



## REVIEW

### Book Reviews

*William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion*, Christopher K. Coffman, Daniel Lukes (eds.), Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016. xvi + 366pp

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It is expected, and therefore not noteworthy, that critical companions come with some introductory throat-clearing, arguing the importance of their subject matter and how it warrants the publication of such a volume, or the need to expand upon the existing literature, fill in gaps, or move it in heretofore unexplored directions. What is noteworthy in this instance is how much space this throat-clearing takes up in this (highly recommended) volume's preface (by Larry McCaffery) and its introduction (by Christopher K. Coffman). Because while, as Theophilus Savvas suggests, '[being] the first significant volume on the author, *A Critical Companion* is a landmark in Vollmann scholarship',<sup>1</sup> the book itself is very interested in asking why this should be.

McCaffery immediately refers to 'an almost inexplicable lack of extended critical commentary about Vollmann's work' (xiv). At first glance, this is not a contentious statement: the notion that Vollmann is undervalued has long accompanied him, and there is some truth to it, even if we are slowly approaching a point where it can no longer be said to apply. But McCaffery adds that:

'...Vollmann's works have [not] been entirely neglected – his books have been regularly (and mostly favourably) reviewed; there's been the occasional article in scholarly journals and features in the Sunday supplements; and he's received his fair share of awards...' (xiv)

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<sup>1</sup> 'William T. Vollmann: *A Critical Companion* ed. by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (review).' *College Literature* 42: 4 (2015): 728–730.

The issue therefore seems to be, not that Vollmann is a relatively obscure figure, but that, as Coffmann notes, ‘recognition seem[s] not to have kept pace with his achievements’ (1–2). The *Companion* aims then, not to present Vollmann as worthy of *some* attention, but to attest to ‘the remarkable significance of... Vollmann’s contributions to American literature’ and to ‘rectif[y]... the extremes present in too many of the published evaluations’ of his work (‘spitting vitriol or drooling fandom’)(1). It is in this context that McCaffery and Coffmann rehearse the ‘obvious explanations’ for the ‘disparity’ between the work and the attention it has received (xiv).

McCaffery begins by suggesting that ‘some readers are made uncomfortable by Vollmann’s graphic treatment of violence and sexuality’ (xv) while Coffmann notes that ‘[e]ven the best scholarly criticism and belletristic assessments seem incapable of proceeding without at least a glancing reference to Vollmann as a subject who lends himself to sensationalism’ (10). Vollmann’s unsparing depictions of violence and sexuality can indeed prove an insurmountable hurdle for readers, but it is worth asking whether his preoccupation with marginalized groups (Native Americans, ‘illegal immigrants’, drug users, sex workers, etc.) raises multiple issues regarding representation, appropriation, and privilege that in today’s cultural climate might make some scholars hesitate to write about his work (an issue the *Companion* does not address as directly as it could have). To this could be added the difficulty in Vollmann’s engagement with the Other: as Coffmann rightly notes, Vollmann does not emulate other writers of his generation, presenting us with figures who prove to be ‘like us in essential ways’, but offers instead ‘figures that provoke discomfort while simultaneously demanding engagement. There is neither an assumption of commonality nor one of compatibility...’ (14).

Furthermore, encountering the marginalized, Vollmann appears uninterested in discussions of victimhood or blame (‘other people’s codes, until they tell us otherwise, must be presumed to be good enough for them’).<sup>2</sup> As Melissa Petro argues

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<sup>2</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2003), 3: 122.

in her contribution, Vollmann's work does not for example reinforce the 'notion that sex workers are *either* empowered *or* oppressed' (245). This laudable approach is not however without its dangers, illustrated most clearly in the case of sex work, which brings to the fore what Daniel Lukes calls Vollmann's 'often problematic, sometimes passive-aggressive relationship with feminism' (248); an assessment that slightly understates the extent to which Vollmann's approach can lead him to what seem like indefensible positions. ('I object to the people who call female circumcision female genital mutilation. That's what they want to call it, and they're convinced that it's a hundred percent bad and it should be eradicated no matter what anyone says. It might be true, it might not be true, but I think that sort of thinking is very, very dangerous').<sup>3</sup>

This example can help us appreciate Coffman's 'vitriol or fandom' binary: whether one reflexively wishes to condemn Vollmann for holding 'unpalatable' or 'abhorrent' views (precisely the kind of response his work opposes), or to blithely praise him for his 'daring' (without however interrogating either his thinking or his conclusions – a failure the work itself pushes against), it becomes difficult to offer the kind of measured analysis academic enquiry requires. In this sense, the *Companion* does Vollmann Studies a great service, offering complex perspectives on the challenges of *Poor People* (Aaron D. Chandler), *Europe Central* (Bryan M. Santin), *Rising Up and Rising Down* (Okla Elliott, Joshua C. Jensen), *You Bright and Risen Angels* and *The Royal Family* (Joshua C. Jensen).

As to the Vollmann cult of personality: The *Companion* includes a series of 'reflections... by many of [Vollmann's] peers, confidantes, and collaborators' (back cover); a decision taken at least in part, one would assume, to attract Vollmann's non-academic fans. It does not completely avoid the risk of providing more fodder for the cult (Jonathan Franzen agrees to exchange work in progress with Vollmann; starts receiving hundreds-of-pages-long manuscripts every nine months! etc.). But overall, essays such as Mariya Gusev's (Vollmann's Russian interpreter), Carla Bolte's

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<sup>3</sup> 'Vollmann Shares Vision (2000) by Michelle Goldberg', in *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews*, p. 128.

(Vollmann's book designer at Viking, beginning with *Argall*), and Priscilla Juvelis's (on Vollmann's artist's books) provide fascinating insights into how Vollmann's myriad intersecting interests feed into his work.

For McCaffery, the 'main obstacle that has impeded the flow of Vollmann studies has been... the bewildering variety and enormous, intimidating profusion of his literary output to date' (xv). Michael Hemmingson has similarly noted that 'Vollmann has been labelled a postmodernist, metafictionist, contemporary and historical novelist, pornographer, journalist, cultural/social critic, travel writer, and memoirist... [h]e is also an accomplished photographer, engraver, watercolorist, printer, bookbinder, poet, song lyricist, and manufacturer of his own bullets for his pistols'.<sup>4</sup> This is (only) a little hyperbolic, but the fact remains that even Vollmann's most dedicated readers often have a hard time categorizing his work, or discussing it as a corpus: the very wide range of both Vollmann's subject matters and the stylistic and formal devices he utilizes from book to book makes this a challenge.

As a result, the *Companion* also offers a wide range of approaches, under four broad thematic headings: 'Engaging People, Space, and Place', 'Engaging Narratives: History, Historiography, Ethics', 'Power, Sex, and Politics', and 'Methods and Mores: Texts, Paratexts, Aesthetics.' This results in some overlap, but as Savvas notes, the 'framework allows Vollmann's major thematic concerns to be brought to the fore'.<sup>5</sup> It is indeed fascinating to note how essays on works that appear quite dissimilar reveal them to be thematically linked. Savvas uses as an example the discussions on empathy in the pairing of Georg Bauer's essay on Vollmann's sociological works, such as *Poor People, Imperial* and *Rising Up and Rising Down*, and Miles Liebttag's reading of *You Bright and Risen Angels*. An equally interesting example would be that of the discussion of Vollmann as a historical novelist's treatment of the Real in Buell Wisner's essay on *Argall* and Bryan M. Santin's on *Europe Central* (more on this below).

Finally, McCaffery suggests that Vollmann's work 'doesn't slot neatly into any of the paradigms/pigeon holes that critics normally rely on' (xv). There are indeed

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<sup>4</sup> William T. Vollmann: *A Critical Study and Seven Interviews*, p. 67, and endnote 1 to Chapter 7 (p. 193).

<sup>5</sup> Savvas, *ibid.*

significant difficulties here: for example, as a historical novelist Vollmann is often assumed to be borrowing from and updating writers such as Pynchon and John Barth. While early on such comparisons may have been valid,<sup>6</sup> they have become increasingly misleading: as Wisner suggests while discussing *Argall* in relation to novels such as *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Mason & Dixon*, 'the function of Vollmann's pastiche seems significantly different' (102). And this is the crux of the matter, especially in the case of the *Seven Dreams* sequence, probably the defining project of Vollmann's career.

Critical reaction to the sequence has been muted; even critics who have championed Vollmann's work have often seemed uncertain as to how to discuss it. Robert Rebein, having suggested that the *Seven Dreams* 'could go down as the most significant contribution to our literature since Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha series', notes only that so far they 'have been more or less respectfully ignored, and this is perhaps as it should be, given their length, difficulty, and the overall project's radical state of incompleteness'.<sup>7</sup> The project's state of incompleteness is certainly a legitimate reason for caution. But citing the novels' 'length' and 'difficulty' is tantamount to an admission that scholars have been hard-pressed to know what to make of them, at least in terms of existing theoretical approaches; and understandably so, for, on the one hand, it seems evident that the *Seven Dreams* cannot be discussed strictly within the context provided by classic approaches to postmodern fiction such as Fredric Jameson's, Brian McHale's and Linda Hutcheon's, while on the other, Amy J. Elias' 'metahistorical romance' approach, while getting closest to the core of Vollmann's method, doesn't fully account for his very unusual (for a 'postmodernist') relationship with irony and the Real.<sup>8</sup>

It is in developing this conversation that the *Companion* provides two of its highlights: Wisner's essay on *Argall* and Santin's on *Europe Central*. Wisner contends that *Seven Dreams* 'is perhaps most remarkable for its efforts to advance the historical

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<sup>6</sup> See Tom Leclair's 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.1 (1996): 12-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky (2001) p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Vollmann's sixth writing 'rule': 'We should believe that truth exists.' ('American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease', in *Expelled from Eden*, p. 330).

novel beyond [the] postmodernist phase' (101), and that Vollmann's goal is 'similar to that of the classic historical novel and the realist historicism that underpinned it: to show human life as deriving out of social-historical conditions' (102). Wisner argues that in order to achieve this Vollmann employs a 'textual' or 'historically inflected literalism' (102, 104) that 'represents a new kind of realism, or hyper-realism, which suggests both the inherent dangers and the continued validity of the textual model in relation to the socio-historical real' (104).

This is a bold claim, but one that this reviewer finds convincing, especially when Wisner notes that Vollmann 'employs the insights and techniques of postmodernist fiction, while retaining little of the existential or political anti-historicism that permeates the so-called historiographic metafiction of earlier postmodernists' (104) and goes on to make a case for Vollmann's 'hope for a recuperation of the historical real' (109).

This becomes particularly interesting when read next to Santin's analysis of the 'Clean Hands' chapter of *Europe Central*. Santin suggests that '[a]ccording to Vollmann, historical accuracy is not nearly as important as readers' ability to imagine themselves in a particular moral actor's historico-ideological matrix' (143).<sup>9</sup> Santin's discussion of Vollmann's complicated treatment of SS Officer Kurt Gerstein, where the empathetic impulse coexists with 'two different – though intimately related – dimensions of judgment': a moral actor's 'ability to judge his own actions within his unique historical situation', and 'our ability as non-participants in [the actor's] Wittgensteinian "form of life", to judge [his] actions from a later historical perspective' (150).

It is instructive to consider this in light of Vollmann's attempt to manifest these 'dimensions of judgment' in the *Seven Dreams*, by simultaneously 'simulating the "actual" past world... through a system of textual icons' (Wisner, 104) and

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<sup>9</sup> The seeming contradiction between Wisner's 'recuperation of the historical real' and Santin's assertion that Vollmann is not primarily interested in 'historical accuracy' is not as problematic as it may appear. For Vollmann, there is a distinction to be made between historical accuracy and historical truth – for a very useful discussion of the ideas of 'symbolic history' and 'syncretic truth' in Vollmann's work, see Theophilus Savvas' "A long list of regrettable actions": William T. Vollmann's Symbolic History', in *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK (2011): 95–123.

introducing the later perspective in the form of the 'Vollmann'/'William the Blind' persona/narrator. For while *Europe Central* initially seems to be a more 'conventional' historical novel than the *Seven Dreams*, it is finally motivated by the same moral, philosophical and literary considerations: as Santin astutely observes, Vollmann's statement that with *Europe Central* 'the goal... was to write a series of parables about... European actors at moments of decision'<sup>10</sup> reveals a deep affinity with his aim 'to create a "Symbolic History"' in *Seven Dreams*.<sup>11</sup> This reviewer for one will be very interested in future scholarly responses to these views, and to the wider conversations this valuable *Companion* will hopefully spark.

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<sup>10</sup> William T. Vollmann, *Europe Central* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 753.

<sup>11</sup> William T. Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt* (New York, Viking, 1990), p. 397.

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