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William Vollmann's Burqa

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William Vollmann's career exemplifies the importance of the historical moment in the life of a writer. It is hard to imagine his writing temporally outside the very specific circumstances of the last thirty years, a context that has shaped his work's hectic, cosmopolitan energy. Born in 1959, Vollmann is a writer of the 1980s and 1990s, an author who witnessed the emergence of a radically-globalized world. Vollmann's fascination with central and eastern Europe (as in the 2005 fiction, *Europe Central*) looks back to the Cold War; but the insistent non-Western focus in much of his reportage and storytelling, as in *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992) and *Poor People* (2008), the subjects of this paper, heralds a new stage of literary globalism. The end of the Cold War, a newly-energized globalization, and the 'crumbling' (in Don DeLillo's phrase) of one culture into another: more than any American writer, Vollmann has been shaped by tectonic global transformations, the 'chaotic situation in the world-system' diagnosed by political scientist Immanuel Wallerstein.¹ There is a restlessness to his writing, a volatility of form and setting that fits the contemporary tu-

1. 'This is the empirical description of a chaotic situation in the world-system. What can we expect in such a situation? The first thing to emphasize is that we can expect, we are already seeing, wild fluctuations in all the institutional arenas of the world-system. The world-economy is subject to acute speculative pressures, which are escaping the control of major financial institutions and control bodies, such as central banks. A high degree of violence is erupting everywhere in smaller and larger doses, and over relatively long periods. No one has any longer the power to shut down such eruptions effectively. The moral constraints traditionally enforced both by states and by religious institutions are finding their efficacy considerably diminished.' Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 87. It is worth emphasizing that this book was published four years before the onset of the 2008 global credit crisis.

mult. Crucially, his imaginative movement out of the United States has not been confined by the already-established pattern of expatriate movement to Europe. Unlike the writer-adventurers of the 50s and 60s, Vollmann is uninterested in Western Europe (though Eastern and Central Europe fascinate him). His work shares certain affinities with the Beatnik travels of Paul Bowles or William Burroughs in its engagement with non-Western cultures. But while their sense of the exotic led primarily to the international enclave in Tangiers, Vollmann pushes heterocosmically into a range of territories: Southeast Asia, the frozen North of the Arctic, Belize and Guatemala.

Yet he remains a U.S. resident: his is not the writing of the sojourner or white settler but of what I would call an 'encounterist.' An encounterist is a writer with an ethnographer's fascination for the foreign. Travel writing works in a zone shaped by forms of local color discourse, and carries with it a historical debt to the picturesque, but encounterism has more affinities with political reportage. In post-war American literary culture, the great encounterist was Richard Wright, whose three 1950s travel books (*The Color Curtain*, *Pagan Spain* and *Black Power*) demonstrated the prescient power of transnational reportage. Encounterism is about the encounter itself; it is a discourse of meetings, conversations, face-to-face intimacies. The encounterist text is typically a patchwork, held together by the presence of the traveler (hence its formalistic links to memoir and autobiography). Vollmann's is a teeming, hectic, turbulent cosmopolitan globe. People, in sheer numbers, are everywhere in his writing: encounters come quickly now, at the start of the new century.

Vollmann published *An Afghanistan Picture Show* in 1992, three years after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and a full ten years after his trip to central Asia. He explored Afghanistan and Pakistan as an American idealist, an advocate of 'freedom' and a sympathetic observer of tribal cultures and Islamic idealism.² In the most direct sense, this is a text subject to the ironic re-reading that historical change will then bring about -- a document inserted into a radical, ongoing pro-

2. In an interview published in *Salon* just after 9/11, Vollmann continued to defend the Mujahideen.

'They were my heroes ... I thought it was terrific the way they got their country back.' 'Creating 'many, many Osamas,' *Salon*, September 28, 2001, <http://www.salon.com/books/int/2001/09/27/vollmann/print.html>

cess of historical flux. Note the important transitions and stages in Vollmann's encounters with Afghanistan: the first encounter with the news of the Soviet invasion in 1979; his field trip at the start of the 80s; the return to America, and the comic, failed attempts to raise awareness about the Mujahideen; then the book's publication in 1992. The text is retrospective, but points forward in time; its many contradictions and paradoxes shift their ground, becoming signs for the future meanings of Afghanistan in American culture. Eighteen years after its publication, and more than thirty years after the Soviets made their incursion, the book's ragged, mobile texture has allowed certain insights, scenarios and passages to gain in significance, while other passages have receded in their analytic power.

Vollmann traveled to Afghanistan seeking adventure, and in a spirit of youthful, internationalist idealism – an idealism invoked and mocked throughout the book. The text is overtly Twain-esque in its blend of picaresque comedy, self-promotion, its rambling and digressive structure. Twain can be heard, too, in the comic invocation and undermining of didactic, moral purposefulness. The book begins with this 'Advertisement for the Revision,' dated 1989:

Ten years ago, when Soviet troops were airlifted to Kabul, the radio spoke in shocked tones. This afternoon it seemed to me somewhat reconciled, for the invaders were now called 'government spokesmen,' and the Afghans had become 'Muslim extremists.' As for me, during this decade I have thought much on Afghanistan and accomplished nothing; and so the Young Man has become the Thirty Years' Bore. This work for its part has been similarly revised, ossified and prissified. I hope that it is still honest nonetheless. And I pray that this record of my failures may somehow in its negative way help somebody.³ (xv)

The twisting, turning Preface to the work of American internationalist writing: Vollmann is not the only writer to begin his record in such a way. The Preface to Dave Eggers's *What is the What* stakes out a similarly complex rhetorical position as Eggers negotiates his way to be the author of a story which is not his, and which is a 'real life' narrative presented nevertheless as a novel. Why Vollmann should want

3. William T. Vollmann, *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), xv. Future references are given in the text.

to sound so flummoxed, so assertive yet self-denying (the 'record of my failures' working in a 'negative way') is a question with rhetorical and political implications. For Vollmann, recent political history itself now has a self-consuming quality. The invaders are now 'government spokesmen'; the Mujahideen, whom the West assists, now 'Muslim extremists.' Vollmann's reflections in *An Afghanistan Picture Show* demonstrate the creative writer's imaginative response to a world of 'blowback', a world where enemies become friends, good intentions run sour, resistance become terror. Vollmann later cites a CIA officer who tells him that 'fanatics make good fighters'.

The 'advertisement' for 'failures' (the play on Mailer is clear) is a way to foreground the author's own responsibilities (and his failures to live up to them). Vollmann presents himself as the 'Young Man': earnest, committed, and naïve. He hopes his work will be of value; when asked by his father about the trip, he notes: 'I meant to be good, and was prepared to do good' (24). He is 'the Young Man', the 'proud, great and Yankee come to help the Third World'(30). 'And the Young Man, slightly light-headed with fever, suddenly understood his role as an American: to accept responsibility for everything' (56). Vollmann shares with Dave Eggers an abiding, ironic and sometimes anguished sense of U.S. agency in a globalized world. The West, especially the United States, has all this power and wealth (for the moment): what can be done with it? Can the world be made a better place? Thus the madcap global altruism of Egger's *You Shall Know our Velocity!* One hears in Vollmann's sentences a missionary idealism, but also a self-ironizing perspective. 'After all, what could he have done? — A book, maybe, or a slide show, or a radio show, or sale of his photographs on the street, or mailing campaigns to libraries or churches, or fund-raising booths? — Later, he tried every single one of these'(79).

These self-characterizations help to frame and contextualize Vollmann's gaze, as he looks at women in the Burqa and the chador . The book has an extraordinarily insistent emphasis on sight and seeing, an emphasis that begins with the dustjacket, with its image of bespectacled Vollmann gazing out at the reader, and inset illustration of the author gazing down at his computer. In the book's most critical passage, a condensed and dream-like vignette of American interventionism refracted through the act of photography, Vollmann finally imag-

ines the veil being lifted. 'I must take photographs of Afghan women,' he writes, 'Otherwise, American women might think that Afghans are sexist (wouldn't *that* be wrong?) and not want to help them' (116):

'The woman crouches miserably in the sand like a dark bird. Her husband comes forward, balling his fists at me, and the administrator puts a hand on his chest and pushes him back. He stands there looking at me. We are surrounded by people – the woman, the administrator and I – all of them standing and looking at me. The administrator speaks to the woman rapidly and fiercely. Everyone is murmuring and watching my face. The woman removes her veil. She will not look at me. I see her cheeks, her mouth. Her unbound hair. I move to one side and raise my camera. I believe I am taking good pictures. – Afterward, the administrator goes to speak with her husband, who finally comes forward. – 'Dera miraboni,' he says to me. Thank you very much. – We shake hands.' (117)

The reader of *Anthropology Quarterly* (2002) might have been reminded of this Western attention. In a layered discussion, Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood turned to the impact of Taliban policies on Afghanistan's rural women. They noted that 'even though Taliban policies had made conditions much worse for urban women, they did not substantially affect the lives of the vast majority of rural women either because many of the Taliban edicts already mirrored facts of rural life, or because these edicts were never enforced.' The co-authors went on: 'Sensitive writers documenting the catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan have occasionally pointed this out. For example, an article published in the *New Yorker* noted that just outside of the urban centers, "one sees raised paths subdividing wheat fields ... in which men and women work together and the women rarely wear the burka; indeed, since they are sweating and stooping so much, their heads often remain uncovered. The Taliban has scarcely altered the lives of uneducated women, except to make them almost entirely safe from rape."⁴ This 'sensitive' writer, they noted, found that 'life for the majority of Afghans had become considerably safer.'⁵

4. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, 'Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency,' *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2002), 339-54: 346.

5. William Vollmann, Letter from Afghanistan, 'Across the Divide,' *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2000, 58.

Who was this writer? It was Vollmann, whose 2000 *New Yorker* piece, 'Letter from Afghanistan: Across the Divide', finds its way into *Anthropology Quarterly* as a form of fieldwork testimony. Hirschkind and Mahmood seek to problematize the 'meaning of the veil', showing how its significance shifts across and even within cultures: Vollmann's work is vital evidence of divergent social practice even within Taliban-led Afghanistan. Vollmann's own fieldwork had led him to a monitoring of difference, divergence and ambiguity. His relentless emphasis upon, and exploration of, the faculty of sight finds an echo in this anthropological account. The authors, indeed, end their argument with an explicit call to view, to see, in a different way: 'Our ability to respond, morally and politically, in a responsible way to these forms of violence will depend on extending these powers of sight.'⁶ What we witness here is a sense that the veil is multivalent in ways many Western viewers fail to appreciate. A form of super-sensitive, ethnographic, 'thick' viewing might allow these cultural variations to emerge, making complex (and more dialogic) an initial encounter that seemed to end only with blockage: the Western viewer staring at the veil, unable to read its meaning, then recoiling into a series of established hermeneutic positions about its significance.⁷

Vollmann's 2007 work of reportage, *Poor People*, continued his journeys into a global imaginary of marginality and poverty. As with most of his books, *Poor People* moves backwards and forwards in time, recording a series of encounters in staggeringly-disparate global settings, from post-bubble Tokyo through the slums of Thailand to the remote terrain of central Asia (Kazakhstan) and domestic scenarios of American destitution. *Poor People* is, literally, what it says it is: a se-

6. Hirschkind and Mahmood, 353.

7. Another recent commentator, Gillian Whitlock, has argued that the circulation and reception of 'life narratives' from Afghanistan has often marginalized the significance of the burqa as a site for resistance to the Taliban. Often, 'The image of the veiled woman in particular is a powerful trope which both invokes this passive Third World subject, and enables and sustains the discursive self-presentation of Western women as secular, liberated, individual agents.' As she notes, some Afghan women used the burqa to smuggle within its folds messages and banned publications for domestic consumption, and used it to record and smuggle out evidence of Taliban repression. Gillian Whitlock, 'The Skin of the Burqa: Recent Life Narratives from Afghanistan,' *Biography* 28.1 (Winter 2005), 53-76: 57.

ries of encounters with the world's impoverished. The text carries a form of theoretical apparatus: the insertion into the narrative of extended quotations from, and references to, political commentary on poverty by figures from Adam Smith to Karl Marx and then contemporary social theorists. Again we can see that Vollmann is working within the reportage matrix pioneered by Richard Wright, whose 1950s travel books drew extensively on analytic models from social and political science. For Vollmann, as for Wright in *Pagan Spain* and *The Color Curtain*, these materials establish a carefully foregrounded argumentative architecture which frames the encounter. Each of *Poor People's* chapters focuses on an intimate encounter between the author (and his interpreters) and the global wretched. Each encounter — the annotation drawn using a similar template to 1991's *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs* — is specifically dated and placed. Vollmann's method has the particularism, precision and ethnographic specificity of a field report.

Yet there is something recurrently disturbing about these images, especially the sense of violation they signal to some readers. The photographs in *Poor People*, all taken by Vollmann, are often of women and children. The poor sometimes look away, shield their eyes, seem to flinch in the face of the camera, or have their hands reached out in apparent entreaty. In a graduate class, many of my students confessed to feelings of discomfort or disgust at Vollmann's intrusion into the lives of others (even outrage that the book had been chosen in the first place). In a particularly unsettling series of images, two Afghan women stand before a ruined wall. Above them, clearly visible, stands a white 'x' (made with chalk, on a ruined building), which seems to reveal the sheer manipulation of the photographic process, as if these individuals have been asked to pose, quite precisely, beneath the mark. The processes of power and exploitation are almost too immediate; but it is difficult to gauge whether Vollmann is deliberately revealing the processes of power that underpin his work. If we read these images as devices to make visible the processes of representation, does the revelatory mode make his work more palatable, or excuse his behavior? After all, Vollmann is a writer who has always been open — brazen indeed — about his relationships with developing world prostitutes. But does the confession of exploitation remove or defray the cost of exploitation? I am also reminded of one of

Sontag's points about photography: that the dignity of shielding the dead, injured or the suffering from the camera's gaze is usually accorded to the rich or those from the global North. 'The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying.'⁸ Vollmann deals with poverty, not death, in this volume, but he creates a unsettlingly ecumenical map of poverty by placing the poor of the global South alongside, for instance, a homeless couple in Florida. On the other hand, the Florida couple seem to 'address' the camera, to stare it down – as if possessing an agency not available to non-Westerners.⁹

By and large, the non-Western selves that become the object of Vollmann's photographic gaze are isolated, or (occasionally) formed into a diptych of parent and child. In what seems a quasi 'classic' modelling of cultural and social otherness, the subjects are isolated for the camera, cut off from the bustle and impoverished conviviality of the slum and then framed in individualized personhood.¹⁰ There is something conspicuously missing from these still lives: a sense of connection, network, community. What strikes many recent Western investigators of the South's slums is exactly this connectivity: a sheer social energy and creativity that richer societies can learn from. In a telling summary of this strand of thought, ecologist and futurist Stew-

8. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 70. Sontag points out that the exotic performance of exhibiting the suffering colonized subject can be traced back over centuries – see Trinculo's realization in *The Tempest* that Caliban could be exhibited in just this way in England: 'When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian' (II.ii.31-33).

9. Contrast the images numbered 58, 59 and 60 (of women in Afghanistan and Pakistan) to 9 ('Couple who lived near the toilet,' from a series entitled 'Homeless camp under the freeway, Miami, 1994'). *Poor People* (New York: 2007), no page given.

10. It is instructive to compare Vollmann's camera work with that of professional photographer Fazal Sheikh. Sheikh's images from East African refugee camps and 1990s Afghanistan/Pakistan contain many more group shots, and also gather the viewed together in ways where the affective or relational bonds between participants (a hand held, a glance) are as significant as the implied relationship with the lens. Sheikh, too, includes wide angle landscape shots, for instance of Kabul before the Taliban conquest in 1996 or of refugee camps (seen from water towers), which create a broader sense of place and context for his figures. 'Photographs by Faizal Sheikh,' *Triquarterly* 131 (2008), 129-56.

art Brand has held up the global slum as a model for 'green' community and urbanism, a vision of a twenty-first century society. 'But the squatter cities are *vibrant* ... This is urban life at its most intense. It is social capital at its richest, because everybody in a slum neighborhood knows everybody else intimately, whether they want to or not.'¹¹

Vollmann's own globalist writings repeatedly and thrillingly capture exactly this sense of vibrancy, for instance in the teeming worlds within our world of *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs*. So a larger, final concluding point might be that to examine Vollmann's travel narratives is to encounter the crucial representational difference between a *written* and a *visualized* globalism. This is one of the key features of much recent writing about travel and transnationalism. In fact, many contemporary globalist writers make the negotiation between word and image the centrepiece of recent narrative – here I'm thinking of Eggers's extensive use of photographs in *Zeitoun* (2009), or Geoff Dyer's meditations on photography and travel and India in *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varinasi* (2009), or the use of photo-essays alongside reportage and fiction in journals such as *Granta*, *Triquarterly*, *Guernica* or *Transition*. In an age increasingly dominated by accelerated global integration, and by the proliferation of visual technologies, reportage and the writing of travel will increasingly become poly-media, combined and spliced together with photographs and soon, one suspects, moving images.

11. Stewart Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto* (New York: Viking, 2009), 36. Brand makes an electrifying case for the slum paradigm, 25-73. Brand builds on sources such as Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (New York: Routledge, 2004), and a self-help website focused on the global South, Shack/Slum Dwellers International: <http://www.sdinet.co.za/>. See also David Harvey's essay on the resilience of cities: 'The City as a Body Politic,' in Jane Schneider and Ida Susser, eds., *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 25-44.