MEMORY AND MISTAKE

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Abstract

My paper is an attempt at drawing a parallel between the memoirs of two novelists writing in English, one Canadian and the other one British. In analyzing Timothy Findley's *Inside Memory* and Paul Bailey's *An Immaculate Mistake* I have as starting point images of a childhood fascinated – and here I intend to slightly adopt Maurice Blanchot's existentialist perspective on children's way of getting into fascination –, with stories about war, and especially the Great War, later reflected in some of the writers' major works. Timothy Findley and Paul Bailey, who couldn't take part in either of the two World Wars, seem to have been heavily influenced by the accounts provided to them by fathers and other relatives – possible father substitutes – during childhood & youth years, when searching for / trying to accomplish their artistic identity.

Keywords: memory, childhood & youth memories, stories of the World War I, artistic identity

1. Memoir vs. Autobiography and a nutshell poetics of *memory*

1.1 *Memoir* (from French: *mémoire* / Latin: *memoria*, meaning *memory*, or *reminiscence*), is commonly perceived as a literary sub-genre, more flexible than the traditional story tracing the development of personality – from birth to (sometimes) old age –, to be found in an autobiography. According to Gore Vidal, "a memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked." (*Palimpsest*). In this respect, Timothy Findley's *Inside Memory: Pages from a writer's workbook* might appear to have a narrower focus on the author's memories or feelings than Paul Bailey's *An Immaculate Mistake: Scenes from Childhood and Beyond*. Both writers *recall* and describe significant *episodes* that helped to shape their emotional intelligence as well as their artistic career. Apparently, Findley chooses to circle them around the writing of some of his novels, out of which six are lending their titles to the chapters. Among the other five one could count an introductory chapter, an interview, and pages from a diary kept while staying, actually living for a good number of years, at an old Ontario farm. Unlike Findley's, Bailey's book, also published in 1990, has forty shorter sections of a more or less chronological linear narrative that stops somewhere at the beginning years of his acting career. Nevertheless, in both works one can feel the presence and the persistence of history, "requiring research, dates, facts double-checked."; and there are, in the two books, flash-backs and flash-forwards or other narrative devices that usually prompt the stories and add to the flavor of memories displayed.

The importance of *memory*, of *reminiscence* is made obvious within the *dedication pages*, on which not the names of the persons mentioned are especially relevant for our research, but the quotes belonging to writers from other, older times. Bailey resorts to Montaigne in order to underline the importance of telling the truth from what could be just the

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opposite: "He who is not very *strong in memory*[2] should not meddle with lying"; and continues by warning us that the "scenes from childhood and beyond were written" with the French authors' caution in mind. Findley chooses the words of a character created by Dostoyevsky, a paragraph in which the function of memory is to ensure the link between the individual destiny and the collective memory of the community:

> *And so we will remember him all our lives. And even if we are occupied with the most important things – if we attain to honour or fall into great misfortune – still let us remember how good it was here, when we were all united by these loving feelings which made us, for the time we stood together, better perhaps than we are.*
> Alyosha, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Both writers employ the word *remembrance*, Findley for the title of the very first chapter of his book, and Bailey making it part of the title for the last section in his, "Remembrance Day". Interestingly enough, Findley also refers, in his introductory chapter, to Remembrance Day – the official day of remembrance for the dead of two world wars in the Commonwealth countries. But, unlike Bailey, who moves on to giving an account of the events and the meetings of such a particular day in the year 1989, the Canadian writer succeeds in turning the phrase into a key element for shaping his own poetics of memory:

> *I like Remembrance Day. I'm fond of memory. I wish it was a day of happiness. I have many dead in my past, but only one of them died from the wars. And I think very fondly of him. He was my uncle. He didn't die in the war, but because of it. This was the First World War and so I don't remember the event itself. I just remember him. But what I remember of my uncle is not the least bit sad. (Findley 6)*

1.2 Most authors writing – generally form the first person point of view – memoirs & autobiographies, be them politicians or members of the court, military leaders, businessmen or writers, besides dealing with their careers or private life, attempted at producing / developing their own poetics of *memory* and / or of the act of *remembering*. And probably the most successful attempt so far has remained a piece of fiction, although written in the first person point of view and starting with the words "I recall", entitled "Funes el memorioso", a short story by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. "Memorioso" in Spanish means "having a vast memory", therefore the English translations hesitated between "Funes the Memorious", the latter being a rare word in modern English, and "Funes, His memory". The many occurrences of the phrase "I recall" in the first paragraph of the story, together with the augmentative images associated with it, give the readers a hint at what dramatic – almost tragic – value memory might have:

[2] Italics mine.

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> *I recall him (though I have no right to speak that sacred verb – only one man on earth did, and that man is dead) holding a passion flower in his hand (…) I recall him – his taciturn face, its Indian features, its extraordinary remoteness (…) I recall (I think) the slender, leather-braided fingers. I recall near those hands a mate cup (…) I recall, in the window of his house, a yellow straw blind (…) I clearly recall his voice (…)*
> *(Borges, 91)*

It is mainly the voice – that accounting for the *remoteness* felt – of a young man the narrator recalls, a young man who, having lived for nineteen years completely unaware of his terrifying gift, and after having been "bucked off a half-broken horse" and "left hopelessly crippled", discovers that "his perception and his memory were perfect" (Borges 96). So perfect that other cases of prodigious memory cataloged in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* – "Cyrus, the king of Persia, who could call the soldiers in his armies by name; Mithridates Eupator, who meted out justice in the twenty-two languages of the kingdom over which he ruled" (Borges 95) – fail by far to amaze him. The protagonist and the narrator meet several times, the encounters gradually changing for the latter into increasingly alienating experiences that prove the sometimes scary *insanity* of such a perfect memory:

> *It was then that I saw the face that belonged to the voice that had been talking all night long. Ireneo was nineteen (…) he looked to me as monumental as bronze – older than Egypt, older than the prophecies and the pyramids. I was struck by the thought that every word I spoke, every expression of my face or motion of my hand would endure in his implacable memory; I was rendered clumsy by the fear of making pointless gestures. (Borges 99)*

Of the two writers our paper is focusing on, Timothy Findley is the one who constantly develops a poetics of *memory*. Paul Bailey's dispersed remarks or considerations on the subject make it hard for us to draw an accurate or consistent conceptual map. But that does not diminish the pleasure of reading, his book having a different structure and employing a different strategy. Findley approaches us *via* the plays of Anton Chekhov, in which one could always notice the occurrence of a moment of silence, almost always broken by the words "I remember…" In most situations, it is the voice of a woman that breaks the silence, and two things happen as a result of her resuming her memories: she is transformed and the audience is also transformed. **(1)** A woman in tears remembering happiness or a smiling man remembering pain give the people watching the play "depth and contrast" at the same time and the reassuring feeling that "Memory (…) is the means by which most of us *retain our sanity*[3]" (Findley 4). As opposed to Funes' *perfect*, yet frightening memory, the *bits* of either sad or happy memory from Chekhov's characters are more comforting. And better than nothing, for "In going back, we recognize that we've survived the passage of time – and if we survived what we remember, then it's

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likely we'll survive the present" (Findley 4). So, the cathartic dimension of memory speaks forth about hope and survival.

The next step in elaborating his own poetics of *memory* is questioning the implications of Remembrance Day, in the sense that he finds it strange to confine "ourselves to remembering only the dead – and only the war dead" on such a day. Findley makes a very fine distinction between *being a child in memory* – therefore being capable to recover scents or sounds or images closely associated with the ones he loved such as parents, siblings, relatives – and *being a child in photographs* bearing his name. It is the distinction between mobility and immobility, of both memories and people; the physical immobility of his Uncle Tif – Thomas Irving Findley, his godfather – dying at home, and who "was always in a great tall bed – high up – and the bed was white" (Findley 6), and the mobility of his image *inside* the author's memory:

> *I know he sacrificed his youth, his health, his leg and finally his life for his country. But I'd be a fool if I just said thanks – I'm grateful. (…) my being grateful has nothing to do with what he died for or why he died. (…) I am grateful he was there in that little bit of my life. (…)*
> *Remembrance is more than honouring the dead. Remembrance is joining them – being one with them in memory. (Findley 7)*

2. Childhood & Youth memories and stories of the World War I

2.1 In 1990, when their books were published, Timothy Findley was sixty years old, and Paul Bailey was fifty-three. This means that there was no possibility for them of getting physically involved in either the First or the Second World War. Nevertheless, both writers displayed a manifest interest in the horrors of war and their impact on people, especially on those who were close to them and whom they loved and felt compassion for. These people don't show up as characters in the novels of the two writers, yet they served as models and / or propellers of the narrative. Robert Ross, for instance, the protagonist of Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, published in 1977, was inspired by his uncle Tif, to whom the novel is dedicated, and also by T. E. Lawrence – a figure of outstanding iconicity for the Middle East warfare of the second decade of the 20th century. According to the author

> *The whole setting of that book in World War I had been the stuff of my childhood. I was born twelve years after the First World War ended, and I grew up with stories of that War around the living room and the dining room table, because it so greatly affected my parents' families that they never got over it. (as qtd by Olos, 72)*

Paul Bailey's *Old Soldiers*, from 1980, features "two septuagenarians assailed by memories of the First World War" (Hickling). In the section "Historical" from his *Immaculate Mistake*, Bailey provides the readers with an explanation for the subliminal power of this quasi anachronism in his works:

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> *Other boys' fathers had served in the Second World War, which had recently ended. My father had been in Flanders, in the First. He was an old soldier, a veteran of the trenches, a survivor of Passchendaele. His fighting days had finished thirty years earlier, when my friends' fathers were no more than toddlers. He was, I remember, almost historical. (Bailey 29)*

2.2 In the first full-length study on Timothy Findley, *Front Lines*, Lorraine York seems to be convinced that the Second World War – the war of Findley's childhood, constitutes his "touchstone among wars, the conflict to which he returns obsessively" (61). He tackles it in his second novel, *The Butterfly Plague*, published in 1969, in *Famous Last Words*, in 1981 – a novel seen by Linda Hutcheon as an epitome of historiographic metafiction –, and in a section of *The Telling of Lies*, in 1986. *The Wars* then appears to Lorraine York to be only a kind of *intermezzo*, though part and proof of the author's "fascination with twentieth-century warfare". *Fascination* may be the right word here, yet for the wrong purpose; or direction. Because when reading between the lines of *Inside Memory*, it is the First World War that comes "to the front", so to say, as a consequence of the stories heard, over and over again – when being a child, or an adolescent, or a young adult – from father-substitutes such as his uncle Tif, and the actors Ernest Thesiger and Wilfrid Lawson.

Maurice Blanchot believes that childhood fascinates us because it is the moment of fascination itself. Being a *golden age*, it is accompanied by a splendid light, alien to any revelation, for there is nothing to reveal, it is just pure reflection. In this respect, mother is fascinating because the child is fascinated, and everything *it* remembers from childhood has a certain immobility that pertains to fascination (Blanchot 28). It is only through this conceptual framework, I believe, that one could fully understand the attempts – or should we call them trials – undertaken by Findley when trying to imagine, for some of the major scenes in *The Wars*, the ordeal his uncle had been through:

> *Did people really do this? Survive this? I mean the freezing rain, the wind and the mud. (…) This is the mud experienced by Uncle Tif (…) This the mud that he and all those men in that Flanders campaign had to live in every hour of every day for weeks and months on end. My determination was that I would go down the lane and stay there twenty-four hours. I would do all the things they had to do and I would do them – as best as I could – in weather conditions matching theirs. This, of course, was impossible. (Findley 148)*

As a young actor, Findley had among his mentors Ernest Thesiger, who had his hands crushed in the First World War after a building he was hiding in collapsed during a bombardment. Thesiger told Findley how he was waiting for rescue for "almost all of one day" and that he could not see his arms or his hands, but he was happy that he could feel the pain in them. His happiness lasted until he "dimly remembered" what other friends had told him – friends who had already lost their legs and arms –, that those were actually *ghost pains*. He could not imagine his life without hands, and, as he wanted to be an artist,

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he prayed that he would die. Luckily, his arms and his hands were saved, but that was when "needlework entered his life – as a therapeutic activity by which he could regain control of his dexterity" (Findley 43). The pages containing this particular episode and others related to the life and personality of Ernest Thesiger begin with straight references to the ways human memory works, somehow strangely similar to the work of *ghost pains*:

> *My memory keeps delivering the past in brown-paper parcels done up with string and marked "address of sender unknown" One such parcel arrived the other day. Winter. Early evening. Not quite dark, but dark enough to turn on lights. (Findley 39)*
> *I don't know how it arrived – I don't know why. But slowly, as I moved about the room adjusting lamps and thermostats, I was gradually overwhelmed by a certainty that someone was about to speak. (Findley 40)*

The other British actor haunting Findley's early Canadian evening at his Ontario farm is Wilfrid Lawson, and the author's first ever memory of him was from the 1938 film of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which Lawson played Alfred Doolittle, the dustman – Eliza's father. Findley's relationship with Lawson was "greater in terms of intimacy" – as he had to make every effort possible, while on tour, to get the older actor to the theatre *on time*.

> *We more or less marched. It was supposed to be good for our lungs.* ***Take in lots of air, Findley. Take in lots of air!*** *My nightmare was that he would spot a pub and want to go in. That never happened. I guess it didn't need to. Primed before he left the digs – his dressing-room was pub enough to welcome him upon arrival. (Findley 52)*

Lawson's problem was drinking, which he deliberately had chosen over morphine to deaden the pain caused by a metal plate in his skull. For, just like Ernest Thesiger, "Mister Lawson had been dreadfully wounded in the First World War". Findley remembers that, although not sharing a room, he had to go to Lawson's during the night "out of flames and battle-sounds and the cries of other people dying" and save him "from his fallen aeroplane and the horrors of the mud" (Findley 51-52). The wrecked bed used to be the aeroplane from where the young actor would take Lawson to the bathroom, wash his face and pretend he was adjusting his senior's uniform. And in the morning, as requested by Lawson, Findley, standing like a soldier, had to report that "nothing untoward had happened in the night".

In spite of such nightmarish scenes, and of the images triggered by the horrific events they had been through, the two senior actors made their way, and *room*, into the written pages of Findley's memoir. Memory can accommodate them both, making justice to their *mobility*, restoring it for the purpose of ensuring the readers' delight.

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Ernest was not alone in the package I received that late afternoon. Perhaps in some ways it was inevitable that in my memory, especially, he should always keep the company of another with whom, in real life, I doubt very much he would have kept company at all. (Findley 46-47)
They came – already old – into my young life. They left an indelible and wondrous impression – and they gave me the gift of their company whether for good or ill. (Findley 53)

2.3 For Paul Bailey, the horrors of the First World War turned into a rather strange opportunity to clarify family relationships. In one November afternoon of the year 1948, he came home to find his father "in a restless fever, in the bed my mother shared with my sister". Given the limited size of the house and the physiological changes in his sister's body and his, he had been his father's bedfellow since he was eleven. But now he could witness whatever his father had refrained from expressing during the conversations they used to have on their Sunday walks together. The boy was intrigued by the names shouted in his father's delirium, some of them unrecognizable to him: "They belonged, I think, to his comrades in the trenches, many long dead" (Bailey 25). Some names were addressed with tenderness, others with rage, but when asking about Esther, the one which truly stirred his curiosity, little Paul was told to just go and do his homework: "Esther, I learned in 1985, some months after my mother's death, was my father's first wife. She had gone to live with another man while he was in Flanders. I owe my existence to her unfaithfulness" (Bailey 26).

At his father's funeral, he is reunited with his half-brother and his half-sister, whom he had never met before. They exchange information, a letter follows after one year, yet it is "entirely accidental" that he meets his half-sister again, on that Remembrance Day of 1989 – described in the last section of the book –, so there is a time span of more than half a century in between the two encounters. And it is only then that the writer finds out the truth about the circumstances of his father splitting with Esther, and as a consequence never being able to fully love his first two children, because they constantly reminded him of his wife's betrayal.

The writer takes the opportunity to elaborate on the way memory plays its games *on* and *with* people: "Late on that Remembrance Day, I thought of my half-sister's father, who did not seem like my own father at all" (Bailey 163) He remembers *his* father playing bowls "as the soldier he once was", or talking, in a "vanished foggy London", about the miserable mess of Flanders: "Heroes, my arse', he'd said' (Bailey 164).

For him, *his* father had embodied history, in his "three-piece suit" he would put on for his Sunday walks at "what he called a 'gentlemen's pace", or when he would produce a pocket watch on a chain from his waistcoat. The course of his father's life had followed the rise and the decline of the music hall, and Bailey feels that the best way to conjure the image of his parent is when listening to an old record of George Robey and Violet Loraine **(2)**. Yet this is but another chance to bring forth the *war motif*, pointing at broken hearts and fractured lives:

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My father might have sung 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World' in Flanders, for it was a great favourite with the soldiers in the trenches. His 'only girl' was Esther, who was to 'mar his joy' when he returned to England soon after 'the war to end all wars' was over. (Bailey 31)

3. Poetic Justice

Written and published when the two authors were at the height of their literary reputation, the two books of non-fiction allow the readers to get a glimpse into the writers' lab or to decode, and uncover, both the material and the immaterial elements that make up for the essence and the structure of their fictional works. Images and motifs to be found in memoirs or autobiographies usually account for the certainty and universality of the approach encountered in novels, plays, poems, etc. An American critic dealing with the topic "novels vs. histories or biographies" admits that her "central subject is the ability to imagine what is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one's loved ones" (Nussbaum 5). Her plea for literary works that, due to their very essence, "promote identification and emotional reaction" is grounded on the efficiency with which they cut through any "self-protective stratagems" meant to keep knowledge at a so-called *objective* distance from the reader.

But sometimes it really takes time to achieve that ability to imagine in order to promoting any emotional reaction. In a 1998 interview, when speaking about his writing of *The Wars*, Findley insists on him being affected for decades by the stories of the First World War overheard during his childhood years: "And therefore it was the thing I had had all my life – this bloody war. And I was forty seven before I wrote that book. That's a long period of digestion – a long period of gestation." (qtd. in Olos 72) **(3)** Findley's partner remembers how happy Tif was when finding the subject for the new book and that it was going to be a book with a positive approach, in spite of the dreadful things that were awaiting the protagonist. But "To write means to enter the assertion of solitude where one can feel the threat of fascination"[4] (Blanchot 28). And Findley did find the kind of solitude assaulted by a certain fascination that helped him to produce his first major novel:

I have always believed that concentration lies behind the images we remember – a concentration of energies or of focus or of space. (…) I have been making notes in preparation – while the things gels in me. Reading Uncle Tif's letters – looking at photographs – steeping myself (but lightly) in the times. By "lightly" I mean cautiously – lest I get over-burdened with detail and lose touch with imagination. (…) Characters have their own names and will tell you, if you wait… (Findley 142)

As for Paul Bailey, the image of the father who, hadn't he died too prematurely, would have been a true ogre for his son's aspirations to become, first an actor, and then a writer, which definitely didn't mean "doing a proper job of work" in the eyes of his family, that

[4] Translation mine.

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kind of image didn't stay. Instead, he remembers the father he understood best, and who talked, one Remembrance Day, of the terrible mess that was Flanders. And just like Findley, he did find the kind of solitude assaulted by a certain fascination that helped him to become a true artist:

> *It was this father, the man who had given brief expression to his knowledge of futility, I cherished. They were welcome to their dictator, their man of absolute judgements, unafflicted by doubt. I had been granted a few precious moments of his despair, and they gave me a curious sustenance. They made me want to write. (Bailey 95)*

Endnotes

1. In an interview given in June 1998 – and later integrated in a book published in 2001 –, to Ana Olos, Timothy Findley confesses about the pleasure of reading plays, especially by Chekhov and Shakespeare. He believed that such writers and their plays always work: "And the beauty of *The Cherry Orchard* to me is in its everlasting connections to all those people who are basically lost in a moment of change" (qtd. in Olos 79)
2. George Robey, born George Edward Wade, was an English music hall comedian and star, who lived between 1869 and 1954. During World War I he raised over 500, 000 pounds for war charities; Violet Loraine, born Violet Mary Tipton, was an English musical theatre actress and singer, who lived between 1886 and 1956.
3. These remarks are in obvious contradiction with Lorraine York's assumptions on the Second World War as being the touchstone of wars in Findley's works. The author seemed to be *marked* by the stories overheard in his family for years, and this is a proof that the discourse that affects us more is the one produced by who has the power, as Foucault suggested.

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