



Now on view in the Loeb: Tim Youd's literary pilgrimages

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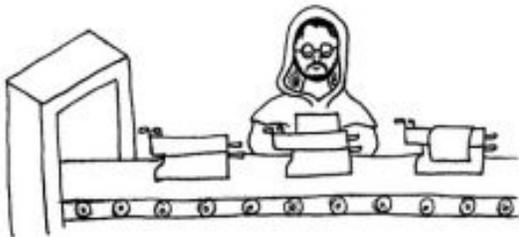
Artist Tim Youd's re-typed version of the novel "The Group," penned by Vassar alumna Mary McCarthy '33, is currently on display in the Loeb. Youd aims to replicate 100 novels over the course of 10 years. Courtesy of Clara Pitt.

Along an assembly line in another life, a master of boredom exchanges compulsion for quietude, toward the realization of some obscure industrial plan. Elsewhere, monastic pursuits at the Abbey of Gethsemani occur. Set to a strict regimen of work and prayer, Tim Youd finds synonymy in the two: truth from ascetic devotion. Yet in this life, where he is an artist, little is different. It's still truth and revelation through work—in banal, rote repetitions—a typewriter his book of hours, the model and location his only variables.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Process, procedure and meditation are the crux of Youd's series of "100 Novels," in which over a period of 10 years, Youd has set out to re-type that many great works of English-language literature. Youd commented, "[I am to carry out the project in a] location charged with literary significance specific to the subject novel... on the same model typewriter [used by the author to compose the novel.]" A smile on his lips, he called the project an "exercise in devoted reading." At Vassar, Youd spent the months of April and May retyping Mary McCarthy '33's "The Group." This was exercise number 56.

The novel, McCarthy's fifth, is the fictional account of the post-grad lives of eight Vassar women, and their frustrations with a world still very much intent on stifling a woman's agency. McCarthy is a writer revered and reviled in New York literary circles for her acerbic, critical pen. "The Group" created quite the scandal upon its release due to its frank depiction of sex, sexism and characters' encounters with radical progressive politics (the latter McCarthy's forte when writing for *The Partisan Review*). A bestseller, McCarthy was lauded for her depiction with deft hand and for the fact that over the course of her narrative she had found some truth and solidarity. In a world where women are forced to play the ingénue, McCarthy writes about the prison of appearances, and the suffocating, morose mask of performance.



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There is an element of performance to Youd's work, but he's not a performance artist. He is better labeled as a procedural artist, where the effect

of the work (and it is, he insists, work) arrives in the residue. At first, the audience sees the man armed with a typewriter, a beverage and a plastic folding table. He types each novel on a single sheet of paper, a support sheet underneath, repeatedly re-loading the paper through the typewriter until the entire novel has been typed. Eventually, the top sheet, suffused with ink, will become perforated from overuse. Explaining the rest of the procedure, Youd stated, “[T]he sheet underneath becomes embossed from indentation. Upon completion, the two pages are separated and mounted side-by-side as a framed diptych...[which] remains as a relic of the performance that embodies the novel, even though it is completely illegible.”

The banality inherent to this work is totally removed from the spectacle that tends to characterize that lump phylum of “performance art,” from which the skeptical if curious mid-cult might depart with anticipations dully—albeit immediately—satisfied. Youd, whose procedure-through-performance is internal, concerns himself with no audience—he has set solitary work. If we happen to pass by, we might watch. But think again of the monk. Curious garb aside, for the uninitiated, there is no room or reason to gawk. For the curious Catholic, here a stand-in for the fellow artist, there is reverence for the act.

Then, Youd is less a performance artist, tirelessly slaving for our immediate satisfaction; and less a monk, because the procedure begets something residual and massive. Each finished piece is an eternal monument of page, drawn and hammered in remembrance. He states, “[Each mistake is a] metaphoric way for what happens to the brain when we read—it’s not legible but it’s all there.” Here, histories are recalled and resorted into something new, categorized into one hundred cenotaphs. Perhaps he’s a Boullée. Or perhaps he’s just Tim Youd spending a summer along the Hudson.

The exhibition opens on Sept. 13 at 5:30 p.m., but Youd has set up early. This time, he is working at a collection of poems by Elizabeth Bishop ’34, a friend of McCarthy’s and spirited co-conspirator from their Vassar days. As a two-finger typist, Youd is a self-described hunt-and-pecker, but he says, “[P]lenty of great authors hunt-and-peck. [Raymond] Chandler and Hemingway, for example. That’s why I’ve stubbornly refused to learn.” If one arrives at the Loeb just before any other curious viewers, there is little to hear besides the echo of a spirited, persistent clack piercing the air. Youd is already typing away.

But here, unique to all the previous work, Youd engages spectacle as the spectacle. It is the rare opportunity to watch the artist in his own studio,

creating amongst his creations. The audience granted the opportunity to see time compressed, the before and after becomes both negligible and immediate. He is crowded by pilgrims, onlookers and cultish devotees (who, I am told, call themselves artists), themselves few in number but expanding throughout the night. They gather around a man who sits at a foldable table, armed only with a water bottle and a typewriter. The artist speaks. He does not shy away from questions.

Unsurprisingly, he talks about McCarthy and Bishop in religious terms. These are pilgrimages, not just to locations but also from the front cover to the back. The texts are icons and relics for veneration. But Youd is punching into them, trying to break through. Truth—in the artist’s eternal quest—is underneath, or at the very least is something hidden. He is generous with his time, taking long breaks from work to engage the spectator if she should approach him. There is no “do not disturb” sign set atop his table. There never was.

Approaching the McCarthy diptych—framed in the Loeb among others like an old master print—caught unaware, the agnostic is confronted by the relic, saved for the world by the faithful from a burning cathedral. You can see Youd reflected through the glass covering the piece. This is noticeable in the rightmost page, less a piece of paper than four connected corners covered in ink and stray letters. The leftmost page is covered in ink, the occasional hole in the page impressing itself more as an angered tear than a sign of weathering. But it is all intelligible. Why?

Because, for Youd—and here, I think, is why he’s no factory worker, or why he’s not tossed his typewriter for a habit—the work is hagiography by destruction. Recall the right-hand page of the diptych. I am about to leave the exhibit when I notice an older woman staring intently at the piece. “The Group” is nearly pressed to her silent face, something missing where the page once was or a refracted glass vortex where Youd has broken through. I ask her what she sees and, like so many young women that read McCarthy’s novel upon its publication in 1963, through the page, she states: “I see myself.”