

A Book Lover's Journey: Literary Archaeology and Bibliophilia in Tim Bowling's *In the Suicide's Library*

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Resumen

Nativo de la costa occidental de Canadá, Tim Bowling es uno de los autores canadienses más aclamados. Su obra *In the Suicide's Library. A Book Lover's Journey* (2010) explora cómo un solo objeto —un ejemplar gastado ya por el tiempo de *Ideas of Order* de Wallace Stevens que se encuentra en una biblioteca universitaria— es capaz de hacer el pasado visible y tangible en su pura materialidad. En la solapa delantera del libro de Stevens, Bowling descubre la elegante firma de su anterior dueño, Weldon Kees, un oscuro poeta norteamericano que puso fin a su vida saltando al vacío desde el Golden Gate Bridge. El hallazgo de este ejemplar autografiado de la obra maestra de Stevens marca el comienzo de una meditación lírica por parte de Bowling sobre los libros como objetos de arte, sobre el suicidio, la relación entre padres e hijas, la historia de la imprenta y la bibliofilia, a la par que lleva a cabo una suerte de arqueología del pasado literario de los Estados Unidos con una gran pericia literaria y poética vehemencia.

Palabras clave: Tim Bowling, bibliofilia, narrativa, arqueología del saber, vestigio.

Abstract

A native of the Canadian West Coast, Tim Bowling is widely acclaimed as one of the best living Canadian authors. His creative work entitled *In the Suicide's Library. A Book Lover's Journey* (2010) explores how a single object —a tattered copy of Wallace Stevens's *Ideas of Order* that he finds in a university library— can render the past visible and tangible in its pure materiality. On the front flyleaf of Stevens's book, Bowling finds the elegant handwritten name of its previous owner, Weldon Kees, an obscure American poet who apparently took his own life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. Finding this signed copy of Stevens's masterpiece is just the beginning of Bowling's lyrical meditation on books as art objects, on suicide, the relationships between fathers and daughters, the history of printing and bibliophilia, while pursuing an archaeology of the American literary past with an astounding level of artistry and lyrical intensity.

Keywords: Tim Bowling, bibliophilia, fiction, knowledge archaeology, trace.

1. A FORM OF LITERARY ARCHAEOLOGY

A native of the Canadian West Coast, Tim Bowling is widely acclaimed as one of the best living Canadian authors. Even though his work is a great human achievement, he has been undeservedly ignored by academia and literary critics. He has published the poetry collections *Low Water Slack* (1995), *Dying Scarlet* (1997), *The Thin Smoke of the Heart* (2000), *Darkness and Silence* (2001), *The Witness Ghost* (2003), *The Memory Orchard* (2004), *Fathom* (2006), *The Book Collector* (2008), *The Annotated Bee & Me* (2010), *Tenderman* (2012), *Selected Poems* (2013), and *Circa Nineteen Hundred and Grief* (2014); several novels, including *Downriver Drift* (2000), *The Paperboy's Winter* (2003), *The Bone Sharps* (2007) and *The Tinsmith* (2012); a superb memoir entitled *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory and the Death of Wild Culture* (2007), on his childhood memories by the Fraser River; and a creative work on book collecting and poetry entitled *In the Suicide's Library. A Book Lover's Journey* (2010). In this article, we examine the way Tim Bowling (a book lover himself who finds genuine solace in literature) explores in his work *In the Suicide's Library* how a single object —a tattered copy of Wallace Stevens's *Ideas of Order* that he finds in the Modern Literature stacks of a university library— can render the past visible and tangible in its pure materiality. On the front flyleaf of Stevens's book, Bowling finds the elegant handwritten name of its previous owner, Weldon Kees, an obscure American poet, painter, photographer, filmmaker and musician that apparently took his own life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge on 18 July 1955. This serendipity finding sets the whole story in motion.

What Bowling does in this book is to pursue an archaeology of the American literary past with an astounding level of artistry and magnificent lyrical intensity. Finding this signed copy of Stevens's masterpiece is just the beginning of a long quest into the American literature of the 1940s and 1950s, but also a lyrical meditation on books as art objects and depositories of culture, on literary tradition and the individual talent, on canonical and marginal authors, on death and suicide, on masculinity and the responsibilities of parenthood and marriage, on the relationships between fathers and daughters, on mid-life crisis and the idiosyncrasies of individual human lives, on the Internet and the ubiquitous mediocrity of contemporary life, on the history of printing and book destruction across the globe, on bibliophilia and bibliomania, and on book collecting and bibliokleptomania, while trying to find a satisfactory answer to the question Weldon Kees asked one of his friends the day before vanishing: *What keeps you going?* And also: Is it ever acceptable to

steal a rare book (a unique association copy that brings together the genius Stevens and the marginal author Kees) to preserve it from destruction and the barbarism of ignorance?

All books are traces of the past of humanity, that is to say traces of the human imagination as it has been in the past, but also verbal gestures that prefigure the course the human imagination might take in the future. What makes *In the Suicide's Library* unique is precisely the very idea of the book *qua* book as a tangible trace of the past, or, to put it differently, the book as the trace of a literary tradition and as the trace of a human life, Weldon Kees's. The signed copy of Stevens's *Ideas of Order* becomes a material artifact that serves the purpose of an opening for the imagination: a window wide open onto the past and an imaginative link with experiences, stories and irreplaceable human lives. As Marianne Hirsch suggests in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, objects carry "memory traces" and mediate "acts of return". Though Hirsch focuses largely on the Holocaust and on "the ethics and the aesthetics of remembrance in the aftermath of catastrophe" (2012: 2) and she develops the concept of *postmemory* as "the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (2012: 5), her insights into material objects as bearers of personal and communal memories may shed light on Bowling's work. In chapter 8, "Objects of Return", Hirsch explores precisely "the role that objects play in stories of return to a lost home" (2012: 24) and develops "the idea of the "testimonial objects" that shows how we inherit not only stories and images from the past, but also our bodily and affective relationship to the object world we inhabit." (2012: 24) Material objects are in themselves openings to journeys of discovery: an old letter, a family photograph, an item of clothing or a book may well conjure up memories of past worlds and lives. Tangible artifacts become metonymic openings for stories, but also the beginning of historical journeys, both imagined and literal.

In the Suicide's Library opens with a material object that is the beginning of a fascinating narrative, one that crosses spatial and temporal boundaries and brings together the lives of Wallace Stevens, Weldon Kees and Tim Bowling. Bowling seeks to reconstruct the trace of a lost human life (the suicide's life) on the basis of an artifact, a book of poems signed by the master Wallace Stevens. He is literally engaged in a form of archaeology aimed at uncovering experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from traditional literary histories. Sensitive as he is to the particular vulnerabilities of lives like Kees's, Bowling is fighting here forgetting, oblivion and erasure, and he is engaging in an act of repair and redress. As Hirsch puts it, his is a form of justice "outside of the

hegemonic structures of the strictly juridical.” (2012: 16) In the process, Bowling comes to learn that our memories are always composite of dynamically interrelated and conflicted histories. Memory is constituted through individuals and through social institutions, and is materially embodied in literary tradition and books, which remain sophisticated technological media and reservoirs of knowledge in the digital age. Thus, material objects remain powerful tools that evoke and invoke the past, as well as the interconnectedness inherent in the living mesh of things.

From a structural point of view, *In the Suicide's Library* is made up of three intertwined narratives. The first narrative is Bowling's fast-paced account of his book-hunting transactions via online rare book dealers, spending hours browsing through the stock of antiquarian booksellers in search of the books in Kees's personal library, which was rich in first editions, including a copy of Stevens's *Ideas of Order*.¹ This gripping account of book collecting is full of moments of hesitation and ardent desire when Bowling, with a pounding heart, is determined to acquire expensive unique copies of Kees items. He calls up American booksellers or rushes through the checkout process on his computer to complete the purchase of a rare edition in the hopes that no one else has bought it already. At any rate, the origins of Bowling's bibliophilia are to be traced back to his own childhood, when his parents built for the little child a haven of boundless possibilities in reading *the pages of the Earth*:

I descend into a sleep so protected and dream-rich that it has sprouted a life indistinguishable from its folds and recesses, a life of reading and writing, a life that is books, more and more, a return to moments stolen from an increasingly systematic world, freedom as purely distilled from birth as honey distilled from the bees' joyous collection of a clover field. [...] And to remember my childhood is to remember the thrill of opening a book, the warmth of a little library in the pouring rain, the sight of my father hunched over in the lit room of his unusual labour as a rabbi over the Torah, a medieval monk annotating the Book of Kells in salmon blood. (2010: 47).

The second narrative involves Bowling's detective work as a biographer and critic of Kees's life and work, although he conducts his research in an unorthodox manner, which is truly refreshing when compared to the traditional academic approach, characterized by an abundance of erudite footnotes and scientific critical apparatus. As Bowling himself puts it, “to read any author carefully and closely is to live in that person's sensibilities for a while.” (2010: 74) Bowling is determined to tease out the details of Kees's mysterious

¹ Tim Bowling investigates what happened to Kees's books after his disappearance. He reads an illuminating essay by James Reidel entitled “Ex-Libris Weldon Kees”, and finds out that Kees's library contained much of value, including first editions of Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein, Federico García Lorca, T. S. Eliot, Kenneth Rexroth, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Max Beerbohm, Virginia Woolf and Wallace Stevens himself. (2010: 86)

disappearance and so he proceeds to a detailed examination of his primary work (poems, letters, music and paintings) and a wealth of secondary sources, including the canonical biography by James Reidel, *Vanished Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees* (2003), and Kees's friends' memoirs. The serendipity of finding the right book or literary document at the right time (i.e., when most needed) leads him to yet another unexpected discovery, until he seems to discern the invisible pattern in Kees's life and work. What makes Kees so fascinating to Bowling is precisely that, leaving aside his mercurial character or the fact that he was a student of librarianship at University, he pursued a life of creation vehemently and earnestly as a polymath committed to imposing artistic order upon the chaos and flux of reality, and yet he could not resist the temptation of taking his own life in an act of supreme conquest over death.

And the third narrative concerns Bowling's moral dilemma over his discovery of Kees's own copy of Stevens's *Ideas of Order* and his determination to steal it from the university library, so as to preserve it from potential destruction or disappearance. The Stevens book *qua* physical object becomes a complex vortex of traces conjuring up echoes from the past: a trace of the life of a particular human being who once owned it (Weldon Kees), a trace of a canonical Modernist master who once composed these memorable poems for posterity (Wallace Stevens), and a trace of a period in the history of American Literature (the twentieth century) as embodied in such lives as those of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hart Crane, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath, among others. The book becomes a sort of time capsule, so to speak, but also a fabulous propeller that leads Bowling to meditate not only on the meaning of poetry, but also on his own childhood, on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood, on his relationship with his own children (two sons and a daughter), on the crisis he is undergoing in mid-life in search of a life with a purpose, and on the threshold he is about to cross from the safe domains of bibliophilia and into the unknown, perilous territories of bibliomania and bibliokleptomania.

Because of the interconnected stories, *In the Suicide's Library* resembles a polyphonic composition and a palimpsest that juxtaposes a logical narrative that unfolds chronologically alongside excerpts from Wallace Stevens's and Weldon Kees's poems and letters, quotations from numerous authors on the meaning of book collecting, excerpts from writers' journals and novels, descriptions of rare books found on antiquarian booksellers' websites, and fragments from emails sent to Bowling in response to his bibliographical and bibliomaniac queries. All the fragments coalesce to form an organic, harmonious whole, though. This is an intensely hybrid text, but, at the same time, it is an intensely lyrical meditation on the meaning of life and on the nature of books as depositories of human knowledge and experience. In fact, the title of Bowling's book is

followed by a long subtitle (i.e., a miniature plot) that is reminiscent of many of the early narratives of the Modern Age, like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Thus, the complete title reads as follows: *In the Suicide's Library: A Book Lover's Journey. Being an Adventure Through Twentieth-Century American Poetry, Mid-life & Bibliomania Sparked by the Coincidental Discovery of a Book of Poems by Wallace Stevens, Signed by Weldon Kees, & Left Out in the Stacks of a University Library*. Here is a unique book which is a creative work on bibliophilia and bibliomania, a memoir and a sustained piece of criticism on contemporary American poetry, and a collage of quotations from a wide range of works that betrays the impressive breadth of Bowling's readings, as well as the depth of his maturity as a writer. At any rate, Tim Bowling is an avid outdoor man who has spent a lifetime reading, surrounded by printed and natural signs. He is a gifted, learned author that belongs to the narrative and lyrical Modernist tradition: "Writers learn from other writers, mostly dead ones," he says with utter confidence, feeling the weight of tradition in his own bones, in the interview "Tim Bowling on Rapacious Greed and the (Relative) Triviality of the Curriculum". He looks at the world in all its splendour and what he finds there is ineffable, hard to convey in words, and yet he does his best to optimistically depict a universe which is a mystery of gigantic proportions, an interconnected entity rich in subtleties. In one of the rare, substantial interviews he has given, entitled "Tim Bowling – Interview" and conducted by Don Denton, he points out that the 1980s were a time of literary apprenticeship for him: "I was focused on the apprentice work of the poet and novelist (i.e., reading a lot and writing a lot, most of the latter materials being bad)." But, at the same time, in the 1980s he was working as a deckhand on a gillnetter in the fishing industry in Ladner, his home town, south of Vancouver. So, in a sense, he was doing another instructive kind of reading, with his eyes and with his hands — i.e., a pre-literate reading based on interpreting the non-verbal signs of the natural world. He was learning to read the rhythms of fishing-town life and also the subtle intricacies of the green world: earth and sky, sun and rain, birds and trees, mountains and clouds, colours and smells and sounds, and, most importantly, the Fraser River, whose waters concealed a wealth of mysteries to his imagination.

2. WALLACE STEVENS'S IDEAS OF ORDER: A BOOK OF POEMS AS A TALISMAN

The opening lines of Bowling's book are simply captivating: "I'm a poor man with an expensive taste for rare books, a gentleman of lean purse [...] and a bibliophile rapidly on the path to bibliomania and moral decay." (2010: 13) *In the Suicide's Library* is said to be the first contemporary literary, elegantly-written and illuminating account of bibliophilia and book collecting. As an art object in itself, the actual production of the physical book by

Gaspereau Press is more than aesthetically pleasing when the overall harmony of the paper and the type used, the slipcover and the graphic design are all considered. As for the plot, the book tells a most intriguing autobiographical story. A simple serendipity book found on the shelves of a university library sets the whole story in motion. One day Bowling finds a shabby first edition of *Ideas of Order*, by the well-known American poet Wallace Stevens. What makes this particular copy so irresistible is that it is signed by its original owner, another obscure and yet fascinating American poet by the name of Weldon Kees. This is how Bowling describes this magic moment, which has the texture of an epiphany:

Idly, I flipped the pages until I came to the first free endpaper, the first page in the book not pasted down to the cover board. And I gasped.

What a lovely ornate signature I found there, in rich, black ink, all alone in the middle of an off-white page. [...] the signature was a beautiful calligraphic wave in a polar sea. I clutched the book to my chest and looked slowly around. [...]

No one was there. I opened the book again. The signature pulsed with culture and creativity – I could almost see the fine hairs on the hand that once held the pen, or perhaps quill would be more accurate. [...]

I stared at the rich, flowing ink so intently that it became the very black of the enigmatic man's pupils. I was staring straight into the legendary, aristocratically-handsome face of Weldon Kees, poet, novelist, short story writer, jazz musician, abstract painter, avant garde photographer, experimental filmmaker, entertainment impresario, and, most dramatically, mysterious suicide. It was like looking full-on at all the joy and despair of the human species... (2010: 17-19).

This signed copy of Stevens's masterpiece takes firm hold of Bowling's bibliophilic heart. He must have it, as it is the only copy of its kind. Bowling, an avid book collector himself, instinctively understands how this book must be protected and honoured, and so he starts contemplating ways to possess it. Thus, *Ideas of Order* brings together three distinct poets: the genius Stevens, the obscure Kees and 44-year-old Bowling, who is facing a midlife crisis and finds a haven of warmth and protection in books. The powerful aura surrounding this book sets Bowling's six-month quest into Kees's life and work going. While Stevens's *Ideas of Order* left a stubbornly tangible trace in the form of a physical book, Weldon Kees, who vanished mysteriously one day in 1955 without a trace, didn't. Kees was a polymath: poet, jazz musician, experimental filmmaker, photographer, artist and a "mysterious suicide". He had talked of vanishing into Mexico, but the truth is that his car was found parked near the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, from which he apparently jumped to his death on a foggy day. Overnight he became legendary: had he vanished or had he committed suicide? There is no way of knowing now for sure. What is certain is that, as time passes by, Bowling's fascination with this underrated, forgotten, so-called minor artist deepens to the point of hallucinatory fixation. He says:

If I stole the book, I would never sell it, impecunious poet or not, father of three young children or not. Increasingly, I regarded the book as a talisman – all the bibliophiles and all the poets before me had presented this particular poetry collection as a gift. “You have esoteric knowledge,” they whispered, “and you should benefit from it. Besides, you know that the true value of a rare book is in its contents. Only you can truly appreciate this book...” (2010: 42).

As his quest into American literature and Kees’s life unfolds, Bowling’s blossoming bibliophilia flowers into bibliomania, and this metamorphosis takes him by surprise. He feels compelled to safeguard this copy from some undergraduate student who might deface Kees’s signature mindlessly, or a bibliophagist who might tear the page out, or some other borrower who might casually lose it for good. Bowling meditates on a number of ways to protect the copy from potential barbarians and destruction, to the extent that he even presents to some people this “sticky moral dilemma re: an association book” (2010: 43) that truly thrills him. He asks some judicious friends for advice. This is an excerpt from the email he receives from American author Jack Matthews:

I think most of the obvious ploys are imperfect: 1) buying another copy & substituting it for this one; 2) doing that with the Acquisition Librarian’s consent; 3) sharing your dilemma with said AL but doing so w/o telling him/her the title of the book (in case s/he is greedy enough to lasso it for the university’s own Archives & Special Collections, or perhaps selling it at an auction – although I don’t think there’s that much traffic in collecting Kees’s books); 4) just taking the book & paying the penalty for “losing it”; 5) cutting the free end paper out & returning the book... [...]

Obviously, #5 is clearly impossible, for it would destroy the integrity & sense of the inscription (although some might tip it into a better copy, but your knowing that would eat away at your pleasure in possession), & the other options are, as I’ve admitted, also imperfect. (2010: 49-50).

Facing the temptation to steal a book for the first time in his life, Bowling dwells on the distinction between bibliophile and bibliomane: “the former is interested primarily in the contents of books, while the latter more commonly lusts after books as objects” (2010: 53), which is “the pinnacle of book-love.” (2010: 53) But the driving question throughout Bowling’s six-month quest is why the Stevens-Kees book was pushing him “towards a criminal act, albeit an admittedly minor one.” (2010: 53) Bowling takes us backwards and forwards in his narrative to find the answer to this crucial question, and, at some point, he acknowledges that “the man [Kees] could write poems. And the more I read him, the more I was moved, the more I felt, in Emily Dickinson’s memorable definition of poetry’s effect, that I was having the top of my head taken off. And the more I wanted to steal *the book*.” (2010: 79) At last, Bowling figures out a way to steal the book, but he learns that someone has borrowed the copy and failed to return it, even though it is well past the due date. The

last part of *In the Suicide's Library* is a feverish account full of moral and existential suspense of how Bowling manages to get hold of the copy again. But that is precisely the end of this book lover's journey, to which we will return below.

In Bowling's hands, literature becomes a true mode of cognition, a sharp form of knowledge, and a way to understand the complexity of our perception of the world and our place in the larger mesh of things. *In the Suicide's Library* is a kaleidoscope work that juxtaposes meditation, factual information, and thrilling moments of epiphany and revelation. The object of knowledge under scrutiny in this particular creative work is not just the details of the private life of an obscure poet called Weldon Kees, but also the larger picture of the American literature of the 1940s and 1950s. In the end, the fundamental lesson Bowling learns is that "Our Masterpiece Is the Private Life", as the title of a superb poem included in *Blizzard of One* (1992) by American poet Mark Strand suggests. It is not History in capital letters, not even the books he has read and come to love over the years, but the small details and vulnerabilities in human lives (including his own life) uncovered by serendipity gestures that make up our everyday lives that really matter. He may be a book lover, but his ultimate concerns are the fundamental questions that have assailed intellectually alert writers and thinkers over the centuries. At any rate, Bowling reminds us that literature (a sharp instrument of mental production) is a most powerful tool to investigate the mysteries of the human condition, the self and our surrounding world.

Like science, philosophy or love, art in general (and literature in particular) sheds light on the ultimate essence of human nature, or so says French philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, where he claims that there are four different kinds of truth: scientific, artistic, political and amorous truths. According to Badiou, a truth is a paradoxical thing, as it is "at once something new, hence something rare and exceptional, yet, touching the very being of that of which it is a truth, it is also the most stable, the closest, ontologically speaking, to the initial state of things." (1999: 36) The intuitions of contemporary Philosophy highlight the fundamental fact that art is a mode of cognition, a powerful epistemological tool and possibly the purest form of coping with and making sense of reality. It comes then as no surprise that Bowling's main concerns should be timeless, universal issues. After all, Bowling is a man concerned with life written in capital letters, and nothing human is alien to him. In this respect, Bowling characterizes himself as a *humanist* in "Tim Bowling on Rapacious Greed and the (Relative) Triviality of the Curriculum": "I've been [...] humanist, all my life, and I'll go the grave that way." He dwells on the same idea of humanism in yet another interview with Dave Brundage entitled "A Writer's Tension: Reflections on Genre, Place, and Time":

When it comes to the relationship between people, I'm an old-fashioned humanist. I believe that the things that matter are birth and death and love, and all these things are the same. I know there have been all kinds of statements over the past thirty or forty years to say that's not true, there's no such thing as a general universal humanism. But as a writer [...], I have to believe in a shared humanity.

In Western literature and philosophy, the origins of the idea of Humanism have to be traced back to the very cradle of our Graeco-Roman tradition. An enlightening essay on the place of the poet in society, Marcus Tullius Cicero's speech *Oratio pro Archia* (62 BCE) remains a central work in the Western canon, as it is the first Latin text that highlights the personal and social importance of the study of the Humanities. The so-called *bonae litterae* were conceptualized as being a fundamental tool for the ethical fashioning of humans and a means to cultivate a virtuous nature in men and women. According to Cicero, learning, knowledge and wisdom made a human being a more benevolent, noble and sublime creature.² Thus, the heart of his *Pro Archia* is a passionate apology of humanistic culture, conceived of as being not just mere erudition, but as the genuine cultivation of humanity itself. The study of the *bonae litterae* is the most privileged of ways to cultivate the plenitude and self-realization of the *homo humanus* — a human being that is aware of the vulnerability of everything human and of the sublime nature of humankind. Hence, Humanism is the knowledge of our own limits; it is the acknowledgement of our shared vulnerability. Confronted with a book from the suicide's library (a material object that triggers the unfolding of an intriguing narrative and a process of discovery), Tim Bowling comes to the realization that humanism and humanity lie precisely in the acknowledgement of such shared vulnerability. *In the Suicide's Library* places the notions of material artifact and quest at the very centre of a figurative journey that takes the author back in time to the small details in the pattern of Weldon Kees's life, which somehow becomes representative of the human species in its entirety.

3. BOOKS AS MATERIAL TRACES OF THE PAST OF HUMANITY

Books are illuminating fragments of the human soul, vibrant slices of life, and tentative depictions of the world and its mysteries. They are also a memento of the stages through which we have gone in History. In Auschwitz there is an eloquent quote by George

² In his *The Orations of Cicero. In Defence of Publius Sylla and Aulus Licinius Archias*, C. D. Yonge translates a crucial passage, §15, as follows: "I admit that many men have existed of admirable disposition and virtue, who, without learning, by the almost divine instinct of their own mere nature, have been, of their own accord, as it were, moderate and wise men. I even add this, that very often nature without learning has had more to do with leading men to credit and to virtue, than learning when not assisted by a good natural disposition. And I also contend, that when to an excellent and admirable natural disposition there is added a certain system and training of education, then from that combination arises an extraordinary perfection of character." (1927: 418)

Santayana that reads: "Man is bound to make the same mistakes if he doesn't learn the lessons History has to teach him". In this respect, books are the true depositories of human memory; they prevent us from forgetting the past. In the work of creative writing under scrutiny here, Tim Bowling, a humanist and a book lover, pays a moving homage to books. From a 19th-century dictionary of phrases, the Canadian poet takes the following definition of what a book is:

Before the invention of paper the thin rind between the solid wood and the outside bark of certain trees was used for writing on; this was in Latin called liber, which came in time to signify also a "book." Hence our library, the place for books; librarian, the keeper of books; and the French livre, a book. (2010: 55-56).

And in a central passage in *In the Suicide's Library*, a sustained meditation on the value of books, Bowling reminds us of what sounds like a truism:

The world of the book is the world of the human race, so vast that to begin an education can be a daunting, overwhelming task. However, it is a task wisely undertaken, for, as Hermann Hesse says, "Without words, without writing and without books there would be no history, there could be no concept of humanity." And the diminishment of our humanity that can result from a world hostile to books is tragic. [...] If you can eliminate a people's connection to their own past, you can eliminate their will and their purpose. And nothing connects a people to their past more than books. Jorge Luis Borges, himself a librarian, put the matter plainly when he wrote that the book is the most astonishing of all man's instruments precisely because it is an extension of memory and imagination. (2010: 56-57).

Books are the true embodiment of human knowledge, or the treasure-house of all the knowledge that has been conquered by men and women over time. They are a finer world within the world. As perfect art objects and aesthetically pleasing artifacts surrounding our daily life, they are a constant reminder that knowledge finds a solid incarnation in things made by the human mind and the human hand. Upon closer inspection, *In the Suicide's Library* is, therefore, also a moving celebration of human knowledge as a collective enterprise. This moving celebration of books and libraries is reminiscent of a similar apology in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. In the British Museum, Jacob is overwhelmed by the presence of the ancestors murmuring from beneath the covers of thousands of books:

The books were now replaced. A few letters of the alphabet were sprinkled round the dome. Closely stood together in a ring round the dome were Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles and Shakespeare; the literature of Rome, Greece, China, India, Persia. One leaf of poetry was pressed flat against another leaf, one burnished letter laid smooth against another in a density of meaning, a conglomeration of loveliness. [...] This

density of thought, this conglomeration of knowledge. [...] There is in the British Museum an enormous mind. [...] This great mind is hoarded beyond the power of any single mind to possess it. Nevertheless [...] one can't help thinking how one might come with a notebook, sit at a desk, and read it all through. (2005: 78-79).

The palpitating heart of the so-called Humanities is made up of books, for a book lover is a lover of words, a lover of languages, and a lover of everything human. Contemporary literature is full of material traces from the past for obvious reasons. To begin with, literature is ultimately concerned with unveiling and understanding reality, which somehow manages to find its way into books. The world is vaster than whatever literature may manage to say about it, and there is a solid stubbornness about it that is simply inevitable and inescapable. Our contention is that books themselves are material traces (embodiments or lasting records) of the human imagination, of the past of humanity and of the irreplaceable personal histories of specific human beings. Part of the ineffable magic of books is that they may contain within themselves other books as tangible traces of the past. This is why destroying a book is tantamount to destroying a fibre or filament of the human mind and an idiosyncratic worldview or *Zeitgeist*, and this is why totalitarian systems like Nazism or the Islamic State have been intent on destroying books as the spiritual bond that links a human community to its past and to its future. Books cannot but make political statements all the time.

Canadian poet Robert Bringham is the author of a brief text entitled *The Library Opens Its Eyes*, a text that Jorge Luis Borges, the author of "The Babel Library", might have loved reading if only he had had the chance to lay his hands and his eyes on it. This work is a folding limited-edition broadside containing a prose text of some 400 words which was commissioned by Simon Fraser University in celebration of its 40th anniversary in 2005 and which was designed and set by Bringham himself. There is a moving beauty about this prose text, which is held in the Rare Books and Special Collections at the Library of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. It is a one-page meditation on the relevance of books and libraries, literacy and literature, as part of the ongoing epistemological odyssey of the human species on Earth. In other words, here is a tribute to a book culture, one that takes the side of genuine civilization, the side of the best that has been imagined and thought by humans over time. In a most relevant passage in *The Library Opens Its Eyes*, Bringham observes:

Library buildings are not often spherical, yet libraries – real ones, that is – with their square-cornered pages on squared-cornered shelves, are as round as the globe. Every book in the library leads to another, which leads to another, which leads to a book you have already read but cannot read again as you read it before, because of the others you've read in between. [...] The library acts like a world, because it is a

working model of the world, built from simple bricks of printed paper in an ever-changing order. [...] Like the world and every creature in it – and like every stream and river – the library constantly changes its mind and follows its nose. You cannot step twice into the same collection of books.

Its lifeblood is meaning, but readers are its life. They are the neurons in its brain. Without them the library closes its eyes and shuts its mind – and yours as well – forever. (2005: 1).

Robert Bringhurst's lyric and philosophical meditation illustrates the intimate connection between books, knowledge, culture and truth. Most importantly, this text is an example of what could be called *Lyric Philosophy* or *Lyric Criticism*: a species of critical writing and thinking that is at the crossroads between poetry, philosophy and pure criticism. The beauty and wisdom of *The Library Opens Its Eyes* testify to the unspeakable potential inherent in brevity. This jewel-like essay is a moving homage to language, to human knowledge and to human communication, but also a tribute to typography, which, to tweak a phrase from the High Modernist master Ezra Pound, is *the dance of the mind among words on the page*. In writing *In The Suicide's Library*, Tim Bowling belongs to this century-old tradition as well. He listens carefully to his ancestors —Wallace Stevens and Weldon Kees, among them— and he honours them by composing a beautiful book called *In the Suicide's Library* that is hard to categorize as memoir, biography, book-length essay, literary criticism, creative writing or fictionalized history.

4. A LIFE WITH A PURPOSE: HOW TO LIVE? WHAT TO DO?

"What keeps you going?" This is presumably the last question Weldon Kees asked a friend before his mysterious disappearance on 18 July 1955. It resonates powerfully with echoes related to the ultimate meaning of life, the mystery of death and the attraction of self-annihilation. It takes courage and stamina to take one's life. Kees had tried to commit suicide at least once before vanishing forever; the vertigo from such a stunning height was unbearable, he said. Only four seconds separated him from a fatal death. Tim Bowling seeks to answer that question for himself. It can be translated into two closely related questions: How to live? and What to do? Bowling is a man on the side of life. It comes as no surprise that *In the Suicide's Library* should be dedicated to his daughter Sadie, "in loving admiration of her creative spirit." Confronted with a profound mid-life crisis, Bowling chooses life to death, not just because the responsibilities of parenthood and marriage are too pressing, but mainly because he chooses to celebrate light and air, and the joy of having a body and being alive amid so much beauty. Life is too precious to be discarded with a sleight of hand.

After spending six months on a literary quest into the heart of American poetry, he comes to the realization that books are not life after all. A life of reading and writing is not enough, for life is vaster and more sublime. Bowling says: “I am a poet, a man of spirit, and a father, a man of flesh and heart, who chooses the fresh green breast of the new world that is the future, not the type-burdened and heavily calligraphied past.” (2010: 314) The end of Bowling’s book is a celebration of life in itself. On 18 July 2008, exactly 53 years after Kees’s disappearance, he travels to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco with the determination to be reborn, to get rid of Kees’s tattered copy of *Ideas of Order* and to pay homage to the American poet. As he reaches his hand beyond the railing to let the book drop down into the river waters, he does something unexpected:

I take out a pen and, in the full sunlight, under his [Kees’s] black name, quickly write “For My Daughter, Sadie. Much light and air and joy. Love, Dad. The Golden Gate Bridge. July 18th, 2008.” As I finish, I can’t see any ironic smiles; the stroke of my pen is the death of irony. For a moment, I hold the book open. Is what I’ve done a desecration? To a library book, yes. But not to this book. [...] Breathing easily, a confirmed thief at last, I begin my descent of one of the modern wonders of the world. (2010: 315).

In a lucid essay entitled “The Instruments of Mental Production”, included in *The Stubborn Structure. Essays on Criticism and Society*, Canadian critic Northrop Frye claims that “the knowledge of most worth, whatever it may be, is not something one has: it is something one is...” (1970: 3) It seems a truism we take for granted most of the time, but the knowledge most worth having is not the knowledge one has, but the knowledge one becomes. In the end, Tim Bowling becomes the knowledge he has gained about Weldon Kees, about Wallace Stevens, and about twentieth-century American literature. Most importantly, he becomes the books he has come to love and cherish, the books he has collected over time, the books he has come to write over the years, and also the children he has come to raise and home school with his wife. This is the stubbornly tangible trace—both intellectual and biological—that he will leave for posterity.

The tattered copy of the first edition of Wallace Stevens’s *Ideas of Order* signed by the enigmatic Weldon Kees has propelled Bowling into a six-month emotional and intellectual quest rich in experiences, exciting findings and moral perils. The book *qua* book, as a tangible artifact and material trace of the past, is the beginning of an imagined journey into literary tradition and into the stories of other lives—most notably into the suicide’s idiosyncrasies and vulnerabilities. Curiously enough, as if it were a vortex capable of bringing together times and spaces wide apart, *Ideas of Order*, a book of poems and a masterpiece central to the canon of American literature, manages to set order amid chaos,

to set up a new list of priorities in Bowling's own life. Life comes first and books come immediately afterwards, and so he chooses life to death, human beings to printed books. Books may be the sublime treasure-house of humanity, but it is humans that really matter most in the end. This is the beating heart of Humanism and the elemental lesson the author comes to learn at the close of his journey. In this context, Weldon Kees stands metonymically for the whole human species (*pars pro toto*): a single man embodies humanity in its entirety, he represents all the joy and despair of humans. It is no coincidence that *In the Suicide's Library* should end with Bowling holding the book over the waters of a river. In Western culture, the river stands for metamorphosis and perpetual change, but also for human life, relentless flowing towards the sea of death. Nothing ever stays the same, said wise Herakleitos about 25 centuries ago in Asia Minor. Bowling's life has changed after his serendipity encounter with a material object, and so has the reader's. One cannot step twice into the same river or into the same book. The reader, the river and the book have already changed for good in the meantime.

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