

# BASHING THE FASCISTS: THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF FINDLEY'S FICTION

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What on earth is this Findley fellow up to? Just when he seemed to be developing nicely from a writer of more or less realistic novels into a postmodernist writer of metafiction, he crossed us up. His first novel, *The Last of the Crazy People*, has been aptly described as "Southern Ontario Gothic" — a form with little or nothing to distinguish it from everyday, garden-variety type realism.<sup>1</sup> His next, *The Butterfly Plague*, contains a few instances of diegetic self-consciousness, verging on metafiction, but on the whole stays mostly within the conventions of realism, though it tends to foreground some of these conventions: a book *slightly* aware of its bookness. Then came *The Wars*, with its obvious metafictional aspect, as it conscripts the reader to perform the tasks of the narrator; this was followed by *Famous Last Words*, characterized by Linda Hutcheon as "historiographic metafiction" in an article of that title. Mind you, the metafictional element of *FLW* is not as blatant as in, say, some of the work of John Barth, or John Fowles, or Donald Barthelme — "indirect metafiction" or "pretend realism"<sup>2</sup> might be more appropriate — but the work of full-blown, highly self-conscious metafiction which would continue his progression would surely follow. But no: what followed was an allegory, a fable using the Biblical flood as a vehicle and starting point, but with no attempt at scriptural accuracy; rather, it points grimly to the present (and possible future) of the world. To be sure, there are elements of literary self-consciousness and overt and explicit intertextuality in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, and Hutcheon has called it "postmodern" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 7), but it certainly doesn't seem *very* postmodern (assuming there can be degrees),<sup>3</sup> and it would clearly be stretching things to call it metafiction. (Whatever insight into the nature of fiction the "all fiction is metafiction" view gains — see Todorov et. al. — seems

to me more than outweighed by the consequent loss of critical leverage in applying the term to individual texts.) If that wasn't enough, Findley then published *The Telling of Lies: A Mystery*. And though Findley isn't particularly happy about calling it a "whodunit," preferring the term "howdunit,"<sup>4</sup> the fact remains that as such it is not metafictional in any critically useful sense of the word: no Borgesian self-consciousness, no real foregrounding of convention, no sly metafictionist inviting us into the funhouse of his fiction. Again, Hutcheon has called it postmodern (5), and again, I see little postmodernism in it. In the meantime appeared *Dinner Along the Amazon*, collecting short fiction written over a thirty-year span, with some slightly metafictional concerns, some postmodernism, but mostly realism: this certainly wasn't Findley's *Lost in the Funhouse* either. Nor is his most recent collection, *Stones*. In short, the canon to date is clearly *not* the work of a writer moving away from involvement with the fictional world into the world of fiction itself — if anything, he is more obviously and directly concerned with the real world. But if Findley's fiction has not been characterized by a progression away from realism and towards metafiction and postmodernism,<sup>5</sup> is there anything which *does* characterize it?

A clue as to what this unifying thread might be appears in the closing pages of *The Wars*: "To his [Robert Ross's] left there is a fascio of guns: tall old fashioned rifles stooked and bound as if for harvest" (190). The word "fascio" here simply jumps out at the reader (I'm not even sure it is an English word, though from the context it obviously retains its Italian meaning of "bundle"). Clearly, its primary purpose is to wave a flag at the reader: the term can no more be used naively today than can "swastika." The picture of the guns reminds the narrator of something written by (the fictive) "Nicholas Fagan": "Nothing so completely verifies our perception of a thing as our killing it" (191). *FLW* is overtly about fascism, and it appears as an element in *Plague* and the play *Can You See Me Yet?* as well; is fascism a thematic element in *The Wars*, and could it be one in the other fiction too? And if so, just what does Findley mean by "fascism"?

Substantial scholarly articles rarely discuss fascism in Findley's fiction, though it occasionally crops up in short articles, reviews, and interviews, often for newspapers. (See, for example, Blackadar, Mumford, Marck, Corbeil, MacLeod.) Indeed, most of the discussion of fascism takes place in interviews, whether it is

mentioned briefly (Benson, "Interview with Timothy Findley"; Meyer and O'Riordan, or at some length (Cameron, Gibson). Nonetheless, this crucial thematic element has not enjoyed sustained critical attention, especially in conjunction with close textual analysis, and no one, to the best of my knowledge, has dealt with it comprehensively.

Hence this article relies to some extent on things Findley has said outside his books, but which often touch on them: interviews, conversations, letters, and public lectures.<sup>6</sup> While this may offend those who hold, with Barthes, that "the author is dead," one can reply that Barthes is dead — and Findley is not. Even Findley does not believe that the author's word on his intentions is the final word in interpretation.<sup>7</sup> But deliberately to ignore what an author has to say about his work and his views of the world as they appear in his work seems more than a little perverse. Moreover, one of my main arguments is that the moral dimensions of Findley's own world are closely reflected in his fictional worlds.

Obviously, the relatively narrow political interpretation of fascism, especially as it applies to Nazi Germany, appears frequently in both *Plague* and *FLW*. And Findley makes it clear that this fascism is not limited to World War II: the two books (indeed, a case can be made that this is true for all his books) are "about today in every sense" (Fitzgerald).

About *Plague* specifically he says, "And, too, of course, I'm saying in the book — this is all being repeated right now. This is a book called Hollywood, 1938 . . . about America . . . North America, *now*" (Gibson 146; ellipses and emphasis his). Its topicality, and that of the others, has to do with fascism:

if someone came right now . . . and said (and I'm sorry, but I think they have started to come already), and said, as they're now saying in Europe, "Well, it's all right to lay a few bombs at the synagogue doors again; it's time we had another pogrom" — and people are responding! The bombs are going off . . . they're doing it to homosexuals, they're doing it to Jews. (*Anthology* interview)

Throughout the novel, the juxtaposition of quotidian occurrences with the events in Europe adds a sinister and symbolic significance to the former, and forces upon the reader an awareness that what was to become the horror of World War II began in seemingly commonplace fashion: the horror is at its *ordinariness*.<sup>8</sup> For example,

Six days passed.

In the English Parliament, the Prime Minister, Mr. Neville Chamberlain . . . developed a cold and stayed home.

In China, more bombs fell.

In the Soviet Union there was a state banquet at the Kremlin for Herr von Ribbentrop. Joseph Stalin prepared a toast to Adolf Hitler.

Leslie Howard and Olivia de Havilland were contracted to play featured roles in *Gone With the Wind*.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, there was not even a fire. (230)

The parallels between Hollywood and Germany are deliberate and significant, though they depend more on juxtaposition than on explanation; Findley felt that if he put in "too much explanation," he "would destroy the character of the book, which is dream-like, nightmare-like." He continues,

all those events leading up to Ruth's "rape" of the Blond Man are historically tied-in to what was actually happening in Germany at that time . . . such historic events as the Crystal Nacht [sic], the burning of the Synagogues, the Reichstag Fire, the shooting of the German Consul in Paris: all of these things really did happen . . . and their dates parallel the dates in the book when Ruth's "event" take place. What I was trying to express was, that Ruth translated them into this "thing" . . . not even a human being, but a "thing" . . . almost only an *idea*, that went around murdering people and lighting fires and doing all these things. Now — in fact — her translation of reality was correct. An "idea" was going around killing things. The idea was fascism. (Gibson 146)

But there is more to fascism, as far as Findley is concerned, than banality, brutality, and destruction; it is also intimately tied up with the quest for unattainable perfection: "that to me is the great tragedy, that our mythology is involved in the impossibility of perfection. We're taught to look up — to be *humbled* by impossibility" (Gibson 141). Naomi puts it succinctly:

Each human being is Race. Potentially a whole Race. But each human being is flawed. Great intellects are held prisoner in the bodies of impotents. Physical beauty is trapped in the bodies of lesbians and homosexuals. Poets are consumptive. Artists are bound in by insanity. . . . But the greatest flaw of all, the very worst, the most destructive and the seat of all our woes and pain, is this *dream* — this dam-

nable quest for perfection. When I think . . . of the misery and despair caused by people like you who will not accept — and who will not cope with reality as it is, I find it small wonder that humanity is condemned to suffering. (156)

Findley explicitly connects this quest with fascism:

Everybody keeps being driven to be more, and more and more and more beautiful . . . (that's why it's laid in Hollywood). But it also — it deals with — I mean Ruth Damarosch comes back from . . . the 1936 Olympics as a swimmer . . . so that you've got that too; she's been infected with this disease, which is . . . what the Nazis are about." (*Anthology*)

The Nazi dream of perfection is evil, yet also "fascinating" because of the "terrible thing . . . we all have inside . . . . [It is] our need for perfection which tells us that they had some of the right ideas" (Gibson 142).

The notion that there is some element of fascism, some part of what must seem a monstrous evil, which is also present in most of us, which is even *attractive*, can be more than a little disconcerting — and demonstrates that Findley's view of fascism is far from simplistic. There is no easy (and uninteresting) division into good and evil, white hats and dark hats. The issue is not exactly cloudy — the reader seldom has much doubt as to where the author's sympathies and values lie — but it is undeniably complex.

*Famous Last Words*, which is also obviously bound up with fascism, takes this complexity somewhat farther. In place of the easy tension between good and evil, Findley presents the tension (and insidious connection) between brutality and elitism, between aestheticism and fascism. The result is not merely an examination of the nature of fascism, but also an exploration of its origins. "Findley," writes Carole Corbeil, "is genuine in his search for what he calls 'the seeds of fascism'; he does want to understand where the corruption begins. And there is a correlation, as Leni Riefenstahl so aptly demonstrates, between surface estheticism and fascist ideologies."

In *FLW*, the focus (in more than one sense of the word) of Findley's exploration is Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, aesthete, elitist, and fascist, but also author and voyeur *par excellence*, whose reportage contains the truth (and the lies) about a truly ugly age and the people in it — himself included. Noting that it was research

into the murder of Harry Oakes in the Bahamas in 1943 which ultimately led to *FLW*, Findley explains:

The next thing I knew, I was spinning backwards, and I had cottoned on to something larger than a single murder in a tropic isle; and I sort of rode with them back through the age that had preceded all that, and that became the fascination. And of course, once I was there I couldn't avoid what was there: . . . the seeds of fascism. . . . What power-hungry people do (and I think all power-hungry people, coming straight to *Famous Last Words*) can be embraced very generally by my use of the word "fascist," because I think that's what fascism is: all power-hungry people can touch the rest of the people where they are hungry to be powerful too, but no, they can never be powerful without the powerful iconic people doing things for them, and in their name. (*Anthology*)

Thus *FLW* deals not so much with the Nazis *per se* as with sympathizers like Charles Bedaux and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, who sought to be precisely these "powerful iconic people." Another sympathizer, incidentally, also reflects the union of elitism and brutality: François Côté, the effete perfumer, "had once been the guiding force and inspiration of a militant right-wing group that called itself Solidarité Française, made up mostly of homosexual hoodlums who were given to wearing leather and boots" (131). While the characters are seen through Mauberley, focused through his consciousness and his words, he himself is nonetheless a central character for Findley's purpose:

In *Famous Last Words* what is explored is — you see it at the intellectual level, how was it that minds with stupendous insights and creative powers could allow this to happen, and even take part in it happening, on the one level; and the other is just the basic creative, or lack of creative reaction to a world filled with fear. (*Anthology*)

The connections among lack of creativity, fear, and fascism I will explore later; with regard to fascism and "creative powers," however, Mauberley is not the only one implicated. Ezra Pound is also, and less obviously so is Lieut. Quinn, Mauberley's exponent.

Quinn is the aesthete (153), a meticulous and prissy hero-worshipper (60, 156) who has "read every word [Mauberley] ever wrote" (46). His "forte" is "interpretation" (58), his Colonel has noted his "fine mind," and even Capt. Freyberg, his philistine

antithesis, admits his "skill . . . with words and ideas" (54). Yet he is an apologist, defending Mauberley (and the Duchess) so far that he risks a court-martial (154). A clever, imaginative fox, he nonetheless stumbles when confronted by the monomaniacal hedgehog, Freyberg. "'Now listen,' said Freyberg . . . 'he walked with Mussolini. He sat down with von Ribbentrop. He befriended a gang of murderers. He wrote Fascist garbage: anti-Semitic, pro-Aryan; anti-human, pro-Superman garbage. He even won prizes for it . . .'" (149). For all his fanatical Nazi-hating, however, Freyberg is also a fascist of sorts: "obsessed with perfections" (156), he has "given up even the pretence of rationality" (44); brutalized by Dachau, he has himself become brutal, bringing Quinn to his knees with a blow to his stomach (393). "The problem with Freyberg," says Findley, "is that he won't acknowledge his complicity, that he is not ultimately unlike 'these people'" (Corbeil). Quinn's failure is that he uses his creativity to distort, to avoid the harshness of reality; for Freyberg, the harshness of reality has destroyed his creativity. Aestheticism and brutality — again.

Freyberg is partly right, too: Mauberley the fascist is not exonerated. But Quinn is also right: Mauberley at least partly redeems himself through his creative response. In the most trying of circumstances, and "after years of silence, Mauberley was a writer at the last. And here was his book — his testament entirely made on walls" (58). Findley confirms this view in an interview:

all through the book [Mauberley] has fallen to the right, he's joined the elite, the elitists; but as he writes — that is to say, from the moment he is writing, when he's waiting to die, and he's putting all this on the walls of the hotel — by then he's reached the middle — that is to say, he's become creative again — the very act of writing is going to save him from solidifying in that rigid, non-creative position he'd fallen to on the right. (*Anthology*)

But even Quinn understands something of the paradox of a man "whose greatest gift had been an emphatic belief in the value of the imagination," who could at the same time "join with people whose whole ambition was to render the race incapable of thinking" (48).

While *Can You See Me Yet?* appears to concern itself mainly with insanity and the instability of reality filtered through memory, it too deals with fascism, as Findley confirms in an interview: "I

don't know why fascism won't let go of my insides. To write this book [FLW] I really had to look for the fascist in me. . . . I wrote about the other side of Nazism in *The Butterfly Plague* — it's about Hollywood, about the overt search for perfection. And then I wrote a play about it, *Can You See Me Yet?* I just don't seem to be able to let go of it" (Corbeil). Here the fascism takes two distinct forms: the public fascism of Hitler and Mussolini, and grouped with them Roosevelt and Aimee Semple McPherson (Findley would later expand on evangelical and religious fascism in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*), and the private or familial fascism in which "Cassandra and Franklin are tortured by their father and the unattainable perfection of their brother Patrick, killed in World War One" (Laurence 12).

Overtly political fascism appears in the sound of Hitler giving a speech on the radio throughout Scene 11, concluding with a chorus of "SIEG! HEIL! SIEG! HEIL!" (123). In this scene, Cassandra widens and explains the circle of darkness:

Every day we all hear the same thing, voices: radios, loud speakers . . . . God. Voices, every way we turn. Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Ma Perkins. Yes: and Aimee Semple McPherson. Why do we listen? Why do we pay attention? Why do we obey? I cannot say, except to say there's something eager and malignant in us all that yearns to cringe, wants to be obedient. That is the secret of their power. Our willing weakness. We are the horses they ride, the beasts they hunt, the cattle in their abattoirs. We are their victims — everyone — because we are afraid to be ourselves. (121)

This fear to be oneself is contrasted with Edward's refusal to let his children be themselves; Franklin (talking to his father) captures it nicely: "Why is he over there? Dead. And, why do you wish that we were there instead of him? All I ever wanted was to be who I am. And, all you ever told me is who I'm *not*. Patrick" (157). Findley confirms the thematic link with *Plague* in the *Anthology* interview, when he recalls that it was during the writing of *Plague* that he first realized

what one of the things at the heart of my being was about — was the impossible quest of being perfect, and what it did to us all to be told we must be, but of course you can't be — slap, slap. God, what a hideous way to bring people into the world and to treat the human spirit: to say "Shine, shine, you little



bastard — no, you're not shining enough yet! Can't you see how shiny all those people up there are — all those *dead* people?"

Nonetheless, there are traces of this theme in Findley's first novel, too. *The Last of the Crazy People* tells the story of Hooker Winslow and his family; Hooker, an eleven-year-old boy who maintains his personal cemetery for dead animals, gropes to understand an adults' world in a family which has ceased to live, whose members are unable to talk to each other, unable to find anyone to listen, utterly cut off from life, from each other, from themselves. His brother, Gilbert, immolates himself in a symbolic act of crucifixion, despairing of being understood or accepted; his mother, Jessie, in "an hysterical reaction to reality" (40) cloisters herself in her room after a stillbirth, admitting virtually no one; his father Nicholas is distant, detached, disapproving; the shadows of a father thirty-five years dead and a lover who died on the last day of World War I dominate the life of Rosetta, Nicholas's sister. Only Iris, the maid, has a clear grip on reality: "These people are all asleep," she says, "Day and night. They lock themselves up in a bunch of old rooms. They make their whole life around things that are dead" (92). Hence there is a tragic inevitability to Hooker's shooting of his mother, father, and aunt; it is a release from pain and suffering, the sweeping out of an old, dead order — "delivered from their travails" (Gibson 135).

Are the Winslows a bunch of fascists, like Hitler and Mussolini? Hardly. Yet there is no doubt that Findley violently opposes what Nicholas, Jessie, and Rosetta represent:

I think that Hooker has a lot to do with . . . the urgency with which we must wipe out the old order. We must destroy what is destroying us. We must kill what is killing us. We must violate the violators, it's all that, and it's a very tough road to walk on, because you're surrounded constantly by the knowledge that what you're asking people to give up is one of the strongest things inside yourself. That's really what I'm doing, as well as some other things, like endings of things. There's always violence, because you hate so strongly what is happening that it can only bring that It Must End sense. (Cameron 62)

As Findley notes on another occasion, "it seems to me that fascism is beyond politics; that is to say, it is almost a spiritual reaction to

life" (*Anthology*). In this vein, I remember Findley once saying that the essence of fascism is "saying 'No' to life." And here is the fascism in *Crazy People*. Jessie is clearly the most life-denying: she has deliberately cut herself off from any human contact, hating her father, her husband, and her sons, dead and alive. Any attempt to draw her out prompts a hysterical shriek: "No. No babies. No babies. No babies" (109).<sup>9</sup> But Rosetta and Nicholas, too, are dead, and life-denying. For example, Rosetta's hands "were in repose, like little dead birds in her lap" (252); "Nick's voice, as usual, was flat and lifeless" (214); "[I]like his children, those past parts of his own life were dead or buried, one way or another, forever" (148). In contrast, Iris is life-affirming: "It is a good thing, whether you know it or not, just to be alive" she says on one occasion (50), and "the place below them [Hooker's 'cemetery'] was so suddenly alive with her [Iris's] singing" (282).

Patrick ("perfect Pat," as Gilbert calls him [146]), the dead brother of Nick and Rosetta, clearly resonates with the dead and perfect Patrick of *Can You See Me Yet?* But it is Gilbert who suggests a thematic link among all the works, and an antidote to fascism: imagination. Sensitive, literate, and literary, Gilbert has always had a lively imagination. His downward slide, however, begins at the hands of the Gradgrindingly factual (and utterly unimaginative) Mr. Brown, his teacher: says Gilbert, "He wanted blind obedience to fact, but to me all that meant was the guy had no imagination. I had to wonder. I had wonderment . . ." (198). When Gilbert writes a fine ballad for an assignment, Brown refuses to believe it is Gilbert's work, and absolutely demands a public admission of guilt. Exit Gilbert. In denying Gilbert's creativity, Brown had denied the essence of his being — all that he lived for, and through.

The antithetical nature of fascism and imagination Findley has dealt with explicitly at some length ("Matter Over Mind: The Imagination in Jeopardy"), and I would suggest at least implicitly in virtually all his work. Furthermore, there is a corollary, with regard to fear and love (or its lack). Fear is of course a dominant theme in *Can You See Me Yet?*; in it, says Findley, "everybody is so afraid of life that the safest place to be is in a mental institution" (*Anthology*). Fear is often what keeps people from becoming themselves, and from establishing contact with others. "In all houses, all families, was it true that no one really loved?" wonders

Hooker. "Was fear, then, was craziness absolutely everywhere?" (228).

Findley confirms this connection in the *Anthology* interview: "I said once to someone who gave me a superb answer, I said, 'What is fear?' And he said, 'But of course, it is nothing more than lack of love.' Somebody else said (somebody else called Thornton Wilder), he said, 'Cruelty is nothing more than a lack of imagination.'" Hence it is no surprise to find this passage in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*:

What is this cruelty, then, she wondered; that battens those doors up there and locks us in, as if we were dragons — and fearsome?

The thought of Noah's rages and of Japeth armed gave her the answer.

Cruelty was fear in disguise and nothing more. And hadn't one of Japeth's holy strangers said that fear itself was nothing more than a failure of imagination? (252)

This is not to say that the novel (or any of Findley's works, for that matter) is preachy or tendentious; as he says, "I've tried very hard never to say anything [in his fiction] overtly political, but to imply it all — to tell the story and leave the question hanging" ("Matter Over Mind"). However, the passage does suggest strongly that the moral world of the novel is contiguous with the moral world of the novelist. Call it what you will — allegory, or fable, or parable, or metaphor — *Not Wanted* is clearly about today, and Findley's concerns are clearly with various forms of fascism.

Noah is the chief villain, with his murderous intolerance, inflexible cruelty, his "experiments" on Mottyl's kittens — deliberately like something out of Dachau — his intransigence, hypocrisy, venality, and misogyny. And he finds followers.

I think the seeds from which fascism can grow are in everyone; in virtually everyone there is a seed-bed where fear can grow awfully quickly, and do awfully well. Equally hatred — and since these are the things that fascism feeds on . . . the danger lies endlessly around us in movements like the Moral Majority and so on [which] find simplified solutions based on fear alone. And it's surprising how quickly, when you look in the mirror of your mind, you will find the places in your own self where you say — I find *myself* saying, for instance — "I hate the Moral Majority; I really hate them." Well, if

there's that hatred, I've got to find a creative way [around it], so that it doesn't end up with me pulling a gun on Gerry Falwell. (*Anthology*)

Noah's principal allies are Japeth and Shem: Japeth, whose "trophies had been the heads of four calves . . . whose mouths, when he had killed them, had still been full of milk" (292); Japeth, whose "name was now synonymous with violent death" (293); and Shem, not greatly evil of himself, but an accomplice, a collaborator in great evil. The narrator early on suggests the reason for this acquiescence: "Shem did nothing but eat and work and sleep. He thought of nothing else but these three things and was devoid of wonder" (10-11). Even his father remarks, "You've even less imagination than I thought" (246).

This puts him in stark contrast to Ham: "you could not ignore, you could not refuse to be infected by, the child's enthusiasm: by the wonder of it all — of everything — and by the wonder of his wonder" (337). "Mozart would have liked him," thinks his mother, "for the games they could have played. Shelley would have liked him for his pockets full of books. Whitman would have liked him for the walks they could have taken. Einstein would have adored him— what a pupil!" (338). Again, the narrator lets the reader know early which side Ham will be on: he has survived a childhood fraught with "plagues and fevers," "emerging with a love of life so great that he could not bear to kill" (25).

The maternal instincts of Mottyl and Mrs. Noyes, of course, make them highly sympathetic characters; Mrs. Noyes' need to comfort the bears even overcomes her fear of them. "That was why Mrs Noyes had been afraid of bears," the narrator explains; "[s]he had not been able to imagine consoling them" (252). Lucy — Lucifer in drag — is also very much a positive character: s/he is a liberating, Blakean hero in leading "The Revolt of the Lower Orders" (302), and a Cassandra figure as well (319-320).

The theme of the novel Findley states succinctly in an interview: "My view is that the world has become a concentration camp. We're destroying everything. We confine both animate and inanimate things if they're useful, and we kill everything else" (Fitzgerald).

The image of the concentration camp works differently in his latest novel, *The Telling of Lies*, but ultimately, its point is similar. At several points in the novel, the narrator, Vanessa Van Horne,

recalls her time in Bandung concentration camp (the Japanese were fascists, too), and her father's death there — shot simply for trying to be with his beloved wife. But the concentration camp is explicitly connected to the world of the novel. At first the connection is tenuous: Vanessa remembers her father's death, and "someone" saying, "Well — if he didn't want to be shot — he shouldn't have been out there" (72), echoing a passage only a few pages earlier: an American police officer, responding to criticism for his ill-treatment of a Canadian visitor (who "does not need this") says, "If she didn't need this lady — then she shouldn't have come down here" (67). Later the connection becomes closer:

Only now am I beginning to grasp what I have not wanted — all these years — to know about Bandung. And only now am I beginning to understand what I do not want to know about Calder's death.

I did not want to know that anyone could die the way my father died — before my eyes. And now, I do not want to know that anyone can kill the way I fear they have — before my eyes. (132)

Finally, the connection becomes explicit:

This place has become, in its way, a little like Bandung. We try to go about the daily business of being alive as if there were nothing wrong; as if it were normal to have a person lying dead on the beach. Calder's death has become a wire around this beach — a fence around our behaviour. The road-blocks out by the highway don't help, either. (190)

Guests at the Aurora Sands suddenly find themselves stopped for no apparent reason by a State Police roadblock, where they are interrogated. Comments one, "I absolutely hit the ceiling. . . . I got out our passports and that did it! *Pass*, they said. . . . You'd think we'd come into Russia" (36). Later Vanessa reflects,

It also went through my mind — once they'd begun to ask their questions — perhaps they were incipient storm-troopers. . . . And, while I fully recognize the rhetoric of words like *storm-trooper*, I make no apology for them. We, after all, were citizens, standing on a beach in the State of Maine. America. Once, long ago, I stood in the company of other citizens — civilians who had just been captured by the Japanese equivalent of *storm-troopers* — and we had been spoken to in exactly the same way. (63-64)

But this is hardly surprising, considering that the Chief-of-Police of Larson's Neck "gives the appearance . . . both in style and manner, of a petty dictator. The Neck, no doubt is his personal Haiti" (219).

The ambience is not as extreme as that of, say, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (though it definitely appears to be moving in that direction); rather it gives the impression that while the events are fiction, they are not at all unbelievable in the United States of here and now. The conspiracy, "dreadful and deliberate and sinister" (247), is never spelled out exactly, but clearly reaches the highest levels of government; indeed, it becomes even more sinister when one cannot see its edges, how far they extend, or exactly why it acts as it does. In many ways, Findley's technique here is reminiscent of the "Penelope Cabal" in *FLW*: beginning with established facts, individuals, and actions, then adding fictional events and characters to produce what is intended to be a vivid and accurate *impression* of reality — an imaginative or figurative (though not literal) truth. In a 1973 interview Findley asserted, "There's no question that what is happening in Washington right now is the result of having walked for about ten years in the direction of fascism" (Cameron 57). Nothing seems to have weakened Findley's opinion in the last seventeen years.

At least one of the events the novel talks about indisputably happened, however: the psychic driving experiments performed by Dr. Ewen Cameron in Montreal for the CIA. It is a particularly ugly piece of Canadian history, and as appalling a piece of psychic imperialism as one is likely to encounter.<sup>10</sup>

The point of it all, of course, is to show "the overall picture of the human race repeating, repeating, repeating"; Findley's aim, much of the time, is to arouse the reader into an awareness of what is happening, in order "to prevent the horrors that are there in this book" (*Anthology*).

One final note on the novel also introduces a strand which is present in much of Findley's writing: the natural world. Here Findley gets in a few slashes at contemporary figures, attitudes, and events. The chief butt is the Secretary of the Interior, Thomas Briggs, who "disgraced his Department and [his] Government" (246). The chief purpose of the passage which follows can only be to cast aspersions on the individual and the workings of his Department:

My involvement with the Department of the Interior proves, I think, something of the stupefying way in which Thomas Briggs and his advisers put their schemes together. It can only be that the word *Park* — as in *Central* — was linked, in their hopelessly amateur minds, to *Park* — as in *National*. The fact that my contribution to Central Park had been the design of its Japanese Gardens apparently prompted them to think of me as a natural candidate for a conference on Wilderness Heritage. . . . Appointing me as a delegate to their Wilderness Conference was tantamount to appointing Tennessee Williams as a delegate to a conference on transportation. *Well — didn't he write something about a streetcar?* (246-47)

That this sort of bungling seems utterly plausible is a grimly ironic commentary on the nature of political bureaucracies, especially with regard to those concerned with the environment.<sup>11</sup>

While Findley might well have modelled Thomas Briggs on a real former Secretary of the Interior (at least one comes to mind), the identification remains somewhat tentative, and Briggs's malicious incompetence and that of his Department are more figurative than factual. Again, Findley's design is to leave the reader with a truthful impression, while not necessarily recounting literal truth. But if the reader is less than certain about the identity of Briggs, there can be no mistaking the very real former President who publicly stated that "*acid rain is not the result of coal-burning industries, but of the trees of the forest giving off poisons*" (247; italics Findley's).

While Findley's concern with politics and the environment is contemporary and specific in *Lies*, in all of his writing the natural world enjoys a privileged place. Those attuned to it are sympathetic characters, and those who act to destroy it unsympathetic. In real life, too, Findley has sharply and publicly rebuked environmental fascists.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Findley the man and Findley the author have remained remarkably consistent. In 1973 he stated that his "motto" was "Make peace with Nature, now. We have declared war on a defenceless enemy" (Cameron 50). Obviously this concern informs much of *Not Wanted*, but it also appears in *Plague*, as Findley makes clear in an interview, noting that Ruth, the character in the novel who sees fascism most clearly, is "also right, incidentally, about Alvarez Canyon, too. The god damn Plastic World was on fire and they tried to save it . . . everyone wanted to save the Plastic World of Alvarez and *they wanted to let*

*all the real things die up against that fence*" (Gibson 146; ellipsis and italics his). Findley's anger is less apparent in the novel, but it is still there. Here is the end of his description of this particular horror — in its own way, something of a concentration camp, too:

The chains of the fence bulged; almost gave — but did not. Paws reached through. Beggars. Dead. Noses, eyes, portions of torn and unrecognizable anatomy dropped before Ruth, melting in the grass at her feet. She turned back. It was over. No more noises. Four thousand creatures had perished against a wall. (*Plague* 143)

Findley's bitterest attack on the rape of the environment, however, appears in the grimly dystopic story, "What Mrs. Felton Knew" in *Dinner Along the Amazon*. In it, a family is desperately fleeing some looming but unspecified peril: "the first sign that it was happening to them . . ." (120), with "it" very much undefined. There are, however, a few clues, a few things associated with "it": airplanes, tanker trucks, and the "E.R.A. Forestry Siren" (123). The story plunges further into nightmare when the comforting associations of E.R.A. (equal rights and baseball) are stripped away: the meaning of the siren is revealed to be "this is the End," and a character (a "Rural Expendable") thinks that if he can "save himself or even one of his animals, then his protest would register with Nature, which was all that mattered to him" (127). E.R.A., it turns out, is "'Environmental Redevelopment Agent.' Sprayed from hoses, its crystal drops burned the oxygen from the air, killing every single living thing within the circumference of their fall" (130).

The framing section of first person narrative at the end pulls the story into a world closer to our own by suggesting that the framed narrative does not necessarily recount some dark and distant future, but might merely be the product of a hyper-suspicious present-day imagination. The final reference to DDT, however, confirms that there is a figurative truth to the story: it becomes an analog or metaphor for the destruction we are wreaking on Nature.

Other fascistic elements in *Dinner* include a story (actually a scene from a play-in-progress) about Ezra Pound, "Daybreak at Pisa"; Pound is also a character in *FLW*. Moreover, there are other stories whose worlds resemble those of the novels: Harper Dewey in "Lemonade" resembles Hooker Winslow (*Crazy People*) more



than a little, as Bertha does Iris, and Mrs. Dewey, in withdrawing from her son and the world more and more into the sanctuary of her bedroom, resembles Jessie (and her life is also ended by a Colt revolver kept in a wooden box). "Losers, Finders, Strangers at the Door" shows the corruption of wealth and the lust for power when individuals turn away from life and towards things — and control over others. "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye" nicely illustrates another of Findley's views: "The thing that breaks you from your childhood is that moment when you lie in bed at night and realize you are not the centre of the world. Some people never have that moment and somehow that has something to do with fascism" (Meyer and O'Riordan 50). "Dinner Along the Amazon" is a story of distances and isolation, of fear and cruelty, of numbness in the face of the impossibility of happiness or fulfilment: lives and relationships are a deathly series of *culs de sac*.

Significantly, the story is set in the jungles of Rosedale, which becomes even more of a target in Findley's next collection, *Stones*. Almost all of the stories in *Stones* deal primarily with families and interpersonal relations; most touch on madness, a recurrent theme for Findley (the Queen Street Mental Health Centre almost becomes a character — and the most frequently recurring one, at that); and attunement to the natural world informs "Foxes." There is little room for environmental, social, or political fascism, but fascism on the level of the family and the individual does indeed come into play. Minna is probably the most sympathetic character in the stories, and their moral dimensions are largely defined by her loves and hates. Chief among her hates is Rosedale, and all it implies: "Them as live in Rosedale," Findley has her say, "are them as keep their shit in jars" ("Bragg and Minna" 10). In "Stones" the narrator notes, "That was the way they talked in Rosedale: very polite; oblique and cruel" (195). Almey's mother (in the story of that name), while not necessarily from Rosedale, certainly reflects its values when she is offended that her son teaches drama because it "brought him dangerously close to public displays of emotion. Worse, it offered him the chance to encourage displays of emotion by others" (176). Minna's parents (of course) lived in Rosedale; like Franklin in *Can You See Me Yet?* she is resented, imperfect, and alive, while a perfect sibling ("the First-Prize Winner of all the children ever born" ["A Gift of Mercy" 51]) is dead. In plotting "the overthrow of silence" (56), in giving words to the inchoate and inarticulate fury and pain of Queen

Street, she affirms the worth of those lives others barely even acknowledge as human. In demanding a child from Bragg, with Bragg, and in her defiant love of a daughter born with half a brain, six-fingered and six-toed, she is the epitome of life-affirming.<sup>13</sup> She explicitly links Bragg's refusal to give her a child because he suspects his genes are faulty to Hitler and Nazi theories of "the Master Race" ("Bragg and Minna" 14).

Bragg himself has been a victim of fascism on the familial level. The best he has seen from any of them is a "forgiveness" for his homosexuality that can only proceed from "impertinence" and "arrogance", while his mother believes he is "a punishment laid upon her immortal soul." "So much," Findley allows Bragg to reflect with wry bitterness, "for the gentle mercy of God" ("A Gift of Mercy" 49-50).

In light of this exploration of these forms of fascist thinking, one can return to *The Wars* and see elements which were not necessarily apparent: the single word which set off this exploration now seems somewhat like the tip of an iceberg. The natural world, especially that of animals (with the exception of carrion-eating birds) is established very early as a source of positive imagery, and those who act against it are viewed negatively. In a picture of "1915," women "no longer wear their furs; they drape them from their arms with all the foxtail trophies hanging down like scalps" (12). With one deft phrase, the supposedly neutral narrator sketches in the moral framework: killing animals to wear their fur becomes the action of savages; this war to end all wars has made savages of us all. Robert is strongly aligned with the animal world (the mere *sound* of a coyote's drinking seems to satisfy his thirst [31]), but so are Harris and later Rodwell; the constant references to the animal world slowly accrete to create a structure in which this world comes to represent peace, safety, asylum, acceptance, and sanity, as opposed to the human world of war, madness, destruction, and death. Clive's "I doubt we'll ever be forgiven. All I hope is — they'll remember we were human beings" (158) anticipates the words of Colonel Norimitsu in *Lies*: "No one is totally monstrous: not even monsters" (15). Things are not simply black and white. Teddy Budge, who kills Rowena's rabbits, has "nothing unkind or cruel in his nature"; he is simply "a large and mindless man" who "would do what he was told" (24) — not unlike Shem in *Not Wanted*. Still, the reader has little sympathy for "the red-faced malcontent with pudgy hands and a bottle of

gin" who is the Battalion C.O. aboard the S.S. *Massanabie*, and shouts, "Transporting men and animals in the same vessel! Barbarous! *Barbarous!*" (60; italics Findley's), meanwhile doing everything he can to make sure both men and beasts are treated barbarously. Captain Leather, similarly, is merely an imbecile, but a dangerous one.<sup>14</sup> He insists on condemning the animals to certain destruction rather than saving them and risking losing face, and he shoots Devlin for sensibly trying to free them. Clearly, Robert's character is to some extent equivocal, and illustrates Findley's belief in "the inherent duality of all things" ("Matter Over Mind"): the violence in him does not emerge only at the end, but is pre-figured in the whorehouse (45), in its narrative reduplication at Desolé (170), and in his destroying a tree with gunfire at St. Aubyn (152-53). Nonetheless, his enemies are all victims of fascist thinking, in one way or another: fearful, cruel, lacking imagination, power-hungry, destructive. In his ultimately futile opposition to them and all they represent, his heroism resides chiefly in his embracing of and reverence for life.

It would be a gross distortion to say that all of Findley's works have the same theme, but it is clear by now that they share strikingly similar moral dimensions. This is not to say that they are tedious moral lessons; as Eugene Benson says, Findley has "written only masterpieces" ("Whispers of Chaos": *Famous Last Words* 600). His fictions work well as literature, as well-made verbal artifacts, but much of their appeal — and strength, in more than one sense of the word — stems from their vital connection with the human realities of here and now, their refusal to sequester themselves in an inward-turning, self-contained and self-preoccupied world, cut off from the real one. Art and life, though they can aspire to self-awareness and be well aware of their differences, need not be strangers. And what they have in common in Findley's fiction is precisely this sense of shared moral dimensions.

In one way or another, all of Findley's books strive to show the pitfalls that fascist thinking places all around us — its infectiousness, its poison, and yes, its attraction — not merely as a society, but also within the family and the individual. But these moral dimensions also embrace means for avoiding those pitfalls: cures, remedies, antidotes. Findley has made it clear on many occasions that he sees a darkness descending, a Dachau of the mind. The heart of this darkness (which is fascism in all its life-denying guises), the power which closes the gates, is nothing more

(or less) than *fear*. But the sign above the gates of Dachau lies: it is not "Arbeit" which "macht frei," but "Einbildungskraft": not work which makes you free, but *imagination*. Timothy Findley is a man whose works of art — and whose life — join to make one bright, creative torch against that darkness.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The one article I know of which attempts to treat it as metafiction acknowledges its "realist texture" and admits that "it can be read and taught satisfactorily at a strictly mimetic level" (Kroller 366).

<sup>2</sup> The former term I adopted in my dissertation ("Mediation and the Indirect Metafiction of Randolph Stow, M. K. Joseph, and Timothy Findley"); Patricia Merivale suggested the latter.

<sup>3</sup> George Bowering, confirming that such degrees exist, calls *The Fiction of Contemporary Canada* "a collection of *slightly* post-modern pieces" (9; italics Bowering's).

<sup>4</sup> See Joel Yanofsky, "Murder He Wrote."

<sup>5</sup> While I firmly believe for a variety of reasons — including discussions with Findley himself — that my depiction of his fiction as moving towards metafiction and then receding somewhat is essentially accurate, it is not crucial to the thesis of this article; rather, it indicates what provoked me to look in the directions I did.

<sup>6</sup> Some of this material is unpublished and unbroadcast; I would like to acknowledge the help of John Merritt of the CBC, who gave me access to transcripts of interviews and to the original tapes (parts of which were edited into "A Frame of Fire") so I could correct the transcripts. I would also like to thank the Theo Koerner Society of UBC for allowing me to obtain a tape of Findley's lecture, "Matter Over Mind: The Imagination in Jeopardy," and Findley himself for permission to quote from these and from his letters.

<sup>7</sup> Findley asserts that "much" of what readers find in his writing "is unknown to me, even though it *is* there" (letter, 23 Oct. 1987; italics his), and that "good writing allows more than one interpretation, and . . . some interpretations may quarrel either with each other or with my original intention" (letter, 31 July 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *The Wars*: "It's the *ordinary* men and women who've made us what we are. Monstrous, complacent and mad" (17; italics Findley's).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Carrie's "No!" in *Can You See Me Yet?* (135) when her husband wants more children. In contrast to these figures, of course, are many richly maternal figures: Iris (and other maids), Marion Turner and Juliet d'Orsey, Isabella Loverso and Diana Allenby, Mrs. Noyes and Motty, among others.

<sup>10</sup> It has been receiving quite a bit of attention lately. See Don Gillmor, *I Swear*

by Apollo: Dr. Ewen Cameron and the C.I.A. Brainwashing Experiments, and William Deverell, *Mindfield*; director Paul Cowen is working on a film based on the events.

<sup>11</sup> Findley is hardly exaggerating here. After all, this is the country where the Environmental Protection Agency went to court to have overturned an injunction (obtained by seven New England states) which would have curtailed sulphur dioxide emissions by midwestern coal-fired power plants; that is, the EPA actually went to court to allow polluters to continue to pollute.

<sup>12</sup> For example, he strongly condemned the BC government for allowing logging on Meares Island when the case was still before the courts, and he is a member of the Council of Patrons of the Temagami Wilderness Society.

<sup>13</sup> "Almeyer's Mother" provides a character who contrasts sharply with this aspect of Minna: Almeyer's grandmother, for whom procreation—creating life—has become an enemy. She thus joins Jessica in *Crazy People* and Carrie in *Can You See Me Yet?*.

<sup>14</sup> To judge by Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Leather is not untypical of Allied commanders.

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