

Françoise Palteau-Papin (ed.)

# Under Fire

William T. Vollmann,  
*The Rifles: A Critical Study*



This study of a novel by William T. Vollmann offers a port of entry into his fiction. Like other titles from his planned “Seven Dreams” collection, *The Rifles* deconstructs the historical novel. Following in the steps of the nineteenth-century English explorer John Franklin, the contemporary American character Subzero risks his life in the Arctic, looking for a way to transcend the history of colonization and his personal limitations. He ventures out on the permafrost of his memory, both private and collective, haunted by history as he revisits the Gothic genre. Deploying the poetry of an anachronistic errand into the white wilderness of snow and ice, in the wake of Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab and Edgar Allan Poe’s Arthur Gordon Pym, the narrator plays with avatars of the author as an explorer, a historian, a cartographer and a sketch-artist to encounter otherness, whether Inuit women or men, or fellow travelers who exchange with the authorial figure in his search for meaning. This critical analysis uses close-reading, ecocriticism, cultural studies and comparative literature to examine an innovative novel of the post-postmodern canon, by one of the finest contemporary American authors.

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*The Rifles: A Critical Study*



**PETER LANG**

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# Contents

FRANÇOISE PALLEAU-PAPIN

Introduction.....	11
1. A Californian Balzac.....	11
2. Close Reading .....	14
3. <i>The Rifles</i> .....	17
4. Deconstructing History .....	18
5. A Note on the Text.....	23

CATHERINE LANONE

Chapter I: From Franklin's <i>Narrative</i> to Vollmann's EcoGothic Metafiction.....	25
1. Threshold.....	27
2. Revisiting the Narrative of Exploration's Visual <i>Topoi</i> .....	28
3. Smashing Chronology .....	33
4. From Hero to Death Drive.....	35
5. Lead Poisoning: From Postmodern to EcoGothic Novel .....	42

VINCENT BUCHER

Chapter II: Putting Historical Enquiry to the Test.....	55
1. Reading, Advocacy and Dream .....	56
2. A Thwarted Desire for History.....	59
3. The Primacy of Fiction.....	64
4. The Documentary Impulse as Narrative Resource.....	70
5. Giving up on Enquiry to Lose One's Self in a Quest .....	74
6. The Dream of History .....	80

FRANÇOISE PALLEAU-PAPIN

Chapter III: Composition as Infinity .....	83
1. Incipit Sentence of <i>The Rifles</i> .....	85
2. "Spindle Diagram" of Vollmann's Incipit.....	87
3. Heliocentric Polarity.....	89

4. Organizing Fragments .....	93
5. Echoing Structures in Other Works.....	95
6. Conclusion: Epistemological Composition, Aporetical Composition? .....	99

#### SOPHIE CHAPUIS

Chapter IV: Narrative Voices .....	101
1. Vollmann's Metamorphoses .....	104
2. A Polyphonic Novel in Four Voices.....	108
3. The Politics of the Narrative System.....	113
4. Conclusion.....	118

#### MADELEINE LAURENCIN

Chapter V: Female Characters: Between Role and Representation.....	121
1. An Impressionistic Approach to Women.....	124
2. All the Roads Lead to the Metaphor: the Role of Women .....	131
3. A Literary Creation in Relief: Reepah the Inuk .....	138
4. Conclusion.....	142

#### CHRISTINE LORRE-JOHNSTON

Chapter VI: Generic Hybridity .....	145
1. Les derniers rois de Thulé / The Last Kings of Thule: Anthropological Narrative.....	149
2. <i>Passage to Juneau</i> : Travel Narrative .....	154
3. A Discovery of Strangers: Historical Novel.....	159

#### FRANÇOISE PALLEAU-PAPIN

Postface .....	167
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Bibliography.....	169
1. Works of William T. Vollmann .....	169
2. Critical Sources on William T. Vollmann .....	172
3. Theory and General Criticism.....	174
4. Other Works of Fiction, Travel and Exploration Narratives.....	177

Authors.....	179
Cover Photograph.....	181
Index of Names .....	183
Index of Notions .....	185



## Introduction

### 1. A Californian Balzac

William T. Vollmann may be considered a Californian Balzac. Not only does he favor historical fiction, which he deconstructs in the way Balzac remodelled Walter Scott's historical novel, but he also aims at representing a society in its entirety. His works fashion a world-book, in which each volume presents a facet of a vast, panoramic view of History and of the violence one people may inflict upon another. He is concerned by how both the past and poverty weigh upon people. Each of his works may be read separately, like a variation upon a common theme, but one gets a better grasp of his scope and the cumulative power of his novels when they are read together. A master of paradox and irresolution, he both presents and eschews the question of historical heritage. He attempts to take stock of individual responsibility in the decisions we make (or don't make) to perpetuate or to impede the consequences of the past. He has publically spoken for the right to carry a weapon and has justified violence in the case of self-defense. One of his novels is entitled *The Rifles*, the plural noun encapsulating the tensions between principle and action. *The Rifles* takes up an American argument as analyzed by Tony Tanner in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. Deerslayer, the hero of Cooper's five "Leatherstocking Tales", carries an emblematic rifle. Summarizing the contradiction between myth and fact, when Deerslayer leans on his rifle, he "disturbs" the natural countryside around him, as much as he makes it his by naming it. As he brings into the wilderness the sign of man's violence, he wounds nature more irremediably than by naming it with authority: "For bullets, even more than names, are 'disturbances' of nature. And no amount of passive poetic wonder at nature's scenes can either conceal, or compensate,

for that. The ‘poet’ leans on his rifle: the rifle deranges the poetry.”<sup>1</sup> Vollmann explores such disturbances, such derangements between art and ideology in his novel.

Vollmann illustrates the consequences of introducing firearms and capitalist economy into Inuit society. The fur trade made Inuit dependent on the colonizers who sold them rifles and controlled the market, while the caribou, the last remnant of an autonomous local economy, was wiped out in unprecedented hunts. If the past haunts the present to the point of being inseparable from it, nevertheless Vollmann frames a photographic encounter in the present.<sup>2</sup> The questions he raises in his non fiction works and his philosophical and historical enquiries also appear in his historical fiction, in a more poetic than discursive manner. Our purposes here are to analyze his poetics and to understand the ideological tenets his fiction relies on.

Like Balzac, Vollmann is a prolific writer. Born in 1959, he has managed to fill several bookshelves in only a few decades. Some of his oversized endeavors, like his reflections on violence, have been published both in full, all seven volumes of it in a large box, and in an abbreviated version totaling 734 pages. More often averse to concision, he refuses editors’ cuts. On all occasions, his laid-back informality combined with his perfect courtesy makes his determination all the more powerful. He preferred to accept a cut in his royalties rather than to allow a cut in his 780-page novel *The Royal Family*. That novel rewrites Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, exploring the San Francisco underworld as a figure of Dante’s Inferno. It plunges into abjection and masochistic servility, understood as the ultimate gift of the self, with no other possible redemption than the ironic transformation of the protagonist into a ghost<sup>3</sup>. Vollmann is famous for his sense of provocation, his desire to show the hidden side of polite behavior when it is only decorative and inauthentic. He likes to lay the heart bare of the protective layers of convention. Moreover, his

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1 Tanner, *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men*, p. 7.

2 Such encounters have been studied in other writers; see Regard (ed.), *De Drake à Chatwin : rhétoriques de la découverte*, p. 11 sqq.

3 Palteau-Papin, “A Pilgrim’s Progress to Slab City in *The Royal Family* by William T. Vollmann.”

relationships with his editors have become the stuff of legend.<sup>4</sup> His letters to his editors have been published either as prefaces or in the book-length study Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson have devoted to his works: *Expelled from Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader* (McCaffery and Hemmingson: 311 *et seq.*). In one letter, Vollmann thanks Paul Slovak for having authorized him not to cut through his long novels. Not without humor and self-irony, he enumerates the great books of the canon that matter by their size as well as their quality, such as *Remembrance of Things Past*, *War and Peace*, or *Moby-Dick*. He reminds Slovak that he could win the greatest literary prize, proclaiming himself “a bleeding-hearted un-deleter – and potential Nobel Prize Winner” (McCaffery and Hemmingson: 319). He concludes insincerely, guaranteeing that his next novel would be much shorter, which was not the case at all (*Argall* totals 747 pages). If the editors went along with his demands, it is probably both because they realized that the bulk of his output and its heterogeneity did not lessen its literary quality, and also that the sheer bulk of his novels generates his own cult. The full edition of *A History of Violence* was bought out almost from the time of its printing, and can be found at an expensive price on the second-hand book market. Vollmann also fascinates because of his eclectic capacities; in barely thirty years, he has written fiction that ranged from science-fiction to historical novels, as well as philosophical essays and journalism, in the course of his world-wide investigations.

If his works are the subject of many articles, so far only few book-length studies have been published in English. Michael Hemmingson was the first to publish a scholarly study on Vollmann, which offers a general introduction to his works: *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews*. The current study, on its first publication in France (in French), was the second critical volume, concentrating on one historical novel in particular. The third book-length study, *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion*, was published by The University of Delaware Press (in 2015), edited by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes, before another volume of the Seven

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4 Paul Slovak, his editor at Viking's, has had to answer questions from journalists who were impressed by the gigantic size of some of his works.

Dreams series (*The Dying Grass*). As the writer David Markson has remarked with humour in his correspondence, one may fear that Vollmann publishes faster than any scholar of his work, damning any critical study to incompleteness before it sees print: “Are you insane? Before you finish reading half of what he’s written, he’ll publish six more fat books!<sup>5</sup>”. With this addition, we wish to pay homage to the pioneering work of Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson, who have opened the way for Vollmann studies. Our addition is of another kind, as it concentrates on one particular novel to introduce the bulk of Vollmann’s works of historical fiction.

## 2. Close Reading

The authors decided to make the choice of an in-depth study to resist any mimetic fascination for the character of the author, and to resist the temptations of comprehensiveness or survey to which the breadth of his scope might allure devoted readers. We chose to focus our research on a short novel amongst the historical books the author calls the “Seven Dreams” series, although four out of the programmed seven novels have been published to this day. Set in different time frames, these novels describe the colonization of the North-American continent in very different literary terms. In the bulk of Vollmann’s output, which gathers essays, stories, novels and photographs, the so-called “Seven Dreams” series requires a separate study, because it deals with history in fictive terms, and with the encounter between the *homo americanus* and the *homo indigenus*.

To inform his work, the author conducts historical and cultural research that provides time depth and mythical dimension for his exploration of the present times, when he immerses his narrative in Norse sagas to follow in the footsteps of the Vikings who were the first to set foot on the American continent they called Vinland. The series raises the question of the relationship between historical fiction and writing

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5 Letter to Françoise Palleau-Papin, 23 december 2009, uncollected.



about the self, or auto-fiction, in a particular way which we will attempt to analyze.

In Vollmann's historical fiction, we estimate that the two shortest, least repetitive, and most structured novels are the first published in the series, *The Ice-Shirt* (1990), and the one Vollmann calls the "sixth" in the series, *The Rifles*, which is the third published (1994). Between these two, relatively short novels, *Fathers and Crows* was the second in the series, both in terms of historical chronology and in order of publication, as it was published in 1992. Its 990-page length betrays the temptation of exhaustivity the author fell prey to in his narration of the Jesuit colonization of New France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. The third novel in historical order is entitled *Argall*. Published in 2001, it is the fourth and last in the series so far. Throughout its 747 pages, *Argall* imitates Eighteenth-century English, at times with whimsical humour, at times with bitter melancholy, to narrate the story of Pocahontas and John Smith. The colonization of North America is described as the ravishment of a Virginia, the new land of Queen Elizabeth. Here, Vollmann is following the trope of John Donne addressing his mistress as a new found land: "Licence my roaving hands, and let them go,/ Before, behind, between, above, below/ O my America! My new-found-land... (Elegy 19, 25–27).

Among the most concise novels, in which the quality of the writing and the composition seem at their highest, the first work in the series is also the one that goes the farthest back in the chronology of the colonization of North America by people who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean: *The Ice-Shirt* (1990). This novel rewrites the Islandic and Norse myths, and is set mainly in the Ninth and Tenth centuries of our era. Its writing is dense and masterful, somewhat mimetic of the rhythm of the sagas it draws on. Vollmann's opening volume to his own saga of the Western colonization of the North American continent may have been a precursor to Peter Hoeg's 1992 novel *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, which also counters the sterile mythology that Westerners tend to project onto Inuit: "The ethnographers have cast a dream of innocence over North Greenland. A dream that the Inuit will continue to be the bowlegged, drum-dancing, legend-telling, widely smiling exhibition images that the first explorers thought they were meeting south of Qaanaaq at the

turn of the century<sup>6</sup>.” In its idiosyncratic and unique way, Vollmann’s *Ice-Shirt* has contributed to deconstructing Western myths about Inuit. Although anachronistic, its chronology is more linear than in *The Rifles*, and the narrative voices less entangled. For these added complexities, we chose *The Rifles* for the object of our critical study, because its deconstruction of Western mythology mixes history and a time more contemporary to the writing in a more intricate manner. Its composition and its craft have particularly drawn our attention.

The graphic layout of *The Rifles* exemplifies another facet of the author: in his Sacramento studio, Vollmann is also an artist and a photographer, a draftsman and a painter. Depending on the book, he chooses to include photography in his text, as in the collection *The Atlas*, or to publish a volume of photography separately to accompany his text, as with *Imperial*, to tag along the narrative by the same title (both published in 2009). He has also designed original illustrations and artist’s books. In 1993, CoTangent published a limited series of fifteen copies of his collection *Butterfly Stories*; the binding pasted the cover with women’s underwear and butterfly wings, and each copy was illustrated with drawings, monotypes and watercolor paintings. The author personally oversaw to the printing of the text and the monotypes.

In *The Rifles*, drawings and sketches are more numerous than in other novels. A hybrid text, the narrative brings together history and our contemporary world on the one hand, and narrative voices of alterity and of intimacy on the other. It combines several literary genres, alternating between the contemporary, non-fiction travel narrative, and the historical journey, anachronistically concatenating eras in a post-modern fiction that subverts any epistemological rationale. Finally, the text converges with (or diverges from) the images drawn or sketched, in a dialogue between writing and illustration.

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6 Peter Hoeg, *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*, 1992. Trans. Tiina Nunnally, 1993, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993. Ebook edition p. 76.

### 3. *The Rifles*

The novel chosen for this study justifies its generic label of a “dream” from Vollmann’s “Seven-Dream Sequence” because it narrates a hallucinatory perception that constantly wavers between nineteenth-century European travel narrative, a contemporary appropriation of Inuit myths, Western culture, and the intimate story of the narrator, a contemporary figure who is close to the author.

Historically, the novel explains how, by bringing rifles into the Arctic, the White man decimated the caribou and changed the ecosystem, which was one of the factors that upset the life of Inuit. While in the contemporary period, Vollmann leads a sociological enquiry on the consequences the Canadian Government’s relocation policy had on Inuit. His enquiry is not historical, compared to Melanie McGrath’s in *The Long Exile* (2006), for example. However, Vollmann’s novel does allow readers to understand the history of the drama that befell the indigenous population; this is achieved through the inclusion of the paratext at the end of the novel. In 1953, mainly for political reasons and to claim that the northern ends of Canada were populated, Inuit were forced to remove from Inukjak (or Port Harrison) in Quebec, to Resolute, on Cornwallis Island, and to Craig Harbour, on Ellesmere Island, both locations being much further North in the Polar Circle. According to the precisely documented chronology, provided at the end of the volume (371–372), nineteen families were relocated between 1953 and 1957. Moreover, the Inuit traditional way of life was further upset in the 1960s, when compulsory schooling turned the semi-nomadic population into a sedentary one. After they were displaced and their ancestral traditions had disappeared, Inuit could neither go on hunting in such northern lands, nor adapt to modern life, because of the high unemployment rates in their new region. From an autonomous people, who saved English explorers that were ill-adapted to the polar cold, they had become an impoverished people, both culturally and economically, as the novel shows.

Dates matter: Vollmann’s novel was published in 1994, but was written before 1991, that is to say, before the descendants and survivors of the displaced Inuit families took the Government to court in Ottawa