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On William Vollmann's
Transgression in His Postmodernist World
论威廉·伏尔曼后现代主义世界中的越界

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Ph.D. Dissertation

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论威廉·伏尔曼后现代主义世界中的越界**

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Abstract in English

William Tanner Vollmann (1959-) is an American novelist, journalist and essayist with twelve fictions and eight non-fictions. Since his rise in the American literary scene in 1987, Vollmann has attracted critical attention with *You Bright and Risen Angels* and established his position as a novelist in American literature with *Europe Central*. With a reputation for the uniqueness of his perspective, the exuberance and beauty of his prose, and his great literary ambition, he has been “among the eight or ten greatest novelists America has produced” and frequently compared to the masters ranging from Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne to William Faulkner. (“The *Washington Post Book World* Review of *Butterfly Stories*.”) Although Vollmann has exerted a powerful influence upon American literature, there is not much academic studies on him in China. The lack of critical enthusiasm somewhat hinders the Chinese reader from getting a comprehensive understanding of this author. The dissertation offers some possible explanations for the main questions raised in his fiction in the hope of enhancing the understanding of and interest in Vollmann among the Chinese readers.

Vollmann has synthesized postmodernist literary devices, humanistic theories and beautiful prose writing in his work. His abiding interest in understanding the meaning of transgression as well as his searches among conflicts and extremities invests his work with both a philosophical dimension and an intellectual depth lacking in much contemporary American fiction. For more than thirty years, Vollmann has been writing some of the most provocative and frankly disturbing books in contemporary American literature. Over the course of his career, the insanely prodigious author has traveled the world seeking out extremity inspired by his belief that providing information about the world's neglected and despised people will help bring about greater understanding and harmony. Thus, he sees the value of literature in opening windows to the world of the Other. However, the windows he chooses to open strike his readers as being particularly grotesque, violent and disturbing. The majority of Vollmann's characters live on the margins and borders of society, confined by its norms and mores. His protagonists are typically social deviants: prostitutes, skinheads, serial killers, drug addicts, the homeless, or other marginalized groups of the contemporary society.

The focus of the dissertation is on the transgression in the postmodernist artistic world of Vollmann. To date, Vollmann has published twenty books. The theme of transgression runs through all his works, whether it is a surrealist parable, a piece of investigative journalism, fictions exploring human nature, travelogues recording bits of life, or the symbolic metahistorical dream series. To transgress means to go beyond or over a boundary or the limit of an article of commandments, basic laws of human civilization, established standards of behaviour, or a moral principle, that is to infringe or violate. Due to the extensive dealings with taboos like drugs, sex, violence and crime and the characters who constantly break social norms through abnormal or illegal means, the fictional works of Vollmann have been categorized as transgressive fictions. Therefore, the study of these transgressive works will result in our consideration over a series of paradoxical problems, such as center and margin, reason and madness, beauty and ugliness, good and evil.

In light of the unique themes and diverse literary genres Vollmann works with, it is necessary to take a dialectical method to interpret Vollmann's fiction, which combines historical, philosophical, theoretical study together with textual analysis. This dissertation analyzes eight of Vollmann's works which are considered by many critics as his canon. Vollmann's themes and writing strategies evoke the postmodernist theories and Michel Foucault's notions of transgression, which will serve as the interpretive tools of this dissertation. But those theories are not referred to systematically; instead, some concepts are chosen when they converge with Vollmann's poetics. In addition, some philosophical and literary ideas are employed on the suggestion of Vollmann's fiction, such as Jacques Derrida's notion of marginality, Georges Bataille's perception of eroticism, and Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern perspective on ethics. Those ideas also provide a fruitful framework for the reading of Vollmann's works.

Firstly, the dissertation provides an overview of Vollmann's transgressive works and aims to examine the fusion of diverse literary and non-literary genres. At his most admirable, Vollmann is a writer who crosses boundaries of nation, race, class, and culture to understand and represent those on the other side, while acknowledging how those same boundaries protect his own privileges. Beside his investment in the exotic and the desire to empathetically represent the Other, Vollmann is also noted for

blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. His works has never been easy to categorize: a combination of “fiction, memoir, erotica, journalism, social critique, ethnography, history, and speculative fiction.” (Hemmingson 7) Throughout his literary career, he has been effortlessly moving from one category to another. In a 2006 interview with *Poets & Writers Magazine*, he contends that the “different genres are like different paint brushes you might pick up, which create different effects [...] It doesn’t really matter whether you are writing a detective story or a science fiction story.” (Bush) Focus on some particular works of Vollmann, such as *The Rainbow Stories*, *The Atlas* and the *Seven Dream* series, this chapter investigates how Vollmann blend journalism, travelogues and myth with fiction.

Secondly, the dissertation takes up the discussion of marginality to explore Vollmann’s understanding of transgression over social limits in *The Rainbow Stories*. With the collection of interconnected tales categorized along the color spectrum, the novel narrates the true lives of the outsiders on the margins of society and demonstrates Vollmann’s deep love for them. Regardless of their wretched living conditions, the marginalized selves reject or even redefine their marginal status and seek to transgress social limits—by expressing affection for a person of the same sex, by madly fantasizing about marrying a lifeless object, by getting addicted to drug or alcohol, by involving in gang violence, or by committing adultery or murder on the innocent. Vollmann repeatedly pushes the reader to various limits, frequently providing incidents which at first are insipid and consequently become disturbing. In the novel, marginality is no longer presented as binary and static, but rather gains a multidimensional dynamic. Therefore, there are neither angels nor demons, neither sinners nor righteous men in the novel. There are only humans who exist in real life. Their marginal position entails a certain inner evolution, an independent thinking of existence and a step towards freeing oneself from the norm. On the whole, *The Rainbow Stories* demonstrates that no limits are absolute. By transgressing social limits, Vollmann’s characters successfully escape their stigmatization of failure and exclusion, and build up another type of identity that can provide self-worth and a sense of belonging. With those particularly grotesque, violent and disturbing characters, Vollmann proves that people with different social roles may not only coexist, but also enrich the hues of the human rainbow and make the world more colorful.

Thirdly, the dissertation analyzes Vollmann's three novels on prostitutes who transgress into disgrace: *Whore for Gloria*, *Butterfly Stories*, and *The Royal Family*, and traces his thematic understanding of searches for love. Devoted to prostitution, each novel is a desolate love story at its core. While not published as a trilogy, the books are interconnected in theme and style so that they form a *de facto* trilogy. The protagonists—all antiheroes—are on a quest for human connection and a search for what they consider is love in the guise of a prostitute. In *Whores for Gloria*, a Vietnam vet seeks the whereabouts of a streetwalker named Gloria whom he believes has known in his past. In *Butterfly Stories*, a journalist falls in love with a young prostitute in Thailand, only to discover that he is infected with AIDS. In *The Royal Family*, a private detective is hired to find the Queen of the Whores, who provides him everything he requires to sooth the pain and guilt inside his heart. The three men in these novels are delusional and misplaced. They believe their salvation is found in the embrace of the prostitutes even if they know this kind of love is fleeting, absurd and futile. Unlike mainstream romance novels, Vollmann's prostitute trilogy is sordid tales of affection for the apparent outcasts of society, vindicating the many varieties of love that life presents. The men in these novels go beyond erotic desires and find beauty in the horrendous.

Fourthly, the dissertation meditates upon the theme of moral transgressions of the fragile historical figures in *Europe Central* when confronting impossible choices. Recognized as Vollmann's masterpiece, the historical novel dramatizes the complicated relations between Nazi Germany and Russia during WWII and reveals the evils of totalitarian regimes. Through the series of interlinking stories, the novel paints a fantastic portrait of that struggle and its aftermath, studded with individual moral dilemmas and the search for integrity. Caught on the wrong side of history, Paulus, Vlasov, Gerstein and Shostakovich are deeply flawed, but prove to be the compromised heroes in Vollmann's mind. Trying to survive horrific totalitarian regimes, they struggle with inescapable moral choices: whether to betray one authoritarian regime for another; whether to ultimately expose the Holocaust thereby putting one's own family at risk; whether to compromise constantly to preserve artistic integrity. Vollmann paints these characters' struggles to maintain integrity—between Hitler and Stalin, between the collective and the self, between the party line and their

own uprightness. In observing the progress of each of these characters through their personal decision-making processes, readers begin to show sympathy to the conflicted characters and blur their own good-and-evil, black-and-white view of the Second World War. *Europe Central* succeeds in showing what it was like to live in such a tumultuous time for the fragile selves, and their personal charm for having to making moral transgressions for certain degree of integrity.

Finally, the dissertation gives a general comment on the contributions and limitations of Vollmann's writing. Vollmann is distinguished from other contemporary American writers by his obsession with transgression. Going to the places where no one dares to set foot on and approaching the outsiders with understanding and love characterize the majority of Vollmann's works. For him, the soul of writing is to observe and participate. Over the years, Vollmann has observed the world with the keen eyes of a journalist and reported faithfully with great details, meanwhile he has a talent for sweeping imagination, beautiful prose and smooth combination of fact and fiction, all of which make his postmodernist artistic world as vivid as possible. Moreover, he could deal with them with humanistic care and preserve the dignity of the outsiders. However, it is such taboos like sex and violence that make his works alienated from readers and even repel them. Indeed, Vollmann has been accused of moral ambiguity in his work, in part because of this style of writing and in part because of his apparent reluctance to remark on the physical brutality and spiritual ugliness he often depicts. This stance constitutes at the same time the very limitation of his work. In addition, Vollmann's social critique never goes further to yield any advocacy of profound social engagement and commitment. His protagonists, more often than not, possess a limited and extreme perception of the world, which finally prevents them from achieving self-fulfillment with a positive attitude towards reality.

Key Words: Vollmann; transgression; postmodernism

中文摘要

威廉·特纳·伏尔曼（1959-）是美国当代小说家、新闻记者和散文家，他的作品至今共有十二部小说和八部非小说。自 1987 年涉足文坛以来，伏尔曼先是凭小说《你们闪亮升空的天使》崭露头角，后以《欧洲中心》奠定他在美国文坛的宗匠地位，其独特的视角、出众的文才和远大的抱负令他在美国文学界声名日盛，直追纳珊尼尔·霍桑、赫尔曼·梅尔维尔和威廉·福克纳等文学大师，被誉为“美国历史上最伟大的八到十位小说家”之一。（“*The Washington Post Book World Review of Butterfly Stories*”）尽管伏尔曼在美国文坛颇具影响力，但在我国文学评论界却鲜有所闻，关于他的评论文章也寥寥无几，这在一定程度上使得我国读者无以对这位美国文坛的当代名家达成一个翔实和细致的认识。本论文旨在对伏尔曼小说中所关注的主要问题进行探讨，以期能增进我国读者对伏尔曼的了解。

伏尔曼的作品糅合了后现代主义文学理论和技巧、人文主义思想以及优美的散文风格。他长期以来对越界的涵义孜孜以求，在冲突和绝境中探寻人生真谛，这赋予了他的小说罕有的哲学深度和思想意蕴。三十多年来，伏尔曼一直坚持将最发人深省、最扣人心弦的作品呈现给美国读者。在多年的创作生涯里，这位惊人的高产作家足迹遍布世界，游走于社会边缘，始终坚信自己对被歧视和被淡忘人群的关注必将促进人与人之间的真诚沟通，带来世界的和谐。从创作伊始，他就意识到为他者向世界打开一扇窗户的意义。然而，他所选取的他者大多行为古怪、个性张扬，在读者心里荡起层层波澜。他们大多不拘礼法，逾越常规，因而只能蜷缩在社会角落里苟延残喘。颇具代表性的人物形象包括妓女、光头仔、连环杀手、瘾君子、无家可归者等社会边缘群体中的人物。

本论文侧重对伏尔曼后现代主义艺术世界里的进行越界研究。迄今为止，伏尔曼已创作 20 部作品。无论是超现实主义寓言、调查性的新闻报导、探讨人性的小说、记录人生点滴的旅行见闻，还是宏伟的编年史式巨作，越界的概念贯穿始终。越界即超越由诫条、法律、习俗或道德准则设定的界限或限度，意即违反或侵犯。由于伏尔曼的作品广泛涉及吸毒、性、暴力、犯罪等禁忌话题，其笔下人物往往采取非常的或非法的途径冲破社会规范，美国评论界将伏尔曼的小说归

类为越界小说。因此，对于伏尔曼小说中越界主题的研究将引发我们对中心与边缘、理智与疯癫、美与丑、善与恶等一连串矛盾问题的深刻思考。

鉴于伏尔曼小说的主题独特性和体裁多样性，本论文采用辩证的批评方法，将历史分析、哲学理论研究和具体的文本阐释结合起来。论文涉及伏尔曼的八部经典佳作。这些作品所体现的主题和写作技巧使得后现代派文学理论和米歇尔·福柯的越界理论成为行之有效的批评工具，但本文并未对它们进行全面系统地研究，而是选取其中与作品相契合的理论部分进行分析和引用。此外，论文还引用了与作品相关的其它哲学和文学理论，如雅克·德里达关于边缘的论述，乔治·巴塔耶关于情欲的理论，以及齐格蒙特·鲍曼的后现代伦理观。这些观点也为理解伏尔曼的作品提供了恰当的理论背景。

论文首先对伏尔曼的越界作品进行综述，并探究其文类界线的模糊性。为了理解并再现世界的另一面，伏尔曼不断穿越国家、种族、阶级与文化的界限，形成了自身创作的鲜明特点。除了致力于再现异域题材和同情笔下的他者形象，伏尔曼作品的另一特色就是事实与虚构之间界线的模糊。他的作品类别一向很难界定：可以说是“小说、回忆录、色情文学、新闻作品、社会批判、民族志学、历史和推理小说”的大融合。(Hemmingson 7) 阅读其作品，我们不难发现他总能在不同的文学类别之间游刃有余地创作。在 2006 年《诗人与作家》杂志的访谈中，伏尔曼坦言：“各种文类交互运用好比是选取不同色彩的漆刷，必将产生不同的效果……不管你是在写侦探小说还是科幻小说。”(Bush) 本章论述紧密结合《彩虹故事集》、《地图册》和“七个梦”系列的相关小说文本逐一分析伏尔曼是如何将新闻报道、旅游散文及神话故事等文学类别与小说巧妙糅合在一起的。

其次，论文探讨了伏尔曼在《彩虹故事集》中对逾越社会边界的理解。小说借着五彩光谱的意象将每个故事紧密相扣，记述了在社会底层挣扎的边缘人物，表达了伏尔曼对他们的深切关爱。尽管处境卑微，这些人不断寻求对各种社会边界的逾越，拒绝甚至重新界定各自的边缘地位：表达对同性的爱恋，犯上恋物癖，酗酒吸毒，涉入团伙暴力，抑或是谋杀无辜者。在看似波澜不惊实则跌宕起伏的故事中，伏尔曼不断将读者推向各种极限。在作品中，边缘与中心的关系不再是二元而静止的，而变得多元而动态。因此，小说里既没有天使或恶魔，也没有小人或君子，只有在现实社会中生存的人。正是这种边缘地位促使他们释放内心的

能量，反思人生在世的意义，摆脱世俗的束缚。总的来说，《彩虹故事集》论述了这样的观点，那就是任何界限都不是绝对的。在逾越社会边界的过程中，伏尔曼笔下的人物成功地摆脱了失败和被斥逐带给他们的耻辱，塑造了他们另一种个性，获得某种程度的尊严和归属感。通过对这些古怪、残暴和让人心神不宁的人物的塑造，伏尔曼试图传递这样的理念，那就是扮演不同社会角色的人不仅可以共存，而且能让人性的彩虹和我们生存的世界变得更加丰富多彩。

其三，论文分析了三部关于堕入风尘的妓女的小说：《妓女格洛丽娅》、《蝴蝶故事集》和《皇族》，并考查了伏尔曼对爱的追寻这一主题的理解。尽管共同涉及妓女题材，但每部小说就其核心而言都是一个凄美的爱情故事。虽未以三部曲形式发表，但它们主题相近，风格连贯，极具三部曲的特色。故事的主人公都可谓反英雄，他们渴望与人沟通，踏入红尘找寻心中的真爱。《妓女格洛丽娅》是关于越战老兵游荡街头寻觅红颜知己格洛丽娅的故事。《蝴蝶故事集》讲述一位记者与泰国妓女相恋并最终染上艾滋病的故事。《皇族》则是一个私人侦探受雇找寻“妓女皇后”而她却用爱抚平其心灵创伤的故事。这三个男人无一例外充满幻想，略显不合时宜。他们都相信在妓女温存的怀抱中能得到爱的救赎，尽管内心很清楚那份爱转瞬即逝，荒诞而徒劳。伏尔曼的妓女三部曲没有主流爱情小说中的浪漫与缠绵，而是再现被社会遗弃的人物之间污秽而凄苦的爱恋。他们超越尘俗的欲望，找到心中最美的爱情。

其四，论文对《欧洲中心》中集权统治下渺小历史人物面对艰难抉择，逾越传统道德界限的主题进行了深刻反思。这部关于第二次世界大战期间纳粹德国和前苏联错综复杂关系的历史小说，揭露了集权主义的丑陋，是伏尔曼最杰出的作品。小说中的故事大多两个一组，前后呼应，淋漓尽致地再现了身处道德困境的历史人物为了不失节操而苦苦挣扎的经历。鲍卢斯和弗拉索夫将军、德国士兵格斯坦和前苏联作曲家肖斯塔科维奇都曾饱受历史争议，他们身上人性的弱点毋庸置疑，但在伏尔曼的心目中，他们都是能屈能伸的英雄。为了在恐怖的集权政权的枪口下幸存下来，他们迫于种种两难抉择：是背叛集权统治下的祖国而投靠敌方，还是不顾家人安危一心揭露纳粹滔天罪行，抑或是为了追求艺术的完整性而忍辱负重。为了坚守信仰，保持节操，他们不得不在希特勒和斯大林之间抉择，在集团利益与个人信仰之间抉择，在党的路线与个人节操之间抉择。在静观每个

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