



Enthymema XXIII 2019

## The Sentence Is Most Important: Styles of Engagement in William T. Vollmann's Fictions

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**Abstract** – William T. Vollmann frequently asserts that his ideal reader will appreciate the functionality and beauty of his sentences. This article begins by taking such claims seriously, and draws on both literary and rhetorical stylistics to explore some of the many ways that his texts answer to his intention to find “the right sentence for the right job.” In particular, this article argues that Vollmann’s stylistic decisions are most notable when they most directly satisfy his effort to produce texts that foster empathetic knowledge, serve truth, resist abusive power, and encourage charitable action. Extended close analyses of passages from an early and from a mid-career text (*The Rainbow Stories* and *Europe Central*) illustrate Vollmann’s consistency across two decades of his career regarding choices in the areas of figuration (including schemes and tropes of comparison, repetition, balance, naming, and amplification), grammar, deixis, allusion, and other compositional strategies. Particular attention is paid to passages that display the stylistic mechanisms underlying Vollmann’s negotiation of his texts’ moral qualities, including both the moral content of the worlds represented in the texts, and the moral responsibility the texts bear with regard to their audience. The results of my analyses demonstrate that Vollmann typically prioritizes openness, critique, and dialogue not only in terms of incident and character, but also on the scale of the phrase, clause, and sentence. Ultimately, this article shows how Vollmann’s sentences serve his declared intentions and allow readers to recognize compatibilities between Vollmann’s works and the characteristic features of post-postmodernist writing in general.

**Keywords** –William T. Vollmann; Style; Contemporary American fiction.

Coffman, Christopher K. “The Sentence Is Most Important: Styles of Engagement in William T. Vollmann’s Fictions.” *Enthymema*, no. XXIII, 2019, pp. 20-35.

<https://doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/11919>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



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ISSN 2037-2426

# The Sentence Is Most Important: Styles of Engagement in William T. Vollmann's Fictions

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## 1. Introduction

In a 1994 interview, William T. Vollmann stated, “When I write a sentence, oftentimes what I do is . . . refine it, until it explodes. . . . that’s the way it has to be.” He added, “I just try to come up with the right sentence for the right job” (“Write” 120). More than a decade later, in a 2007 conversation with Karl Taro Greenfeld, he reiterated and revised somewhat his devotion to the sentence: “When I’m writing a work of fiction, the sentence is most important. What I want is to create the most beautiful prose I can” (Vollmann, “Why”). Those who appreciate Vollmann’s writings recognize that he is not often unsuccessful in his efforts. For example, Vollmann’s most perceptive critic, Larry McCaffery, asserts that of the many winning qualities of Vollmann’s texts, the most impressive are the “sentences—with their unexpected analogies and their evocation of sensual specifics, their odd mixture of lyricism and abstraction, their wit and self-mockery” (McCaffery xiii). Likewise, friend and peer Jonathan Franzen praises Vollmann’s stylistic excellence: “Given the richness of Bill’s material, it’s possible to overlook what a very fine stylist he can be.<sup>1</sup> . . . his interests run to questions of grammar and punctuation, to . . . ‘What are her sentences like?’” (Franzen, “Friendship” 283). Vollmann expressed his interest in the sentence yet again in 2014, as recorded by Tom Bissell: “The reader that I write for will be open to beautiful sentences and will try to see why I’m doing what I’m doing. . . . That’s the reader that I love and the reader who loves me” (Bissell). While the preceding catalogue of Vollmann’s remarks regarding the sentence and his readers’ positive assessments of his writing could be extended, this handful of examples is probably enough to indicate the centrality of stylistic decisions to his fictions. The final quotation is particularly striking because it situates the sentence at the center of the contract between reader and writer and prioritizes the notion that Vollmann’s ideal reader will recognize that appreciation of sentence-level style is inextricable from any apprehension of his texts’ other goals.

But what is it that Vollmann attempts in his texts? What will appear if a reader decides she will “try to see” why he is doing what he is doing in a given book? The answer of course varies as one moves from fiction to fiction, but certain general tendencies are evident. One notes that Vollmann’s writing, idiosyncratic as it often is, developed in ways that are not incompatible with the work some of his peers were producing. When McCaffery edited the Summer 1993 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, he not only accumulated and arranged contents that suggested Vollmann may be productively read in relation to two other younger writers, Susan Daitch and David Foster Wallace, but he also included an essay by Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” that has occupied a problematic yet central place in conversations about the nature of American fiction during the past two and a half decades. Wallace’s concluding assertions in that piece are well-known: postmodernism’s irony has become a dead end for creative writers; the next generation of literary authors will find a constructive

<sup>1</sup> It is gratifying to note that in the revised version of the essay from which these remarks are drawn, Franzen changed the “can be” in this sentence to “is” (Franzen, *End* 105).

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alternative in “single-entendre values”; the cutting edge will increasingly be found in texts that explore “troubles and emotions . . . with reverence and conviction”; and, the hip sarcasm of readers still viewing the world through the dark lenses of postmodernist suspicion will lead them to dismiss such seemingly unsophisticated efforts as simply “Too sincere” (Wallace 192–93). On the basis of these ideas, Adam Kelly proposed in 2010 that Wallace’s literary generation be regarded as that of the “New Sincerity,” a phrase that has enjoyed a contentious reign as a label for post-postmodernist fiction for most of the past decade. While Kelly’s label is perhaps not the very best, and while Wallace’s arguments by no means summarize the entirety of Vollmann’s achievements, several strong correspondences are evident, and especially so when one recalls that, three years prior to Wallace’s piece, Vollmann issued a statement of his own that anticipated Wallace’s remarks in several ways.

In “American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease,” which was first published as an article in *Conjunctions* and has since been collected in *Expelled from Eden*, Vollmann asserts that our “survival and happiness” as a culture “depend on knowledge. And knowledge can only be obtained through openness, which requires vulnerability, curiosity, and suffering” (330). This knowledge, he continues, is our most powerful means to stave off unjust violence and other abuses of power, and it may best be accessed by “empathizing,” which, in turn, one may best do “Through art” (330). While all of the arts have certain advantages, Vollmann explains, literature “articulates best” the knowledge empathy allows, and “writing with a sense of purpose” is therefore needed (331). The piece concludes with a list of “rules,” of which two are here reproduced, although the others reinforce them: “We should believe that truth exists”; and, “*We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves*” (332). These attitudes and intentions are echoed in many of Vollmann’s remarks about justifications of violent action in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, including the following: “respect the inertia of an alien situation. Don’t inject yourself into it for your own gain, or for any other reason unaffiliated with true goodness. Study the victim and the oppressor, and judge them both. Then, if your creed so moves you, intervene on the side of the righteous, respecting the most justified version of the Golden Rule you can” (II.461). What is the most justified version of this rule? Vollmann proposes what he calls “The Empath’s Golden Rule”: “Do unto others, not only as you would be done by, but also as they would be done by. In case of any variance, do the more generous thing” (I.285, II.461, MC.45). In one corollary point, he elaborates: “We bear an obligation is [*vis*] to study and intuit the identity of the other, his rights and needs, his appropriate mode of self-expression, his ethos” (MC.44). Vollmann acknowledges this approach is merely “steady,” as well as both “unimaginative” and “impractical,” but it is nevertheless the moral position he advocates (II.460–61, I.285). Vollmann’s unqualified declarations of devotion to such qualities as truth, charity, and happiness may risk the eye-rolling of hip postmodernists, but sit quite well alongside Wallace’s points, and the declared intentions of other writers of their generation.<sup>2</sup>

So, if one is to do the bare minimum Vollmann asks of his readers, that is, to try to see why he does what he does, and if one takes into account his many suggestions that the work of his fictions is enacted powerfully at the level of the sentence, one must understand better what he accomplishes at the level of the sentence. One needs to recognize not only the beauty of his sentences, but also how they articulate helpful knowledge achieved through empathy as conceived on the terms described in the preceding paragraph. Some important first steps of this sort have already been taken, by Daniel Lukes in his discussion of simile in the prostitute

<sup>2</sup> See, for consideration of Vollmann’s similarities to literary figures of his generation beyond Wallace, my Introduction to *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* and the essay Theophilus Savvas and I published as an Introduction to our special issue of *Textual Practice* on the topic of “American Fiction after Postmodernism.”

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trilogy and especially by Françoise Palleau-Papin in her remarks on anadiplosis and chiasmus in *The Atlas* and on alliteration, puns, amplification, metaphor, simile, anadiplosis, chiasmus, and other stylistic elements in *The Rifles* (Lukes 270–72; Palleau-Papin, “Over/exposure” pars. 16–17; Palleau-Papin, “Composition” 91–98).<sup>3</sup> This article extends the effort by looking at exemplary sentences from a handful of Vollmann’s fictions, with the goal of demonstrating some of the ways particular sentences serve as “the right sentence for the right job” in relation to the other work performed by the text in hand. In so doing, this article intends also to indicate how Vollmann’s sentences illuminate the compatibility between his project and the one Wallace declared might be the best next thing after postmodernism.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Deixis, Cataphora, and Narrating Skinhead Ethics

Readers of Vollmann’s works do not have to look far to encounter characters who challenge the moral status quo; among others are the pedophile Dan Smooth from *The Royal Family*, the aggressively misogynistic photographer of *Butterfly Stories*, and the grasping and brutal colonial figures of the *Seven Dreams*. Although the texts ultimately pass suitably harsh judgments on many of these figures, in no case does Vollmann suspend the empathetic exercise he declares is the heart of his moral universe. Indeed, many of Vollmann’s works are driven by a tension between the responsibility of a text to “respect the inertia of an alien situation” and the physical, political, and emotional violence perpetrated by its central characters. One common means by which Vollmann manages this tension is via deictic markers, which allow him to control and to question the ethical positions operating in his texts.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from her own chapter (cited above), several other essays in Palleau-Papin’s book about *The Rifles* touch in passing on stylistic matters, including remarks by Catherine Lanone on anaphora, Vincent Bucher on metonymy, Sophie Chapuis on apostrophe, and Madeleine Laurencin on antithesis and metaphor (Lanone 41; Bucher 73; Chapuis 104–06; Laurencin 133).

<sup>4</sup> The following analysis is informed by the work of both rhetorical and literary stylistics. Many critics argue for the separation of these fields, even though they typically acknowledge the intersections between them. The rhetorician Jeanne Fahnestock, for example, declares literary stylistics to be primarily concerned with the aesthetic value and uniqueness of literary expression (in contradistinction to “ordinary” speech), and relatively indifferent to persuasive potential (12–13). Literary stylisticians Alison Gibbons and Sara Whitely see rhetorical analyses of style as too concerned with persuasion and orality, and relatively deficient in terms of suitability to written expression in terms of accommodating insights afforded by structuralism and theories of reception (4–5). While some rhetoricians and literary theorists seem content to agree to disagree, richer appreciation of the work of post-postmodern authors in general, and of Vollmann in particular, may depend upon a willingness to bridge these apparent gaps in the conversation, to register the suasive potential of literary style, and the aesthetic uniqueness of many effective rhetorical utterances. Virginia Pignagnoli illustrates the helpfulness of the “IRA” model of communication proposed by James Phelan to analysis of post-postmodern fiction (Pignagnoli 189). Phelan’s model begins with an Implied Author (I), and ends with an Actual Audience (A). Mediating between the two are a wide array of strategies, or Resources (R), available to the implied author that shape the experience of the audience. Phelan’s examples of these resources draw widely on concepts from both the rhetorical tradition and literary theory (especially structural narratology) and are thus well-suited to thinking about the sentence at the intersection of rhetorical style and literary stylistics (Phelan, “Voice” 52). Furthermore, Phelan situates ethics in relation to this model when he asserts that narratives are purposive enactments of ethical positions, with implications that range from such fairly familiar topics as the ethics of the teller and the nature of ethical dilemmas represented in the text to the responsibility of the audience to the text (Phelan, “Rhetoric, Ethics” 56ff.). Because it is so positioned at the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, and rhetoric, this model is especially promising as a conceptual framework for considering the style of such socio-politically engaged authors as Vollmann.

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Deixis is essentially indexical. In the most basic sense, deictic terms and utterances define the temporal and spatial center of narration, allowing readers to comprehend the “when” and “where” of a text. However, as Paul Chilton and others have argued, deixis also at least implicitly establishes a modal distinction between the central “here” and “now” of a fiction and one or more peripheral “there”s and “then”s (56–61). Such modal distinctions allow for attitudinal hierarchies that tacitly define social and moral value.

A typical example of Vollmann’s use of deictic terms as a way of managing his text’s moral content is found in “The White Knights,” a story about a group of skinheads in San Francisco. A short chapter of the text entitled “The Old Days” begins with a passage that conjoins cataphora with deictic markers in a fashion that generates ambiguity:

They used to go into bars and pick fights, punch people in the face when they didn’t like the way they looked (being Nazis, they were conscious that appearance is everything). At least that was what some people said about them. But the Skinz said they didn’t start anything. It was the others who started things, who talked rude to them and then didn’t get out of the way. (Vollmann, *Rainbow* 31)<sup>5</sup>

If one sets aside for the moment the preceding parts of the story, the opening of this chapter generates ambiguity with the cataphoric “they” presented together with the somewhat vague temporal marker, “used to.” The third-person plural pronoun appears twice in the main part of the opening sentence, and once more in the parenthetical comment appended to it. Only in the parenthesis does the referent of the pronoun become more determinate (“Nazis”), and it is not until the third sentence of the paragraph that its significance settles on the “Skinz” in particular. Yet, opposed to this burgeoning specificity, and the increasingly sharp characterizations of the Skinz that come with it, are similar ambiguities about the identity of the “not-they”: that the Skinz picked fights is something only “some people” assert, and this group of “some people” is affiliated in its vagueness with that of “the others who started things.” In these ways, markers of place and time serve modally in the paragraph, joining with shifts in focalization to suggest coherent group identity and moral distinctions while also preserving some measure of uncertainty regarding claims that the Skinz were guilty of pointless violence.

The next sentences of the chapter provide an illustrative anecdote relating a tale in which “one time” two Skinz, Lorelei and Blue, boarded a bus, and became offended when “this nigger poked Lorelei in the ass with a stick.” Later, getting off the bus, “Blue hit the nigger in the face a few times and said, ‘Now you’ll remember the skinheads.’” An immediately-following second story of similar past actions—likewise located in a temporally vague prior time indicated only by the use of the past tense—again illustrates the tendency of the skinheads to carry out serious violence in response to little or no provocation. Vollmann’s relatively value-free narrations of skinhead violence preserves the reader’s sense of his devotion to objectivity and resistance to hasty judgment, while simultaneously relating events that undermine the Skinz’ earlier assertion that other people started the fights for which they were blamed.

The chapter concludes with several narratorial reflections that bring the action into the present, and not only the present of the Skinz, but also that of the composition of the story itself: “It is not my aim, however, to describe these old times of violent freedom, for this record was made in the decline of their movement, when . . . they sat around . . . muttering about how it used to be.” After a paragraph break, the text continues as follows: “At that time, it seemed to me, death was their watchword, death being not a threat, not a reward, but simply a placement. They had no thought for any future day. . . .” The initial vagueness of the chapter’s action, which is generated by the opening use of cataphora and both temporal and modal

<sup>5</sup> Cataphora is the use of a pronoun or other word before its referent. One rhetorical consequence of this may be, as it is in the passage discussed in the main text, a suspension of the reader’s certainty.

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deictic ambiguity, is here abstracted into a summary statement by the narrator: the Skinz acted as they did not only because they are racist and more prone to disproportionate retributive violence than are others, but also and more fundamentally because they lack a sense of temporality in general. From this perspective, the narrator is positioned to suggest that the past is, for the Skinz, only “the old days,” occupying no specific temporal location beyond being forever removed from their current condition, and the future is not worth consideration. In the absence of more definite temporal markers, their sense of cause and effect, including informed assessments of the implications of their actions for their own present and futures, will be impractical at best, and likely almost nonexistent. The final terms of the short chapter, then, are effectively a judgment: while the Skinz’ actions garner attention because they are shocking in the short term, these characters lack the sort of historical perspective that augments character and provides longevity to political power. A reader willing to allow them a measure of sympathy may pity them for their social marginalization, but they can win positive regard for little else beyond a sort of faded, and disconcertingly brutal, pragmatism.

The preceding remarks on “The White Knights” are concerned with how Vollmann employs certain figures of speech and deictic terms as a way to position the Skinz’ actions on spatial and ethical axes. Yet, the moral work of a fiction is not restricted to judgments of the actions represented therein. As I have already suggested, Vollmann pays significant attention to another dimension of the text: the question of the moral value of reportorial objectivity and balance. Voice and focalization certainly contribute to the creation of a text’s ethos, and the chapter’s initial suggestion of some uncertainty regarding the validity of stories told about the Skinz goes some way to establishing the text as morally sound, for that narratorial uncertainty indicates a resistance to the sort of closure that would prevent unbiased presentation of all relevant voices. Thus, when the narration of the past is focalized through the Skinz’ own voices, and it changes registers, as signaled by the shift in diction (“nigger,” “ass,” “got it in the face”) that comes with the tales of skinhead violence, the text gives them room to redeem or to condemn themselves. As a consequence, their blindness to the implications of their actions serves as more damning evidence of their failed morality than do the voices of their critics. In these ways, Vollmann’s text preserves the reader’s conviction regarding the text’s objectivity without sacrificing its moral obligations to the subjects it represents.

A more radical, and therefore possibly more effective, means to assure the reader of the text’s balanced presentation is the story’s final chapter, in which the Skinz are allowed to voice their judgments of the text as a whole (presumably necessarily excluding this final chapter itself). Marisa succinctly exclaims, “it fucking sucks!” Dan-L offers, “You need a lot of work with your grammar.” Ice suggests, “it should be cut, maybe to about a page” (*Rainbow* 64). Here, Vollmann allows his subjects an opportunity to critique his writing about them, providing a final bulwark to the text’s many implied assertions of its own fairness. An important element of this ethical maneuvering is the degree to which the concluding passage disrupts the deictic center of the narrative. There is no authorial “I” here (although there is the “You” Dan-L mentions); the time and place remain unspecified; and, these gaps in temporal and spatial positioning unsettle somewhat the modal positioning of the text, placing its social and moral intentions under scrutiny. The Skinz’ voices comment on the story from the outside, but they are also inside of it. The diegesis thus includes and excludes them, and is both itself and a metafictional commentary on itself. This collapse of the boundaries of the narrative authority blurs the lines between authorial identity, subject matter, and narrative representation. As a consequence, the story’s final chapter has the effect of resituating the whole of the text within a frame of narrative inconclusion, resisting not just narrative closure, but also the authority of the implied author. Ultimately, the generation of these uncertainties serves as a further sign of the text’s sensitivity to the manner in which narrative authority can remain blind to its own ethical responsibilities, a move that reinforces the audience’s sense that the text offers itself

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with moral goodwill. Indeed, the turning of the text's scrutiny upon its own methods is a recurrent feature in Vollmann's work, as the next section of this article elaborates.

### 3. Resistance to Power via Allusion and Figures of Understatement, Negation, and Incompletion

Many of Vollmann's sentences resist direct assertion, and figures of hesitation, understatement, and negation, conjoined with verbs in the conditional tense or subjunctive mood, are consequently prevalent. While some of these sentences do not follow the structure of familiar schemes or tropes, others do, and his writing includes conventional examples of *distinctio*, *meiosis*, and *litotes*. For instance, an example of the latter can be found in "Yellow Rose": "Being in love unloved is not unlike rowing in a glass-bottomed boat, which allows you to see both the shimmering green light of the pond and the muck at the bottom. . . ." (*Rainbow* 216; underlining not in original). Here, the double negative simile of "not unlike" highlights the ambiguous unease of being in love more strongly than would the use of "like" alone. Expressions of this sort are sometimes voiced by a character. At other times, they are presented by a third-person narratorial voice. When that latter condition is the case, the sentences tend to serve as a means for abstraction, irony, or the establishment of tonal differences that implicitly signal criteria for moral reflection. In many cases, understatement allows for a measure of ambiguity, thus working in opposition to speech that diminishes the openness Vollmann declares a prerequisite to knowledge-generating empathy. In order to see more clearly how Vollmann's sentences work in conjunction with the broader ethical and aesthetic goals of his texts, the remainder of this article moves between close stylistic analysis and remarks on the various rhetorical strategies of such macro-level literary qualities as the counterfactual and allusion.

Among their other virtues, Vollmann's texts often delight or horrify readers with flights of fancy, and such moments can be more or less rhetorical. Sometimes, fanciful passages are not directed primarily to the diagnosis of some particular sociopolitical problem, and the aesthetic pleasures of the counter-factual are instead foregrounded. Sometimes these tales open to the possibility of the truly fantastic, as when, in "The Visible Spectrum," Vollmann writes with grotesque humor of the head of a motorcyclist killed in a crash continuing to think for some time after decapitation, passing judgment on what unfolds: "I imagine that head sailing, sailing down the long yellow tunnel, blinking in wonder at the view, . . . and long after the killer had lost himself . . . that head remained aloft" (*Rainbow* 4).<sup>6</sup> In "The White Knights," the reader encounters a different sort of speculation, one directed to a more specific persuasive end: "I wonder if our country was better when Indians lived on it by themselves. . . ." (*Rainbow Stories*, 34). Although both the "I imagine" of the former example and the "I wonder" of the latter resist fact, the second sentence has none of the grim playfulness of the preceding one, but the *aporia* signaled by its mood of speculative interrogation thereby delivers a sharper irony.

In other instances, the counterfactual mental leaps one encounters in Vollmann's texts are not those of imaginative fancy, but of logical premises. Such is the case, for example, with the final paragraph of the "Haight Street" chapter of "The White Knights," which begins with detailed descriptions of skinheads but concludes by shifting the tone from the paragraph's early realist verisimilitude to ironic abstraction: "the skinheads are among our most spontaneous politicians. Let us assume, then, that being spontaneous they are light of heart" (*Rainbow* 33). The remainder of the paragraph, indeed almost everything in the story, undermines the assumption the narrator here suggests the reader adopt, and the distance between the violent

<sup>6</sup> The passage is an early anticipation of the flying head central to the action of Vollmann's much later story, "Two Kings in Ziñogava."

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seriousness of the skinheads and anything that may be identified as lightheartedness reinforces the irony. A similar construction is offered later on the same page, when the narrator again generalizes: “If you are white then I suppose it was your great-great-great-great-grandfather who started it. . . .” Like the earlier “Let us assume,” this “I suppose” is followed by an absurd leap in logic, presenting the reader with an ironic reflection that assures the reader of the text’s distance from its subject and thereby guards against negative judgment of its, and of the implied author’s, own moral sensibilities.

While the two preceding paragraphs consider examples of typical counterfactual passages in Vollmann’s texts (in service of either fanciful aesthetics or ironic logical surmise), one also encounters in them a sharpening of implications via his use of modal auxiliaries such as “might.” These words sometimes suggest opportunities for productive alternatives. In other instances, the uncertainty they engender creates a more negative mood, emphasizing both something that did not happen and also all that was lost as a result. Too, this uncertainty can draw the reader more viscerally into the world of the fiction, especially when in passages narrated in the second person. Such is the case in the titular chapter of “Ladies and Red Lights,” which begins: “Walking down O’Farrell on some dreary grey day . . . you might see a black woman come sleepwalking down the exact middle of the sidewalk, and if you stepped to one side she would step dully to one side, too, as if she were your mirror-image whose dead hands must touch your hands.” The quoted passage is an instance of the sort of metalepsis Gérard Genette describes: the use of the second person to blur the discursive boundary between narration and narrated event (234–36). Yet, to regard the sentence as only an example of such a narrative convention is to ignore some of the work it accomplishes. The concrete particulars of street name, weather, and sidewalk anchor the conditional and subjunctive terms of “you might,” “if you stepped,” and “as if she were,” creating for readers a balance between knowledge and doubt preserved in the chapter’s second (and final) paragraph, with its additional “you might,” “if you wanted her,” “if you went around the corner,” “You could almost smell,” and “You probably cannot remember her face” (*Rainbow* 125). Here, all of the short chapter’s uncertainty culminates in a reminder that the prostitutes who fill the story often remain unseen, literally, legally, and morally, even as their condition reflects that of the reader, and although scenic details around them easily impose themselves on our memories.

At times, Vollmann conveys a similar sense of lost opportunity by presenting actions with negative expressions. For example, early in the “Woman with Dead Child” chapter of *Europe Central*, the mood of the narrative moves quickly from one of excitement and promise to one of absence and dread. In the opening pages, the following sorts of clauses and phrases flesh out the characters of Käthe Kollwitz and her husband: “when news came of the Russian Revolution, she’d wept for joy”; “now a Republic! Surely there was something fine about that. . . .”; and, “He lifted her up in the air in his joy” (*Europe* 37). The mood of the text darkens rapidly, however, particularly as Kollwitz’s thoughts turn to the executions of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. At first, the shift is marked by the absence of emotive terms, which are replaced by largely value-free descriptions of even the most distressing narrative events, as in, “She heard shooting in the streets. Karl was in the city; she didn’t know where Hans was” (*Europe* 38). By the end of the chapter’s third page, the tone has moved past neutral, and constructions such as the following have become the norm: “she couldn’t avoid feeling”; “she didn’t simply imagine”; “She tried not to torture Hans”; “that wouldn’t have been fair”; “wasn’t a hollow monument worst of all?”; “Luxemburg’s coffin wasn’t void”; and, “Communists told her that she had no right, because she wasn’t one of them” (*Europe* 38; underlining not in original). These clauses do not simply employ the negative verb form; they appear so thick on the page that one cannot but register Kollwitz’s world as one of despair, a mood that stands out especially strongly in comparison with the more positive ones that had preceded it.



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As a consequence, understatement and negation serve as tools of critique, implicating the agents of Kollwitz's suffering.

Most of the examples discussed above demonstrate Vollmann's use of figures of understatement and negation, and the conditional or subjunctive, to stage critique of wartime violence, of political corruption, of social marginalization, and so forth. But, Vollmann also employs related stylistic strategies as a means of signaling moral approval. Indeed, the conditional and counterfactual, which can celebrate what may have been or what might yet be, rather than what *is*, sometimes help Vollmann resist declaring in simple, indicative, terms the conditions otherwise suggested in the narrative. At such moments, stronger figures of exclusion and ellipsis replace those of understatement and negation. Perhaps the most extended examples of this tendency are those deriving from the stuttering speech and thought Vollmann (ahistorically) ascribes to Dmitri Shostakovich in *Europe Central*. This aspect of Shostakovich's idiolect (the particular language habits that define his speech) appears in the text for a variety of reasons, but among them is the establishment of a contrast between Shostakovich's moral identity and the spirit of fascist and totalitarian propaganda.

The language of such propaganda is almost always that of declarative assertion, and the most common example of the Shostakovich chapters in *Europe Central* is, "Life has become better, comrades: life has become more joyful" (*Europe* 161ff.). These words were uttered by Stalin in the mid-1930s, and became both a political slogan and the chorus of a popular song. Vollmann conveys a sense of their ubiquity in Soviet Russia via their frequent returns, sometimes with variation, throughout novel. In many cases, the slogan is marked by a typographical distinction, by virtue of which the words appear in the text in the overbearingly heavy block lettering of posters and handbills. Of course, the reality of Stalinist Russia as presented in the novel undermines the veracity of the slogan, and the easy violence of its dishonesty emerges not only on its own terms, but sharply in contrast to the nobility of those who suffer and die in opposition to such abuses of language and to the physical and political violences they hide—such as Sherbakov, of whom Shostakovich asserts "But he believed in *truth*," or Shostakovich himself, who observes "doing the right thing might destroy me, but that doesn't mean it's not the right thing" (*Europe* 689, 696). Unlike the speculative subjunctive or conditional passages encountered in some of Vollmann's works, which illuminate complexity and draw attention to the ignored, the unreality encountered in government propaganda harmfully obfuscates and misdirects.

Set against the unwavering declarations of Hitler, Stalin, and state propaganda of every stripe are the hesitant expressions of Shostakovich. Again, their purpose is hardly singular, ranging as they do from a nervous tic brought on by ungratified desire to the signal of care necessarily taken by someone living in a state that enacts violence against its own populace without check. Hence, passages such as, "I wish that Maxim would stop having nightmares about Auschwitz! I mean, in this world we have to ... And Galisha tells me that he won't even ... Not that she's so lucky herself," and, "he liked to imagine that they'd knock on the door in a 5/4 theme, which would be very ..." (*Europe* 623, 625). These instances of aposiopesis<sup>7</sup> in Shostakovich's thought and speech indicate an unwillingness or even inability to speak directly of state power with ease, and in their not-saying these statements express the absences (of people, of justice, of liberty) during Stalin's regime more profoundly than would many attempts at lengthy description of what has been lost. As a consequence, the lack of conclusion in Shostakovich's own truncated articulation of Stalin's theme, "LIFE HAS BECOME MORE, more, you know ...," can be read as of a piece with the other silences of his world, silences that likewise derive from terms Stalin proposes: "death oozes out of the silences between notes, too, the silences of secret Nazi documents (*Geheim*), the eight-beat rest which

<sup>7</sup> Aposiopesis is the breaking off of an expression, leaving completion to the audience's imagination.

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hung between himself and Maxim when the boy confessed to having denounced him at school; the suffocating air of a Black Maria with its windowless cages” (*Europe* 699; both the initial four words in the second quotation and “Geheim” are presented in a typographically distinct style). In such instances as these, Shostakovich’s seeming inability to complete his ideas is not inarticulation, but a making-present of absence. As he opens the declarations of propaganda to the indeterminacy of incompleteness, he encourages the reader to provide her own conclusions to his thoughts, rather than those contrived by the organs of the state. Such moments are for these reasons not failures to describe, so much as the disruption of the rhetorical efficacy of untrue premises, including those that underpin totalitarian propaganda.

While Vollmann’s Shostakovich may be inarticulate when speaking, his mastery of expression emerges fully in his music. *Europe Central* touches upon several of his works, but Opus 110 (the Eighth String Quartet) lends itself as a name for a late chapter that serves as something of a capstone, or, as Qian Cheng puts it, the “emotional climax,” to the volume (Qian 199). Vollmann generally presents Shostakovich as more capable than many of negotiating the demands of the totalitarian state, although he is hardly exempted from the fear and despair it evokes. Some measure of his strength comes from music itself, his understanding of which is presented numerous times in the novel as one with his love for Elena Konstantinovskaya and also as a figurative space “Beneath the piano keys” (174). Especially powerful is “the fabled world within every piano’s black keys” where he can access the “vibrations of chromaticism” that “nourished him” (629). If the propagandist prefers the tonality of a “sweet and melodious . . . harmonic line” in C major, Shostakovich’s exploration of the dissonance and the relatively more exotic harmonic possibilities allowed by chromaticism opens onto two alternatives, both of which are more ennobling than that of the diatonic scale. The first is a direct honesty, the illumination of the terrors of fascism and totalitarianism, as when, “Shostakovich, entering the negative spaces beneath the piano’s black keys . . . extends his front line *beyond* music into a perfect hell where his life, dekulakization and Operation Barbarossa become one” (653, 700). The other alternative to duplicitous propagandistic oversimplification is sublime freedom, a freedom evoked by music that allows the listener to “soar farther and farther into the sky of absolute music, until” she can “rise beyond atonality into a sacredness beyond comprehension” (653). This escape may be death itself—readers might note the similarity between the sky described here and “the blue yonder” of *The Rainbow Stories*—but the music that points the way to this escape offers listeners a liberty that is enlivened by Vollmann’s extended metaphors.

The novel’s argument that art offers individuals psychological or spiritual means to express and to resist political horrors is reinforced not only by such metaphors, but also by Shostakovich’s use of self-referential allusions and motifs in his pieces. The most fundamental of such elements in Opus 110 is the four-note sequence of D, E-flat, C, and B. These notes open and recur throughout the piece, and are, as *Europe Central* reminds us, represented in the German system of key notation as DSCH, that is to say, they serve as a musical signature of Dmitri Shostakovich (623). The quartet also includes material found in a number of Shostakovich’s other works, including the First, Fourth, Fifth, Tenth, and Eleventh Symphonies, the Second Piano Sonata, the First Cello Concerto, and the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The DSCH signature (which appears as well in the First Cello Concerto, the Tenth and Fifteenth Symphonies, the First Violin Concerto, and the Second Piano Sonata) and the allusions to his other works distinguish Opus 110 as a profound declaration of the composer’s identity.

Shostakovich’s declaration of individualism is no mere exercise, but a politically powerful “Assertion of self” expressive of solidarity with “Soviet artists who were persecuted for following their private Muses,” such as Anna Akhmatova (Vollmann, *Europe* 623–624). While one may feel the political power of self-assertion here, this work also folds back upon itself with every return of the opening theme, highlighting the isolation and suffering of the artist in

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Soviet Russia. As the novel expresses the point: “Opus 110 is no progression, only a prison, and the prisoner [...] has now paced the walls right back to his starting point. He’s at the center of the world [...]. (The center of the world is Leningrad, which is Stalingrad, which is Auschwitz.) Every place leads here. Hence Opus 110’s horror as intimate as the throat-slime of music, the strings dripping with bitterness and hate” (703). Particularly powerful in this passage is the sentence that offers different definitions of “the center of the world.” The repetition of that phrase from a prior sentence provides cohesion via anadiplosis, but the anaphoric accumulation of place names—Leningrad, Stalingrad, Auschwitz—in parallel grammatical and rhetorical structures allows each of the closing dependent clauses to serve as resumptive modifiers, clarifying and extending the initial spatial term (“center of the world”) in a manner that does not redefine, and is even not merely additive, but profoundly climactic. This sentence should be viewed in contrast to the following one from “The Blue Yonder”: “The sky was blue and the sky was blue and the sky was blue” (Vollmann, *Rainbow* 424). In this earlier case, polysyndeton and parallelism are employed in the interest of a conceptual levelling, and any sense of climax or accumulation is undermined by the redundancy of the statement. There is a sense of emphasis, but the weight of time and place achieved in the Shostakovich passage delivers a much stronger sense of the power of place in the experience of the composer. To the extent that self-expression is self-referential in Opus 110, these allusions work in conceptual tandem with the stuttering aposiopesis of Shostakovich’s speaking voice: he remains constitutionally incapable of articulating the totalitarian party line, instead offering himself in music without self-betrayal.

This is not to say that Opus 110 is entirely hermetic, for it does borrow from others’ compositions. The Russian revolutionary song “Zamuchen tyazholoy nevolyyey” (which title is translated by Vollmann as “Languishing in Prison”), for example, features prominently in the final movement of the quartet, although here, too, use of the folk material ultimately directs our attention back to the horrors of Shostakovich’s own entrapped aesthetico-political state (*Europe* 700). Perhaps more intriguing than the intertexts of which listeners can be certain is one for which Peter J. Rabinowitz argues: that of Richard Strauss’s *Metamorphosen*. The nature of and compositional situation that engendered Strauss’s piece demands, Rabinowitz convincingly contends, that one hears it as a fascist-German ghost of Shostakovich’s totalitarian-Russian Eighth String Quartet (Rabinowitz 250). One could take Rabinowitz’s argument further, and recognize that today’s listener cannot think of the *Metamorphosen* without thinking as well of Franz Kafka. Vollmann’s novel seems to affirm both the relevance of Strauss’s piece to Shostakovich’s and the unavoidability of Kafka when, early in *Europe Central*, Shostakovich is introduced as “the larvum of a grain-beetle” (141). At first, the narrator takes himself to task for this image, shifting the metaphor to that of birds, but the bug comparisons stubbornly reemerge throughout the text. Consequently, one reads that Shostakovich’s fingers will “spider across the sheets of music” (*Europe* 152). During interrogation, the composer, “tried to become as flat as a cockroach so that he could hide between the piano keys” (*Europe* 687). On the final page of the novel, Vollmann writes that Shostakovich’s aged fingers, “began to clench like the feelers of an insect drawing up and dying” (*Europe* 752). The hiding cockroach and the curling legs of a dead bug evoke most strongly the presence of Gregor Samsa, whose inability to communicate and anxious, persecuted isolation anticipate those of Shostakovich under the scrutiny of the NKVD.<sup>8</sup>

While it would be nothing less than perverse to equate Vollmann’s own well-advertised struggles with the American political machine and Shostakovich’s suffering under Soviet totalitarianism, a comparison between the two artists does suggest that Vollmann has drawn on

<sup>8</sup> Kafka is an evident forerunner to *Europe Central* in other ways, also, perhaps most directly in Vollmann’s Kafkaesque penchant for the parable.

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some lessons learned about the political work done by the self-referential passages in Shostakovich's music. Superficial connections of this sort include the similarity between the title of *Europe Central's* chapter "White Nights in Leningrad" and Vollmann's much earlier story "The White Knights." Richer territory emerges in light of the suggestion that one views the Eighth String Quartet through the lens of Kafka, for "The Metamorphosis" can thereby be seen as a bridge between *Europe Central* and the controlling conceit of *You Bright and Risen Angels*: the war between the bugs and electricity. Indeed, even if one regards the comparison between the Eighth String Quartet and Strauss's *Metamorphosen* as spurious, the insectoid metaphors in *Europe Central* evoke the imagery of Vollmann's first novel, and thus allow readers to regard Vollmann's writing in *Europe Central* as informed by a self-referentiality akin to that employed by Shostakovich. The connection is reinforced by the use of the telephone as a multivalent metaphor throughout *Europe Central*. The device generally serves in the text as an emblem of the pervasive and controlling powers of fascist and totalitarian oppression, but its sinuous reach as a tool of remote surveillance and destruction also finds a metaphorical vehicle in the octopus, as is evident from the novel's first sentence: "A squat black telephone, I mean an octopus, the god of our Signal Corps, owns a recess in Berlin (more probably Moscow . . .)" (*Europe* 3). Readers will recall that, in *You Bright and Risen Angels*, the protagonist, Bug, is the "volunteer" victim in an exercise practiced by the other eight members of his swim team. The exercise is called "the Octopus," and involves an attempt to drown a victim in the interest of competitive advantage. The comparison between the octopus and disproportionate power is lent weight as well by a passage in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, in which Lenin's soul is described as "shapeless, weightless and self-insinuating like an octopus" (II.178). Taken together, the images of telephone, octopus, and insect allow one to view *Europe Central* as following the model of Shostakovich's Opus 110 in employing self-referentiality as a critique of power.

Furthermore, Vollmann also follows Shostakovich in referring to works by artists other than himself throughout *Europe Central*. As mentioned above, the more explicit literary references include several to Akhmatova's poems, but the novel has as well its less superficially apparent allusions. Aside from the aforementioned remarks regarding the intertextual presence of Kafka, most intriguing among the less explicit references may be those indebted to Thomas Pynchon's fictions, especially *Gravity's Rainbow*. Vollmann's degree of familiarity with this book is somewhat unclear, even though it seems to inform a number of his own. The influence is difficult to assess honestly in part because of Vollmann's own hesitations on this front. For instance, the presence of Pynchonesque material in *You Bright and Risen Angels* provoked McCaffery to ask Vollmann about his sources, but the response denied any direct influence: "I hadn't read *Gravity's Rainbow* until after *Angels* came out, even though I'd read the other Pynchon books" (20). On the other hand, Rob Turner has uncovered a letter to Esther Whitby in the Vollmann archives at Ohio State University that discusses "the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow* in detail." The letter is undated, but Turner declares internal evidence suggests it was written around 1985, a date well in advance of the publication of Vollmann's first novel (Turner 147). Turner likewise notes a similarity between a cover-blurb for the 1960 Bantam edition of Peter Neumann's *The Black March* and the opening sentence of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a similarity that may have drawn Vollmann's attention when he was deciding to include an epigraph from that same edition of Neumann's book at the start of "Scintillant Orange" (Turner 148; Vollmann, *Rainbow* 145).

Whether or not he had actually read *Gravity's Rainbow* prior to composing such early texts as *You Bright and Risen Angels* and *The Rainbow Stories* (the title of which also seems indebted to Pynchon's third novel) is perhaps irrelevant to the immediate point, which is that Pynchon's great postmodernist novel of the Second World War does seem to serve in *Europe Central* in a fashion akin to that Strauss's *Metamorphosen* serves in relation to Shostakovich's Eight String Quartet. Searching among the points of intersection, one encounters again an echo of the

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famous opening sentence of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "A screaming comes across the sky," in Vollmann's "The bomb was his destiny, falling on him, screaming" (Pynchon, *Gravity's* 3; Vollmann, *Europe* 186). Too, there are passages that seem to combine several allusions to Pynchon, such as the following: "I cut Natalka's eyes out . . . and bored wires into them, which I hooked up to transistors and diodes. I squeezed the bulb and they opened. . . . I installed Natalka's eyes high in the nose of the rocket . . . , and the rocket came alive. . . . I sharpened Natalka's fine white little teeth, . . . and packed them into grenades which I mounted under my rocket's wings. . . . I cleaned out her skull and filled it full of wires and switches so that the rocket had a guidance system. . . . the rest of her I reduced to metal-tinned cubes. . . . Under other circumstances I would have made jewels for that woman" (*Europe* 621). The mechanization of Natalka reminds readers of V.'s obsession, in her incarnation as the Bad Priest, with "bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter," from feet made of "amber and gold, with the veins . . . in intaglio," to a "glass eye" with a "clock-iris," "wig," "false teeth," and "star sapphire sewn into her navel," and possibly detachable "arms and breasts," an "intricate understructure of silver openwork" beneath the skin of her legs, balloon lungs, and silk intestines (Pynchon, *V.* 321–22, 459).

At the same time, the dominant image of the Natalka passage (the encasement of a person within a rocket) resembles nothing so much as Blicero's similar treatment of Gottfried in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a process that leaves Gottfried looking out through "a window of artificial sapphire" in a rocket that has enclosed him like a "womb": "his bare limbs in their metal bondage . . . among the fuel, oxidizer, live-steam lines, thrust frame, compressed air battery, exhaust elbow, decomposer, tanks, vents," where "one of the valves . . . is the right one, the true clitoris, routed directly into the nervous system of the 00000" (*Gravity's* 765–66). The final phrases return readers again to Vollmann's *Europe Central*, which envisions Elena's cries of pleasure emerging "as calmly unstopably as a rocket rising upon its own flame" (723). Even the conclusion of Vollmann's novel evokes features of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's text has been viewed by many, beginning with a very perceptive early review by Richard Poirier, as deeply indebted to film. For Poirier, the small squares that indicate textual breaks in Pynchon's novel are graphic reinforcements of its cinematic nature: he asserts in particular that they are attempts to represent the sprocket holes in film (Poirier 169). While later Pynchon critics have second-guessed the significance of the small squares, one notes that Vollmann also marks *Europe Central* with small squares at the start of each chapter. Furthermore, in addition to its ongoing concern with the films of Roman Karmen and other directors, *Europe Central's* final paragraph leaves readers with a reminder of the importance of cinema to the novel, beginning: "All right, so he'd known it was a movie all along" (752).

Cumulatively, Shostakovich's and Vollmann's self-referential passages demand their audiences recall that phrases, both musical or written, develop within the context of earlier inscriptions, including the prior idiomatic expressions of the literary or musical composer. To the extent that these works ask listeners and readers to consider the Eighth String Quartet or *Europe Central* in the context of other pieces by their authors, they actively expand the boundary of the work, highlighting its incompleteness and role as a part of its world rather than sealed off apart from it. This suggestion of the necessity of dialogue among texts is felt even more forcefully in Vollmann's work than in Shostakovich's, because although the self-referential passages draw attention to the composer's other pieces, Vollmann's engagements with the fictions of such writers as Kafka and Pynchon more explicitly situate his novel within the broader context of its composition, actively and repeatedly reminding readers that writing is indebted to prior literary works and that his writing takes shape in the context of specific predecessors. Insofar as this is the case, and to bring this argument back to the work performed at the level of the sentence, the allusions are relatives of the incompleteness and hesitations of Shostakovich's speech: both Vollmann's allusive text and the composer's utterances call the authority of self-

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contained statements, such as those of totalitarian propaganda, into question, and they do so in a fashion that relies for its efficacy on a version of the vulnerable openness Vollmann prioritizes. In these several senses, then, *Europe Central's* celebration of understatement, incompleteness, hesitation, and other such qualities, at the level of the sentence and of the broader literary-historical context of the work, preserves an openness that tacitly denies the validity of any authority that bases its claims to power on reductive and self-contained assertions. In this manner, the literary devices support Vollmann's intentions to "find the right sentence for the right job" in dealing with totalizing control.

When Vollmann's narrator in "Yellow Rose" speaks of his beloved Jenny, catalogues of food tie her in the reader's mind to consumption (the relationship will devour him) and to onerous physical embodiment. Readers see Jenny buying "chocolate bars," cooking Korean meals, and feeding him "ice cream"; her mother fries meat; and, she visits a service that "had about five thousand kinds of foods" and consumes gin and tonics, marijuana, plums, sugarless gum, psilocybin mushrooms, and blueberries (218–23 *passim*). She even describes oral sex as an encounter with comestibles: "It's like a slippery lollipop" (218). Yet, Vollmann attends to the immaterial Jenny as well, expressing the beauty he sees in her soul in a comparison that combines an allusion to the classical emblem of Psyche with both a hesitant adverb ("almost") and a past perfect conditional construction that further undermines the authority of the metaphor: "the autumn leaves . . . could almost have been butterflies born from her" (*Rainbow* 229). The image recalls the disembodied brain of "The Visible Spectrum," which is preserved "like a butterfly in an album," and the many bugs of *You Bright and Risen Angels*, even as it proleptically anticipates the "butterfly rustling"-like sound of a sleeping family in "The Yellow Sugar," the butterflies on Mount Shasta in "Violet Hair," and the whole of *Butterfly Stories* (*Rainbow* 4, 249, 527).<sup>9</sup> The tentativeness of Vollmann's comparison of leaves and butterflies (he does not give readers the more direct alternative of "the leaves were butterflies") reminds readers that, however emphatically his positions are sometimes asserted, they are just as frequently couched in a manner that resists determinate conclusion. The sentences consequently illustrate a stylistic humility, one that rarely proffers interpretations without acknowledging simultaneously a willingness to reevaluate them. As a consequence of these sorts of stylistic maneuvers, Vollmann's texts avoid the dangers of the sort of hermetic totalizations that, as he reminds us, so frequently underpin abuses of power made by those who wield unjust claims to authority.

Close study of Vollmann's texts—and, this article has only been able to give the briefest glimpse of all that they offer in this regard—allows one, to paraphrase his own expression of the point, to be more the reader for whom he writes. It allows one to recognize not only that he pursues his goal of benefitting others, but also the mechanisms of that pursuit. Furthermore, as Vollmann's stylistic decisions work in tandem with other features of his texts, study of these decisions reveals something of the compatibility between his intentions and achievements and those of other post-postmodern authors, who likewise seek to trade exclusive devotion to postmodernist irony for an interest in exploring more constructive alternatives. While the scale and richness of Vollmann's material can distract readers from close consideration of his texts, it is nevertheless the case that, at the most granular level, his writing is informed by such particulars as the Kabbalistic values of letters (treated in the "The Palm Tree of Deborah" chapter of *Europe Central*) and the exegetical talents of those who would comment

<sup>9</sup> One might also recall, on encountering Vollmann's butterfly images, the lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov, who, like Pynchon, preceded Vollmann at Cornell University (albeit in the role of faculty member rather than student).

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upon “every letter of the Qur’an” (Vollmann, *Rainbow* 270). Between such letter-by-letter interrogations of written language and the sociopolitical ambitions of his books’ arguments are what he has called the “most important” elements: the sentences that mediate and exemplify in their own ways the many virtues of his texts.

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