shape and the violence" (160). Finally, the violence and sense of combat in the rape scene demonstrates the lack of morality of humans. Rape is intrinsically a violation, but the real significance of this rape is that, "his assailants, who he'd thought were crazies, had been his fellow soldiers" (175). It was not the mentally challenged men (people who typically get negatively dehumanized) that committed this evil act, but the men who are supposed to be his companions. Humanity in war, therefore, lacks any moral values, which is why Robert identifies so much with the ethics and morals of animals, who do not engage in acts of war but, at most, survival.

In conclusion, animals shape Robert Ross's identity by providing his moral standards, whereas humans in war lack any sense of morality. This leads him to value dehumanization and reject faith in humanity. The essence of this statement lies in the moment just before Robert shoots Captain Leather and takes off with the horses. Robert has a sort-of epiphany regarding the relationship man has to animals: "if an animal had done this—we would call it mad and shoot it" (184). As humans, we see ourselves so superior to animals, and yet had they committed the acts of violence done during *The War*, we would consider them monstrous creatures. So that begs the question—what kind of creature are we?

### Works Cited

- Findley, Timothy. *The Wars*. 1977. Reprint. Toronto: the Penguin Group, 2005. Print.
- Rhodes, Shane. "Buggering With History: Sexual Warfare and Historical Reconstruction in Timothy Findley's 'The Wars'." *Canadian Literature* 159 (1998): 38-53. Print.