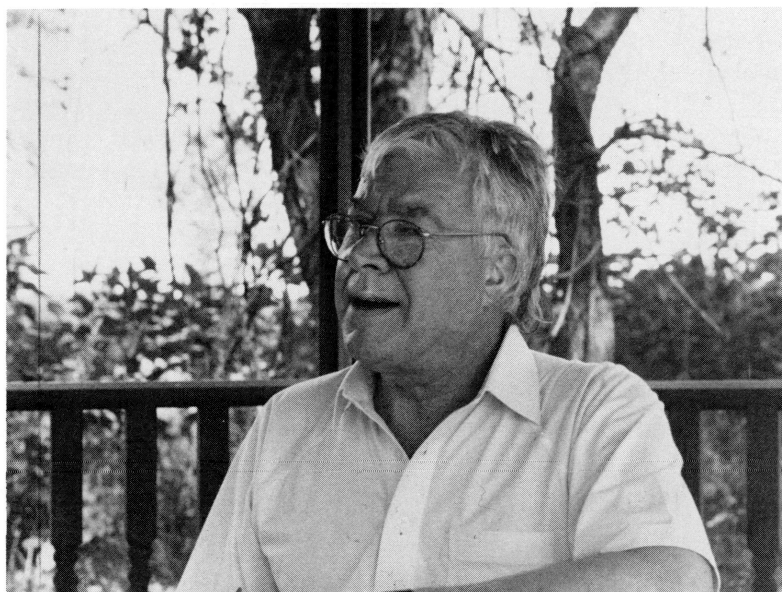


TIMOTHY FINDLEY'S TRUE FICTIONS: A CONVERSATION AT STONE ORCHARD

SCL/ÉLC Interview by W. M. Mellor



WM First of all, I don't know how you feel about these kinds of terms, but what do you think about postmodernism?

TF The honest truth is I don't have, in any sense at all, an academic mind. That is to say, I am not formally educated. I am educated, but I left high school at grade ten so I don't have a formal connection with all the terminology. When I first heard it, it was Linda Hutcheon who gave a paper at a conference in Hamilton and I was there to read, not to give a paper, but simply to read. And I heard her do this number. I did not know what postmodernism was. I had no idea. So I came home and I looked up "Modernism" in the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* and I

couldn't find it. So, therefore, I thought I'm not going to know what postmodernism is. It took ages for me to even begin to grasp vaguely what the term means. But I don't think I could define it.

WM I don't know if anyone can. Linda Hutcheon has certainly made a good stab at it though.

TF Yes, she sure has. She also writes interestingly about what various people do. I wouldn't for a moment claim to have deliberately done all the things that she finds in my work. I think with most academic critics, they do find stuff that the writer is not aware of, simply because that is part of the process of writing: it's the automatic response that gives you a kind of order that is not order in the predetermined sense. I never sit down and write an outline, for instance. I was fascinated that Linda Hutcheon or somebody pointed out, relatively early on when *The Wars* had just been published, that it is fascinating how you make that journey over and over from the top to the bottom of the hole into the depths—into hell and back again. I realized it was all through the book, this constant rising and going back down into the depths, into the pit of the ship, into the crater. It is all repeated. I did not know that when I wrote it, but the mind knows that in a subconscious way.

WM I understand, having read your other interviews, that you don't like to be classified as a Canadian writer or gay writer. Why classify anyone as a postmodern writer or modern writer for instance?

TF You are always breaking free of whatever was there before. Or you're trying to.

WM Academics seem to like to have these discussions.

TF That is what academic life is about.

WM One of the things Linda Hutcheon talks about and many people have noticed in your writing is how the work thematizes its own discursive processes, in other words, how it pays attention to the process of writing and of using language. Certainly in the three books that I am looking at, that seems to be

apparent and that whole sort of metafictional business of writing about writing, writing about research, writing about history—writing, fiction. Again, is that something that you see yourself fascinated with and therefore exploring?

TF Yes. I have a kind of surface interest in that area which is not to say the interest is negligible, but it's only on the surface. I am fascinated by the texture of what appears—by the surface in that sense. Once I start working, I then discover that the work is delivering all this extraordinary material. I will never ever forget when I was writing *Famous Last Words* and Mauberley was there. I couldn't believe what I was finding in terms of what existed before as writing, but it was all there in Pound. It was all there to be had in the Mauberley poems. Even the pattern I had found was a pattern that existed in the Mauberley poems which I'd read as a reader only, not as a student or as someone studying Pound, but as someone who read poetry. And yet there was this pattern; it was as though he had been tailor-made and I was waiting to discover him because he was already, somehow, inside me as a character, but I needed to see him. Then, all this extraordinary material started opening up in other places, for instance in the Nicholson diaries. I kept finding all these same attitudes that I was exploring, perfectly articulated, but in their moment. He was saying, "I had a meeting with Lindbergh today." Much of the Lindbergh material was then, therefore, augmented by what I discovered in the Nicholson diary, but I didn't know that when I started. It was almost scary. And I would get the giggles and I'd run into Bill and I'd say, "Look what it says here!" It was extraordinary, just extraordinary. The first time, I think, I went in that direction—blending real history with what I was making up—was in *The Butterfly Plague*, but I had no idea what I was doing until I got to *The Wars*, where I was self-conscious about the fact that I now was using other material, because I was using my uncle's letters as a time frame and as a frame, like a map, that told about the very campaign that Robert was involved in. But I didn't use it to the degree that I ultimately used it in *Famous Last Words*. In *The Telling of Lies*, I think it is less evident. It's crossing fiction with reality in a different way because I was not relying on what had been written. The research that I did for that, of course, involved the Memorial Hospital and extraordinary conversations I've had with

people, for instance like Phyllis Webb, who knew one of the people who had been brainwashed.

WM Where did you get the information on the internment camp?

TF The internment camp material I got partly from a woman called Agnes Newton Keith, who had written an extraordinary book, published in 1948 or 1949, called *Three Came Home*. I loved that book as a kid. She was in a camp in Java or Sumatra. I met her when I was doing radio interviewing much later in my life. Along she came. It was like meeting God. It was one of those things where you don't believe you're meeting the person who really has had quite an effect on you as a kid. Otherwise, I didn't really read books about the camps. I made it up on the basis of what you suspected had to be true. There were moments in *Famous Last Words* that were the same where, if I had historical fact, and written encounters from the moment, as revealed in various diaries and things, then there would be moments when the files were closed and you couldn't bridge that with a document and so you had to make up the bridge. If you had to make it up in the terms of the characters you were writing about, there could only be one way to get from there to there, given all the circumstances. There might be subtle variations, but there could only be one main route. To my delight, I ultimately discovered that all my bridges were correct. I didn't know that when the book was published. I only knew that fact as more and more files were opened. When the Duchess of Windsor died, for example, a whole world of files were opened. Then, I discovered the things I thought I had been making up about Bedaux were absolutely true—and I discovered this because his niece in France was also writing about him, and got in touch with me after she read *Famous Last Words*. Other files revealed that the whole cabal that I called Penelope did in fact exist and they were known as "The Friends." That network of people existed and was made up largely of the same people as in the book, with many others thrown in as part of that whole picture. So sometimes you have the support of literature, you have the support of documents and the support of somebody else's fictional rendition of something and then you have the support of journals, files, letters, etc.

WM How important was it for you to know that what you were saying was true or accurate?

TF It was terribly important to me to know that I had not ever lied. That is to say, in spirit, although the incident might be a variation on the real incident. The whole episode in *Famous Last Words*, for instance in Portugal, and the attempt to kidnap the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Well, I made up my own version of that, but it was based on data—Schellenberg was in Berlin when he had the following conversation so I knew who his people were. My version of the man he pretended to be is entirely made up. My version of the delivery of the note and the flowers is a version of what actually happened. In fact, it was, I think, a little boy who actually delivered the flowers and note; whereas, I made it a little girl.

WM Versions of history are pretty much all we get anyway, right?

TF Yes. I delight in passages where you throw in something from reality that seems like fiction because who could ever make this up. One such thing which immediately comes to mind is in the Windsors' leaving Portugal to go on that boat when they were run out of town, so to speak, and Churchill said, "Get them out of here now" and that is what really happened. They got on the ship with the Biddles who had been ambassadors in Paris and the Biddles really had stolen potted plants from their hotel in Lisbon and brought them on board to augment their living quarters on the ship and they had put an awning out. And they really had their dog with them as well in that way. So when it came to writing about the airplane going on board and that whole passage that's based on another figure who was already dead by then—it made me feel comfortable. There is no reason why a plane called *Icarus* shouldn't be loaded onto a ship that already has stolen potted plants. And then you can say, "that really happened." So challenge me. Why not? I love that. That is fun to do. That was my entertainment.

WM Your work is fiction. How do you feel that it is possible

for someone to lie in fiction? Isn't all of fiction a confabulation, an invention anyway?

TF I think it is possible to lie. When I was telling my own story, as I did in part when I was doing *Inside Memory*, I had a contract with myself that I wouldn't lie, but I discovered that in order to tell the thing that I wanted to tell—which was true—the only way to tell it was to lie in minor ways, which is to say that you would telescope events, you would bridge events with the nature of a meeting as opposed to the real meeting itself. There might have been five meetings and you leave out the one where you argue. It is like writing biography and I am secure in that because I had a long conversation with Donald Creighton, who was a biographer and historian, on this very subject. He said you have to write biography and history as though it were fiction, as though it were a novel, because that is the only way the human mind can deal with it. You have to backtrack and embroider along the sides and the embroidery isn't necessarily a lie, but the embroidery isn't drawn from the moment. The embroidery comes from. . . Wallis is thinking of a moment in her childhood, etc. That is embroidery because that is not what is in the given moment. The childhood isn't there, but the embroidery of the childhood is there and I don't think I had to learn how to do that. I think I knew how to do that. Even where I myself was concerned, as in *Inside Memory*, I am always telling the truth, but sometimes the only way the truth can be told is to tell it either as a parable, or as an anecdote, which combines maybe the elements of three or four incidents which ties them together as a single incident because that tells the story. Your job is to tell a story. That is what fiction is.

WM Is that not the job of historians as well, though?

TF Yes it is. The best historians, I would maintain, do exactly what fiction writers do.

WM History as the telling of stories.

TF Yes. The telling of stories through the lives of people as opposed to simply through events and dates. If you know the details of the human lives in the French court, for instance, surrounding the French Revolution, and the reigns of Louis XIV and

XV, the details and the intrigues all contribute to that history, and it is fun. It is history I read endlessly, but it is history I'll never write about. But the human factors that determine the sweep of history are all there and are to be had and used, for instance, in a book like *Famous Last Words*. There I could fall back on all the information about the great courtesans and the great mistresses of the Kings of France and all of that set of political intrigues which was part of what was going on and which were called love affairs when they were really no more than servicings. If you can keep the King intrigued with your services you get to run the country for God's sake. Those women were immensely powerful. I used that all through the story of Wallis Windsor and her ability to gain power. One of the things I learned reading about the great mistresses and courtesans was they weren't beautiful women. They weren't physically beautiful. They were women who stage-managed what they did have in order to give the appearance of beauty to a degree that allowed the doors to open. I mean if a light shone on her face like this, holy shit, that's far more interesting than having Elizabeth Taylor walk into the room. And let's face it, as much as I am very fond of Elizabeth Taylor, nothing happens when Elizabeth Taylor walks into a room. But it does if DuBarry walks in. Why? What's the difference? And it did obviously if Wallis Windsor walked in. They had far less equipment; therefore, they had far more need to build. And so, she was a fiction. And I came to have a great admiration for her as a political survivor. I didn't like her, I didn't like her any more than when I started. But I had to write from inside her. I had to find a way of saying "Why am I doing this?" I had to find part of her in myself and part of her I found in these other women. That was very informative. It is something I wouldn't have had if I had simply read history as dates, etc. That doesn't tell you anything. But these women tell you everything. Those are great, great stories. Isn't it funny that, it just occurs to me now as we're talking, that around those great stories there is great story-making. And when there's flatness in history, there is a flatness in literature and art and creativity as well. Because there is nothing to respond to. You have to be challenged by the horror of what is happening, as in our time, or by the wonder of what is happening, as in the Renaissance. That isn't to say that the Renaissance didn't have its horrors. That's probably a half-assed idea, but it strikes me that

there are blocks of history where you suddenly think that is the moment when we had all of these extraordinary creative forces at work, and then there is nothing and then *boom!*—it explodes into creativity again. You can, in a sense, match those periods to how history challenged the artist.

WM What happens also is it challenges people to “get it down” and you seem to deal with that quite frequently in your work. People must respond by writing or art or doing something. There seems to be this level of fascination with the problems of getting it down and getting it right and in a form that will be understood by others. There seems to be that level which connects to this other level where the real issues are happening and the horrors are taking place, the atrocities of war or the horrible brain-washing that governments do. Do you see a strong link between those kinds of problems that artists have and writers have when they are challenged to get things down and the actual things that are happening and the actual things that they need to get recorded?

TF Yes. Absolutely. That’s a very good way of saying it. As you were talking I got the image, the classic image, of the child who is not believed. “I saw daddy kill mommy.” “You can’t possibly have seen that.” When you are not believed then you have to find a way of making people believe so you have to struggle in opposite directions. Let’s go to politics. Let’s say you state that Mulrony killed Canada—which I believe. How am I going to make that more than a mere rhetorical statement? I have to find a fictive way of proving that he did that—a believable way—by working that story through the lives of people and incidents in a way that is so engaging that you can’t help but close the covers of the book and say “It is all true.” In the meantime, he is going in the other direction and saying, “I have killed the country and I have to prove I didn’t.” He is walking off into a fiction of another kind which is the very opposite of the one you are creating. He is saying “I didn’t” and you are saying “He did.” It is like a court. You know, you can make all kinds of analogies, but it is that. You have in the centre, the ultimate judge, which is the people.

WM Is this how fiction can be both true and untrue?

TF Yes.

WM Or real and unreal?

TF Yes.

WM Both are really opinions.

TF Yes. Absolutely, but both are opinions based on, let's say, self-survival, self-preservation. He is protecting himself and I am trying to protect myself. He is revealing me and I am revealing him. We are enemies and you have to do one another in—in a sense.

WM In that way, then, you make the reality more real in your mind by creating fiction.

TF Yes. He makes it less real by saying his real motive was such-and-such so it doesn't matter if he did all those things he's accused of.

WM And this is what history writers do all the time: self-preservation, again.

TF Yes. Self-preservation ultimately has to do with the feeling that a lot of people are caught—in both fiction and history. The big corporations are the centre of what one group of people are grouped around and that is the self that is being preserved. The self that we others are protecting is the creative self and the right to have freedoms they don't want us to have and the right not to be governed by decisions actually made on behalf of corporations, but ostensibly made on behalf of the people. I am one of those people, but I am also a spokesperson in that area so I have got to double believability. I have got to make my voice believable and, therefore, self-protection of the voice has to stay believable.

WM If something in history or something in politics never gets written about, do you believe that it somehow becomes less real to people because it is never recorded? Take the story of *The Wars* and the story of Robert Ross' fictional life, but this re-

searcher who wants to record it seems to want to make it real or make it exist by recording it. Do you think that is what it is?

TF The spirit of Robert Ross was in a lot of people and I think that the researcher in that book would be satisfied with the fact that by telling the story of Robert Ross you're telling a larger story. It's the story of the spirit in everybody. It touches that part of all of us that says, "I won't do that." It is not touched by reading other things or being told other things which say "we are urging you to do that."

WM Or by the silence of not telling the story?

TF Yes exactly. I think at some point the book says something about: There are people who will not tell you this story. When you ask them, they will fall silent or tell you to go away. That gets said. This is what we are going through now with *The Valour and the Horror*. It is a very good example of that very thing. This lawsuit is grotesque, but it is tragically grotesque. That those men should honestly believe that they didn't know what they were doing. . . is tragic. Because they did know. They had to. But the propaganda wiped it out: "You've done it, but you've done it for a good reason."

WM The whole business of obscuring facts and lives by silence.

TF Yes. There is a play of mine called *The Stillborn Lover* in which the wife talks about her days as a cipher clerk when she was the one who was asked to decipher a message that came from the Japanese Emperor to the Japanese Ambassador in Moscow saying: "We now wish to treat for peace." I had a friend in Ottawa who saw the play with someone who had been in the diplomatic corps around that time and when that curtain came down, the diplomat turned to my friend and said, "It's wonderful, the play, but of course he has rewritten the ending of World War II." He didn't know about that message. Hardly anyone did. Because it wasn't to our benefit that it be known because the bomb was going to fall. The bomb was going to fall! You can't have the Japanese saying, "please don't drop the bomb" if we are dropping the bomb because then you are inhuman. But if we

don't know that they have said it is over, then we aren't inhuman. But they did say it—in the voice of—Good God—of the Emperor of Japan. And he was saying, "it's over" before the bomb fell, and they still got the bomb. That is not rewriting the end of World War II, that is revealing the end of World War II. It is interesting that this man is a very highly respected—and I respect him too, because he did a lot of good work—member of the diplomatic corps.

WM Gaps. How many gaps are there in the historical record like that though, that will never ever be known?

TF Yes, what will we never know? I mean, who the hell are we to think we know anything if you think of it in those terms? Exactly.

WM Still, the whole impetus behind telling, revealing, unveiling the secrets seems to be important.

TF Yes. And the other thing that goes through literature, too, particularly in our time, is that there are two kinds of telling: one is gossip and the other is serious. Gossip is being made to win the day. Gossip is more interesting, more attractive, titillating. The gossip's version of history as opposed to real history is more interesting.

WM What is real history though? Is it real because someone who writes it is the right person to write it or is it real because it is an eyewitness account?

TF Well, this is the trick. I can't answer the question, but I can explore it. One of the things I immediately think is an eyewitness account can tell you exactly what happened. John Hershey's *Hiroshima* is a brilliant piece of writing. I will never forget the first reading of that book as long as I live. I think it should be taught in all schools everywhere all around the world. He does it by implicating people. So-and-so was sitting in her office. That is how he tells the story. Suddenly the building starts to fall and the people start coming down from the floor above them. There is this extraordinary sentence, he said—"Isn't it extraordinary that at the very first moment of the atomic age, a woman, there she was, buried in books." And all the books came down, and buried

her. That is an eyewitness account because he is telling her story as she told it to him. He is also reading an opinion into that because he is reading the insight of a civilized human being into an uncivilized act that was perpetrated by his own people.

WM An eyewitness can give an account.

TF Exactly, but beyond that how do we know the whole story of how the bomb came to be there to be dropped in the first place?

WM Even in *The Wars* when it gets down to the actual incident of Robert Ross and the horses, there are lots of eyewitnesses, but there is no story, no clear story. No one knows what happened. This witness says this, this witness says something else. There is a different version for every teller. If that were history, what is real history?

TF This is the Russian thing; all the versions of reality. Everybody has a legitimate point of view. Every story is told from someone's point of view. We're sitting here; this is one thing from your point of view and quite another from mine. In every sense. But there is a mutual thing. We both say, and we would, "the tractor went," we'd both say, "there's a breeze, we fed the fish, blah blah blah." All those things would match, but our reading of this would be different because we bring a different history to it as we sit at this table.

WM A different way of seeing it?

TF Yes. But it is also shared. This is what is so hard to get at. And this, I think, is what you are always trying to articulate as a fiction writer. I don't know about historians because I think they are struggling for something else. There is a kind of truth that the academic or historian wants to trap, that the fiction writer is not trapping at all, not even going after. But there is still trapping because a mood or atmosphere or the very tone that rang through the moment is the thing that the fiction writer is trying to trap and maybe when you bring them both together you've got some version of the truth. Believable. But they're going to always be at war.

WM Does the documentary novel or historical novel not add to history, though, by supplementing the historical record?

TF Obviously it depends on what it is. *War and Peace* of course does. So does Jane Austen. They are all being affected by the same events. She is slightly earlier, but Napoleon is always there. History is happening in the same manner to all the people in Jane Austen. But Jane Austen is writing in the moment and Tolstoy is looking back.

WM History is affecting the author too.

TF Yes. He is being informed by stuff she would never know. If you skip to someone like Emily Brontë, you think: I don't want her to leave her dreadful—this is cruel—her dreadful little place on the top of the hill and her dreadful father and frustrated sisters. I don't want that to happen because then we wouldn't have had *Wuthering Heights*. If she had been able to walk down the hill and head for London and get well, and all of those strictures had fallen away, that book would never have existed. So there's a lot about knowing the big wide world, which is another way of saying getting to know history, that probably does us a lot of harm. Because it shuts off the interpretive mode.

WM In *The Wars* you have a very sceptical researcher who is trying to piece together the past, but is obviously working in contemporary times and knows of the difficulties, if not impossibility, of ever getting the complete story.

TF Take note of how often that researcher is called "you."

WM So it is the reader who is doing it as well.

TF Yes.

WM You do a similar thing in *Famous Last Words* with the events narrated by Mauberley read by the men at the hotel who are still in the middle of the war and don't have all the perspective that the reader has.

TF Each reader has an agenda, too, as all readers of history do.

WM Oh yes. They are not informed by the things that we know. But still with both your researcher in *The Wars*, and Vanessa Van Horne and Mauberley, they are all compelled to tell the story and they feel it has to be told, it has to be gotten down and that it will accomplish something.

TF Yes. There is very much that. That is part of the impetus that makes people write, should they write. That is to say, true writers as opposed to people who say, "How can I make living? Well, let me try this." I think there is this absolute compulsion to say, "I have to tell you this or I'll die." Or I'll explode or whatever. I simply have to pass this along. That is constantly a part of me. I am endlessly fascinated because I don't have children, which may be problematical, but on the other hand, it is part of who I am so it may be part of what drives me to put stuff on the page because I can't tell it into the ear of my child. I have to find some way of saying, "This was here. All of these people were here." That means something. That is compulsion. I can't bear the thought that I am going to die as the repository of so much that will never be told because I haven't found a way of communicating it yet. Or I haven't the time to communicate it. Isn't that part of what you are saying also about history that there is this whole underbelly of history that we are never, never, never going to know. Somewhere there must exist a version of events that is not partisan. Everyone claims to be non-partisan, but everyone is partisan. They have to be.

WM How does that exist then?

TF But it does exist. We know it exists. I can't do this: I don't have the skill to work out how to present such a thing, but if I were able to make something that was made up of paintings, and music and real people, for example now I'm going to bring in Pierre Trudeau and he's going to sit on stage and he's going to say something, and it's really going to be him, and these paintings and this music and this bit of a film and this lecture by so-

and-so and these three books that would be the moment. But there is no way of doing that.

WM But that would be that moment. That would not be a recreation of a moment from the past, would it?

TF It could be if you could amass it all in ways where each portion approved of the other.

WM But then you are relying on individual memory, which is a defective sort of medium to work with. You know how you have three people sitting there saying this all happened yesterday. We had such and such for lunch. The other person might say "Oh no, I thought we had something else." "Oh no, it was roast beef with horseradish, don't you remember?" and the person will say, "Yes, I remember." This kind of interaction goes on and people's individual memories influence each other's, so all of a sudden they are remembering the same roast beef sandwich, but in all accuracy it could have been cheese.

TF Yes. But the important thing is the point of view. The person who gets to be the recorder says: "I want to tell you about the roast beef and the horseradish," so I'm writing it from that point of view, but I might include that argument about "No, no it was cheese" as part of what I am doing. The thing about the point of view of saying "No, I had a cheese sandwich" is that you are telling it from that point of view and the roast beef sandwich takes a lesser place. There has to be point of view in anything that is told. How can there not be?

WM Only if it is not told can there be this sort of non-partisan moment that exists because once you start telling, then point of view comes in.

TF Yes. Alas, that is true. Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were some overriding way to run that down, to have the real thing.

WM I think the only real thing that you can ever have in that way is the actual moment that is happening now because once you start to deal with those moments from the past, you start

telling of them and then with the telling comes the perspective, and everything else, memory and language. With the moment that is happening now, and there does not have to be language for there to be a moment. But when I tell this moment tomorrow, I am going to have to use something to tell of it and that is going to have to be language which is very limiting.

TF What if you were dumb and couldn't write it down? I just had an image of this recently. If you had to, you would go into the rooms wherever you were and you would bring back a bouquet of flowers, a plate of sandwiches, a thing full of water, a table, some chairs, an open window; I mean, you would make it up. You would find a way of demonstrating the moment without words.

WM Yes, but it would still be a limited rendering, wouldn't it? Because it wouldn't be quite the same sandwiches, quite the same day, it would be a little bit less. I think that is what happens when we retell or when we tell. But not necessarily less. Sometimes it is more because the moment was nothing great, and then it becomes more in the telling. But whether it's language, music, or art recreating it, it is somehow not the same is it?

TF No.

WM It is somehow altered.

TF It's altered, but don't forget, it's being altered in a way that may get at the truth. This is where I go back to what I was saying earlier, about my . . . in a sense, my panic . . . about not being able to say everything. By landing on just the right image, through whatever means, whether by talent or by will alone, you manage to say: This is what was in that moment. You might be able to make it blossom around the reader, and around the listener, and the watcher in the same way that moment broke around those who were engaged in that moment. Does that make sense? What you are trying to do as a writer as a maker of these things is to find that. If you can put the pin in just the right place, you stimulate or restimulate the moment or the possibilities of the moment.

WM Or at least a new moment that is marvellous and . . .

TF And that comments or reflects upon the true moment of the past. Of course it's impossible.

WM So is that why Mauberley writes his story?

TF Yes.

WM He is compelled?

TF Yes, and he is a novelist so that is his mode and he relies upon that mode in a sense to protect the integrity of what he is saying because he announces right off the top, I think, "I'm telling this as a story so that you will understand all the feelings, and the nuances, and the ingredients and all the materials that go into the making of the thing as you would if you were telling a story." If you had to recreate this moment how would you do it? You would do it with all these things and this is how I do that. I remember the editor of the book saying that there was a whole section of the book I had to take out because he said, "Does Mauberley have the time to tell that story when he is under the threat of death and driven by the need to tell the whole story?" Is he going to pause to tell this, and of course, he wouldn't so I had to take these things out. But he did take the time to record, as only a novelist would or a maker of words would even think to tell, almost as Shakespeare did, the moment of seeing her [Wallis] that first time in the hotel in Shanghai, and the whole feeling of that hotel and the feeling of that time and the passing hordes of people getting on and off ships, arriving and departing. The movement of history around this solitary figure sitting there saying, "I am waiting for my moment." If he couldn't tell it like that he couldn't tell it at all, because it wouldn't make sense if he simply said, "I met her in the lobby of the hotel in Shanghai."

WM He doesn't want to just get the facts down, he wants to tell the story.

TF He has to tell you who she is. What's important is who she is. Even if the guy with the knives were right there he would still try to put it down that way.

WM Well, because surely he knows he is going to be killed anyway.

TF Yes.

WM So it can't really be self-preservation.

TF No. He is not delaying the moment of his death in any sense, or subverting it in any sense.

WM But he is also telling it with a certain ideology that is clearly. . .

TF Clearly apologetic. No—it is beyond apology; it is regret. “Look what I did by being subservient to all this glamour.” The thing that punched the book into being was a need to do something and I am obviously not sitting down and passing off a story. Something was happening here. It was motivated by a profound need in me to say things, to articulate things that I believe in very strongly. It is my belief that glamour so dazzles us that we literally sweep into another corridor of history dragging the whole of the human race with us because we have been swept away and a sufficient number of people being swept away by Hitler dragged the whole of civilization into an oven. That is what happened and you have to express that in some way. You have to say “I am the one who did that” which is what Mauberley is saying at the end with the knives poised at his back, he sees that. This is how it happened. In another book of mine called *The Butterfly Plague*, it is all the same thing, but no one ever paid any attention to that book at all. But it is the same thing. We did this.

WM Why have Quinn and Freyburg? Two opposing views or readings of Mauberley. Why not just have the Mauberley story and let the reader interpret that?

TF I think at some point, as it started to formulate itself in that particular mould, which didn't happen until close to the end of the making of that book altogether, I kept having those arguments myself. “What a dreadful, ghastly man, thank God he is dead!” I'd say at one moment. Then I would say, “Wait a moment, we are now talking about Ezra Pound.” We are talking about, if you want to go

right down the line, we're talking about Eliot and all kinds of people who lent, by silence or by leaning or through their anti-Semitism or whatever mode they took—they lent credence to that whole movement. Elitists are now leading us into the dark again, of course. I am talking about people, for some of whom, I have great affection. I will never be able to back away from Eliot and say the guy's writing didn't affect me because it did. His insights are dazzling.

WM But just because someone can create an aesthetically pleasing art object doesn't absolve them of guilt.

TF Exactly. Celine is the best example probably of them all.

WM Interestingly, the business of an aesthetic art object and fascism sort of went hand in hand.

TF Yes, whereas fascism itself was not about an aesthetic of any kind. And isn't that funny? Well, they used Wagner, but there's a lot about Wagner that's vulgar and there's a lot about him that's wonderful too. But that's not being swept away by the aesthetic, that's being swept away by purely the emotional content and nothing else. And misunderstanding it at that. But yeah, so the argument was taking place in me and it is interesting. Shortly after the book was published, I had a letter from Margaret Laurence which made me very unhappy, because she was totally Freyburg—she was a Freyburgeian. "Kill the son of a bitch!"—you know—"Get rid of him! Who needs him?" This disturbed me because it meant that this is what she thought I was saying. And it's not what I'm saying. I think that Quinn's finding at the very end when he says, "I'm still here waiting" (Maubertley says that, but Quinn underlines it, he underscores it, he dates it)—is that he ultimately sees what has really happened and that Freyburg is in fact part of the problem because it's Freyburg who will deliver us into the hands of other kinds of monsters because he is so absolutely driven in black and white. And of course, the motive that drives him is—there's no way you can challenge that at all. You can't say that walking into that concentration camp doesn't put you away. I experienced walking into that camp just simply seeing it in photographs in someone's living room in Hollywood, before it was known. Before it was widely known. Everybody knew some things but this guy had walked in and he was the official photographer and there was the album in his living

room. How you could ever forgive the human race or any part of it including yourself for what had happened and what had been done to—if it had been done to animals it would have been the same—if you follow me. . . it was so grotesque and so inhuman, unimaginable. How could you imagine this stuff? We couldn't imagine that people would do these things. There is nothing people won't do. Once it falls into the world of politics, and power-mongering, it is time we recognized people will do anything. People will do anything. And they're so crazy to walk away from that fact that we have now got the world we've got yet again which just staggers me. I feel like a child. You want to raise your hands and your fists and beat and say, "Didn't you see that?" "No, I didn't see that. I saw something else entirely." "Oh." That is where sometimes fiction can run over.

WM This is what you are exploring in *Headhunter*—the scary world of power-mongering and that people will do anything.

TF Yes. Absolutely.

WM At the very end of *Famous Last Words*, there is a creature that rises from the sea. What is the creature a metaphor for?

TF It is the gathering. It is that unseen. Actually it stems from a moment by the seaside where that actually happened and something was swept up on the shore. You couldn't tell what it was; it was just a thing. This was down at the Atlantic House. And everybody gathered around it and sort of said, "What could that have been?" And obviously it had been something that was alive at some point in its career. But the sea had done some damage, and enemies—or predators—had done some damage. What you got was simply an organism that had been alive that was dead. The really weird thing is that there's a moment in a Fellini movie, and now I don't remember whether it's *Eight and a Half* or whether it's *La Dolce Vita* in which something is washed onto the beach. And everybody looks at it and goes through exactly the same thing. And when I saw that, I thought isn't that crazy. He wasn't on the beach when we found this thing on the beach down at the Atlantic House in Maine, the United States of America. He made this up. Or maybe he didn't. Maybe it rolled

up on the beach in wherever he goes in Italy. The basic thing is there was this unidentifiable thing that was made of living matter and my sense of the furor around the finding of the body, the meaning of Mauberley's life, and all the things reaching out into all those worlds had created an unseen creature, who, as if under the sea, feeds on things that are alive. You know, it's the great horror of the ocean, you may have never felt it but I sure have, when you roll out and you are swimming and you know you've left the shelf and suddenly there's this gap and you feel the weight catch at the back of your calves, I can feel it now, it's ghastly. And what's there? And a friend of mine, Janet Baldwin, who was the character of Baby in *The Telling of Lies*, and she was also, by the way, the woman on whom I based the character of Ruth in *The Butterfly Plague*; Janet was a dancer not a swimmer, but she went to those Olympics and had some of those experiences. Anyway, she was swimming in the sea and she got out over the shelf and she looked down—and down below her at whatever depth there was a shape—now isn't it wonderful how the shivers go down your back if you simply say the word "shape"? Isn't it? She couldn't define it. It wasn't a shark. She couldn't say, "That's a shark." But something was there. And she didn't know how to escape because she couldn't know how to define what it could be. She only knew: "I must find some way away from here." And she didn't thrash because she knew enough about the ocean and swimming in the ocean never to thrash, because that brings everybody: "Hey, come on over here, there's something good going on." So she had to very quietly manoeuvre herself away, trying to be calm and undemonstrative and got away. But what was it? So what it was in those terms in that book is the thing upon which the thing that Freyburg commented on had been drawn. It's like drawing the poison from a wound. Then the Russians entered Vienna and it was immediately obvious: "This is the New World." The division of that, which of course everybody in politics had been aware of what was going to happen but the people who fought the war didn't know that, the soldiers didn't know that, Freyburg didn't know that. And everything he'd fought for and what he'd discovered in Dachau and suddenly they say, "We're going to forgive them. It's over. And let's put it away and never think about it again." This thing that. . . it's gone underground. And what it was this thing made up of the elite.

And lo and behold, look who won. Leading the world: Japan, Germany, everybody else following, but not in their aggressive faces but in their corporate faces, aided and abetted by the corporate elite of the world. That's my reading of history and this is the result. They will always have the power. They are the thing under the sea. And I really believe that.

WM The title, *Famous Last Words*, apparently that expression came out during the Second World War in '39 or so in the Air Force. Is it meant to be ironic as in, "Pay attention, everyone says it won't happen here, it can't happen here, it can never happen to us?"—*Famous Last Words*, is that the spirit?

TF Yes. Without my knowing, that it came about in that way. I thought I had known that expression all my life, but obviously I didn't. I can give you an example in *Famous Last Words* where history falls in your lap and delivers you from that bind. Three weeks before I went to the printer, Bill Clark, who had been editing the book with me, came to the Atlantic House and said, "Here is what is missing: There is no relationship between the Duke of Windsor and his mother. There is no historical background. We just need a little background. I want to know something about him, something personal." So I thought OK. I went into the library, the little library which is quite a nice library at the hotel, and there was a book about Queen Mary written by a very highly respected British biographer and I took it down and I started reading through the whole part that had to do with, from her point of view, the crisis with Wallis Warfield, and there was this extraordinary juxtaposition of facts which leapt off the page at me. When he came back from the Nahlin cruise Queen Mary was in the process of moving out of Buckingham Palace into Marlborough House. And I got this image of Mom in her aprons and her silly hat and the whole parade of English history being moved down the mall and into this other residence and all her paintings going up the stairs. And it arose out of an absolute moment in their lives that was based on the historical record meeting that took place in the very moment I needed it to.

WM In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Mrs. Noyes prays for rain

at the end of the book. I take it as a gesture of hope while others take it as a gesture of despair. Do you have any thoughts on it?

TF The motto of the book is "Against despair" which is my personal motto; it is from Sam Johnson. I can remember writing it and the feeling of writing it. I wrote it before I had reached the end of the book. I wrote it on a separate piece of paper. I think that Mottyl had died and that was part of her despair. The things she had tried to save and loved the most, in essence, had died. I hadn't known where it came in the book. I had thought it was just a moment, toward the end of the book, but I didn't know it was the very end. But I had it and I knew—I was waiting to find where it belonged. Then I decided I couldn't kill Mottyl. Not just that I couldn't bear to but that logistically that was one too many. It's like the ending of *Headhunter*, you can go one too many and you miss the meaning of what you yourself have done, which happens anyway. But this was a mostly self-conscious missing of it—I'm going to deliberately walk past it, because I'm mad or whatever. When I got to the end of *Not Wanted on the Voyage*—I'll tell you absolutely, it was two-thirty in the morning and I was sitting in my nightshirt and dressing gown and it was late winter and Bill would come and pick up the pages and put them on the computer—because the book was being delivered the next day—and this always happens, this has happened for all the books—there's this last minute screaming: "How does it end?" And I am conscious of the fact that it has to have its own ending. I can't predetermine the ending. My feeling sitting in that kitchen was a feeling of rage. It was beyond anger. It was literally rage at what had unfolded under my hand. It was as though it was pushing the pen. It carried a lot of weight. And I wasn't sad; I wasn't—I was enraged. Being enraged, I thought, "This can't be right." It's all right to be enraged by what the book means because that's part of the meaning of the book. But you mustn't leave the reader in this state. Because then they're just going to throw the book across the room and what good does that do? So I then remembered this extraordinary thing. And by then I had decided that Mottyl would live. I had Mrs. Noyes go down and bring her up onto the deck and say: Let's look at the moon, and all that and the stars. And then she does this extraordinary thing. She prays for rain. And I thought, Thank God! Some pre-informing thing had said, "Save

this!" I took it and put it at the end. It cuts against the despair. It's not despairing. For me, it self-consciously cuts against despair. It's my determining that it's not going to end like this. It's going to end on a note that says she has regained her footing. By the end of her existence, Lucifer has become Cassandra. And that's the meaning of all the beehives. Beehives are the symbol for Cassandra. And she comes out and she's dumb. No one's ever going to believe her again. She's given all the warnings. Now she is condemned to death. That is part of the despair for Mrs. Noyes: the sheep won't talk, we've won our little war, but so what? But then there's this wonderful thing of "If it went on raining, we couldn't land and Noah wouldn't get the chance to start it all over again." So to me it's really the connivance of hope.

WM If it kept raining it might be able to wash away some of the evil that exists. If the first rain was supposed to wash away the evil on earth, maybe more rain can wash away the evil that is still here.

TF I hadn't thought of that, but that is a very good reading of it.

WM Baptism by water.

TF That's the first time I've ever had that put to me. But of course it is, it all is—all the things about Christ.

WM Baptism as destruction but also baptism as cleansing.

TF Yes it is a baptismal.

WM History, myth and other works of literature seem to come together in your works really well.

TF I don't see how you can avoid it. I have to say, it's not self-conscious in that, I don't have the capability. If I ever set out on a quest to discover certain things, I do not feel equipped to make the discoveries in any academic way. Which is good in a way because then I have to rely entirely on what's there. But of course part of what's there is the intellectual accumulation of

whatever I've garnered throughout my increasingly long life. Which is only where your eye leads you and your interests lie.

WM It may surprise you to know that "truth" and "lies" appear exactly fifty-five times each in *Famous Last Words* not counting "la verdad."

TF You're kidding. Even the subconscious can count.

WM And even though *The Telling of Lies* is called *The Telling of Lies*, the words "true" and "truth" appear more frequently than the words "lie" and "lying." There is more truth than lies in *The Telling of Lies*.

TF Yes. Isn't that marvellous?