

**A FRAGMENT OF THE WORLD, A PIECE OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS:
TIM BOWLING'S *THE BONE SHARPS* (2007) AND *THE TINSMITH* (2012)**

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ABSTRACT. *Canadian novelist, poet and essayist Tim Bowling is one of the most prestigious authors in 21st-century Canadian letters. A prolific and versatile author; he has published twelve poetry collections, four novels, a memoir and a work of creative non-fiction so far. This paper looks at two of his novels, *The Bone Sharps* (2007) and *The Tinsmith* (2012), tools of knowledge that explore not just human consciousness as the lens through which we make sense of reality, including our selves, but also history, memory and identity, epistemology and ethics. A fragment of the world and a piece of human consciousness: this is what both novels are.*

Keywords: Tim Bowling, fiction, consciousness, epistemology, history, identity.

**UN FRAGMENTO DEL MUNDO, UN TROZO DE CONCIENCIA HUMANA:
THE BONE SHARPS (2007) Y *THE TINSMITH* (2012), DE TIM BOWLING**

RESUMEN. *El novelista, poeta y ensayista Tim Bowling es uno de los autores más prestigiosos de las letras canadienses del siglo XXI. Autor prolífico y versátil, ha publicado hasta la fecha doce poemarios, cuatro novelas, unas memorias y una obra creativa de ensayo. Este artículo analiza dos de sus novelas, The Bone Sharps (2007) y The Tinsmith (2012), verdaderas herramientas de conocimiento que exploran no solo la conciencia humana como prisma a través del cual dotamos de sentido a la realidad y a nosotros mismos, sino también la historia, la memoria y la identidad, la epistemología y la ética. Un fragmento del mundo y un trozo de conciencia humana: esto es lo que ambas novelas representan.*

Palabras clave: Tim Bowling, narrativa, conciencia, epistemología, historia, identidad.

Received 14 June 2016

Revised version accepted 10 April 2017

1. SEARCHING THE BONES OF ANCIENT DINOSAURS, OR THE PURSUIT OF SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

A native of the Canadian West Coast, award-winning Tim Bowling (b. Vancouver 1964) is widely acclaimed as one of the best living Canadian authors. He is a prolific author who has cultivated several literary genres with astonishing talent and verbal craftsmanship. To date he has published twelve 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 work of creative non-fiction entitled *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory and the Death of Wild Culture* (2007); and a creative work on the joy of book collecting entitled *In the Suicide's Library. A Book Lover's Journey* (2010).

Like a loaf of hand-made bread, a novel is a slice of life and a vibrant fragment of the world, but also a small piece of human consciousness. David Lodge is right in saying that "literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have" (2002: 10) and "that the novel is arguably man's most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time" (2002: 10). Fiction is thus a form of knowledge, no less

valuable than science or philosophy, which have tirelessly looked into the mystery of the self and human consciousness. In this respect, in his ground-breaking *Manifesto for Philosophy*, French philosopher Alain Badiou claims that there are four types of generic procedures – the matheme, the poem, political invention and love –, which may produce 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 lesson is thus crystal clear: different paths lead to knowledge and, at best, to wisdom. The novel is no exception, as it seeks to shed light on consciousness, which is tantamount to shedding light on human nature. It possibly remains the most privileged of spaces where we see the human mind at work, scrutinizing the world within and the world without.

In this paper we explore two novels in particular, *The Bone Sharps* and *The Tinsmith*, to demonstrate how fiction becomes a genuine tool of knowledge and an anatomy of human consciousness in Bowling's hands. What all of his novels appear to have in common is the fact that they are turned into epistemological weapons that seek to illuminate the human condition, while mapping the mythic exuberance, the historical density and the beauty of the natural world, be it the wilderness of British Columbia or the badlands of Alberta. In actual fact, in a brief but illuminating entry on Tim Bowling included in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Ross Leckie dwells on the themes explored by this Canadian author in his poetry: “the sublime momentary incarnations of nature, the transience of life and the fleeting nature of consciousness, the importance of the historical to the structure of memory, and the need to drink deep of life, to transcend quotidian routine. The language of his poetry is frequently lush and rhapsodic, drawing the reader to the intensity of beauty within mutability” (2002: 148). What Leckie says about Bowling's poetry can be rightly said of his fiction. The great themes he explores in his *oeuvre* are the timeless and universal concerns great literature seeks to elucidate for the rest of humankind. It could not be otherwise in a man who calls himself a humanist, to whom nothing human is alien. In this respect, in an interview entitled “Tim Bowling on Rapacious Greed and the (Relative) Triviality of the Curriculum”, the author characterizes himself as a *humanist*: “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.

The self is probably the greatest enigma of all for a humanist and a novelist: a consciousness being bombarded by thousands of stimuli coming from all directions, trying hard to impose a pattern on the seeming chaos within and without, on the ebb and flow of the carpet of existence. Traditionally, the novel has tirelessly tried to decipher the mystery of the self from innumerable standpoints: the self *vis à vis* a specific social, political and historical context; the self as a construct affiliated to communal entities like the nation, or as something shaped by biological and social forces such as sex, gender, race, culture or language; the self as the crossroads where time and being meet in the process of apprehension of physical reality; or the self as a solipsistic entity, isolated from the world outside and yet inevitably partaking of the bustle of life. This is what we find at the very beating heart of Tim Bowling's novels. The enigma of the self may suggest the final unknowability of being, but time and again Bowling seeks to unveil layers of what is out there to be known and he seems to indulge himself in the immense joy of literally writing the self and mapping the world at the same time.

Fascinated by the flow of the natural world and the workings of the mind, Bowling seeks to portray diverse landscapes of the self and geographies of human consciousness in his fiction. This is most evident in *The Bone Sharps* (2007), an exquisite¹ lyric novel set mostly in the badlands of the Red Deer Valley in Alberta that represents an attempt at elucidating a particular consciousness, that of paleontologist Charles Sternberg, renowned for his fossil hunting in the vast, seemingly empty, expanses of land of the West in the late 19th century. Sternberg is the central pivot around which the whole novel is articulated, even if the text is a delicate palimpsest woven from various voices at different times in history. The novel opens in 1916, when 67-year-old Sternberg, old and tired after exhausting field trips, and dreaming of his deceased daughter Maud, is hunting for bones in the Red Deer Valley. He is not alone in this paleontological enterprise, though. His three sons, also bone-hunters, a cook and a young woman called Lily are helping him uncover the fossilized bones of dinosaurs that lived about 85 million years ago. As Mary Jo Anderson suggests in an enlightening review of the novel, upon closer inspection, the jobs of paleontologist and novelist share striking similarities. Both of them are readers and world-makers, even if the stuff they work with is of a very different nature: whereas the paleontologist interprets signs in the form of bones, the novelist puts together words to evoke a new world. Anderson's insight is worth quoting in full:

¹ *The Bone Sharps* is exquisite in terms of the story that it tells and the poetic language in which it is written, and as an art object per se. Printed and bound by Gaspereau Press, it shows the typographical elegance typical of the books made by Gary Dunfield and Andrew Steeves.

Both work in often solitary, demanding conditions, digging into the unknown, praying to mine valuable fragments, which they can assemble into a whole creature. The paleontologist seeks bones to recreate a skeleton of a prehistoric dinosaur, so unfamiliar to us as to seem an imagined being. A novelist seeks pieces of prose and characters to recreate an imagined world, so familiar to us as to seem real. (2007: 30)

But *The Bone Sharps* is a complex novel, punctuated by flashbacks that take us back to 1876 and 1896, when Sternberg was learning the profession of a 'bone sharp' (one with a special talent to find prehistoric fossils where others would see but empty tracts of land) with the help of his mentor, the great paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope, and a flashforward that takes us to 1975, when an old Lily travels to the badlands where she spent part of her youth as a bone-hunter to reminisce (and somehow pay homage to) her lover, Cameron Scott, Sternberg's protégé. In 1916 Scott happened to be fighting in the Great War in the French trenches, dreaming of coming back to Alberta, to Lily and to fossil-hunting with the man he admired most. The novel is, thus, a kaleidoscopic mosaic in which each tessera is illuminated by the consciousness of different characters: Charles Sternberg at different points in time during his bone-hunting expeditions and field trips (1876, 1896 and 1916); Lily as a young woman in 1916 – excavating the lands in search of fossils and coming to terms with a desolate landscape and terribly missing her lover – and as an old woman in 1975 – reminiscing dead Scott, reading his love letters and preparing to die –; and Cameron Scott, an unwilling witness to the non-sense of war and the carnage on the front, but also a willing witness to the humanity and brotherly camaraderie that flourishes among soldiers in the trenches amid the most inhospitable conditions. In alternating chapters the stories of the characters unfold, the subplots being delineated by the year in which each part of the story takes place and revealing the events in the characters' lives.

As Andy Belyea points out in his review of the novel, *The Bone Sharps* is “not only a “historical fiction” but is also part epistolary novel, part war journal, part rabid confession, part dream/madness narrative, and more. It employs a fragmented temporal and spatial postmodern style and structure (several geographic regions and multiple timelines in addition to the plethora of mixed storytelling media just mentioned)” (69). In other words, the polyphonic structure of the novel avoids a traditional linear mode of narration. The narrative is offered to us in fragments as it were, like the tesserae of a mosaic we are invited to assemble or to reassemble. As a result, Bowling invites the reader to look at the world from different simultaneous perspectives at the same time, through the lens of idiosyncratic consciousnesses. Fiction in Bowling's hands is thus a medium to understand the motives beneath human behaviour, and also the links that hold a person to a specific culture, a place, a vocation or a passion, and a

Zeitgeist. To put it differently, fiction is a form of paying attention to and making sense of human nature and reality. There is a moving, meticulous celebration of the natural world in *The Bone Sharps* as well, even if it does not have the green and lush exuberance of the BC coast depicted in Bowling's earlier novels, *Downriver Drift* (2000) or *The Paperboy's Winter* (2003). Bowling is writing the self and mapping the eternal landscape of silence of the Albertan badlands at the same time. He has got a keen eye for natural observation, not only for the riverscapes of his native West Coast, but also for the landscapes surrounding his life in Edmonton, Alberta, where he settled years ago and lives with his family.

Though *The Bone Sharps* is a polyphonic novel for multiple consciousnesses, let us not forget that the presiding consciousness in the whole novel is that of Charles Sternberg, a man with a mission, truly passionate about his commitment to making a lasting contribution to the world of science. Bowling made thorough preliminary work of documentation and read the man's autobiographies, *The Life of a Fossil Hunter* (1909) and *Hunting Dinosaurs in the Badlands of Alberta* (1917), to be able to recreate the epoch. As Samuel Pane points out in "A Bone to Pick", his review of the novel:

Cameron carries a copy of Sternberg's first autobiography from 1909. The novel's flashbacks involving Edward Drinker Cope, principal antagonist in the American "Bone Wars," are indebted to *The Life of a Fossil Hunter*. It details the early phase of Sternberg's career before he was engaged by the Geological Survey of Canada to participate in the "Canadian Dinosaur Rush" – a gentlemanly contest against Barnum Brown who would send Albertan dinosaurs by the boxcar to New York's American Museum. However, *The Bone Sharps* owes much of its psychological thrust, mainly Sternberg's crisis of faith, to *Hunting Dinosaurs in the Badlands of Alberta*, Sternberg's second autobiography, published a full year after the action described in the novel. (2008: 118-119)

However, history and fiction exist side by side in this masterwork: the love story between Lily and Scott is fictional, and the date for the 1916 field trip is not historically accurate. After all, Bowling's ultimate vocation is that of a poet-novelist, not that of a historian, and he is searching for imperishable universals beneath the minutest details of existence. And yet, as Mary Jo Anderson observes, "the discoveries of science, the barbarity of war, the slow seep of Darwin's thoughts of evolution into the culture – all that we know in our bones, in our history – is made to seem new, challenging the order of the world, needing to be absorbed" (30). Bowling's novel conjures up in the reader's mind a time when humanity was intent on understanding the vast world and its mysteries, which included the silent stories implicit in the pristine bones of creatures that had lived millions of years ago. In short, the intellectual climate and sense of expectation and astonishment of the epoch are evoked masterly, not just because

Bowling has done thorough work of documentation for his novel, but also because he appears to have a keen eye for observation and a relational mind capable of bringing diverse dimensions of reality together.

Bones are ubiquitous in the novel indeed and a recurrent motif. For Sternberg, hunting for the fossilized bones of the creatures of the Mesozoic is tantamount to undertaking a spiritual quest. Time and again in *The Bone Sharps* we find innumerable instances of this religious, quasi-mystical calling the paleontologist is engaged in. From the very outset, his life appears to have been predestined to accomplish great things in the field of paleontology: "His [God's] plan for me involved finding the bones of his long-dead creations" (85). Sternberg reads the book of nature and what he finds there is not just a plethora of *signatura rerum*, but an overwhelming abundance of signs of God's omnipotence and grace. Thus, we read passages of moving lyricism like this one:

Daughter, everything is planned and ordered by the Creator. Never doubt it. What happens is meant to happen, is for the best. Do you think we would be here, in this valley, finding the bones of His great ancient creations if He had not ordained it so? Child, you know the infirmity in my leg? I tell you, as I have told no one before, it is not my weakness, it is my strength. The very pain that others believe must impede me in my work is the sole cause of my work. And I am grateful for it. [...] I pray to know that God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform. This leg [...] is a wonder, and the pain it caused me is as nothing to the life of praise and labour it has carried me to (51-52).

After decades working as a bone sharp, Sternberg "didn't even need to see the fossils; he felt their presence all around him. It was as if a cloud was peeling back off the earth to reveal a sky brilliant with stars, some in perfect constellations and others broken and scattered" (279). Being a devout and religious man, Sternberg has no problem in reconciling the pursuit of science and his profession of faith. To his mind, fossils are evidence of God's grandeur and the awe-inspiring beauty of the natural world. Fossils are nothing but signatures left by God, traces of his sublime power to create things *ex nihilo*. The fossilized bones of fish, turtles and dinosaurs found on ancient seabeds must have caused astonishment in ordinary people, but to Sternberg they testify to God's omnipotence and they leave him with an aching sense of the wonder of the world. Every time he touches bones, he feels his hands are *touching origins*, and *time dies* (279). This is Sternberg musing on bones and on God, looking at the world with humility through the lens of his devout religiosity:

We are not greater than we know. We are smaller. This silence, this western silence that surrounds and awes, is but the faintest echo of God's heartbeat. We lean towards it, almost hear words in a tongue we recognize. [...] It is this joy, this power to discover, this science, that presses us for a few precious seconds to the

bosom of our Father, and we hear the Truth, the only Truth; it beats so loudly that the starlight pours in our eyes and the blood knows other worlds. Are we so clever, are we so deadened, that the life in us does not hunger ceaselessly for more life? [...] Joy is the knowledge of God's greatness. (19-20)

This sense of utter communion with the natural world is moving; the presence of the divine is pervasive wherever one turns to look. In *The Bone Sharps* Bowling represents the natural world as the locus of the inner life, echoing the Burkean configuration of the sublime as an expression of the divine. However, what makes reading Bowling's novel a memorable aesthetic and learning experience is that it confronts the reader with the naked consciousness of a man driven by a passion for science (the realm of reason, intellectual pursuit and objectivity), but also haunted by his deceased young daughter, Maud (the realm of emotions, feelings and subjectivity). He talks with her constantly in disturbed dreams and feels an intolerable sense of guilt for not having made it on time from a field trip to be by her side on her deathbed, when she needed him most. In his own "dark night of the soul", he experiences a surreal reunion with his deceased daughter in the desert, which makes his loss even more palpable. Dreams appear to give him solace, though, and the opportunity to talk with her dead daughter for a while appears to blur the toils of his fossil-hunting duties. However, the landscape of eternity his eyes scan in search of fossils is rich in resonant bones, not just the bones of the Mesozoic lords, but also human bones singing an almost inaudible melody. Sternberg's fascination with bones prompts him to contemplate life as a continuum spanning from prehistoric bones through vast tracts of hostile badlands and starred skies to the bones of her deceased daughter, even if he is puzzled by the vastness of Earth, *terra matrix*, capacious enough to embrace everything that is:

Maud is dead. Cope is dead. Maud is dead. The words pounded out of the sun together, joined like the bones of a fossil. [...] The past –how capacious it was, swallowing the bones of the great extinct beasts in a number of barren cemeteries like the one of this valley, and yet the fine bones of his precious child too. How could it be? That the earth could hold the beasts' gaping skulls of stone along with the softness of her hands that once soothed and cooled his calluses – it was absurd, he could not see the connection. Perhaps if he had been able to touch her before the end... the thought was too painful and he shook it off. (83-84)²

Everyone wants to know and to understand, said Aristotle at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*,³ a seminal text in Western Philosophy. *The Bone Sharps* is a lyric

² By the end of the novel, Sternberg dwells once again on the vulnerability of human bones: "the bones of Maud, his parents, Uncle Wilhelm, Cope, Marsh – so many others – lay in the earth, prey to the elements, as vulnerable as the bones of the great beasts he'd spent his life tracking" (289).

³ These are the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* I.I, 980a 21-7: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness

novel that honours learning as the true vocation of all human beings from all times. There is sufficient evidence in this novel that Bowling is aware that knowledge is an ancestral enterprise, a gigantic work in progress to which every human being is called upon to contribute. “We don’t have any idea of what mysteries surround us. Any day, any rainfall, here or in a million other places on the planet, anywhere, anywhere, another mystery can appear! How can anyone not be moved by that?” (242-243), Cameron Scott asks his beloved, Lily, trembling with excitement. In spite of his love of knowledge, Charles Sternberg, the man of science and the man of God, compares his passion for knowledge to his existential pain induced by the death of his young daughter and must admit that, even if he “had spent his life working for men driven to find the truth in Creation”, “the answers they sought [...] were nothing compared to the loss of a child” (178). He still has faith in reuniting with Maud in the afterlife: “Can it be true, Lord, he lamented. Will I never be with her again?” (178). Even his mentor, Edward Drinker Cope, a man intoxicated with knowledge and endowed with an immense “love and respect for all the marvelous workings of the Creator” and “enthusiasm for the work of fossil hunting and his fascination with all forms of life” (203), intones a forceful celebration of a life devoted to the pursuit of science that still keeps an eye on the emotional side to human beings:

A man should not be all intellect. That is the danger in science. Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, the damnable Marsh – such men believe they can reason their way through life. But how, how faced with the glories of the Creator, can they reason away the cosmos, bird flight, a woman’s heart? Doth experience teach them nothing? And mystery is no enemy to man – it is his greatest friend. Without it, we are as the extinct beasts whose bones we seek. Imagination and feeling. God has given us these faculties to praise and honour, not to deaden. (218)

At some point, Charles Sternberg summarises beautifully what a bone hunter is. He is convinced that life is a constant search. Everything is a bone hunter: “The sun, the wind, the rain: everything was searching, all the time. And an ordinary man, too. A rancher on the prairie above, a merchant in one of the great cities: their days were nothing but one continuous search for the final truth hidden in their own flesh” (144). The old metaphor rings true: human life is a journey, but it is also a search for some form of revelation whereby everything appears to cohere and make sense beautifully at last. Fiction and truth go hand in hand after all: what for would novelists put so much time and energy into the writing of novels if they did not strive after some kind of permanent truth?

they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things”. See *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, Vol. 2, p. 1552. The original translation is by W. D. Ross and was published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1924.

2. A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY: FROM THE BATTLE OF ANTIETAM TO THE FRASER RIVER

The Tinsmith (2012), Bowling's latest novel, though a very different kind of novel, is precisely a search for the final truth literally hidden in the flesh of its main character, the runaway slave William Sullivan Dare, and the story of his identity reconstruction. Set in two very different scenarios, the American Civil War battlefields after the Battle of Antietam and the pioneer salmon canneries on the Fraser River in British Columbia, the novel brings fiction and history together just like *The Bone Sharps* does. But whereas Sternberg's search is a search for knowledge in the form of fossil-hunting to honour his Creator, Dare's anguished search is a search for identity in the aftermath of a violent war and a life of slavery. The war is not mere backdrop in this novel, as it was in *The Bone Sharps*, in which the European trenches were a mere echo, faintly heard in the distance, in spite of the description of certain scenes of overt carnage on the front. War is the central experience that reconfigures Dare's life once he learns the transcendental fact about his biological origins. But let us begin at the beginning.

The plot⁴ of *The Tinsmith* is not difficult to delineate, bristling with action as it is. A story of impressive temporal and spatial scope, it opens with the Battle of Antietam, the first major battle in the American Civil War to take place on Union soil and the bloodiest single-day battle in American history, fought on 17 September 1862 near Sharpsburg, Maryland. Anson Baird, a surgeon for the Union Army, is on the front line tending to the wounded, amputating arms and legs to save the lives of the survivors. Exhausted by the growing number of patients and casualties on his own improvised operating table, he is grateful for the generous aid of a mysterious soldier by the name of John. He roams the battlefield in search of wounded soldiers and carries them diligently on his shoulders to the hospital. Anson realizes that John is no ordinary soldier and soon learns that he is a runaway slave haunted by a dark secret. However, moved by the man's selfless actions, Anson decides to help him escape under the guise of a new identity: "within just a few days of the battle, a runaway slave with no other name besides John became, in the army's records, a Union soldier named William Sullivan Dare" (61). Amid a bleak landscape of death, utter desolation and rotten bodies, where "solitary figures and small groups of

⁴ Tim Bowling himself summarises the essentials as follows: "It's two different points of view told in the third person. One's an American surgeon who'd been a surgeon in the Civil War battlefields and met this character, this mixed-blood character, there. The first third of *The Tinsmith* takes place on the battlefield of Antietam in Maryland in 1862. Then the narrative switches to the Fraser River a decade later and it takes off from there. Then it goes back and forth." See Dave Brundage's "A Writer's Tension: Reflections on Genre, Place, and Time", July 2014.

three and four men moved among the dead and wounded, slowly as wasps over rotten fruit" (264), this secret forges an indestructible bond between both men and sets the action in motion.

In 1882, exactly twenty years later, in a different place just across the continent, the Fraser River in British Columbia, Anson comes to the rescue of his friend once again. Haunted by his memories of the war and the death of his wife Elizabeth, the surgeon is compelled to discover the fate of his missing friend once he arrives in Canada. Working as one of the pioneer salmon canners on the Fraser River, Dare is apparently the victim of the dubious ethics of some Scottish and American competitors who harbour racial prejudices against him. As the story unfolds, readers come to learn about the toils in Dare's life as a slave, how he lost his only family (other slaves working on the same mansion) under dire circumstances of cruelty, extreme violence and collective suicide on a river crossing. Once again, he must be on the move and leave the place for a piece of land he has acquired in California. All he asks of Anson is to sell the property for him to get him money for a new start. At a climactic moment towards the end of the novel, the truth about Dare's identity is revealed: that he is not black and that he was born of white parents that he never got to know: "The overseer told me they were white. That I was born of white trash and only raised as a nigger" (277). Because he had to believe that his friendship and bond forged with Dare in *Antietam* "had pulsed behind everything, like the sun, even long after it had gone down, pulsed with the promise of more light" (279), Anson's shocked reaction in the face of the blunt truth that shatters one of his most elemental convictions is worth quoting in full:

White? Both parents? The idea staggered him. He had looked past the colour of Dare's skin for so long that it simply never occurred to him that there was any question of his mulatto ancestry. Dare was black, an escaped slave who looked white. And Anson had saved him. To doubt these facts was worse than to lose faith in God; it was to abandon everything, to find nothing in life but deceit and shadows. (277)

With astonishing stoicism and conviction, Dare admits that he had long stopped caring about whether the overseer's revelation about his biological origins or the colour of his skin was true or not: "Then I knew it didn't matter. Not if I owned myself. That was all I had to do. The owning is what matters" (277). Surprised by such a blunt philosophy and the struggles he must have endured to reach this conclusion, Anson, facing his puzzlement with regard to Dare's newly-discovered identity, is forced to humbly embrace epistemological uncertainty as part of the incomprehensibility of life. That there is no way of knowing anything for good seems to be the implicit message. And also he appears to be reminded of what looks like a truism: that the only way of finding out who you are is by reaching out to another and allowing that other to reach out to you. His consciousness is

invaded by an empathy and humaneness that Bowling catches magnificently well: “Here was a man, likely of mixed blood, once white in the eyes of this place, now black, for whom the past was more than merely inescapable; it was deadly” (278). By the end of the novel, Dare must keep on moving and go somewhere else to live, which is suggestive of the fragility of identity, something constantly fluid and unfixed, something perpetually in the making.

The Tinsmith is a novel of great intricacy and craftsmanship that addresses a complex constellation of themes like racial issues, ethics, history, war, memory and identity. Bowling spent a long time doing research on the historical background to recreate the epoch faithfully, but the major driving force beneath the novel is the exploration of human consciousness in the central characters of Anson and Dare, the two men united by the violent experience of war for the rest of their lives. Both are forced to rethink their own identities. Dare is literally and figuratively engaged in a quest for his own identity and in search of his biological origins. His journey from the battlefields of America to British Columbia is literally a journey of self-discovery and self-confrontation. Some members of the prejudiced society where he lives on the Canadian coast simply do not tolerate the colour of his skin and undeservedly associate it with moral inferiority. Once he ceases to be a slave in the aftermath of the war, he must forge a new identity for himself. Towards the end of the novel he finds the truth inscribed in his own skin: compelled to believe that he was born of white parents, the cruelty of the times made him a slave. In the end, he turns out to be a self-made man, unfortunately constantly on the move, because his past is simply inescapable.

As for Anson, disillusioned with the war and with his present (having no wife or children to give him warmth and protection), he has made Dare into an emblem of everything that he deems uncorrupted purity, limitless generosity, integrity and honour: “his friend was still the cure for futility and despair, just as he had been at Antietam” (162). Dare is the true embodiment of a good man, the ideal man: “Not vengeful, not remorselessly responding to misery and pain by inflicting it on others, most of whom, like most people, were innocent” (296). Amid a world of hostility and nonsense, the only truth Anson respects is *a man’s character* (223) and actions: “A man of character and courage deserved to be the master of his own life”, he thinks apropos the escaped slave, who “had almost driven himself mad to earn his freedom” (163). His first-hand experience of war and death compels him to keep his feet firmly on the ground though. The man who recites Latin verses to calm down his nerves while at the operating table during the Battle of Antietam, his body covered with sweat and blood, is all too painfully aware of man’s compulsion for destruction. While on the battlefields, he invokes the blind poet Homer to shed

light on the present situation of senseless havoc that war brings: “No war ever ends, Anson thought, seeing Odysseus, hooded and plotting, as he returned to his home ten years after the fall of Troy. But Anson was no Odysseus. Dare was not his son, there was no Penelope, no kingdom. The only parallel was the memory of death and the palpable sense of violent change” (138-139).

At any rate, Dare finds the truth about his own identity firmly inscribed in his own skin, the colour of which made him into a slave early in his life. Dare’s journey of self-discovery is inextricably linked to an awareness that he is a thinking and sensitive body. That we consist of a body and mind appears to be a truism that goes unnoticed most of the time in our Western mindset. Since the very beginning of Western Philosophy, humans have been conceived of as consisting of a body and a mind. At the beginning of the Modern Age, Descartes still embraced the notion that a human being is a split creature: the *res extensa* was the perishable body, whereas the *res cogitans* was the immortal mind capable of penetrating the mysteries of the world. In the 21st century, Western Philosophy is still occupied with trying to unveil the body-mind dichotomy for good. In a book-length essay entitled *Corpus* (2008), French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy provides a most interesting definition of ‘body’:

Bodies aren’t some kind of fullness or filled space (space is filled everywhere): they are *open* space, implying, in some sense, a space more properly *spacious* than spatial, what could also be called a *place*. Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a “here”, a “here is,” for a *this*. [...] the body *makes room* for existence. [...] More precisely, it makes room for the fact that the essence of existence is to be without any essence. That’s why the *ontology of the body* is ontology itself: being’s in no way prior or subjacent to the phenomenon here. The body *is* the being of existence. (15)

Thus, Nancy claims that the body is “the being-thrown-there” (13) and “the very familiar strangeness of this being-there, this being-that” (13) is a moving mystery with which Philosophy has been confronted since antiquity in all traditions across the globe. Bodies are the place of existence, “bodies are existence, the very act of ex-istence, *being*” (19) and so we live in the world of bodies. Only a body can touch or be touched. A spirit or a soul can do nothing of the sort. Jean-Luc Nancy appears to claim that ontology is to concern itself with bodies, not as shells, simulacra or deceiving appearances, but as true places of existence. In his view, the Cartesian *ego*’s articulation makes sense inasmuch as it is literally *embodied*: ““Ego” makes sense only when it is declared, proffered (and when proffered, its sense is exactly identical to existence: *ego sum*, *ego existo*). [...] In the Cartesian *ego*’s articulation, therefore, mouth and mind are the same: it’s always the body” (25). Hence, body, mind and speech are the basic

ingredients out of which humans are made, and “it makes no sense to talk about body and thought apart from each other” (35). Dare and Anson are *embodied existences* or *thinking bodies* that collide in time and space in a terrible scenario of war and violence that forges an indestructible bond between them. Dare’s skin colour makes him the victim of racial prejudice. Anson learns to value the man for his character and self-determination to live with dignity, leaving aside any racial considerations. Bodies as the place of existence are finite, singular and exposed. Bodies are finite because they have clear-cut boundaries both in time and in space, and they are singular because they are irreplaceable and unique. And if bodies are open spaces exposed to all kinds of elements, then they turn out to be extremely vulnerable. Dare’s existence as a body has been subject to the violence of slavery and war, to the cruelty of humankind, but it has also been elevated by the presence of a man like Anson, who makes him an emblem of the most noble aspirations of humanity.

As a counterpoint to the war carnage and the violence implicit in slavery, Tim Bowling crafts jewel-like descriptions of the great salmon run, the riverscapes and life in the canneries on the Fraser River back in the 19th century. In one of the rare, substantial interviews he has given, published in the *Literary Photographer* on 23 September 2008, Bowling points out to Don Denton 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 in the 1980s he was also 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. Bowling was trying hard to understand the cycle of salmon ferociously swimming upriver from the ocean and back to their origins up in the mountains, obeying an inescapable ancestral calling, even if fulfilling it meant their own annihilation. The salmon cycle represents life and death, the perpetual metamorphosis of things in the green world, where nothing ever stays the same, and also a pretext to dwell on the perennial themes of literature. In the interview “Poet Staves Off Poverty in Exotic Edmonton”, by Adam McDowell, Bowling remarks that the “Fraser River and salmon fishing is a way into the traditional poetic obsessions with mortality and time and memory”. Having grown as the son of a fisherman, it comes then as no surprise that the great Canadian river should figure so prominently in *The*

Tinsmith as much more than mere backdrop. As Bowling claims in his interview with Don Denton, in words reminiscent of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent", "the writer must transmute lived experience into meaningful art". Writers cannot help writing out of the worlds they come from and know best.

The secular concern of literature has been grasping human nature and the twin mysteries of time and space, but human nature cannot be dissociated from Nature at large. If we do so, we are blindly embracing the preposterous intimation that humankind can exist on its own and that humans are superior to everything else in life. This biased anthropocentrism might be firmly inscribed in our gene pool in our Western mindset and, consequently, it goes unnoticed most of the time. Bowling's intimation seems to be that life is but an interdependent continuum of subtle modulations and so, by understanding Nature, we will understand ourselves, and by understanding ourselves, we will understand our place within the larger scheme of things. Thus, in the natural world, both Anson and Dare seem to find their truest selves. Anson "could still feel himself embraced by something outside of all conscious planning, even if he no longer cared to use the name of God to describe that presence, the God that both sides in the war had used as justification for killing" (239). On the river, Dare finds his true self and feels like he is home for a precarious while: "the night calmed his blood; how often he had relied on the stars' loyal patterns when life seemed only a roiling confusion" (204). And the salmon cycle provides Bowling with the perfect metaphor for the relentless alternation of life and death:

All day he [Dare] had felt the salmon coming, sure as nightfall. [...] Out there, by the millions, the salmon waited, hanging like ripe fruit in the salt depths, ready to make their last fierce rush to the spawning grounds far inland. The brinish air trembled with the weight of the fish's will, the sun burned yellow-white as it crept between the horizons, and Dare often had to raise one of his muscle-knotted forearms to his eyes to wipe away the sweat. All around him the delta of sloughs, sandbars, and marshes held its breath; the tall reeds and grasses close to where the river met the ocean shivered slightly, like the fine filaments beneath the gills of the salmon, and, behind him, along both banks, the serried rows of great firs and cedars silently pulled in their shadows as if they did not want to contribute their black nets to the harvest that would soon follow. (202)

"You can't be taken out on a fish boat at the age of three or four and not have a sense of awe and mystery about the natural environment", confesses Tim Bowling to Mark Medley in the interview "A River Runs Through Tim Bowling's *The Tinsmith*". His upbringing by the great river inspired *The Tinsmith* in a decisive way. In fact, William Sullivan Dare is the fictional version of a real person, a mixed-raced South Carolinian by the name of John Sullivan Deas "who,

for a time in the mid-19th century, was the largest salmon canner on the Fraser River”, he admits in the same interview. In his interview with Dave Brundage, Bowling dwells on the historical basis for Dare:

[*The Tinsmith*] is really about how the American Civil War affected the development of British Columbia in the 1860s and 1870s. It deals with slavery and it deals with one of the early salmon cannery men on the Fraser River, who was mixed blood, white and black. This is historical but very little is known about him. So that had always haunted me from a very young age. Sarah Orne Jewett, an American writer, has said [that] what haunts the imagination for years and years and finally gets put down on paper has the possibility of being literature. [...] As a kid I'd be taken to the local museum, which was very close to my home, and there'd be these references to this character, John Sullivan Daes, but very little was known about him, a very shadowy figure, very mysterious [...] So that was the basis of that book.

Thus, Bowling was haunted by this character since he was a kid and he ended up transmuting it into suitable literary matter. In an early poem entitled “The Tinsmith”, included in *Low Water Slack* (1995), the poetic persona looks at the man's grave and concludes: “But he's not lying where the Fraser doesn't flow. / His bones feel the swimming magnet of this coast” (16). What haunted the author for a long time became literature in the end: Deas is resurrected under a new name in Bowling's novel, which, according to Mark Medley, “begins on the eve of the Battle of Antietam [...] and ends on the shores of the Fraser River on the eve of a historic salmon harvest”. The spatial and temporal scope of *The Tinsmith* is thus simply breathtaking, like the mastery with which the author depicts Anson and Dare to make them round, complex characters that evolve over time.

3. CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE CROSSROADS: EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS, HISTORY AND MEMORY

The Bone Sharps and *The Tinsmith* remain novels of astounding artistic scope and lyricism. Bowling's command of the expressive possibilities of English as a medium of literary creativity is out of the question. Because he is primarily a poet, the language of his novels has got the very texture of poetic language. Though at first they may appear to have very little in common, upon closer inspection we realize that they are tentative attempts at shedding light on human nature and on the world at large. This has been the ancestral calling of literature since antiquity, but the way Bowling maps the green world and explores human consciousness is highly articulate and lyrical in nature. While Bowling's focus appears to be consciousness, as the very centre around which the overall design of both novels pivots, the natural world as represented by the vast tracts of silent land in the Badlands of Alberta and the lush exuberance of BC landscapes, including the

Fraser River, also plays a crucial role. After all, humans are *embodied existences* living in time and in space in a tangible world. The poet-novelist cannot help trying to record the minutest details of the world as it changes from one minute to the next, and not just as merely decorative backdrop to his novels, but as an element essential to his fictional conception. But consciousness (or the interplay between the mind and the world at large) remains the main focus of both novels. Being endowed with a truly voracious intelligence, Bowling cannot but look at the self and try to capture the evanescent moment in time as reflected and refracted through the consciousness of his own characters. If the flux of life is simply unstoppable, language at least gives him the opportunity to freeze moments of being and look at them as if from simultaneous angles at the same time.

The approach to consciousness is slightly different in *The Bone Sharps* and *The Tinsmith*, though. The former brings together multiple points of view in the reconstruction of Charles Sternberg's story of fossil hunting and in the mastery evocation of a *Zeitgeist* marked by epistemological exhilaration (to the point of intellectual intoxication) at the discovery of ancestral creatures that lived millions of years ago. By forcing the reader to listen to a polyphonic novel spoken by several voices and to look at the story from multiple perspectives, Bowling's omniscient narrator appears to suggest that there is no way of understanding reality for good, or, to put it differently, that nothing can be known finally. This is precisely the reason why it is of the essence to have access to reality via different consciousnesses, as it were. Because reality is not a monolithic entity, but a fluid succession of discrete moments in time and space, and because all things exist in a never-ending chain of contexts, the juxtaposition of different viewpoints makes a much more accurate rendition of the world possible. At any rate, what the reader experiences when confronted with *The Bone Sharps* is a sense of radical epistemological uncertainty concerning both consciousness and reality at large.

Consciousness, which is always there mediating humans' relationship with the world at large, goes unnoticed most of the time, as it is the very culturally-conditioned lens through which we look at the world. As the world cannot be grasped through sensorial osmosis, consciousness intervenes to make sense of reality and of the place of humans in the larger mesh of things. Like the senses, consciousness is not a completely reliable tool to help us grasp being, but it might be feasible to harmonize different moments in time (1876, 1896, 1916 and 1975), places and settings (the badlands of Alberta and the trenches of World War I in Europe), and viewpoints (those of Sternberg, Lily and Cameron Scott) to make a more accurate rendition of the world possible. A single human consciousness will not do, but a harmonious combination of all three will take us closer to the truth and into the heart of the matter. Fragmentation is thus turned into a virtue. *The*

Bone Sharps is, therefore, a novel concerned with a particular epoch as refracted through the consciousness of three particular characters. Most importantly, it is a novel concerned with epistemology and the potential limits to our understanding of the world. Though at some points it is a moving ode to knowledge, Bowling is aware that reality is vaster and more sublime than whatever the human mind might find out and verbalize about it. Deep at its core, reality remains an inexhaustible and undecipherable mystery to Sternberg's amazed mind.

The Tinsmith is not a polyphonic novel for multiple viewpoints or a suite for several voices, but a chaconne performed by two voices only. Consciousness vis à vis the self, the others and identity (and not consciousness vis à vis the world at large) is at the very centre of the novel's overall architecture. It is not primarily epistemology but ethics that appears to be the overriding concern of the author. Dare's journey of self-discovery represents an odyssey towards his own biological origins, beyond his past experiences of slavery and cruelty in the hands of cruel human beings. Consciousness is not just a tool of self-knowledge and introspection, but also the space where the self confronts itself and experiences a radical sense of otherness. The colour of his skin made Dare into a slave early in his life, but the process of growth is an act of self-emancipation. By fleeing from the US after the Battle of Antietam to the Fraser River in BC, his odyssey becomes both literal and figurative. Constantly on the move, he learns the fundamental lesson that identity is a construct and that it is fluid, hence it is in the making for a whole lifetime. Bowling seems to convey the message that there is no way of getting to know the self for good, as it remains an inscrutable mystery that needs to be interpreted in a relationship to everyone and everything else. Anson represents precisely the other, the mirror against which Dare tries hard to decipher his own self. Even if Dare is the embodiment of everything Anson deems sacred in humankind, the surgeon's convictions are shattered the very moment he comes to learn that Dare is not an escaped black slave, but a white man made into a slave by a twist of fate. But human self-identity is fluid after all: it must be revisited and reassessed time and again.

Contrary to the Positivist intimation that the self was a non-fragmented whole, 21st-century communities forge fluid, multifaceted identities, according to Zygmunt Bauman, who deploys "fluidity as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era" (2000: 2), a time when individuals are ready and prone to change, and a society where fluidity reigns over solidity. Identity is not a monolithic entity, but a culturally-determined construct impacted by multiple forces. In the fifth century BCE, Thales of Miletos is said to have uttered somewhere on the coast of Asia Minor these words: "Know thyself". The old in their knowing knew that the world of natural phenomena is a huge mystery

and a miracle, but on Earth the human being poses the greatest dilemma of all to our minds. One needs to spend a whole lifetime to start making sense of what it means to be oneself, and not anybody else — or anything else, for that matter. Sophocles, who also lived in the age of Thales, came up with a handful of resonant words in what is probably the most important chorus in his tragedy *Antigone*: “πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδέν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει”. That is to say: “Strangeness is frequent enough, but nothing / is ever as strange as a man is”. This chorus is a landmark in the history of Western literature, because it is one of the earliest and most probing meditations on human nature. Sophocles thinks deeply about the world and he draws the conclusion that man is the strangest thing on Earth. About 24 centuries later, Virginia Woolf, another author concerned with exploring human nature and how consciousness responds to the world, writes in an entry of her diary (dated Friday 7 December 1917) the following words: “nothing is more fascinating than a live person; always changing, resisting & yielding against one’s forecast”. (1977: 85) To Sophocles’ mind, there was nothing stranger than human beings themselves. To Virginia Woolf’s mind, nothing was more fascinating than a live person. Across oceans of time, the mystery of the self and identity remains intact. Tim Bowling is aware that such is the case and so there is an abundance of evidence in both *The Bone Sharps* and *The Tinsmith* that the Canadian author is concerned with shedding light on (human) nature, the self, consciousness and identity.

History does play a crucial role too in the making of both novels. As with his own experience as a fisherman on the Fraser River, he transmutes everything he has known or read about into appropriate subject for fiction. Such is the breadth of his readings that he is able to bring together a 19th-century paleontologist, the experience of the Great War in Europe, and the passion for knowledge with impressive mastery into the living fabric of *The Bone Sharps*. Such is his intellectual alertness to historical detail that he is able to evoke with utter self-confidence the Battle of Antietam on American soil and the earliest salmon canneries on the Fraser River as historical background for an intricate story that explores war, slavery, racial issues and the search for personal identity in *The Tinsmith*. The impression one gets after reading both novels is that Bowling is a man sensitive to the subtle intricacies of human culture and of the natural world. He is a humanist after all. Nothing human is alien to him. In spite of the havoc and destruction humans are capable of, he appears to convey the optimistic message that we are also capable of the most sublime feats. He cannot but celebrate learning as the true vocation of all humans from all ages and places, and also his sense of wonder in the face of the unending beauty of the world.

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