

When a journalist's scholarly inquiry informs his literary journalism

What are the relations between the scholarship of literary journalism and the practice of literary journalism other than as one critiquing the other? To some that might be a recipe for a divided camp: The “Author” is one thing and the “Scholar” another, and never the twain shall meet. But Matthew Thompson, author of *My Colombian Death*, does both, and for him scholarly inquiry is an attempt to better understand his practice. Although he is an American national, he grew up in Australia and continues to live and work there—when he’s not traveling and gathering material for his next book. Currently, he is the foundation lecturer in Literary and Narrative Journalism at the Journalism and Media Research Centre of the University of New South Wales. No small influence on him has been the work of the American author and journalist William T. Vollmann. Starting on the following page, Thompson engages in an inquiry as to why Vollmann has been so important to him as a writer of literary journalism. This is followed by an excerpt from *My Colombian Death*, published by Pan Macmillan Australia in 2008.



Thompson

The editors

Outrider:

William T. Vollmann, Tony Tanner, and the Private Extremes of an Anti-Journalism

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*The private visions of William T. Vollman and other American authors
are part of an inherent resistance to how society seeks to “envision” us.*

One of Australia's most august newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, hired me as a trainee after I earned my baccalaureate. Yet newspaper reporting had never been my calling and I was not even a journalism graduate; my bachelor degree studies had been in modern history, literature (Shakespeare, the Romantic era, Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence), and creative writing. It was a thirst for capturing situation and character that I sought to bring to journalism—not the slavish devotion to daily jolts of news nor a relish for the reporters' culture that united many of my colleagues. I also had a hunger for adventure and risk, partly to find more realistic and exciting stories to tell and partly to meet my own psychological needs. I wanted to know the world, to know what history feels like, to know my limits and capabilities, and to write prose with longevity. The longer I endured the newspaper, battered by daily deadlines and chafing at the bit of the institutional culture of caution, seniority, and media groupthink, the more I found my mind returning to the long and anarchic, adventurous, anti-journalism of William T. Vollmann. Inspired by Vollmann, I started spending my annual vacations in the armed conflicts of the southern Philippines, writing long freelance magazine stories that were gratifying for me but that did not endear me to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Eventually I resigned, went to Colombia to immerse myself in the country's tensions and joys, wrote a book about it, and completed a doctorate in creative arts. Now I write reportage and work in academia. My attitude to Vollmann has matured and grown more complicated, but he will always be there at the start of my lunatic ambitions.

Regarding being both author and scholar—that dual existence is very important to me, as I explore in the following.

I believe in the American myth that it is both admirable and even possible to devote one's life to a private dream. The probability of failing oneself, either through laziness, incompetence or bad luck, or else, worse yet, through dreaming what one only *imagined* one desired, is terrifying. All the same, *you had no more obligation* to public dreams which dreamed you wrongly.

William T. Vollmann, from *Riding
Toward Everywhere*. *Italics in original.*

In the early 1990s, I was keenly aware that American alternative culture was rising fast, with much of its often raw and uncompromising writing and music breaking through to popular success. One of the American magazines putting considerable resources into capturing the tumult was *Spin*, which had been founded in 1985. *Spin's* in-depth reportage in the early to mid-1990s was aggressively global. One of *Spin's* two staff journalists through this period was William Tanner Vollmann. A Californian with a growing reputation as a member of America's literary avant garde, Vollmann had published postmodernist fiction, semi-fiction, and an experimental memoir about trying to embed himself with anti-Soviet mujahedin in Afghanistan in the early 1980s.

I don't remember whether it was before or after I skimmed Vollmann's fiction and dismissed it as obtuse and pretentious that I discovered his reportage while reading *Spin*. It struck me as far more compelling, and I have never forgotten the peculiar mix of intrigue and annoyance and then the jolt I felt reading his article, "The War Never Came Here."¹

Published in *Spin* in 1994, this curious dispatch from the war in the former Yugoslavia was unlike any other I had read. Much of the Yugoslav coverage fed readily into common narratives of moral outrage, or, on the other hand, was detached and analytical, examining the origins and context of the conflict. Vollmann's "essay . . . about extremists," as he describes it, was in neither of these camps.²

"The War Never Came Here" is novella length, and stands apart through its meandering, idiosyncratic, and even contrarian first-hand dispatch from the conflict. Rather than offering a witnessing of the war's headline events or delivering a dramatic revelation or expose, Vollmann floats within and around the moods and psychologies at play in the conflict.

In fact, Vollmann's first-person coverage borders on the perversely contrarian. The supporting character clearly closest to his heart is a belligerent,

ultra-nationalist Serbian femme fatale, Vineta, aged twenty-two, a volunteer soldier who served in the notorious 1991 Serbian conquest of the Croatian city of Vukovar. The bitterly resisted but successful siege was carried out by the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav National Army with Serbian paramilitary support, and it happened only a few months after Croatia's declaration of independence from Belgrade. The Serbian forces' ruthlessness and atrocities set the tone for another four years of hate-fuelled fighting in the Balkans; fighting studded with war crimes, crimes against humanity, and massacres since deemed acts of genocide by the International Court of Justice.³

Vineta is a paid interpreter for Vollmann, then aged thirty-four, who introduces her to his readers with, "Fiercely frightening, beautiful, racist, loyal, proud, honest and filled with hate, Vineta is my friend."⁴ And, writing at a time when the violent excesses of Serbian nationalism had provoked no shortage of international outrage, Vollmann mentions that Vineta is a member of the Serbian Radical Party, "perhaps the most extreme political group in Serbia."⁵

Furthermore, unlike many of his peers who customarily ranked the moral responsibility for the killing by pointing the finger firstly at Serb nationalists and opportunists, then, to a lesser extent, at Croatian nationalists and the politically naïve Bosnian Muslims, Vollmann does not assign responsibility, even if "the first thing we like to know about somebody else's war is whom to blame." Indeed, he then writes that his view, albeit one "not especially popular," is that "it doesn't matter who is to blame."⁶

Vollmann's unwillingness or inability to lay blame for such widespread death and suffering exacerbates the diffused, almost expressionist quality of a scattered, often non linear, non chronological narrative in which inconclusive, paranoia-fuelling interviews with mercenaries, civilians, politicians, militiamen, academics—traumatized conspirators of all Yugoslav persuasions—are interwoven with the author's observations, memories, sexual longings, and his entanglement with Vineta.

When I bought the magazine in 1994 and saw it had a report from the former Yugoslavia, I was expecting a conventional witnessing of the war: first-hand news from the front.

Instead, in a kind of anti-journalism, Vollmann was delivering endless conversations, second-hand accounts and ugly rumors, punctuated by his repeated admissions of not knowing or having seen the truth, nor even feeling the need to discover the truth. Here is a selection:

What Vukovar meant to the Serbs I never learned, because they refused to talk about it, except for Vineta, whom I never asked . . . I had no right to disturb her tortured memories. Nor was there any need to know.⁷

Another Croat told me he'd just heard a story about a division of Afghans who'd come to fight against HVO, the Bosnian Croat army. . . . This story may or may not have been true.⁸

Vineta . . . believed that all the articles about rape camps were lies, as perhaps they are or aren't since I've never seen one.⁹

Vollmann started to strike me as a bold amateur: he had the nerve to wander in dangerous places but lacked the professional journalist's relentless drive to see and know.¹⁰ Then, in a new section titled: "Mostar: Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina; Casualties," Vollmann abruptly makes the war real and the article, to my mind, unforgettable.

Vollmann opens this section saying he feels compelled to visit Sarajevo because he has recently received a please-help-me letter (posted eighteen months earlier) from a woman he knows in the besieged Bosnian capital. The mission irritates Vineta, who sneers about "my [Vollmann's] Muslim bitch."¹¹

A Serbo-Croatian-speaking high school friend of Vollmann's named Francis Tomasic is accredited for the war zone by *Spin* at Vollmann's request, and joins the writer for the Sarajevo trip. After twice being bumped from U.N. flights to Sarajevo, Vollmann and Tomasic rent a car and set out to drive there from Split, a Croatian port city on the Dalmatian coast.

Typical of Vollmann's disjointed narrative, he gives no indication as to how he got to Split from Serbia or how he knew or met a third American, Will Brinton, who joins the *Spin* pair for the drive. Nor do we learn why Brinton is there. The article's inconclusive, episodic, often creepy but rarely dramatic style to this point gives the starkness of what happens next a terrible power, when, "for reasons which it's now simpler to forget, we took the wrong road from Mostar."¹²

With Brinton driving them down a road along the lip of a dam, Tomasic a passenger in the front and Vollmann in the back, the trio are chatting and joking in their rented Peugeot when:

The first explosion smashed through the windshield. . . . I can no longer remember whether the second explosion came just before or just after Francis's two screams, short and shrill and horrible with what I took at that moment to be only panic. Now I understand that the war had finally caught up with us.¹³

Likewise, the war now has the reader. So startled was I in 1994 to drift into this account of the killing of Tomasic and Brinton right there in the car with Vollmann (who suffers slight shrapnel injuries) that I flicked back to the start of the article to look for reporters' customary foreshadowing of brutal-

ly dramatic content. I reread the opening with its almost sepia toned, World War II-style scene of Vollmann crossing between countries in war-torn Europe and handing his passport to a sneering border guard to be stamped, but there was no clue of the immediate, headlining horror to come:

Seeing Will's bald head slumped forward with bright blood on it and splatters of dark blood on the ceiling and sun visor, seeing two holes like bullet holes in the windshield—all this now in less than half a second—I flung myself down on the floor, certain that a sniper had just killed Will and Francis had fainted . . . of course I could not believe that my friend of almost twenty years was dead. Just then I noticed that the car was motionless, and probably had been for some seconds. I shouted to Will to drive on, but of course he did not answer . . . there was a smell like the smell at a rifle range, except that it had perhaps more of a scorched quality than gunpowder usually did. The smell lingered and thickened in the car, even though the windows were down. Now I heard soldiers shouting something from the Muslim side, and then there was laughter. Not far away at all, and that was when I felt a ball of terror in my stomach. . . . More laughter, deep and relaxed.¹⁴

Brinton's corpse "began to vomit in long moans, the same sort of moans that I have heard a walrus make when it is shot."¹⁵ The dead Tomasic is motionless. A group of Muslim militiamen approach and after discovering the victims are American, not Croatian, they help Vollmann from the car. Vollmann pulls the bodies out, lays them on the ground and photographs them. Eventually, Spanish peacekeepers come to collect him and the dead.

This ordeal elevated "The War Never Came Here" from merely a beguiling but frustrating piece of reportage to being, for me, an unforgettable article. I have read countless dispatches from wars and several accounts of journalists being killed at work, but none like this. Certainly none where a surviving companion, a war correspondent who places himself in such terrible risk in the service of his craft, not only declines to dress the fate of his companions with purpose and meaning, but writes, "I'd known from the very first, of course, that my two friends had died for nothing."¹⁶

Vollmann, however, ignores their sacrificial role in grounding and empowering "The War Never Came Here" as a layered work of troubling literary reportage. In a sense, Tomasic and Brinton died for literature.

Conventional journalism claims to overtly explain and clarify the given subject matter. Ideally, it informs its audience about people, events or arguments with accuracy, balance and whatever degree of comprehensiveness is possible given the limits of resources and word counts or airtime. Conventional journalism fits well with Northrop Frye's assertions about non-literary writing:

In descriptive or assertive writing the final direction is outward. Here the verbal structure is intended to represent things external to it, and it is valued in terms of the accuracy with which it does represent them. Correspondence between phenomenon and verbal sign is truth; lack of it is falsehood; failure to connect is tautology, a purely verbal structure that cannot come out of itself.¹⁷

Literature, on the other hand, is a realm where “the standards of outward meaning are secondary, for literary works do not pretend to describe or assert, and hence are not true, not false.” In a definition fitting Vollmann’s article, Frye argues:

In literature, questions of fact or truth are subordinated to the prime literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake, and the sign-values of symbols are subordinated to their importance as a structure of interconnecting motifs.¹⁸

Vollmann largely absents himself from questions of truth or fact. Instead of pursuing verifiable details and other concrete components of “descriptive or assertive writing [in which] the final direction is outward,” Vollmann—who inhabits the story as one of its mysteries rather than being simply its chronicler—focuses relentlessly on elements of psychology, mood, and other intangibles, which provide the atmosphere for his “structure of interconnecting motifs.”

After the deaths in the car, Vollmann, the protagonist and survivor, drifts in an altered state in which the devices and qualities of literature overwhelm the article. Vollmann and his psychic wounds infuse all we encounter. In one scene, for example, a woman takes his hands and asks Jesus to rain his sacred blood upon them. Speaking in tongues, she draws Vollmann into a rapture, which he likens to an experience taking the drug ecstasy with a woman he loved, when, “it was as if all the nerve endings in my hands suddenly sprouted a million clitorises.” The woman’s sensual rapture brings a sense of forgiveness, Vollmann writes, something he needs after Tomasic’s death: “Of course I felt guilty. Any survivor would. Francis had been working for me, so maybe I was responsible for him; there were certainly those who thought so.”¹⁹

Who thought so, and what did they say? Vollmann doesn’t tell. Instead, he teases the reader much as he does when he raises and then dismisses the critical question of why he and his companions were driving on a road the U.N. has said was marked as mined: “for reasons which it’s now simpler to forget, we took the wrong road from Mostar.”²⁰

Vollmann is as determined as the caustic Yugoslavs he quotes to cling to his own vision of the conflict. The war must remain unfathomable with death the only certainty. Vollmann and his responses are primarily artistic, not journalistic.

PARANOID FREEDOM

Literary analysis has relatively little to say about journalism and its author-protagonists. When a work of nonfiction attracts critical assessment, the work's information or arguments generally take center stage. Reviews and evaluations of journalistic works focus primarily on the subject matter and how adequately or logically it is presented—with its style (or, I prefer, its soul or consciousness) relegated to the more expendable realm of how badly or well the information is delivered. Yet, Vollmann's nonfiction rewards literary analysis and given the grave personal risks that he endures and exhibits—often less in the service of conventional journalistic revelation of facts and connected data, and more to gratify his literary and psychological needs—the analysis is well-suited to a more traditionally fiction-oriented focus on the author-protagonist's personality and negotiations of risk and responsibility. Indeed, Vollmann's radical individualism places him in currents explored by British critic Tony Tanner in *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970*.

Tanner writes in his prefatory note that his aim in *City of Words* is to “understand the American imagination” (*italics in original*) as expressed by authors through a period in which the individualistic streak in U.S. literature turned paranoid, developing an often deeply anti-social, anti-governmental consciousness.²¹ The contrarian nature of the literature's psychology—the compulsion to “resist and extrude” the mentalities at play around the authors²²—grew as a shadow to the Romanticism and Transcendentalism that had long flourished in American arts.

Tanner writes, “there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own.”²³ The libertarian Vollmann, a husband and father who is also an unabashed patron and enthusiast of prostitutes, as well as a freewheeling freight-train hopper, certainly ignores politically correct social conventions and laws with good cheer in the quest for an authentic life.²⁴ Yet twinned with his bravado—and perhaps driving much of its openly masochistic expressions—is anger. In his book about hopping freight trains, *Riding Toward Everywhere*, Vollmann writes with venom about the growing intrusiveness of the state:

As I get older I find myself getting angrier and angrier. Doubtless change itself, not to mention physical decline and inevitable petty tragedies of disappointed expectations, would have made for resentment in any event; but I used to be a passive schoolboy, my negative impulses turned obediently inward. Now I gaze around this increasingly un-American America of mine, and I rage.²⁵

“So many of these developments are well-meaning,” continues Voll-

mann, before complaining about seat belts on school buses, pedophile paranoia, anti curb-crawling laws, motels wanting identification from guests, border security, and other ways in which, “Year by year, those good Germans march deeper into my life.”

Vollmann misses few chances to push back, even—or especially—when it slows queues, provokes more intrusive scrutiny from America’s “good Germans,” and embarrasses his companions: “I used to be with a woman who would plead with me to *play the game a little*, I was doing this to myself, she said. But I figured that they were doing it to me” (italics in the original).²⁶

To accept and collaborate with society’s constraints and impingements—“to play the game”—is to have one’s individuality reduced, Vollmann argues. It is to give one’s authenticity away, and the path to reclaiming authenticity lies through flouting society’s constraints:

Every time I surrender, even necessarily, to authority which disregardingly or contemptuously violates me, so I violate myself. Every time I break an unnecessary law, doing so for my own joy and to the detriment of no other human being, so I regain myself, and become strong in the parts of me that the security man can never see.²⁷

In Tanner’s analysis, Vollmann would find plenty of company in his belief that “they” are a force to be recognized and resisted. Tanner surveys the psychological landscape of work by Saul Bellow, William Burroughs, Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer, Sylvia Plath, Thomas Pynchon, John Updike, and several other writers of the period, and finds a marked paranoia about control. Tanner examines at length the theme that accepting life as it is served up is to be hoodwinked, to be conned into surrendering one’s opportunities for freedom. To be content with what one is served up in life is to be blind to the erosive manipulations of civilization. These forces are a primary source of antagonism in U.S. writing for just as there is the “abiding dream . . . that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible,” there is an accompanying “American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.”²⁸ Vollmann’s nonfiction career is an obsessive’s war against such patterning, and against its accomplices in the self: inertia, self-doubt, and repulsion from the abject or strange. This is a man who—ever determined to help all manner of people (even 1990s Serbs) see each other as real and worthy of respect—makes his little daughter shake the excrement-smearred hands of homeless men he lets sleep in the yard of their Sacramento home.²⁹ To Vollmann, our default consciousness is too often a wilful ignorance; a readiness to “play the game” as laid down by others. These games can be political: in his 2002 speech, “Some Thoughts on the

Value of Writing During Wartime,” Vollmann argues that he is not necessarily opposed to the impending U.S. invasion of Iraq—a country he has visited as a journalist—but to endorse it he would need a more convincing narrative than the U.S. government has so far supplied. To Vollmann, Saddam Hussein and the Iraqis are being presented to Americans as “flat characters,” like villains and victims in crime fiction. Vollmann’s complaint is that crime fiction is a genre which does not aim to capture the unpredictable, unresolvable, often counter intuitive nature of reality, but instead seeks to slot people in to serve the plot:

Life is less simple than it seems, which means that a government which tells its citizens that the world is black and white is not lying, necessarily, but at best it’s a Raymond Chandler government, whose characters will use their skills, if they possess any, to move the story toward a predetermined result.³⁰

Vollmann along with Tanner’s authors share a dread of “predetermined results,” not only in terms of foreign policy or politics in general, but in a personal, existential sense. To surrender through ignorance or impotence to a prepackaged life, or what Tanner describes as “the cycle of conditioned action,” is to betray and abandon one’s authentic even if as yet undiscovered self.³¹ In a passage about fears of formlessness and nonidentity explored in James Purdy’s *Cabot Wright Begins*, Tanner writes that the American protagonist is often caught between the fear of never knowing how best to live and the fear of being corralled into an inauthentic mode of living; a manipulation into someone else’s structures and narratives: “In the name of liberty these armatures, or imposed outlines, or the constructions other people build around us are to be cast off or broken through.”³²

Vollmann’s iconoclastic contrarianism aims at life’s traps and illusions, and tries to break out of them into the authentic; the real. Many moments in the authenticity-obsessed *Riding Toward Everywhere* become opportunities to reflect on breaking through:

On the pallid sand I saw a lump of obsidian, perhaps dropped here by a Paiute hunter a century ago or more; for that stone does not naturally occur here. I ran my hand over its smooth, almost soapy facets. Its weight in my hand was insistent. I could handle it and experience it, but it kept itself within itself, as did the night which was now a moment away. What if I smashed it with a hammer? What if I could smash the night? Would I see within or between its shards the *hereness* that I had failed to determine in the day? (*italics in original*).³³

Like the obsidian lump; like John Updike’s Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run*, Kurt Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse 5*, Joseph Hel-

ler's Yossarian in *Catch-22*, William Burrough's ever restless junkies, queers, and outlaws, and like all the other fleet-footed protagonists of Tanner's authors, Vollmann finds himself dumped some unknown distance from where he "naturally occurs." In *Riding Toward Everywhere*, Vollmann riffs on the disorientation of the long-term quester:

Who am I? Where am I? I know less and less certainly, if I ever did at all, to where this grassy, shadowy world is rushing. I sit perpetually immobile within my spinning blood, at home nowhere and never anything but lost.³⁴

Such American protagonists keep society and its group compromises and group corruptions, its soporific effects and creeping spiritual death, at arm's length in order to remain sane and find their true homes. Yet, by doing so, they risk a compounding misery and estrangement: what if their self-belief is misplaced and their romantic mission a failure driven by little more than deluded arrogance?

Tanner sees a determinedly antisocial quality as central to U.S. literature and the paranoid individualism of its literary writers. After quoting Saul Bellow's protagonist, Augie March, about humanity's relentless efforts to defeat dissenting views of reality, Tanner writes: "One of the main struggles of the American writer is to hold out against all such recruiting assaults on his own consciousness, if only to secure space in which to experience his own powers of mental arrangement and construction." This fits well the awkward contrarianism of Vollmann, as does Tanner's comment on social distances: "Loss of communication rather than loss of private vision is an option many American writers have preferred."³⁵

Vollmann reveals more of his life's toll on himself and his family in *Riding Towards Everywhere* than he does in his other nonfiction, expressing self-loathing and admitting his wife has asked for a divorce. In the chapter in which his thoughts run to hammering the night open, Vollmann mentions the self-doubt that plagues those who exit society's "dream":

I believe in the American myth that it is both admirable and even possible to devote one's life to a private dream. The probability of failing oneself, either through laziness, incompetence or bad luck, or else, worse yet, through dreaming what one only *imagined* one desired, is terrifying. All the same, *you had no more obligation* to public dreams which dreamed you wrongly (italics in original).³⁶

Vollmann and all the protagonists of Tanner's analysis suffer these terrors, and all keep rejecting those "public dreams which dreamed you wrongly." At the most charismatic, most sociable end of Tanner's survey sits Randle McMurphy, the doomed hero of Ken Kesey's 1962 debut, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Despite the rebel in the asylum's relentless self-

assertion, his humor and casual stoicism, Kesey gradually reveals American literature's maverick extraordinaire to be tired to his bones. Not only does clinging to a private dream in the face of institutionalized malevolence wear McMurphy down, it ultimately robs him of autonomy by locking him into a performance, or pattern. When McMurphy is eventually overwhelmed and beaten to the ground by wardens in the book's final round of hostilities before he is lobotomized, the free man is spent:

He let himself cry out: A sound of cornered-animal fear and hate and surrender and defiance, that if you ever trailed coon or cougar or lynx is like the last sound the treed and shot and falling animal makes as the dogs get him, when he finally doesn't care any more about anything but himself and his dying.³⁷

Perhaps this is what free-minded Americans sound like when they go down: recall Vollmann's description in "The War Never Came Here" of the mortally wounded Brinton making "the same sort of moans that I have heard a walrus make when it is shot."³⁸ Or perhaps—and remembering Kesey's narrator is the Chief, a Native American who roamed free until modern, white America dreamed him wrongly—in such literature it takes someone with the experience and instincts of a natural, instinct-centered life to recognize the beast that surfaces in us at the moment of death. Throughout his nonfiction, Vollmann is fond of reminding the reader that he has seen armed conflict, urban anarchy, joined indigenous hunting parties, braved the Arctic, deserts, jungles, and mountains, and witnessed or approached the human condition at its most exotic and stretched. Vollmann also makes no secret of his enthusiasm for guns, even complaining about his father's stance against civilian gun ownership.³⁹ The crack-smoking, freight-train-hopping, whore-worshipping, gun-toting chronicler of the world's margins is determined to live in a world where instinct outranks social mores. "I believe in violent self-defense," says Vollmann, who takes pride in his armory and ideologically justifies the toll in gun crime and accidents ensuing from the proliferation of guns in America:

I believe in freedom of choice for everybody, which entails immense risks. Often people abuse the power that comes with freedom. Either way, society pays a tremendous cost. We pay for our gun violence and we are paying an ever more immense cost for the repressive policies of our government.⁴⁰

The libertarian Vollmann opens *Riding Toward Everywhere* with a discussion of how the American spirit has withered since his father was growing up; since the days when Americans—white Americans, he qualifies—were more self-reliant and spoke their minds without giving a damn what anyone thought. "My grandfather's time must have been even more individualistic," Vollmann writes. The lost age of standing up for yourself without a second

thought and doing as you want without worrying about offending people or appearing eccentric (or drawing the ire of security officials) was an era when to be an American was “to be yourself.”⁴¹

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is the story of a man from such an era colliding with civilization’s totalitarian-leaning modernity—or the “Combine” as the Chief calls it—which employs regulation, fear, peer pressure, pharmaceuticals, and every other available instrument of social engineering, law enforcement, and mood control to devitalize people and enforce conformity. Tanner writes, “McMurphy speaks an older American language of freedom, unhindered movement, self-reliance, anarchic humor and a trust in the more animal instincts.”⁴²

This archaic dialect is a siren for Vollmann. He allows that his critique of America is “fundamentally incoherent,” given the more naked abuses of power that plagued the older U.S., but concludes: “All I know is that although I live a freer life than many people, I want to be freer still; I’m sometimes positively dazzled with longing for a better way of being.”⁴³

In an appendix to *City of Words*, Tanner surveys ideas from American academics who published in the 1950s and 1960s on the struggle between the self and culture. Tanner opens the appendix with a quote from Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*: “The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are.”⁴⁴ Society—with its habit, as Vollmann writes, of “dreaming us wrongly”—can distort both our view of ourselves and our view of others; it can trap us with its infectious, aggressive patterning.

In *Riding Toward Everywhere*, Vollmann laments: “My darling America has become a humpyard where cars and citizens can be nudged down the hill onto various classification tracks. I’ve got to get out of here.”⁴⁵ Vollmann is so determined to remain free of society’s normalizing forces that he accepts lower than usual royalty rates in exchange for the right not to have his manuscripts edited. Publishers may give their views, but “it’s very rare that I agree with suggestions to cut,” says Vollmann.⁴⁶

The problematic idiosyncrasies of Vollmann’s writing have been noted by publishers when rejecting his manuscripts, but his strategy seems to be to keep the manuscripts coming fast and shop them around until someone buys one either on the love of it or on his “fiercely original” reputation. A 1983 letter from Austin Olney of Houghton Mifflin rejecting the *An Afghanistan Picture Show* manuscript offers telling observations:

We’ve now had a chance to give careful consideration to your book on Afghanistan. Certainly your journey there was a remarkable one as was your

boldness in making it. Our problems with the manuscript are not so much with the keenness of your perceptions as with what we feel is the nature of your presentation. You write well and can bring a scene to life in a graceful way, but the changes in point of view and style and the abrupt transition in tone and mood, combined with a pretty relaxed narrative and thematic organization tend, in our opinion, to make the book more a collection of fragments rather than a unified story.⁴⁷

A rejection letter earlier that year from Esther Whitby of Andre Deutsch tells Vollmann that the company gave his manuscript to two readers:

One was very enthusiastic about the thing itself but cautious about its saleability. The other was less wholehearted—this reader was particularly irritated by the device of referring to yourself in the third person and felt you had promised conclusions which you failed to draw.⁴⁸

References to the “Young Man” are indeed grating, and perhaps the greatest broken promise of the narrative comes at the climax in Afghanistan. Less than ten pages from the end of the narrative (but not the book, which boasts another twenty pages of letters, sources, and a chronology of Afghan history) comes the long-awaited battle. Described in a single paragraph, it is shorter than Vollmann’s subsequent account of trudging back to Pakistan and includes a refusal to tell more of what happened. On reading it I felt like throwing the book in the garbage. Nevertheless, the scene helps us draw conclusions about Vollmann. Here it is in its entirety:

Ahead of them, at the summit of the red hill, there was a flash. Poor Man had begun to fire. The boy who carried the rocket launcher ran up to Poor Man, smiling happily. A Soviet shell exploded loudly somewhere near them. The Young Man felt cold. He looked around him. All his companions were happy. Another shell landed, flinging stones. While the boy prepared the rocket launcher, the other Mujahideen began to fire. They shot beyond themselves, like the snap of the slide projector in darkness as he advanced the carousel, letting image after image tumble down into the abyss of light (more than ten seconds’ exposure is said to put the transparency at risk of fading, and now it has been eleven years!), and the Mujahideen fired in this long moment that was the reason that I came; I don’t want or need to say much more about it; they were fighting and I was not; they were accomplishing the purpose of their lives in those endless night moments of happiness near death, no fear in them as I honestly believe; they had crossed their river so long ago that I could not really comprehend them as anything except heroes like Erica on the far side of the water; they were over the hill and nothing else mattered.⁴⁹

To clarify some of the references, Poor Man is Vollmann’s name for the mujahedin commander, and Erica is Vollmann’s ex-girlfriend. Vollmann’s re-

fusal to explain or depict what happened “in this long moment that was the reason that I came” is perhaps the paramount example in his writing of his choice to flout obligations to the reader. For better or worse, the battle is to a large part the reason that the reader came, too, and it is exasperating that Vollmann abruptly shrugs off his responsibility to bring the reader through the experience. It makes me wonder if Vollmann invented the scene but perhaps felt too guilty about doing so to write it convincingly. Nevertheless, whether or not we believe Vollmann was on a red hill in 1982 with guerrillas snapping away like a slide projector at the Red Army, this passage illuminates his anti-social nature.⁵⁰

When Vollmann was asked (in 1990) to list his favorite contemporary authors, he said—his uncommonly expansive understanding of “contemporary” stretching into the nineteenth century—that “[Ernest] Hemingway is usually a wonderful read, especially *Islands in the Stream* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—that is to say, the grandly suicidal narratives.”⁵¹ The suicidal narrative is a teleological end point to Vollmann; a discontent’s aggressively imagined destiny. Barely knowing the Afghans who humored him, Vollmann claims they felt no fear in combat and were even “accomplishing the purpose of their lives in those endless night moments of happiness near death.” If Vollmann stayed in any one place with any one group of people long enough for an osmosis to set in then he might be something of a credible source on the feelings and motivations of his companions, but as it is the story seems determinedly his own. And that story is death bound; it is the unfolding of the *Todestrieb*. In *Riding Toward Everywhere*, Vollmann muses on the idea that all dreams of a better place or better time are delusions:

Reconsidered in this light, Hemingway’s great novels, which all revolve around journeys, bear ominous witness; for it can be argued that each journey is a quest for death. . . . It was the journey itself, with its hardships, triumphs, puzzles and unexpected joys that made these books alive in the first place. Their tragedies do not negate that life, but Hemingway is more deeply morbid than most people know, and so they complete it.⁵²

Vollmann writes over and over in his freight-train-hopping paean to escapism, *Riding Toward Everywhere*, that he longs to exist in a better—less limiting—time or place (the transcendental “Everywhere” of the title); a longing he says Hemingway shared, and that Hemingway ultimately felt was hopeless. He points to the deaths common to Hemingway’s protagonists and to the author’s inability to finish *The Last Good Country*, asking why all Hemingway’s paths of glory led to the grave:

The answer must be that Hemingway could not bring Everywhere into

a more than temporary glimmer of being. There might have been somewhere to go beyond out of here, but even if he found it, he could not keep it. When I imagine him fitting that double-barreled shotgun against his head, I wish for him what I do for all his heroes when they reach their final page: *the sudden feeling of release and freedom when the last caboose whipped past.*⁵³ [The section Vollmann italicizes is a quote from Thomas Wolfe.]

ATOMIZATION AND THE DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE

In *City of Words*, Tanner explores the sense of America as an atomized, relatively rootless community in terms of how it shapes the work of U.S. authors, contrasting it to the more socially grounded psychology of European authors:

The European writer usually seems to have felt more firmly embedded in his given environment than his American counterpart; to have been more sure of his language and his society, using the former to speak about the latter with more confidence and insight even if he feels alienated from the prevailing structures. If anything, it is the instability of language and society which has more often made itself felt to the American writer.⁵⁴

Much the same can be said of Vollmann. His use of language in fiction is more unstable—more experimental⁵⁵—than in his reportage, which is sufficiently copy edited to be reasonably straightforward for publishing in magazines such as *Spin*, *Esquire*, and the *New Yorker*. Nevertheless, the psychology is constant and even in his nonfiction he presents the U.S. as an unstable and often hollow society. In a section of *Rising Up and Rising Down* entitled “Definitions for Lonely Atoms,” Vollmann writes of walking in parks at night with a pistol in his pocket, bracing for muggers to test him. His America is splintered into dead ends of ignorance, fear, need, and greed; a land divided into parallel universes of wise losers (such as street prostitutes, drug addicts, skinheads, subsistence-level immigrants) adrift amidst a majority of dumb winners (the rich and blank consumers). Asked why he lives where he does (Sacramento, California), Vollmann says it was his wife’s choice not his and then lists a few other places he has lived, before declaring, “I’m really from the sidewalk. I’m from everywhere. I’m just a typical rootless American.”⁵⁶

With a far less solid and ordered sense of civilization than their counterparts in older, more mature societies, many American authors work as explorers even at home, issuing wide-eyed dispatches from eternally strange lands. Tanner writes that while these authors—born as they are into America’s faith in limitless horizons—regard the world’s mysteries as forever beyond the capacity of language to capture,⁵⁷ they also have “established an authentically realistic (at times documentary) literary tradition.”⁵⁸

Vollmann has come to exemplify this American divide to an almost exag-

gerated degree. An often taxonomic writer, particularly in such auto-didactically sociological books as *Poor People* and *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann crowds even his fiction with footnoting, glossaries, and appendices. His World War II novel, *Europe Central*, contains fifty-nine pages of annotated sources and acknowledgements. The list of sources opens with a near apology for the book being a work of fiction, yet an apology Vollmann qualifies with claims to have grounded almost everything in exhaustive historical accuracy. He even pre-emptively seeks to snuff out doubts readers may have about his portrait of wartime Germany or the Soviet Union, writing that “the social systems described here, together with all their institutions and atrocities, derive entirely from the historical record.”⁵⁹ Apparently oblivious to the different merits and attributes of novels and histories, Vollmann seems intent on standing above contemporary “postmodern” culture and its writers whom he has accused of being ignorant of life’s “body of facts”⁶⁰ as they casually pluck cultural references from here, there, and everywhere.

Vollmann’s first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels*, is his only overtly artificial work of fiction—being the story of revolutionary insects that exist only in the virtual world of computer software—and it is his only book that he has since belittled, telling the *New York Times* that it is “a kid’s book—it was too easy to go on and on and have a good time making things up.”⁶¹ Vollmann’s “adult” imperative to impress his research upon readers is a prime example of what Tanner sees as a longstanding trait of American writing:

Since the time of the Puritans, there has been a strong tendency for Americans to regard the fictional as the false, the made thing as the mendacious thing, at least in the realm of art and when viewing the customs and manners of society. . . . Where another civilization might celebrate man’s powers of fabrication and his ability to supplement the given world with his own creations, there is a traditional line of American thought which suspects that these powers and abilities might be cutting man off from ‘reality’—reality being whatever was there before man started heaping up his fictions on it.⁶²

Vollmann is clearly obsessed with being a documentarian. Yet in his non-fiction, sustained and convincing immersions in the lives and places of others are absent, and this is where he diverges from many of the more traditional examples of literary journalism, given that “immersion” journalism has been identified as one criterion for the form,⁶³ and hence why, once again, his is a kind of anti-journalism. Vollmann himself is the object of interest: his bravado displays of literary and historical knowledge matched with relentless skid-row globetrotting serving primarily to create on the page an experience of the isolated, nomadic quality of his intellect. He can have fascinating in-

sights and modes of thought, but the settings and characters around him are too thin and inorganic to care about.

In the introduction to his global nonfiction exploration of poverty, *Poor People*, Vollmann acknowledges the thinness but argues conveniently, if somewhat unconvincingly, that it “enhances the truth” of his book:

My own interpretation of how this book’s heroes and heroines see themselves is damaged by the brevity of our acquaintance, which in most cases endured a week or less. I know how little I know. All the same, these snapshots of the ways in which certain poor people experienced their poverty at random moments bear meaning of inexpressible value to me; I’ve been able to pore over them long after my interviewees forgot me and spent the money I gave them. The impossibility of my gaining any dynamic understanding of these lives over time, my very lack of relevance to them, may enhance the truth of this presentation—for what do I have to prove? How could I be fatuous enough to hope to “make a difference”? I’m left with nothing to honorably attempt, but to *show* and *compare* to the best of my ability.⁶⁴ (Italics in original.)

Vollmann’s claim that it would be impossible to gain a “dynamic understanding” of his subjects could perhaps be debunked by spending more than “a week or less” with his subjects. Yet the author claims not to have time to slow down—there is always too much else to learn. Making his argument conveniently exaggerated about why he didn’t get to know the social role of Burma’s drug lord and leader of the breakaway Shan region, Khun Sa, better than he did in order to write more accurately about the man and his popular support, Vollmann is nevertheless faithful to his working rationale as a nomadic discontent when he writes:

. . . did he truly lead a Shan liberation movement? I saw only the tiniest piece of Shan State; I could not say for sure how many supported and revered him. The fact that almost everybody I met praised him before he could possibly have known that I was coming suggests that he truly was well regarded. But again, he himself I met only once. Had I limited myself to writing about Khun Sa over the past decade, I would no doubt have known more about him than I do. But then I would have known less about the Khmer Rouge. . . . I chose broad knowledge, not deep.⁶⁵

Sidestepping his argument’s spurious either/or (surely writing about more than one issue over a decade and gaining deep knowledge of a matter are not mutually exclusive), Vollmann invokes the question of why he unceasingly chooses “broad knowledge” at the expense of deeper insights and richer writing? The answer, psychologically, seems to be that Vollmann—as one of civilization’s discontents—is at heart a nomad determined to keep the wilderness wild. If he stays too long in one of his wild zones, its codes and

practices (its culture, in other words) might domesticate his experience of it and drain uncertainty's menace:

I'm fascinated by exotic things. I suppose I always will be. And very often, if you want some kind of direct contact with exotic things, you find yourself in a dangerous situation, almost by definition. If there isn't some barrier between you and the exotic, then usually it's not exotic. What creates this barrier has to be either danger or difficulty.⁶⁶

The world must remain atomized for Vollmann and his fellow seekers of the exotic so that they can cling to their sense of the frontier. They would be lost without being forever braced, if not armed, against the wilderness' spectres and shocks. This stance feeds into Tanner's thesis that U.S. writers imagine the world from the aggressively individualistic perspective of an unmoored culture. Vollmann inhabits a world in perceptual flux, one in which reality is comprised of contesting views. This is reflected in his advice to writers:

Never forget the other point of view. No matter how you judge it, try to see it fairly and try to describe it accurately. Failing this, you will remain unable to evaluate the ideological claims to which you will be subjected for the rest of your life. . . . Never forget your own point of view. . . . Remember, we writers are among the few who enjoy the privilege of presenting and standing by our own independent position to the world.⁶⁷

In the most exotic and challenging of human environments, Vollmann certainly does not surrender or submerge his identity. In his 2000 *New Yorker* reportage from Afghanistan, "Across the Divide," Vollmann is not coy about being a Christian American when meeting (and later respectfully reporting the views and context of) the Taliban.⁶⁸ It is chiefly when the non-human world of nature places Vollmann's identity in danger of negation that the reader feels him panicking. Such moments surface in *Riding Toward Everywhere*, one being a flash of existential panic that overcomes Vollmann as he walks at night along a desert road that he knows well by day:

By the time I had finished my first bottle of water, its contents were as warm as blood. The wind grew increasingly wild, the darkness more absolute. I could barely see the lights of the old maintenance station ahead; the ranch lights were hidden behind those; I recognized the mountains more by memory than by sight. Suddenly I began to ask myself: *Who am I?* I found that I was speaking aloud. Over and over I whispered and shouted to myself: *Who am I?*⁶⁹

These crises don't seem to strike Vollmann in urban or social settings, where his character, if not body, is in little danger of being shattered or overwhelmed. Even sitting behind his dead friends in the mine-struck car in

Bosnia he acts as cool as a film-noir private eye when the combatants stroll up: “I knew that all three sides in what had been Yugoslavia respected a ‘real man.’ I decided that that was how I’d play it.”⁷⁰ Yet, just over a decade later, in a slice of the world utterly unconcerned with who he is or how he feels—in an arena vastly indifferent to all humans—Vollmann loses hold of his identity, wondering who he is. When at work in his chosen slices of the human world or when positioned in rebellion against other parts of it, Vollmann can coordinate his personality, his being. But when the self has no society to struggle with, when it does suddenly find itself “freer still,” the result can be a profound disorientation.

CONCLUSION

It is a personal and professional hazard for the intellectual nomad, the literary discontent, to face the crisis of “Who am I?” Some writers make the crisis explicit in their work and others don’t but perhaps at the core of every literary outrider’s hard-gained dispatch from the wilderness is a sentiment expressed by the ultimate intellectual contrarian, Friedrich Nietzsche. In the preface to his intellectual autobiography, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, Nietzsche writes that despite his pride, his final duty is to say: “Listen! For I am such and such a person. For heaven’s sake do not mistake me for someone else.” In grandiose moments, the isolated mavericks of prose may well identify with the philosopher’s later filling in of the “such and such”—“I am no man, I am dynamite”—before they join literature’s “grandly suicidal narrative”; its long and bitter ranks of drunkards, junkies, bankrupts, bores and suicides. Or, before they accidentally drive over real dynamite.

So runs the risk of devoting oneself to a private dream.

Endnotes

1. Vollmann, “The War Never Came Here,” *Spin*, November 1994. Reprinted in Vollmann, *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2003), 397–465. All further references refer to the reprint, which will be cited as *RURD*.

2. *RURD*, 418.

3. After seizing Vukovar the Serbian-directed Yugoslav National Army entered the city’s hospital and took hundreds of Croatian combatants and civilians who had sought shelter there out of the city and killed them. Several former soldiers of the national army have since been convicted in the Hague of committing war crimes in Vukovar. The International Court of Justice has deemed

as genocide the mass killing of about 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces in a series of massacres after the Serbs' conquest of the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, July 1995.

4. RURD, 403.

5. Ibid.

6. RURD, 401, 402.

7. RURD, 405.

8. RURD, 410.

9. RURD, 420.

10. Vollmann, however, expressed a different view to the *New York Times* three months before this trip to the former Yugoslavia, telling journalist Madison Smartt Bell, "I'm actually a competent war correspondent at this point, instead of being a war idiot like I was in Afghanistan." See Madison Smartt Bell, "William T. Vollmann," in the *New York Times*, 6 February 1994. All further references to this work (*WTV*) will be cited in the text. It is worth noting that despite any gung-ho connotations of "war idiot," Vollmann's experience of the Afghan war against the Soviets was simply idiotic—and brief. After months in Pakistan trying to find guerrillas who would lead him into Afghanistan, an unfit, chronically sick Vollmann tags along with a band of mujahedin, slows them down, experiences enough of an exchange of fire to warrant one paragraph in his 267-page postmodern memoir, *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1992), and was then walked back to Pakistan by four men who were diverted from their mission to help the hapless American. All further references to Vollmann's Afghan memoir will be cited as *APS*.

11. RURD, 440.

12. RURD, 442.

13. RURD, 443.

14. RURD, 443–44. Vollmann remained unconvinced that a landmine did the damage, but UN peacekeepers soon determined that the car had not been attacked by a sniper, but had driven over a multi-explosive landmine.

15. RURD, 444.

16. RURD, 461.

17. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 74. To Frye, writing that has a documentarian intent uses descriptions and assertions to explicitly refer the reader to a tangible world outside the prose—an external world that is of prime importance. In such writing, the inner world of the author's mind as experienced on the page is of decidedly secondary importance. Frye's polarization of writing is perhaps exaggerated, but it is a useful exaggeration when weighing up nonfiction writing.

18. Ibid.

19. RURD, 455, 456.

20. RURD, 442.

21. Tanner, Tony, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970* (New York:

Harper & Row, 1971), ii. All further references to this work will be cited as *CW*.

22. *CW*, 29.

23. *CW*, 15.

24. Vollmann writes that breaking “unnecessary laws” out of joy and without victims makes him stronger in *Riding Toward Everywhere* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 97. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as RTE. Vollmann writes about his use of prostitutes in many works. An essay he devoted to the topic is “The Shame of It All: Some Thoughts on Prostitution in America [1999],” in Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson, editors, *Expelled from Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 167–86. All further references to this work will be cited as EE. “The Shame of It All” opens with: “I have worshiped them and drunk from their mouths.”

25. RTE, 4.

26. RTE, 5.

27. RTE, 97, 98.

28. *CW*, 15.

29. Vollmann, *Poor People* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 268. All further references to this work will be cited as *PP*.

30. William Vollmann, “Some Thoughts on the Value of Writing During Wartime,” *EE*, 144–45.

31. *CW*, 259.

32. *CW*, 19.

33. RTE, 112.

34. RTE, 155.

35. *CW*, 29.

36. RTE, 102–03.

37. Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (London: Picador, 1973), 250.

38. *RURD*, 444.

39. RTE, 3.

40. Kate Braverman, “The Subversion Dialogues,” in *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews* (uncorrected proof). Ed. Michael Hemmingson, 273. All further references to this work will be cited as *WVCS*.

41. RTE, 1.

42. *CW*, 373.

43. RTE, 5, 6.

44. *CW*, 432.

45. RTE, 180.

46. Tony Dushane, “Drinks with Tony,” in *WVCS*, 258.

47. Austin Olney, letter to Vollmann, 19 December 1983, held in the Vollmann archive of Ohio State University’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

48. Esther Whitby, letter to Vollmann, 21 June 1983, held in the Vollmann archive of Ohio State University’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

49. *APS*, 237–38.

50. The primacy of the slide projector simile also illustrates Vollmann’s

elevation of what Frye called a literary work's "structure of interconnecting motifs" over his delivery of information.

51. *EE*, 36.
52. *RTE*, 123–24.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *CW*, 27.
55. For example, Vollmann wrote his novel about Pocahontas, *Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith* (New York: Viking, 2001), in Elizabethan prose.
56. Braverman, "The Subversion Dialogues," in *WVCS*, 269.
57. Indeed, in "The War Never Came Here," Vollmann seems militant in this view.
58. *CW*, 27.
59. William Vollmann, *Europe Central*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 753.
60. Larry McCaffrey, "Moth in the Flame," in *WVCS*, 189–190.
61. Madison Smartt Bell, "William T. Vollmann," *New York Times*, 6 February 1994.
62. *CW*, 29–30.
63. Norman Sims, "The Literary Journalists." *The Literary Journalists*. Ed. Norman Sims (New York: Ballantine, 1984), 3.
64. *PP*, xv.
65. William T. Vollmann, *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* [abridged], (New York: Ecco, 2004), 33.
66. *WVCS*, 144–45.
67. *EE*, 152.
68. Vollmann, "Across the Divide," reprinted in *EE*, 91–119. This is a remarkable piece of reportage in which Vollmann wanders Kabul with a Koran capturing many of the beliefs and tensions that so seized the world after the events of the next year's September.
69. *RTE*, 106.
70. *RURD*, 444.