

A Moral Reading:

William T. Vollmann and the Tasks of Ethical Criticism

PhD Proposal, by Jack Pender
20 November 2013
Supervisor: Kevin McGuirk
Committee: Professors Harris and McMurry

Description

The wide-ranging, genre-bending work of American writer William T. Vollmann has been largely neglected within the academy. My dissertation argues that the work of literary and rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke offers a methodology capable both of describing the formal aspects of Vollmann's work and of articulating the ethical concerns that underpin its stylistic and generic diversity. This project shows that Vollmann's work is distinguished by its concern with ethics, that is, with the kinds of moral valuations we place on actors and actions as part of the "literary" texture of a work. But these ethical problems are complicated by the way Vollmann strategically employs the conventional mechanisms of literary response—plot, protagonist, dramatic structure—to implicate the emotional (or *pathotic*) responses of the reader in contexts usually reserved for analysis by more "factual" discourses. Part of the challenge in approaching Vollmann as a literary critic is that his work, to some degree, resists or refuses certain markers of literary-aesthetic "value". The "literary", to Vollmann, is only another discourse to be used, ironized, and challenged. This project will describe Vollmann's fictional and nonfictional works as exercises in ethical casuistry: each of his works both invites an abstract, ethical response at the same time that it performs a close analysis of the specific case in question. Vollmann himself refers in this connection to the "perils of context" (*Atlas* 334), the fact that the complexity of experience always resists summation by an abstract category.

This project proposes to examine four Vollmann texts: although each draws on a different set of discursive fields, they each use a given “official” discourse to direct and clarify their ethical critiques. *The Royal Family* (2000) is the culmination of Vollmann’s fictionalized representations of prostitution; *Argall* (2001) is the most recent and the most subversive of his historical fictions; *Imperial* (2009) is a work of creative nonfiction distinctive for employing both journalistic reportage and historical research to construct a narrative of the decline of a once-fertile region of California; *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003) is a wide-ranging collection that combines essays with reportage in an attempt to provide a casuistic analysis of justifications for violence. Considering these works as “dialogic” combinations of distinct discourses, each chapter of this dissertation investigates a text’s use of a particular discourse: novelistic discourse in *The Royal Family*, history in *Argall*, journalism in *Imperial*, and the essay in *Rising Up and Rising Down*.

There has been no criticism so far that describes the governing symbolic structures of Vollmann’s work or that provides an ethical critique of Vollmann’s authorial stances. Although this project is, in many ways, an outgrowth of Wayne Booth’s ethical and ethotic criticism, my project interprets Vollmann’s stylistic and technical choices in terms of the rhetorical category of *ethos*. Booth was hugely influential in insisting that literary criticism entails an explicit concern with ethical judgments: ethical criticism, for Booth, encapsulates “any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies” (*Company* 11). More specifically, Booth explored *ethos* as a category capable of describing the essentially rhetorical relationship between author, text, and reader, a direct influence on the perspective of this project.

Traditionally, *ethos* is one of three modes of appeal in any rhetorical situation: *logos* denotes the rational, logical characteristics of an argument, *pathos* the dimension of emotional appeal. In this Aristotelian model, *ethos*, involves only the speaker’s self-presentation, questions of credibility related to the author’s projected wisdom, good will, and moral character. The modification that this project proposes is to recognize that the category of *ethos* entails the other two, especially in the context of the contemporary scene of literary production, reception and

interpretation. Rational argument constitutes one important discursive strand of the modern novel, but its function can only be understood in terms of the larger structure of the work, which also includes its pathetic dimension.

Kenneth Burke's distinction between grammatical and rhetorical levels of analysis allows us to articulate both the internal, symbolic¹ logic of Vollmann's work and the cultural implications of his creative recombination of existing discourses. Burke's "pentad" also provides a framework that is capable of analyzing the motives of acts and actors on different levels—both within a literary text and in broader, cultural fields (*Grammar* xvi). Pentadic analysis provides an excellent method for describing Vollmann's strategic stylization of character and action. Burke's theories have also been influential in the formulation of rhetorical genre theory, which emphasizes the basis of genre in practice or action (Miller 151), and provides a perspective from which to describe the discourses used in Vollmann's texts.

Considering Vollmann's style in terms of *ethos* emphasizes both the aesthetic and the cultural dimension of his formal strategies. As Bakhtin notes, only in so-called "literary" or "novelistic" discourse can normally exclusive discourses influence and comment upon each other, creating the possibilities for new types of commentary on the existing discourses of a culture: "Artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time." (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 43). Vollmann's artistic forms allow for the ethical reactions elicited by "literary" representation to be applied to "factual" discourses normally governed by their own methods of evaluation.

¹ "Symbolic", as used here, denotes the traditional literary-theory concept of an object or sign that is understood to represent something else. Burke's category of "symbolic", by way of contrast, focused on the role of the author's psychology in the selection of literary symbols and motifs—this aspect of Burke's system was never definitively theorized, and was abandoned by Burke in later years in favor of the "logological" approach that arguably united the concerns of his "grammar" and "rhetoric".

Chapter Plan

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter of the dissertation will introduce the work of William T. Vollmann, arguing that his fiction and non-fiction carefully and eloquently presents an ethical critique that tends to be deflected by existing critical approaches. Vollmann's work integrates and transforms several traditions in American literature—Beat literature, sci-fi, the road narrative, “gonzo” and “New” journalism, the travelogue, the “founding of America” topos—a continuity that demands that his work be considered as part of its broader cultural context. At the same time, Vollmann's formal and generic experimentation raises basic problems of interpretation. This project argues that Vollmann's ethical interests can only be contextualized through consideration of the formal techniques used to present them. Vollmann, despite his obvious commitment to the communicative power of literature, is also constantly suspicious of the efficacy of literature as a mode of social action. Hence the often counter-intuitive effects that his fiction and nonfiction produce: Vollmann's “rhetoric” is less a matter of convincing the reader to assent to a certain proposition than to force the reader's emotional judgments into dialogue with the usually unexplored political dimensions of literary representation. This project approaches Vollmann's works as exercises in ethical casuistry, a case-based application of general rules to specific situations, with attention to the ways in which particular contexts complicate or modify the rule.

This introductory chapter will also outline the organization of the dissertation: each chapter will be devoted to reading one or more of Vollmann's works through the lens of a specific discourse: literary, historical, journalistic or non-fictional, and the essay.

Chapter 2: The Essay

The genre of the essay allows for an interesting intersection of discursive fields: partly constituted by a meditative or confessional discourse and partly by a “factual” one, essayistic prose allows the authorial figure a strategic freedom in

shifting between “realistic” argument and more subjective modes of appeal. These two modalities can be classified according to the traditional rhetorical rubric of *logos* and *ethos*; analyzing the specific and strategic shifts between the two levels gives us concrete information about the author’s rhetorical goals.

Rising Up and Rising Down, Vollmann’s seven-volume, non-fiction analysis of casuistic justifications for violent self-defense, is split fairly evenly between essays that apply Vollmann’s “moral calculus” to historical figures and case studies based on Vollmann’s journalistic work. This text provides a model of Vollmann’s concerns in general precisely because it is self-consciously casuistic: it attempts to apply an almost ironically formal “moral” calculus to the complex, ambiguous, and epistemologically problematic fields of history and journalism. One concrete effect of the essay’s mixture of discourses is in allowing Vollmann to position his historical analyses on the “factual” plane, while simultaneously narrativizing the facts in an openly rhetorical fashion. Vollmann exploits the flexibility inherent in the essayist’s persona to explicitly measure real-world and historical events against an ethical “calculus” of justifiability.

Chapter 3: Literary discourse

This chapter will propose a “grammatical” reading of Vollmann’s 2000 novel *The Royal Family*. Although this novel could be profitably explored from a number of perspectives, it represents a kind of culmination of Vollmann’s interest in prostitution and the ways in which that subject poses interesting problems when combined with conventionalized literary representations of sex and romance.

The Royal Family details the degradation and ultimate self-destruction of its protagonist through the story of his involvement with a group of street prostitutes in San Francisco. Kenneth Burke remarks on “how readily realism leads into symbolism. For the succession of scenes both *realistically reflects* the course of action and *symbolizes it*” (*Grammar* 3). Vollmann exploits this conjunction throughout *The Royal Family*: his writing on prostitution and prostitutes characteristically draws on realistic and journalistic elements as well as literary or symbolic ones. For instance, Vollmann’s use of the archetypal “virtuous prostitute”

in *The Royal Family* elicits a sympathetic reaction that is simultaneously tempered by the use of “realistic” detail. In the same fashion, the “literary” aspect of the prostitute characters induces a sympathy that is complicated (or, arguably, made realistically difficult) by Vollmann’s integration of the “journalistic” record in the form of dialogue, settings, and anecdotes.

This reading of *The Royal Family* furnishes an example of Vollmann’s characteristic presentation of ethical problems: taking a situation from which an ethical argument might be extracted (the novel could be read to argue, on one level, that prostitution should be regulated instead of criminalized), Vollmann complicates any abstract or idealistic statement of moral values by the “realistic” representation of the actors involved. Where a stable system of moral valuations would attempt to arrive at a definitive classification of moral actors according to kind (prostitutes are morally compromised, but deserve sympathy because of their situation), Vollmann’s depiction of character forces these judgments to deal more specifically with questions of context, motivation, and individual freedom.

Chapter 4: Historical Fiction

This chapter will focus on Vollmann’s use of historical discourse as an element in his novels, asking how the interaction of these two distinct discourses provides opportunities for rethinking what Vollmann calls the “Symbolic History” (*Ice-Shirt* 397) of our continent.

Vollmann’s most ambitious fictional project is the *Seven Dreams* series of historical novels. Each novel in the sequence (four of the projected seven have been completed) takes as its subject one of the early encounters between indigenous populations and European explorers on the North American continent. Two of the novels in particular—*Fathers and Crows* (1992) and *Argall* (2000)—are notable not only for their skillful integration of the historical record into a novelistic structure, but for their strategic use and misuse of both academic and popular histories.

Fathers and Crows, which focuses on the 18th-century Jesuit missions to New France, compares the religious imperialism of the French mission to the genocidal policy of the British. The endnotes to this novel show Vollmann’s involvement in the

limited anthropological research on contemporary Huron and Iroquois cultures. The novel uses aspects of the historical and anthropological record to undermine the mythological cultural narrative of the “settling” of America while exploiting its broad narrative structure: in examining the dynamics of European influence on the pre-revolutionary continent, Vollmann deflates the founding myths of America by integrating the motivations of the historical actors into the dramatic structure of the novel.

Foucault argues that the apparent “necessities” of history are in fact contingent, conditioned by a multiplicity of aleatoric and strategic factors. Vollmann’s fiction arguably performs the same kind of historical critique that Foucault describes as “eventalization”, the position that the apparent necessity of the historical “event” must be problematized, “rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on, that at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal, and necessary” (*Power* 226-7). Vollmann’s *Seven Dreams* can be read as a fictional genealogy of America, accomplishing a similar task through a novelistic medium. Vollmann is interested in dismantling the apparently singular “event”: the victory of the British in North America or the founding of Jamestown. Vollmann’s concern with representing the institutional pressures that dictate personal interest suggests an important theoretical point: as all historical discourse partakes of aspects of the literary, it may be no less epistemologically valid to explore “historical” truths through “fiction” than to posit a factual “history” as the background of a “fictional” work.

Chapter 5: Non-Fiction

Vollmann’s professional work as a journalist constitutes his most public, high-profile engagement with non-literary forms of discourse. Journalistic non-fiction provides an example of a discursive system that is strictly governed by the categories of facticity and of objectivity: events and descriptions need to have a basis in verifiable fact, while the author-function is expected to maintain a position

free of prejudice. Of course, the long tradition of “gonzo” and “New” journalism in American letters was predicated on a shift in emphasis from event to observer.

Imperial, as a work of creative nonfiction that integrates novelistic, journalistic, and historical elements, exploits the same ambiguity of authorial ethos as *Rising Up and Rising Down*. But whereas that work attempts to glean general principles from a wealth of specific detail, *Imperial* focuses on the specificity of the historical, journalistic, or anecdotal material that constitutes it, often entirely eliding the authorial persona in favour of concrete detail. Focusing on Vollmann’s strategic use of an author-speaker, this chapter helps to clarify the overall concerns of the project by showing the ways in which narrative focalization—even in nonfiction—is both a function of the discursive “scene” and a strategic choice that allows for a disruption of the interpretive authority of the discourses employed.

Bibliography and Works Cited

Primary Works

Vollmann, William T. *13 Stories and 13 Epitaphs*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1991. Print.

--. “Across the Divide”. *The New Yorker*. 15 May 2000. *The New Yorker Digital Archive*.

--. *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World*. New York: Melville House, 2013. Print.

--. *Argall*. New York: Viking, 2001. Print.

--. *Butterfly Stories*. New York: Grove Press, 1993. Print.

--. *Europe Central*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.

--. *Fathers and Crows*. New York: Viking, 1992. Print.

--. *Imperial*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.

--. *Into the Forbidden Zone: A Trip Through Hell and High Water in Post-Earthquake Japan*. San Francisco: Byliner, 2011. Ebook.

- . *Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement, and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Print.
- . "My Life As A Terrorist". *Harper's* Sept 2013: 39-47. Print.
- . *Riding Toward Everywhere*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009. Print.
- . *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*. New York: Ecco, 2004.
- . *Rising Up and Rising Down*. 7 vols. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003. Print.
- . *The Atlas*. New York: Penguin, 1997. Print.
- . *The Book of Dolores*. New York: PowerHouse Books, 2013. Print.
- . *The Ice-Shirt*. New York: Viking, 1990. Print.
- . *The Rainbow Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- . *The Rifles*. New York: Viking, 1994. Print.
- . *The Royal Family*. New York: Viking, 2000. Print.
- . *Uncentering the Earth: Copernicus and the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*. New York: Atlas, 2006.
- . *Whores for Gloria*. New York: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- . *You Bright and Risen Angels*. New York: Penguin, 1988. Print.

Secondary Works: Critical Works and Articles on Vollmann

- Caserio, Robert L. "James, Cather, Vollmann, and the Distinction of Historical Fiction". *symplokē* 12.1/2 (2004): 106-129. *Jstor*. Web.
- Christenson, Peter G. "Shostakovich in Love: William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central*". *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 40.1 (2007): 97-108. *Jstor*. Web.
- Hardesty, Michele L. "Looking for the Good Fight: William T. Vollmann's "An Afghanistan Picture Show". *boundary 2* 36.2 (2009): 99-124. Web.
- Hemmingson, Michael. *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2009. Print.
- . *William T. Vollmann: An Annotated Bibliography*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2012. Print.

LeClair, Tom. "The Prodigious Fictions of Richard Powers, William T. Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.1 (1994): 12-37. *Jstor*. Web.

McCaffery, Larry, and Michael Hemmingson, eds. *Expelled From Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004. Print.

Palleau-Papin, Françoise, ed. William T. Vollmann: Le roman historique en question: *Un étude de The Rifles*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011. Print.

Savvas, Theophilus. *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Schwieger, Florian. "Loyalty gleaming, guns screaming': William T. Vollmann's Europe Central and the Memory of Stalingrad". *War, Literature and the Arts*. 23.1 (2011): n. pag. Web.

Siegel, Lee. "Rock Bottom: The Royal Family by William T. Vollmann". *The New Republic*. January 22, 2001: *Jstor*. Web.

Smith, Carlton. "Arctic Revelations: Vollmann's *The Rifles* and the Frozen Landscape of the Self". *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 53-61. Print.

Secondary Works: Theory and Criticism

Attridge, Derek. *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. ed. Holquist, Michael. trans. Emerson, Caryl and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print.

--. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. trans. Emerson, Caryl. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Print.

--. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.

- Bloom, Harold et al. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 1979. Print.
- Brummett, Barry, ed. *Landmark Essays on Kenneth Burke*. Landmark Essays Series vol 2. Davis: Hermagoras Press, 1993. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969. Print.
- . *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1950. Print.
- . *Attitudes Toward History*. 3rd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984. Print.
- . *Counter-Statement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968. Print.
- . *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966. Print.
- . *On Human Nature: A Gathering While Everything Flows, 1967-1984*. ed. Rueckert, William H. and Angelo Bonadonna. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Print.
- . *Permanence and Change*. 3rd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984. Print.
- . *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. 3rd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973. Print.
- . *The Rhetoric of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1961. Print.
- Davis, Robert Con and Ronald Schleifer. *Criticism and Culture: The Role of Critique in Modern Literary Theory*. Burnt Mill: Longman, 1991. Print.
- Davis, Todd F. and Kenneth Womack, eds. *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001. Print.
- Davis, Todd F. and Kenneth Womack. *Postmodern Humanism in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Reconciling the Void*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*. trans and ed. Trifonas, Peter Pericles. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. Print.

- . *Of Grammatology*. trans. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.
- de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.
- . *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Flis, Leonora. *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary Novel*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. ed. Rabinow, Paul. trans. Hurley, Robert et al. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, vol. 1. New York: The New Press, 1997. Print.
- . *Power*. ed. Faubion, James D. trans. Hurley, Robert et al. *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. vol. 3. New York: The New Press, 2000. Print.
- George, Stephen K, ed. *Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. Print.
- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millenium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- Gregory, Marshall W. "Redefining Ethical Criticism: The Old vs. the New". *Journal of Literary Theory* 4.2 (2010): 273-301. Scholar's Portal.
- Heinze, Rudiger. *Ethics of Literary Forms in Contemporary American Literature*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005. eBook.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.
- Jonsen, Albert R., Stephen Toulmin. *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.
- Mangueneau, Dominique. "Literature and discourse analysis". *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia: International Journal of Linguistics* 42.1 (2010): 147-158. Taylor and Francis Online.

- Mangueneau, Dominique. *Le discours littéraire: paratropie et scène d'énonciation*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2004. Print.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987. Print.
- Miller, Carolyn R. "Genre as Social Action". *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151-176. *Jstor*.
- Moretti, Franco, ed. *The Novel*. vol 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Print.
- Newton, Adam Zachary. *Narrative Ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Print.
- Plett, Heinrich F. *Literary Rhetoric: Concepts—Structures—Analyses*. trans. Scholz, Myra, and Klaus Klein. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010. Print.
- Posner, Richard A. *Law and Literature*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. Print.
- Rabinow, Paul, ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. Print.
- Rueckert, William H. *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1963. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 2003 ed. New York: Vintage, 1978. Print.
- Su, John J. *Imagination and the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.
- Trigger, Bruce. *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986. Print.
- Weaver, Richard. *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Davis: Hermagoras Press, 1985. Print.
- Wyatt, David. *Secret Histories: Reading Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Print.