

# DE-AUTOMATIZATION IN TIMOTHY FINDLEY'S "THE WARS"

*Vladimir Tumanov*

**T**IMOTHY FINDLEY'S *The Wars* is a very powerful and disturbing book. Despite the novel's historically distant setting, the events of *The Wars* do not seem distant at all: the reader is brought close to the horrible violence of World War I and its devastating impact on a young mind. The question is why? The topic is certainly not new — we are all too familiar with the World War I period. The theme is also an old one — a young man's loss of innocence and baptism by fire on the battlefield. The novelty and vividness of Findley's work are attributable to another source: its form. I hope to show that one artistic device in particular — de-automatization — is largely responsible for the novel's powerful impact on the modern reader.

Any author writing a historical novel about a very well-known period of history has to overcome a monumental obstacle: time. I am not referring to the time separating the writer from the events being described, for that is often just a matter of thorough research. The passage of time presents another fundamental problem — the dulling of the reader's response — and its solution requires much more than the accurate presentation of historical facts. As the present turns into the past, its vividness and novelty are slowly buried under a mound of subsequent experience, which transforms living reality into dusty, boring clichés in the oversaturated mind of most readers. If a historical novel dealing with well-known events is to have any impact, it must trick the reader into reacting to the usual as if it were unusual. The reader must be reawakened and forced to see an old story in a new light.

World War I poses precisely this problem. How does one make World War I appear as bizarre as it really was, given that the modern reader has read countless books, seen endless film footage and heard innumerable historical accounts of The War to End All Wars? This is a very important question, for however "old hat" it may be to today's audience, this war was one of the most baffling events in the 20th

century. World War I was not just another war; it was the initiation of humanity into the concept of total war. It was a break with the past that transformed the world. Modern warfare is just an enhanced version of what began with World War I, and, as Raymond Aron puts it, “the second [world] war was nearly a replica of the first.”<sup>1</sup> The machine gun, the flame thrower, the airborne bomb, the tank, the poison gases and the trench all came together and threw the charging cavalymen off the battlefield. This mechanization was strange, but it is not anymore: The Great War has become “automatized” in our perception. In order to understand how it is de-automatized in Timothy Findley’s novel, let us turn to the work of the Russian formalist theoretician, Victor Shklovsky.

In his seminal article, entitled “Iskusstvo kak priëm” [Art as Technique],<sup>2</sup> Victor Shklovsky argues that continued exposure to something causes us to stop perceiving it: “The thing passes us by — as if it were wrapped up — and we know that it exists only according to the place that it occupies, but we only see its surface.”<sup>3</sup> This he terms *avtomatizacia* [automatization] and argues that it is especially prevalent in everyday language where it plays an important role: economy of effort. When the referential function is uppermost in the communicative hierarchy,<sup>4</sup> as in the case of everyday speech, the speaker strives to make his discourse as easily understandable as possible. He resorts to linguistic formulae well known to the listener who perceives them without giving these clichés another thought: automatically. However, when discourse is artistic, there is no question of “economy of effort” on the part of the speaker. He tries to make his discourse complex, present the usual in an unusual light and direct the perceiver’s attention to elements which are normally overlooked in everyday speech. In other words, artistic discourse is the de-automatization of perception. Arguing that “there are many ways of de-automatizing a thing in art,”<sup>5</sup> Shklovsky describes one such strategy, which he calls *ostranenie* [making strange].

*Ostranenie* comes from the Russian word *stranny* [strange], and according to Shklovsky any device that attracts our attention to something by causing it to appear strange is *ostranenie*:

‘Making strange’ did not necessarily entail substituting the elaborate for the simple; it could mean just as well the reverse — the use of the profane or earthy term instead of the learned or genteel one, provided that the latter represented in the given case the accepted usage.<sup>6</sup>

*Ostranenie* can be achieved, for example, through the explication of a simple concept that we normally accept automatically, without giving it a second thought. Shklovsky cites an example from Tolstoy who takes the simple concept of “flogging criminals” and makes it strange by explicating it: “people who have broken the law are to be undressed, thrown to the floor, and their naked buttocks are to be whipped with rods.”<sup>7</sup> This is a typical example of *ostranenie*, one of the de-automatization strategies used by Findley in *The Wars*.

DE-AUTOMATIZATION IN *The Wars* begins with a picture. To most people today the World War I period is nothing but an old familiar photograph: a black-and-white cliché. And this automatized, fuzzy snapshot, which is usually our first association with The War to End All Wars, is one of the first targets of de-automatization in *The Wars*. The novel begins with descriptions of typical period photographs, but these familiar archival relics suddenly acquire unusual qualities. Even before we reach the narrative sections of *The Wars*, the photographs begin to come alive:

... you read on the back [of the photo] in the faintest ink in a feminine hand: 'Robert.' But where? You look again and all you see is the crowd. . . . Then you see him: Robert Ross. Standing on the sidelines with pocketed hands — feet apart and narrowed eyes. . . . He watches with a dubious expression; half admiring — half reluctant to admire. He is old enough to go to war. He hasn't gone. He doubts the validity in all this martialling of men but the doubt is inarticulate. It stammers in his brain. He puts his hand out sideways: turns. He reaches for the wicker back of a wheelchair. 'Come on, Rowena . . .'<sup>8</sup>

At first Robert Ross cannot be seen at all; then he appears as just another of the photographic ghosts we normally associate with the period in question, but gradually he begins to think and move like a "real" literary character. By the end of the novel, this photographic animation is complete: "*Robert and Rowena with Meg*: Rowena seated astride the pony — Robert holding her in place. On the back is written: 'Look! you can see our breath!' And you can." (191) And so the most stereotypical visual image of the World War I period is transformed.<sup>9</sup> Because *The Wars* opens and closes with the de-automatized black-and-white snapshot, the photograph unifies the various de-automatization strategies in the novel and acts as a kind of picture frame, within which these strategies unfold.

One such strategy is the juxtaposition of the violence of total war — very familiar now but absolutely unprecedented back then — with phenomena which are normally not associated with 20th century carnage. This way the reader is shocked indirectly: not by the violence itself but by the incongruity and the contrast involved in such a juxtaposition. Robert's first battle, which is the first instance of actual mass extermination in *The Wars*, begins with one of the most strikingly de-automatizing juxtapositions of violent and peaceful elements: "In [the battle] 30,000 men would die and not an inch of ground would be won. It began with Robert lying under his bunk with a rabbit, a hedgehog and a bird." (109) Nothing could be more out of place, and nothing could contrast more effectively with 30,000 war deaths than three meek little animals.<sup>10</sup>

Some horrors of modern warfare are described in more or less direct terms in *The Wars*, but they too are de-automatized because the narrator is careful to present them in light of Victorian preconceptions about war:

“THE WARS”

Oh — I can tell you, sort of, what it must be like to die. The Death of General Wolfe. Someone will hold my hand and I won't really suffer pain because I've suffered that already and survived. In paintings — and in photographs — there's never any blood. At most the hero sighs his way to death while linen handkerchiefs are held against his wounds. His wounds are poems. (49)

It is only in light of passages such as this, and given that Robert has learned about life from the *Boy's Own Annual* and *Chums* (107), that the following passages can have any impact on a reader who has been exposed to the Nazi Holocaust, the nuclear missile and other manifestations of total, impersonal and very un-Victorian warfare in the 20th century:

By August half a million men were dead. Two million shells were fired that first day at the rate of 100,000 rounds per hour (84).

In the hours between 7.30 a.m. and 7.30 p.m. 21,000 British soldiers were killed — 35,000 were wounded and 600 taken prisoner by the Germans (103).

Much of the de-automatizing effect in *The Wars* can be attributed to *ostranenie* proper: making something appear strange. One of Shklovsky's most important concepts is *ostranenie* achieved when a phenomenon familiar to the reader is presented directly through the eyes of a character unfamiliar with this phenomenon, i.e., naive observer focalization. Shklovsky cites examples that have to do with the *ostranenie* of the sexual act where the erotic object is presented as “something seen for the first time.”<sup>11</sup> In *The Wars* homosexuality and sadomasochism — taboo subjects in the Victorian world of Robert Ross, but almost trite by modern standards — are made strange precisely according to Shklovsky's scheme. As Robert watches the sadomasochistic homosexual encounter between Taffler and the Swede, he is totally bewildered: “[Robert] had never dreamed of such a thing — of being hit and wanting to be hit. Beaten. Or of striking someone because they'd asked you to.” (44) A description of the homosexual act would not have required *ostranenie* to make an impression on Robert's contemporaries, but it must be de-automatized if it is to make any impression on us.<sup>12</sup> The *ostranenie* of the encounter between Taffler and the Swede, which Robert likens to a mustang and a rider, is similar to the *ostranenie* illustrated in Shklovsky's article by the excerpt from a Belorussian fairy tale where demons, watching the sexual act, wonder: “. . . who is he riding?”<sup>13</sup>

Not only “deviant” sexual practices but also sexuality in general are made strange in *The Wars*, and part of the *ostranenie* effect is achieved by associating sex with violence or destruction. Compare the *ostranenie* achieved through Robert's perception of sadomasochism as unexplainable violence (see above) with similar bewilderment on the part of Juliet D'Orsey who witnesses the sexual encounter between Robert and Barbara:

Two people hurting one another. . . . Barbara was lying on the bed, so her head hung down and I thought that Robert must be trying to kill her. They were both quite

naked. He was lying on top of her and shaking her with his hole body. . . . Robert’s neck was full of blood and his veins stood out. He hated her. (156)

The two naive observers, Robert and Juliet, perceive sexual manifestations as violence, and the *ostranenie* inherent in their points of view is part of the general atmosphere of strangeness that characterizes *The Wars*. In this strange world the sexual act is not an act of love but one of destruction. Thus, Robert’s masturbation is made strange when it is presented as the destruction of potential life: “He made a fist around his penis . . . A sudden vision of obliteration struck him like a bomb . . . He slept with his fist in its place, and the cold, wet blooming of four hundred thousand possibilities — of all those lives that would never be — on his fingertips.” (163) All these instances of sexual *ostranenie* through images of violence and destruction contribute to the *ostranenie* of violence itself, de-automatizing the reader’s preconceptions about familiar phenomena and historical events.

**T**HE OSTRANENIE OF VIOLENCE begins even before the descriptions of battlefield carnage, and it involves the romantic view of violence that was to be shattered by the unromantic reality of World War I. When Robert is asked by Heather Lawson to fight a man who is supposedly in love with her, the prospect of such romantic violence is made strange when it is refracted in Robert’s perception of the young socialite’s request:

Did Heather Lawson love him? “No,” she had said, “of course not.” Then why should I fight him?” Robert had asked. “Because he *loves* me,” she said. She spoke as if Robert were stupid. It all made perfect sense to Heather, but Robert thought it was idiotic and said so . . . In short — she made ‘a scene’ of the sort then popular in the books of Booth Tarkington . . . All because he wouldn’t fight a man she didn’t love and whom he’d never seen. (19)

Heather Lawson’s model is Booth Tarkington,<sup>14</sup> and this metafictional allusion to the mindset characteristic of Robert’s generation places into perspective the romanticization of violence by other characters in *The Wars*.

Heather Lawson’s notions of violence are echoed in another Toronto setting: St. Paul’s church where the Bishop speaks “about flags and holy wars and Empire.” (53) Here the official sanctioning and traditional glorification of organized violence is made strange through Mrs. Ross’s view of the service: “The choir came next and everyone stood. Something was sung. They litanized. They sat down — they stood up — they sang — they sat down — they knelt. *God this and God that and Amen.*” (53) The *ostranenie* effect is achieved because “flags and holy wars and Empire” are strung together with no apparent links, appearing meaningless and absurd. Connections are similarly lacking in the description of the church service where sitting, standing, sitting, kneeling and singing seem unrelated to each

other or anything else and therefore create the appearance of a bizarre and mysterious ritual. Thus, the service and the sermon are made strange because their constituent elements appear disjointed and add up to a meaningless whole.

These and other instances of *ostranenie* preceding descriptions of actual World War I carnage serve to de-automatize the modern reader's conception of attitudes, with which people went into the trenches of Europe in 1914. What follows is the *ostranenie* of total war, which Robert and his comrades face armed with books by Clausewitz (92) and Conrad (107).

The sense of unconnectedness conveyed by the *ostranenie* of the church service is carried over into the description of Robert's first battle. Just as there seemed to be no logical links between the actions of people giving a religious sanction to organized violence, the execution of this violence appears equally disjointed:

Everything moved in slow-motion — even things that fell seemed to float. . . . There was a lot of noise but none of it seemed to be connected with what one saw. The driven, ceaseless pounding of the guns (from both sides now) had nothing to do with the bursting of the shells and the bursting of the shells had nothing to do with the thudding of the earth beneath one's feet. Everything was out of sync. (114)

While in this case *ostranenie* de-automatizes the unprecedented power of World War I shelling, the device is also used to reanimate in our minds the all too familiar innovations of modern warfare: gas and the flame thrower. In the passage depicting the gas attack, *ostranenie* is achieved not through a strange-making description of the weapon itself but through Robert's perception of the fact that urine, of all things, is required to neutralize it. This realization is so unlike anything previously known about war that simply saying the word “piss” is strange-making: “Clear as a bell . . . came the sound of Clifford Purchas, all of twelve years old, giggling and poking Robert's ribs. ‘Piss’ he'd said — and been dismissed from class for saying it. Now that one word might save them.” (126)

In the case of the flame thrower, the weapon itself is presented through *ostranenie*: “The weapon with which the Germans now attacked had been introduced at Verdun. It was something called a ‘flame thrower’ . . . Men, it was said, carrying tanks of fire on their backs came in advance of the troops and spread fire with hoses.” (132) Only this kind of a description can have any effect on a reader who has seen much deadlier flame throwers in the endless color footage of the Viet Nam War. The mysterious weapon — “it was something called a ‘flame thrower’ ” — is described in no less mysterious terms: “tanks of fire spread with hoses.” This *ostranenie* causes us to see the deadly device through the baffled eyes of a World War I soldier: as something incredible, something out of an H. G. Wells novel.

The presentation of the carnage that results from this incredible weaponry involves a problem similar to the difficulty of making a flame thrower look strange and new in 1977 — the year Findley's novel was published. Given that the modern reader is well acquainted with the casualty statistics of World War I, which were

exceeded by the 50 million dead of World War II, the narrator of *The Wars* must once again resort to *ostranenie* if the number of dead is to have any impact on us. The number of dead is presented with a very strange-making addendum: “So far you have read of the deaths of 557,017 people — one of whom was killed by a streetcar [Mrs. Ross’s brother], one of whom died of bronchitis [Harris] and one of whom died in a barn with her rabbits [Robert’s hydrocephalic sister].” (158) This humanization of cold numbers causes the modern reader to suddenly notice the faces behind dusty statistics that have since been matched and surpassed.

PACIFISM AND ANTI-WAR movements — the negative reaction to total war — have become as automatized in our perception as total war itself; consequently, the peace movement is also made strange in *The Wars*. Findley employs the “naive observer” strategy in Juliet D’Orsey’s diary. The use of a twelve-year-old girl’s point of view in the description of very ‘adult’ activities is an effective technique of de-automatization as it was in the sex scene at St. Aubyn’s: “Clive arrived with masses of people. All his pacifist friends. I think they want to persuade him not to go back — but he’s going. . . . Michael loathes and detests them. He says they are ruining the war.” (148) Because of her age, the observer (Juliet) does not understand the significance of the two radically antithetical positions conveyed by her own description. Neither can she assess the absurdity inherent in the idea of “running a war.” Thus, by being refracted through the child’s mind, pacifists appear as strange creatures indeed. This perception is reinforced by the lack of commentary or judgement by the naive observer regarding the beliefs of pacifists or the beliefs of someone who can object to a war being ruined.

The *ostranenie* of the pacifists intensifies when Juliet describes them as sitting in the garden, “leaning their heads together, smoking cigarettes and talking very seriously.” (149) By not revealing — and probably being unable to understand — the topic of the pacifists’ conversation, the naive observer makes strange an ideology which is very familiar to the modern reader. Because we know all too well what the pacifists are talking about, their actual words would elicit a very automatized response on our part. When Juliet reports her mother’s reaction to the conversation among the pacifists, a doubly strange-making effect is achieved: “. . . and Michael said: ‘Why do they huddle like that?’ And mother said: ‘I think it’s because they’re literary, dear.’” (149) Here the pacifists are refracted through the perception of not one but two naive observers: the twelve-year-old girl and her very naive mother. As a result, the modern reader can actually experience the novelty and strangeness of pacifists during the World War I period.

The general result of Findley’s technique is a sense of closeness to the experience of Robert Ross’s contemporaries: a dusty photo is transformed into “blood and

guts” in *The Wars*. The naive observer’s point of view makes it possible to communicate the kind of de-automatized experience that would not have been conveyed by simple authorial narration. Because Robert Ross is a young and inexperienced idealist, he is the perfect focalizer for this purpose: his sense of shock and loss of Victorian innocence is a reflection of a similar phenomenon on a global scale. World War I could be considered the greatest strange-making event of the 20th century, inaugurating a period when “the soldier and the citizen became interchangeable.”<sup>15</sup> This conflating of social roles makes *ostranenie* most appropriate as the main de-automatization strategy in *The Wars*. Because the horror experienced by citizen-soldiers like Robert Ross has lost its novelty and has been multiplied so many times since 1918, by de-automatizing our customary notions about The Great War the narrator of *The Wars* turns his story into a haunting testimony of a radical change in modern history. Instead of ending all wars, The War to End All Wars was only the beginning: the beginning of something that still haunts us, for the machine gun, the bomber, the flame thrower, the long range cannon and the mustard gas are still with us. And in this respect the title of Timothy Findley’s novel can be read as the embodiment of the way The War to End All Wars failed to end all wars: the words “War to End all” have been dropped, and only *The Wars* remain.

NOTES

I would like to thank E. D. Blodgett and Larissa Klein for their helpful suggestions.

- <sup>1</sup> Raymond Aron, *The Century of Total War* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1965) : 32.
- <sup>2</sup> In *Readings in Russian Poetics: Michigan Slavic Materials*, Ladislav Matejka, comp. (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1971) : 1-17.
- <sup>3</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 6. [This and subsequent quotations from Shklovsky’s article are in my translation.]
- <sup>4</sup> See R. Jakobson’s “La Dominante” in *Roman Jakobson: Questions de poétique*, Tzvetan Todorov, ed. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973) : 145-51.
- <sup>5</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965) : 178.
- <sup>7</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1977) : 13. [all further references to this edition will be given in parentheses]
- <sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of photography in *The Wars* see Eva-Marie Kröller’s “The Exploding Frame: Uses of Photography in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 16 (Fall-Winter 1981) : 68-74.
- <sup>10</sup> Another very striking example of how the horrors of total war are de-automatized by being juxtaposed with peaceful images is the description of countless human corpses floating in the swampy battlefield: “There was also the sound of lapping — of movement out in the field — and the sound reminded Robert of the early morning slap-



slap-slap from the diving raft at Jackson point. Something floating in the water." (76) The lapping sound is of course made by the bodies of dead soldiers, and this association of mass extermination with the peaceful image of a lake has the same effect as the above-mentioned juxtaposition of 30,000 dead with "a rabbit, a hedgehog and a bird." [cf. note 12]

<sup>11</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> According to L. M. York, Robert's association of the homosexual with an image of a rider atop a mustang is an example of "familiarization," which is a defensive strategy used by the protagonist to soften the impact of disturbing unfamiliar experiences [Lorraine M. York, "A Shout of Recognition': 'Likeness' and the Art of the Simile in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*," *English Studies in Canada*, 11:2 (June 1985): 226]. York argues that throughout the novel Robert makes the unfamiliar, such as violence and homosexuality, more acceptable to his sensitive mind by drawing parallels with the familiar. Deriving the term "familiarization" from "defamiliarization" — the misleading translation of Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, which, as I have pointed out, really means "making strange" — York transforms Shklovsky's original view of *ostranenie* as an artistic device into an aspect of a character's psychology [cf. "Art as Technique" in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 12]. As an artistic device, *ostranenie* is aimed at the reader and his automatized perceptions, while a character's "bewildered" perspective is merely a means of motivating the de-automatization. Furthermore, as V. Erlich points out, "what mattered was not the direction of the 'semantic shift,' but the very fact that such a shift had occurred, that a deviation from the norm had been made" [Erlich, 178]. This means that perceiving the unfamiliar (homosexuality) in terms of the familiar (horse and rider) is just as de-automatizing as the perception of the familiar in terms of the unfamiliar.

<sup>13</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> A melodramatic American author (1869-1946).

<sup>15</sup> Aron, 9.

**SEVEN SPECIALIZED BOOKSHOPS UNDER  
ONE ROOF AT THE NEW UBC BOOKSTORE**



6200 UNIVERSITY BLVD.  
VANCOUVER, B.C. V5Y 1W9

**UBC BOOKSTORE**

- ARTS AND HUMANITIES
- LANGUAGE & LITERATURE
- SOCIAL & BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES
- PROFESSIONAL
- HEALTH SCIENCES
- GENERAL