

## Self Writing and World Mapping in Tim Bowling's *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter*

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**Abstract.** Widely acclaimed as one of the best living Canadian authors, Tim Bowling has cultivated several literary genres with great talent and verbal craftsmanship. He has published twelve poetry collections to date, two works of creative non-fiction, and five novels, including *Downriver Drift* (2000), *The Paperboy's Winter* (2003), *The Bone Sharps* (2007), *The Tinsmith* (2012) and *The Heavy Bear* (2017). This article explores the epistemological power of Bowling's fiction as a mode of knowing the self and the nonhuman environment. More specifically, bearing in mind fundamental ecocritical tenets, it analyses how his two earliest novels, *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter*, evoke notions of dwelling and a compelling sense of place, as the natural environment in them is much more than mere backdrop to the narratives unfolding in their respective plots. Written in elegantly wrought language rich in poetic resonance, Bowling's novels remind their readership that fiction is a powerful tool to investigate the human condition and our surrounding world, where the human and the nonhuman coexist on democratic terms.

**Keywords:** Tim Bowling, eco-fiction, sense of place, dwelling, more-than-human.

[es] Escritura del ser y cartografía del mundo en *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter*, de Tim Bowling

**Resumen.** Aclamado como uno de los mejores autores canadienses vivos, Tim Bowling ha cultivado diversos géneros literarios con gran talento y pericia. Cuenta en su haber con doce poemarios hasta la fecha, dos obras de escritura creativa y cinco novelas, *Downriver Drift* (2000), *The Paperboy's Winter* (2003), *The Bone Sharps* (2007), *The Tinsmith* (2012) y *The Heavy Bear* (2017). Este artículo explora el poder de la narrativa de Bowling como vehículo de conocimiento del ser y del mundo natural. Concretamente, partiendo de premisas esenciales de la ecocrítica, analiza cómo sus dos primeras novelas, *Downriver Drift* y *The Paperboy's Winter*, evocan nociones de lo que entraña habitar un espacio y recrean la presencia del lugar, pues el entorno natural en ellas es mucho más que un mero telón de fondo de las historias que relatan. Escritas en un lenguaje elegante y preñado de resonancias poéticas, las novelas de Bowling nos recuerdan a los lectores que la narrativa es una poderosísima herramienta que nos permite investigar la condición humana y la realidad circundante, donde lo humano y lo no humano coexisten a la par.

**Palabras clave:** Tim Bowling, narrativa ecologista, sentido del lugar, habitar, más que humano.

**Contents.** 1. Eco-fiction as a Mode of Cognition. 2. An Apprenticeship in Environmental Literacy. 3. Space, Sense of Place and Dwelling in *Downriver Drift*. 4. Landscapes of the West Coast in *The Paperboy's Winter*. 5. Conclusion.

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### 1. Eco-Fiction as a Mode of Cognition

Poet and novelist Tim Bowling is widely acclaimed as one of the best living Canadian authors. He has published twelve poetry collections, several novels, including *Downriver Drift* (2000), *The Paperboy's Winter* (2003), *The Bone Sharps* (2007), *The Tinsmith* (2012) and *The Heavy Bear* (2017); a work of non-fiction entitled *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory and the Death of Wild Culture* (2007), based on his own childhood memories; and *In the Suicide's Library. A Book Lover's Journey* (2010), a creative work on the pleasures derived from bibliophilia. His novels appear to have an irreducible core in common: they seek to grasp the human condition and explore the geographies of the self, while mapping the mythic exuberance, the dense history and the beauty of the wilderness of his native British Columbia with lyrical intensity. This article examines how Bowling's *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter* are novels where the author seeks to make sense of the world within and the world without. He explores not only

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the way place fashions the self, memory and identity in decisive ways, but also a lifestyle in touch with the natural world of the West Coast that is now on the verge of extinction, if not completely gone. As a consummate humanist,<sup>2</sup> his concerns are historical, sociological, mythical and ecological. It comes as no surprise that, in his hands, fiction becomes a form of knowledge. His novels are his way of tackling the nonhuman environment and understanding both the complexity of our perception of the world and our place in the larger mesh of things.

In an early ecocritical study entitled *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), Lawrence Buell defines ‘ecocriticism’ as the “study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (1995: 430). More interestingly, in the introduction to this landmark study, he claims that there are at least four fundamental ingredients that make a text become a markedly environmental text:

The nonhuman environment is present – not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...] The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...] Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. [...] Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (1995: 7-8)

Because “American nature poetry and fiction about the wilderness experience have been much more intensively studied than environmental non-fiction” (1995: 8), Buell contends that his study is mostly devoted to environmental non-fiction, with a special focus on what he considers to be H. D. Thoreau’s masterpiece, *Walden* (1854), and other seminal environmental texts such as John Muir’s *Studies in the Sierra* (1874), Mary Austin’s *Land of Little Rain* (1903), Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* (1949), Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1964), Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Cree* (1974), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), and Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* (1986). However, fiction as a genre is not alien to the representation of the nonhuman environment as much more than mere backdrop, as the word ‘setting’ appears to disparagingly imply. In this respect, Bowling appears to be particularly talented when it comes to cultivating a form of fiction marked by a special ecological sensitivity and a capacity for articulating the nonhuman environment. Alongside plot, character, point of view, themes and narrative, he manages to convey a deep sense of place in a convincing manner, particularly in the novels under scrutiny in this article, which seem to comply with Buell’s first and fourth criteria to qualify as environmental texts. In his novels, Bowling captures the *genius loci* and succeeds in communicating the notion of *dwelling* that bonds a human being or community to a place (its history, customs, traditions and commerce with the natural world) and its nonhuman inhabitants. After all, as Greg Garrard rightly observes, “‘dwelling’ is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work” (2012: 117). For his part, Martin Heidegger, who set out to think dwelling, claimed in memorable words that “Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being” (1993: 245), which is to say that humans situate themselves along a continuum of life ranging from clouds and mountains, through oceans and trees, to all sentient air and land creatures. They are just simple citizens of the biotic community, as Aldo Leopold observed in 1949: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (1970: 262).

Nonetheless, the novel appears to be the literary genre par excellence where consciousness or the self are of paramount centrality. It is the most human-oriented or anthropocentric genre, one of whose main driving forces is precisely the exploration of the human condition. Not surprisingly, in *Consciousness and the Novel*, David Lodge argues that “literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have” and “the novel is arguably man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” (2002: 10). At any rate, like science, philosophy or love, art in general sheds light on human nature, or so argues French philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999), where he 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. This is just to say that the intuitions of contemporary philosophy gesture towards art as a powerful instrument or mode of cognition whereby humans make sense of reality and construct knowledge. In this respect, novels are still valuable tools to gain insights into the world at large and into the human psyche in particular. Bowling’s *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy’s Winter* testify to the fact that fiction is the literary genre par excellence where we see the human mind at work, coming to terms with the world within and the world without. The surrounding world is refracted through the lens of the main characters’ consciousness, while the exuberance of the natural world of the West Coast and the rhythms of life in small fishing communities are captured with a deep sense of poignancy and nostalgia. Bowling is well aware that human beings are situated in the nonhuman environment, which impacts their inner life and their way of living. In this regard, a recognisably Canadian place can be said to be a character on a par with the men and women populating his novels.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview entitled “Tim Bowling on Rapacious Greed and the (Relative) Triviality of the Curriculum,” Bowling calls himself ‘humanist’: “I’ve been [...] humanist, all my life, and I’ll go the grave that way.” In “A Writer’s Tension: Reflections on Genre, Place, and Time (Part 1),” he elaborates on the idea of humanism: “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. [...] [A]s a writer [...], I have to believe in a shared humanity.”

## 2. An Apprenticeship in Environmental Literacy

In a brief but illuminating entry on Bowling included in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Ross Leckie provides basic biographical information delineating the contours of the writer's life: "Bowling was raised in Ladner, and his imagination is shaped by the salmon cycle and the life of the salmon fishery, in which he worked in the summers" (2002: 148). Then he dwells on the themes explored in his poetry:

His themes are those of the English Romantic poets: 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)

At the time this encyclopedia saw the light of day, Bowling had already published his first four poetry collections and his first novel, *Downriver Drift* (2000), and he was probably working on what would become his second novel, *The Paperboy's Winter* (2003). What Leckie says about Bowling's poetry can be rightly said of his fiction. There is a precious consistency and coherence to everything Bowling writes, regardless of whether it is poetry, fiction or memoir. The great themes he deals with in his entire *oeuvre* are the timeless and universal concerns that literature seeks to elucidate for the rest of humankind. This is no minor accomplishment at all; there is deep thinking and beautiful singing in his work. Bowling is a learned author that has inherited the legacy of the narrative and lyrical Modernist tradition with great labour: "Writers learn from other writers, mostly dead ones,"<sup>3</sup> he says, feeling the weight of tradition and the achievements of his literary ancestors in his own bones. He looks at the world in all its splendour and what he finds there is hard to convey in words, but he does his best to depict a nonhuman environment which is an interconnected entity rich in subtleties. The novels he writes can be best characterised as *lyric fiction*, not just because of their concern with grand issues (i.e., consciousness and time, memory and identity, life and death, love and human relationships, the green world and the human-made world, reality and the perceiving self), but also because of the poetic texture of his writing and his deployment of metaphors, which he considers a major driving force in poetic language. Thus, his fiction is informed by a deep sensitivity to the beauty and specificity of the visible universe and its creatures. With his grasp of the human condition and his lyric gifts, he is able to reveal illuminating profundities implicit in ordinary life, where the mundane and the transcendental stand side by side.

As he is a man who lives life with his eyes wide open to the world, there is a persistent perceptual and intellectual vigilance in everything Bowling writes. He manages to bring together totally sensuous or sensorial absorption in the world and reflection on what is going on beneath the surface of things. What makes his fiction heir to the Modernist tradition is precisely the breadth of knowledge and readings informing his work. In one of the rare, substantial interviews he has given, 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)" (Denton 2008). But, at the same time, in the 1980s he was also working as a deckhand on a gillnetter in the fishing industry in Ladner, his hometown, south of Vancouver. In a sense, he was doing another instructive kind of reading, with his eyes and with his hands —i.e., a reading based on interpreting the non-verbal signs of the natural world. This was a long, painstaking apprenticeship in environmental literacy. He was learning to read the rhythms of fishing-town life and also the subtle intricacies of the more-than-human 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. 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, listening intently to an inescapable ancestral calling, even if fulfilling it entailed their own annihilation. The salmon cycle represents life and death,<sup>4</sup> the constant flux of things in a green world where nothing ever stays the same. Everything flows: *πάντα ῥεῖ*, said Herakleitos about 25 centuries ago, who conceived of the river as being a universal metaphor for the metamorphosis inherent in every living thing, both human and nonhuman.

Having grown as the son of a fisherman, it is only natural that the great Canadian river, the Fraser River, should figure so prominently in many of Bowling's poetry collections and novels as much more than mere backdrop. The landscape is a character on a par with the rest of the creatures that populate his novels. Thus, *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter* are both set in the West Coast and deal with the riverscapes, fishing families and the salmon cycle; the half memoir, half creative non-fiction *The Lost Coast*, an ode to a lifestyle now extinct, explores memories of his own childhood in a fishing family near the wild river; and *The Tinsmith* is first set in the American South at the time of the Civil War and then in the salmon canneries that proliferated on the Fraser River in the second half of the 19th century. At times, it is impossible to pinpoint the line separating fiction and autobiography, for many of the episodes in his novels are inspired by real events. Writers cannot help writing about the worlds they come from and know best. However, good writing is good writing and, as Bowling claims, "the writer must transmute lived experience into meaningful art" (Denton 2008). In Bowling's fiction we sense the presence of a consciousness writing the

<sup>3</sup> "Tim Bowling on Rapacious Greed and the (Relative) Triviality of the Curriculum." *The Winnipeg Review*, 28/03/2012.

<sup>4</sup> In the interview "Poet Staves Off Poverty in Exotic Edmonton," Bowling remarks that the "Fraser River and salmon fishing is a way into the traditional poetic obsessions with mortality and time and memory." *National Post*, 1/05/2008.

self and mapping the world at the same time with equal amounts of attention and craftsmanship. He feels the mystery and awe of the world in his bones, an exhilarating closeness to the course of things when he is outdoors, close to the wild, and so his novels could be considered as representative specimens of eco-fiction, informed by a relational awareness and a commitment to hear the language of being. Momentarily emptied of our human-centredness, Bowling's novels direct readers' attention to something in the nonhuman environment that addresses us from beyond our constructs and categories. It could not be otherwise, given the preeminence of the wilderness, which has shaped the Canadian literary imagination ever since the earliest writing of the pioneers recording their exposure to the vastness of the landscape, through the Confederation poets, till the very present, when a flourishing of eco-poetry testifies to the inescapable presence of the wild in Canada.

Put succinctly, Bowling is ultimately concerned with exploring how the self is situated within a more-than-human world, which Bristow defines as "a general term reminding us that the non-human world (on which humans are absolutely dependent) has agencies of its own" (2015: 126). He explains that it was Sarah Whatmore, in her 2006 article "Materialist Returns: Practising Cultural Geography in and for a More-Than-Human World," that first coined the term "more-than-human" as "a focal alternative to the prevailing human/non-human perspective in bio (life) and geo (earth); it celebrates the 'livingness' of the world, in which life is technologically molten" (2015: 6). In other words, the concept of "more-than-human" gestures towards a view of human beings within the larger context of interconnectedness, as being, in fact, part of the more-than-human world. In this regard, Bowling revisits the Cartesian dualism *res cogitans* vs. *res extensa* to transcend it and highlight the mutual interdependency of the human and the non-human, countering human exceptionalism and "a dualist sense of nature as something external to humans" (Bristow 2015: 125). After all, the more-than-human world is not external to humankind, but ultimately co-extensive with it.

### 3. Space, Sense of Place and Dwelling in *Downriver Drift*

In his fiction, Bowling enjoys the pleasure of writing the self and mapping the world simultaneously. At the crossroads where the perceiving subject and the nonhuman environment meet, the novelist builds a textual space that evokes the multifariousness of existence as a work which is perpetually in the making. As he is sensitive to the nonhuman, the natural world of his native British Columbia plays an important role in the stories he tells in his novels. Not surprisingly, the dedication we find in the opening pages of Bowling's first novel, *Downriver Drift*, reads thus: "For one of the world's great rivers." The Fraser River and the surrounding riverscapes and landscapes of its environs inform a novel where place is much more than mere backdrop to the events related by the narrative voice. In actual fact, what human consciousness makes of space is central to the whole conception of this work. Set in an imaginary settlement called Chilukthan, a fictionalised version of Bowling's hometown Ladner on the Fraser River, the novel recounts the events of a few months in the life of the Mawsons, a family struggling to make ends meet in a small fishing town that is on the edge of profound social transformation. It is the early 1960s and the novel is set "in a season of endings: dwindling salmon runs, dwindling union power, small town transitions from hinterland to outer suburb, and characters in the central Mawson family growing from puberty into middle-age" (Dawson 2004: 99). A way of relating to the place is about to vanish, an age in the history of a small fishing community moving to the rhythms of the seasons is about to say farewell to pastoral life, and a traditional way of life is about to disappear for good. Against the backdrop of a fishing strike brewing and boiling over, with the survival of the community at stake because of fish scarcity prior to one of the last big salmon runs, the story of the Mawson family unfolds and is told with great skill in 26 chapters.

In the middle of a March night, a heavy fog rolls in off the Gulf of Georgia to smother the small fishing town. Ominous, mysterious and unsettling, this fog gives way to a series of events that will change the life of the town and their dwellers forever. Vic, a middle-aged fisherman, his wife (Kathleen) and his children (Corbett, Troy and Zoe) are at the very centre of the story. Their survival depends on the unpredictable fortunes of the commercial fishing industry, at a time when fishermen seem to be at the mercy of big industries. But this is just the superficial story; the family harbours the loss of a baby, which seems to be deeply felt and constantly mourned by 44-year-old Kathleen Mawson. Her interior monologue dominates the first half of the novel and shows an abnegated woman living a restricted life. With the 13th anniversary of her baby's death approaching, and after a secret visit to the grave where it was buried, she suffers from severe depression that confines her to bed for three full weeks, with her husband and children looking on, helpless and at a loss about what to do to help her back to daily life. She cannot get rid of the inexplicable depression that has gripped her and she cannot even pin down the exact source of her malaise:

How much she would have loved to give a physical shape to her sense of loss. But it was the ripple of the cast stone and not the stone itself that she felt each day as she pulled herself out of bed. The inability to know the source of the counterweight that tried to keep her from her life was the most maddening element of her malaise. (2000: 30)

Struggling to put the inexpressible into words (i.e., the pain in her chest for her lost child), the reader is invited to explore her inner life and how she comes to terms with her loss. One is mesmerised by the nakedness of the woman's



emotion: “In her sorrow, which she knew every April with that same dull pang, lay a wondering sympathy for the hardness of her mother’s life. Over the years, their two sorrows had blended, so that they no longer stemmed from separate hearts” (2000: 47). For thirteen years she had made her trip to visit her baby’s grave alone, when her husband was on the river and her children at school, “when she wasn’t needed anywhere else, because she did not want anyone to accuse her of dwelling on the past at the expense of the future” (2000: 57). But with the passage of time, not only does she perceive her pain as indistinguishable from her mother’s, who suffered the loss of several children in her lifetime, but, most importantly, she learns to accept her baby’s death, “because necessity [...] is the mother of invention. And there is no way to put a life together again after it’s been shattered if you cannot invent it with the labour of your own heart” (2000: 55).

As pointed out above, what human consciousness makes of space is central to *Downriver Drift*. Or rather, the way physical space configures inner space is of paramount importance in the examination of human consciousness in this novel. As Henri Lefebvre observes, “space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning” (2010: 23). In our age of global movement, spatial awareness and the representation of space and mobility (both literal and figurative) in literature are becoming increasingly important in literary discussion. The twentieth century was a period of great change in this respect, as the growth of technology brought about new forms of transport, increasing physical mobility, altering experience of movement through space, as well as perceptions of relationships between space and time (also theorised by physicists and philosophers). Psychoanalysis investigated inner space and, since the early decades of the twentieth century, literature has dwelled on the connections and interactions between outer and inner geographies of the mind. What *Downriver Drift* offers, among many other things, is a remarkable exploration of the relationships holding between the world within and the world without, between inner space and outer space, particularly through the lens of Kathleen’s consciousness.

A key opposition commonly examined by geographers is that between *space*, conceptualised as being “a sense of movement, of history, of becoming,” and *place*, conceptualised as “a static sense of location, of being, or of dwelling” (Anderson 2012: 113). In this respect, cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s notion of *topophilia* can prove extremely useful in critically accounting for what Bowling accomplishes in his eco-fiction. In his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Tuan draws a most helpful distinction between *space* and *place*. He claims that “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place’”. What begins as an undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (1977: 6). Humans move in space, which is inextricably linked to a deep sense of freedom. While space is “that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (1977: 6). In short, “enclosed and humanized space is place” (1977: 54). Thus, the Tuanian distinction between *space* and *place* constitutes a fascinating dichotomy that may shed light on the understanding of Bowling’s novels. In *Downriver Drift*, while male characters are mobile, both physically and metaphorically, and experience the joy of motion, Kathleen is ecstatic, largely confined to domestic spaces. Thus, whereas Vic and his sons spend their time outdoors, mostly on the river, on the wharf, in the park or in the pub, Kathleen spends her time indoors, which is metaphorically suggestive of the space of inner life. She lives a restricted life, physical spaces shaping the spaces of her mind, one that is engaged in a perpetual soliloquy on her deceased baby, on domestic issues, on the impending fishing strike, on money and household chores, and on the many losses and deaths that punctuated her own mother’s life. In this respect, Kathleen’s journey from the urban cityscapes of Toronto to the lush coast of a small fishing town in British Columbia to marry Vic is also most relevant. She leaves home at the age of 18 in order to forge her own version of her identity next to Vic on the other side of the country. Her love of her husband is genuine, to the point of self-abnegation: “As always, she wished that she could ease his worries. Her love was such that she would spare him every unpleasantness if she could in any way carry the extra burden herself” (2000: 64). Even if her family is dependent on her for “the immense feeling of emotional shelter that she provided” (2000: 101), no one seems to give her the warmth or protection she badly needs: “all she really wanted was for someone to notice the scars and the smouldering in her hands for them to heal and soften overnight” (2000: 64). It is no wonder that, under such emotional strain and pressure, she falls victim to grave depression. And yet her stoicism and willed determination to get well prompt her to think of her malaise in terms of simply physical extenuation. All of a sudden, her depression comes to an end and Kathleen comes up with a paradoxical account of the ultimate sense of the whole experience that betrays her willingness to sacrifice herself to better serve her family. Instead of depicting her severe breakdown as such, she thinks of it as being an opportunity to make herself whole again:

Once Kathleen had adopted tiredness as an explanation for her breakdown, she had a foundation on which to rebuild her emotional structure. It was as though, having been pushed by unseen hands over an embankment into dark water, she had resurfaced with the idea that her body, of its own free will, had sought the water as a form of baptism. Nothing, therefore, had made her sick but her own desire to be well: this paradoxical explanation made perfect sense to her on an emotional level, for though it put the responsibility for the depression on her shoulders, it also validated the breakdown. How could the world accuse her of selfishness when she had merely rested in order to become an even better wife and mother? (2000: 131)

From the quote just cited it follows that Kathleen is a survivor. The threats to her spiritual survival come from within herself: her psychological malaise stems from the traumatic experience of her baby’s death and is further compound-

ed by her deep sense of familial responsibility in the context of a fishing village that is on the verge of profound transformations. She is first paralysed, stuck in the past and confined to bed, and then, out of a determination to be well and attend to her duties as a wife and mother, she comes back to life. As Margaret Atwood eloquently argues in the classic *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, the central preoccupations of Canadian poetry and fiction are survival and victims. She writes:

A preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier [Canadian] writers these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror. [...] It may even be life that he fears; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle. (1996: 33)

As Charles Dawson points out in his review, almost every chapter in the novel opens with a description of place: “Initial chapters lavish attention on building up the river and its atmospheric reach: fogs, rain, trees, and water are the primary descriptive foci; dwellings are incidental, tenuous; people tag along for the ride, but they would not be there without the river” (2004: 99). In his capacity as an eco-novelist, Bowling can be considered a *place-maker*: in writing fiction that directs readers' attention to the complexities, interdependency and fragility of the more-than-human world, he illustrates and cultivates Tuanian topophilia, i.e., “the affective bond between people and place or setting” (Tuan and Schoff 1988: 4), the bond between a fishing community and the Fraser River in this case. Thus, the riverscapes of the mouth of the Fraser River offer Bowling, a keen observer of the natural world, countless opportunities for accomplished passages of lyrical description that underscore topophilia. This is the case with his tribute to the great river, a meditation on his (and his characters') communion with the green world:

But the river afforded much compensation, its wide current sweeping majestically past with its cargo of moonlight and salmon, its massive weight like a reel of history and time, its depth at once an invitation to exotic shores and a looming graveyard of sodden ghosts. To step away from lamplight and human solace to find this unending flow of black before your eyes was to be raised from insignificance and frailty to a state of divine detachment: that you could co-exist with such power and splendor and not be overwhelmed meant that you belonged to something you couldn't even name except you knew it was immense and outside all contemplation. (2000: 71)

The language Bowling uses to craft his descriptions of the natural world shows an abundance of audacious metaphors and conveys a sense that humans belong in this ancestral landscape. Dwelling in space and place is made possible by this sense of belonging and by an awareness that humans coexist with the nonhuman as part of an all-encompassing continuum of life. In “The Poet” (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson rightly said that “language is fossil poetry” (1883: 26); poetry is already latent in language itself, ready to uncover the poetry of the world any minute. Looking at the sky, Kathleen realises “it was rich with stars, blossoming with them, whole boughs of constellations and stars” (2000: 140), as if the heavens were a tree of gigantic proportions. As for salmon and their life-and-death cycle, they are described with almost scientific accuracy in language of crystal-clear clarity and precision. “Gaping without fear or pity or joy at the imminence of their own extinction” (2000: 238), salmon

had heard the inexplicable call of home and were rushing south for the Fraser estuary, bound for the mountain creeks and streams they had left behind four years earlier. Two years at sea feeding off plankton and squid, had fattened them up, made them strong and fast, prepared them for the last burst of energy they would need to fight their way upriver to spawn in the gravel and die. (2000: 153)

This passage shows Bowling thinking like an ecosystem instead of like a visitor or tourist embracing dominion over the natural world. The narrative voice speaking here appears to be resonating with the wild, as if, for the fraction of a second, the perceiving self and the perceived salmon could be one and the same thing. This is a moment of perfect communion with the more-than-human world. In the Canadian imagination, the wild-tame dichotomy remains a powerful one indeed, and it is the wild that always takes precedence. If anything, the salmon run is representative of the wild living its life to the full without human interference. As Robert Bringhurst, a Canadian poet himself, puts it in an essay entitled “The Mind of the Wild”:

The wild is everything that grows and breeds and functions without supervision or imposed control. It is what lives in the long term without being managed. [...] The wild is not a portfolio of resources for us or our species to buy and sell or manage or squander as we please. The wild is earth living its life to the full. The earth's life is much larger than our own lives, but our lives are part of it. If we take that life, we take our own. (2018: 12)

In *The Bush Garden*, however, Northrop Frye claims that Canada has traditionally been a place of wilderness, conceived of as a hostile natural world, a blank space of gloomy or uncanny connotations. Space is simply an over-

whelming presence that has been tackled by the literary imagination ever since the earliest colonisers set foot on Canada. In his “Preface to an Uncollected Anthology,” he writes:

A country with almost no Atlantic seaboard, which for most of its history has existed in practically one dimension; a country divided by two languages and great stretches of wilderness, so that its frontier is a circumference rather than a boundary; a country with huge rivers and islands that most of its natives have never seen [...]: this is the environment that Canadian poets have to grapple with, and many of the imaginative problems it presents have no counterpart in the United States, or anywhere else. (1971: 166)

Frye identifies the central theme of Canadian poetry as being the fact that “life struggles and suffers in a nature which is blankly indifferent to it,” just on account of “the frightening loneliness of a huge and thinly-settled country” (1971: 140). What the poet sees when he turns to nature is “a stolid unconsciousness” (1971: 141). And he concludes his essay “Canada and Its Poetry” with these enlightening words:

To sum up, Canadian poetry is at its best a poetry of incubus and *cauchemar*, the source of which is the unusually exposed contact of the poet with nature which Canada provides. Nature is seen by the poet, first as unconsciousness, then as a kind of existence which is cruel and meaningless, then as the source of the cruelty and subconscious stampedings within the human mind. [...] Nature is consistently sinister and menacing in Canadian poetry. (1971: 143-144)

However, in the same essay Frye also writes: “One is surprised to find how few really good Canadian poets have thought that getting out of cities into God’s great outdoor really brings one closer to the sources of inspiration” (1971: 138-139). These words apply, no doubt, to Bowling, a poet and novelist sensitive to the natural world as being not sinister, hostile or apart from humankind, but rather co-extensive with it.

#### 4. Landscapes of the West Coast in *The Paperboy’s Winter*

In the early 1920s a young and poor Ernest Hemingway in search of his own literary voice found his personal moveable feast in Paris, which happened to be the lively hub of cultural avant-garde innovation at that time. Five decades later, the stunning landscapes of the British Columbia coast and the River Fraser of his childhood became a moveable feast for Bowling: he could take it with him wherever he went. Bowling’s childhood attachment to place would inevitably flourish in his poetry and in his fiction. As the author himself remarks in an interview:

I had an idyllic childhood at the mouth of North America’s wildest river, a Huck Finn childhood of raftings and roaming, except, unlike Huck, I had loving and supportive parents! What can I say? I was very fortunate; children weren’t then supervised every second of the day, my family worked in the salmon fishery, and so I spent a lot of time on my own in the outdoors. Everything I write comes out of the sense of awe I drank in daily as a boy. (Denton 2008)

The heart of Bowling’s *The Paperboy’s Winter*, dedicated to his children and childhood friends, is its picture of the BC coast life and landscapes. It recounts a search for origins, a journey back in time to childhood and innocence in a fictitious settlement also called Chilukthan, by the Fraser River in British Columbia. The novel reads like a personal memoir and has the elegance of a circle: it opens with a prologue set in the present, followed by 19 chapters dwelling on the past (which is the true core of the narrative) and an epilogue that brings the past and the present together. In the core of the novel it is the early 1970s and the protagonist of the story, 10-year-old Callum Taylor, the son of a fisherman and a housewife, spends his days as a paperboy delivering newspaper copies to subscribers in his town, or reading comics (his true passion) in a bookshop, outdoors on the wharf or near the river with his friends, in a tree-house high in a Douglas fir, or, otherwise, at home with his parents, at school and in classrooms. Like the male members of the Mawson family in *Downriver Drift*, Callum is extremely mobile and enjoys moving in space, as though he had deeply internalised a map of his hometown. The main narrative is mostly told in the first person, though occasionally the third person slips in. Thus, the story is recounted from both the somewhat sombre perspective of 30-year-old Callum (in the prologue and in the epilogue) and the vivid, innocent perspective of 10-year-old Callum (in the body of the novel), so the events are refracted through two different versions of the same consciousness, which partly accounts for the architectural complexity of the novel.

Disillusioned and adrift in a world of which he cannot make sense anymore after his father’s death, the older Callum embarks on a literal journey back home and on a figurative journey back to the past, to childhood’s paradise, to his physical and biological origins by the Fraser River, to a lifestyle now extinct: the world of BC fishermen and salmon canneries where he grew up. With nostalgia, he remembers a lifestyle now gone, the past progressively becoming “a sequence of images glimpsed out of the corners of his eyes” (2003: 3), feeling the pain of his father’s absence writ large in the landscape and the inexpressible “salt longing for what couldn’t be recovered” (2003: 3).

All of a sudden, on a bus ride from Vancouver to his hometown, Callum sees an enigmatic figure from his past, the eccentric fisherman named Ezra Hemsworth. This unexpected encounter sets the whole story in motion and one seminal winter in particular rushes back.

A flashback takes readers to the winter of 1975, to a time when 10-year-old Callum is about to enter puberty and discover the complexities of the adult world: “His coming-of-age resides in the borderland before puberty; it is marked by an appreciation of human complexity (relationships become touchstones for his own moral development) and ‘the light of limitless imagination, stories and jokes’” (2004: 100), points out Charles Dawson in his perceptive review of the novel. Against this backdrop of orderly and comforting routine, the fisherman Ezra Hemsworth suddenly enters his life as an unsolvable enigma, “as something more than a strange background figure in that mysterious world my mother always referred to as ‘the waterfront’” (2003: 18-19). As the story unfolds, Callum seeks to understand the mysterious halo surrounding Ezra, who keeps aloof from the fishing community, “as if he needed to keep the core of himself secret from the world” (2003: 40), and he soon understands that the man possessed “all the mysterious qualities of [his] favourite comic book characters” (2003: 40), shuddering deliciously at this moment of epiphany. In his world of innocence, literary adventure and comic-collecting, Callum is his truest self when he is alone and “the rain deepened the pleasurable solitude of reading” (2003: 42), a feeling that has the texture of autobiographical reminiscence. In fact, reading is an aesthetic and learning experience at the very centre of Bowling’s life that dates back to his childhood. In 2010 he published *In the Suicide’s Library*, a lyric meditation on book-collecting and a homage to a book culture on the side of the best that has been thought and felt by humankind over time.

This comes as no surprise after all, for *The Paperboy’s Winter* is again largely autobiographical in its recollections of childhood and home, as well as in its minute descriptions of the geographies and landscapes of Chilukthan, the imaginary version of Ladner, Bowling’s hometown. In this context, the representation of space, whether real or fictional, becomes the locus for questioning perceptions of home, rootedness and dwelling, as well as such crucial issues as identity construction, culture and epoch. Bowling uses thus the matrix of a small fishing town on the Fraser River and the green world to map out questions of subjectivity, memory, identity and self-awareness. It is from the encounter between his narrating consciousness and the exuberance of the surrounding world that the richness of his writing ultimately flourishes. In “Milk and Honey,” one of the compositions in his poetry collection *The Annotated Bee and Me* (2010), Bowling writes about “the confusion of loving too much the world” (2010: 51). It is out of love and a sort of verbal omnivorousness attentive to the minute details of nature that Bowling writes such lyrical descriptions of the world surrounding the young Callum, bringing to life an area of almost mythic beauty and history: “Darkness had folded over the earth as lightly as a heron’s wing” (2003: 127). Looking at the night sky, where certain sublime patterns are discernible in the dark, Callum sees “the stars clustering until the sky became another fattened blackberry bush, ripe, sweet, and bee-hung” (2003: 260). Even if his father, a pragmatic man of the river, had no time for religion, Callum is aware that he spoke of the salmon and the tides “as though nature were a kind of god” (2003: 121), as if embracing a sort of pantheism that senses the presence of the divine dancing everywhere. Snow gives Callum moments of ecstatic contemplation, like the one in this passage of poetic prose:

I was drawn to the competing levels of earth and sky, unrecognizable after so much rain and drizzle and overcast. The brilliant, endless vault of blue above the shocking white: how was it possible for one night of stars and sleep and silence to so utterly transform everything? (2003: 58)<sup>5</sup>

In a myriad of descriptive passages like the ones quoted above, the sense of place – with all the smells, sounds, sights of the West Coast landscape – is evoked in a way that renders it startlingly real. In such lyrical descriptions, Bowling gives voice to what Jane Bennett audaciously terms “the vitality of matter” in her book *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett contends that an anthropocentric view of nature prevents us from perceiving matter as being alive and “from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (2010: ix). Bennett’s notion of *vibrant matter* gestures towards Stacy Alaimo’s concepts of “porous bodies” and “trans-corporeality,” i.e., the view that “the ‘environment,’ which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a ‘resource’ for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions” (2008: 239). Human bodies are ultimately enmeshed in this interconnected trans-corporeality that brings both human and nonhuman beings together.

However, it is against this idyllic natural background of the BC coast described by Bowling that Callum starts to glimpse and experience the complexities of the adult world and of human relationships; the lure of the money he makes delivering the daily paper, getting new subscriptions to enlarge his comic collection or spending some time visiting an old lady, Mrs. Edmundson, who lives alone; new responsibilities, mysteries and risks (like cheating in a school project); and also Mrs. Edmundson’s unexpected death, which was “his first human death,” even though he “did not feel sad so much as surprised by the humdrum nature of the event” (2003: 258). The world turns out to be more fragile than he had imagined it to be: nothing ever stays the same, friends change or drift away, people have secrets in their lives that might remain hidden forever, and people die and vanish from our lives simply for good. Ezra

<sup>5</sup> Snow is a recurrent motif, also found on page 69, showing images of the frozen river to Callum’s astonishment, and on page 101: “The night was all motion and vastness. With the snow falling again, it was as though we were part of the current of the nearby river, swept along in the silted depths below the ice toward some even deeper and vaster sea.”



Hemsworth remains a powerful enigma and a figure of fascination that keeps Callum and his friend Jerris determined to uncover the mystery of his behaviour, till one day they discard their obsession with the fisherman. Not much is unveiled about the enigma surrounding Ezra in Bowling's novel, though. To Callum's innocent imagination, he remains a character shrouded in mystery, a potent symbol for everything that cannot be understood in rational terms. He is a figment of the fantasy world he treasures up in his tree house, where he spends time reading comics, and he vanishes as soon as Callum crosses the threshold of puberty. By the end of the novel, the older Callum looks at the stars, "faint as fish scales on dry woods" (2003: 271) and mourns the absence of his father, the irretrievability of his childhood and of a lifestyle close to nature in an *ubi sunt* elegy: "Where was my father? Where was his world? [...] It wasn't fading; it was gone. And I saw that it was meant to be gone... [...] I felt my lips forming the old question, even though the world, which never had any time for it, now actively scorned it and kept moving faster and faster away from the implications" (2003: 268).

The literary geographies of Bowling's fiction represent what Bristow terms "earth scripts—made by humans who are part of the earth— [...] inherently self-conscious writerly descriptions of our spaces fleshed out by the more-than-human world" (2015: 8). In his novels, Bowling encourages us to see "the human as one part of the more-than-human world, which is to think of us not within the world but of the World" (Bristow 2015: 2), a position that counteracts human exceptionalism and "shifts focus from the significance of human species to transcorporeality and personhood" (Bristow 2015: 2). In this respect, in landmark studies like *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) and *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (2010), David Abram has underlined the notion that humans are just embodied minds deeply and sensuously immersed in the living fabric of the world. In our sensitive and intellectual confrontation with the world, language plays a crucial role as a mediating membrane and air turns out to be the dwelling of what he memorably terms a "Commonwealth of Breath" (2014: 313). Bowling's deft lyrical descriptions of BC landscapes precisely convey the sense that "human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 1995: 7) and that humans live in "humanized space" (Tuan 1977: 54), in a place that they can call home. The natural world is thus not merely a framing device in his eco-fiction, but a potent reminder that the thinking bodies and embodied minds of humans are not *apart from* but a *part of* the more-than-human world.

## 5. Conclusion

In the process of writing his novels, Bowling might have well been partly following Thoreau's exhortation (instead of injunction) as expressed in his *Journal*: "Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man – I say study to forget all that – take wider views of the universe" (quoted by Buell 1995: 116). Bowling is a nature-observing novelist and poet. At times it is even hard to tell both facets apart, for the language of his fiction and nonfiction alike has got an intensely lyrical quality about it. "I'm always thinking Ezra Pound in my head saying that poetry and prose have to be as good as each other" (2014), he explains in an interview with David Brundage. His compulsion to write about the human and nonhuman testifies to his concern with imposing some sort of tentative order on the world at large by means of language. 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. This is why his language is truly poetic and his writing has got the texture of transcendence at times.

Being endowed with sensibility and a 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. And yet he also keeps an acute eye on the details of the nonhuman environment, for his novels are environmentally sensitive texts. In actual fact, Buell claims that "one of the projects of the environmental text is to render the object-world" (1995: 103) and that environmental writing is "a deliberate dislocation of ordinary perception" (104). Bowling's grand narrative project may well be a pastoral project, one whereby he seeks to return to a less urbanised or more natural state of existence, closer to the rhythms of the wild. It is no coincidence that both in *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter* the *locus* of pastoral should be precisely an imaginary fishing village called Chilukthan, a fictionalised version of Bowling's hometown Ladner on the Fraser River. Both novels are set in the West Coast and deal with the salmon cycle, riverscapes and fishing families living in close touch with the natural world. Whereas *Downriver Drift* largely mourns a traditional lifestyle on the verge of extinction as seen through the lens of Kathleen Mawson's consciousness, *The Paperboy's Winter* turns the reader's attention to the lost paradise of childhood and the sombre view brought about by Callum Taylor's coming of age. If the former is presided over by the consciousness of a woman paralysed by severe depression, the latter juxtaposes two versions of the same consciousness – that of 10-year-old and 30-year-old Callum – revisiting the geographies of his childhood hometown.

At any rate, in both *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter*, Bowling crafts intensely lyrical descriptions of the more-than-human world. His eco-fiction is firmly rooted in the specifics of the West Coast and, as a result, his characters are situated within a recognisably Canadian landscape, one punctuated by the riverscapes and coast life of British Columbia. He has a keen eye for the minutiae and tiny details of the green world, which makes his writing highly sensuous and sensorial. Most importantly, he appears to have the hunch that the human and the nonhuman mold each other and that people are inextricably bonded to the place where they were born and they live. This is, after all, the meaning of dwelling: dwelling bonds a human being or community to the specifics of a place – i.e., its history,

customs, traditions and way of relating to the nonhuman environment. *Downriver Drift* and *The Paperboy's Winter* convey a profound sense of dwelling and place; both underscore humans' relational coexistence with the nonhuman in an interconnected world. In a nutshell, Bowling's stance is ecocentric and ecological, even though he might have to make an effort to balance the psychological introspection in which the characters populating his novels appear to immerse themselves and the disciplined extrospection with which he pays attention to the nonhuman world so as to evoke a strong sense of place. As Bowling is a tremendously optimistic author, the glorious sense of being alive in the world and the inexhaustible variety of nature are celebrated time and again in his poetry and in his fiction. Tweaking a phrase from Buell, Bowling's fiction betrays a sort of "suspension of ego" to the point of feeling the environment to be at least as worthy of attention as the self and of experiencing the self as "situated among many interacting presences" (1995: 178) in the nonhuman world. Ultimately, knowing the world is not tantamount to owning it, and this is the profoundly eco-centric sensibility that Bowling cultivates in his novels.

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