Notes on William Vollmann, *Imperial*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

How to Structure a 1,300 Page Book

The book is 1,306 long pages, divided into 13 Parts, with a 24-page bibliography, a 17-page chronology, a list of people Vollmann interviewed, and 112 pages of notes. It is longer than 'Infinite Jest' or 'Science and Sanity' (two books I have always associated), but shorter than 'The Anatomy of Melancholy.'

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These are thoughts about Part One, 'Introductions,' which is itself 182 pages long, and divided into 12 chapters. This Part really is a single long introduction, and it reads as a coherent, if not unified, essay. The question it raised for me, at first intermittently and then insistently, was: What motivation could I have to read the other 12 Parts of the book? Aside, that is, from the motivation I might have if I were treating this like James Mitchener's 'Texas,' which is incidentally exactly 16 pages longer than 'Imperial,' a fact that couldn't possibly have escaped Vollmann. That motivation would be to learn about the history of Imperial County, and its current politics, sociology, linguistics, botany, geology, and other statistics, all arranged in a nicely palatable fictionalized form. That wouldn't be my motivation in reading past Part One of 'Imperial,' partly because I am not that interested in Imperial County (it is, as Vollmann knows so well, not exactly a picturesque or relaxing place), but also because I doubt that in five or seven hundred more pages I might be convinced that Imperial County is a microcosm of the United States -- especially because Vollmann flirts with that idea and nicely rejects it.

Other reasons for reading past Part One? 'Imperial' is not a novel, and in fact chapter 11 of Part One sets out that argument in a very entertaining fashion, imagining how Flaubert or Steinbeck might have written 'Imperial,' and reminding itself (that is, Vollmann reminds himself) that novels always end up being just what the novelist intended, that they are opportunistically assembled from minor travesties against truth. So if you were to read 'Imperial' in hopes of finding the ruined and bleached skeleton of the postmodern 'Moby-Dick' (a comparison Vollmann himself makes, as
if just to stave off the inevitable reviewer’s remark), you would be reading against
the grain. Which is, as Vollmann would say, entirely your business.

A third reason to continue reading past Part One: to find out what new genre he is
creating. Vollmann is past master at what is superficially called the postmodern
‘game’ of authorial awareness, forever talking about the book called 'Imperial' that
he hopes, hoped, and still might hope to write, and playing themes and variations
with irrelevancies, digressions, apostrophes, and inappropriate but irresistible
stories. So people who read Vollmann have to be interested in what kind of books he
is producing -- or rather, why they are so stubbornly unclassifiable, and how
interesting that stubbornness might become. I saw 'Imperial' filed in a university
bookstore under 'US History,' but in those first 182 pages he tells us a lot about the
'love of his life' and how it felt to break up with her, and he gives us plenty of
evidence of his interest in interviewing unreliable, uninformed, atypical people,
whose 'testimony' would not make the cut in any normative history text. (He also
tells us about interviews with bigots and people who have suffered, and then he's
making points, but I always find the dull interviews the best: the ones where the
'informant' says he doesn't know, or isn't sure, or doesn't want to talk.) I like his
unclassifiable maximalist aesthetic, but it is not a reason to read the entire book: in
fact if that is what drew me to Vollmann, I would happily stop after Part One
because that Part so clearly frames the genreless category and ambitions of the
book, and so clearly samples most or all of its major voices and styles.

But I have a fourth reason to continue reading past Part One, even though it also
isn’t a reason to continue reading all thirteen Parts. His writing is stupendous. His
prose is sharp and parsimonious (note that: the writing continuously refreshes
itself, and never, in the first 182 pages, feels like it will need the crutches of statistics
or long quotations to make it to the end). He looks and thinks with every line. This is
not a reason to read the book in its entirety, because it has nothing to do with
criteria of unity or coherence, and it does not justify the book’s exact length: but it
does justify the book’s relative length, and it is enough to prompt me to read one
more Part.

And these are thoughts about Part Eleven, 'Postscripts,' pp. 827-990. This is the
second, and last, section of the book I expect to read. I have been wondering -- page
by page, while I’m supposed to be paying attention to what he’s telling me -- about
what he expected his ideal reader to be thinking. And to the extent that I can
understand how he imagined his ideal reader, I realize that I won’t ever really
understand such a reader.

One thing an ideal reader is clearly not supposed to be thinking is: This is second-
rate reporting, so I’ll go and read something written by a better investigator. In the
chapter on the maquiladores, Vollmann fails, again and again, to get any definitive
information. He buys a spy camera, and tells us for pages and pages how it doesn’t
work; in the end he gets videos, but they are too blurry to be of much use, and he
can't transfer them to his computer anyway. Over and over, interviews are inconclusive, and the people he talks to are ill-informed. An ideal reader is not meant to think: This isn't necessarily a bigger picture, or a more balanced picture: it's just an incomplete picture. So an ideal reader must be meant to be sensitive to some gathering larger truth, one that is accumulates in narrative asides, in intrusions of expressive writing, in the often unaccountable divisions into chapters and numbered sections. At one point Vollmann writes: 'Like most human records, this account essentially recounts failure.' (p. 905) Well, an ideal reader apparently would take that as poetry, and as an elegant admission of every writer’s limitations. But in order for such a reading to happen, it is important not to also think that things could have been managed better, that some failures are more partial than others: and how is it possible not to think that? What notion of maximalist writing can possibly be that capacious, that forgiving? What kind of reader could come across a tightly written story like 'German's Story' (pp. 901-904) and not wonder, in retrospect, about the hundreds of pages of loose, unaffected, unpersuasive, but impeccably indulgent maximalist overspill in the pages before it?

In short: I am baffled when I try to picture Vollmann's concept of his ideal reader, but as the book proceeds I can hardly think of anything else. On p. 887, Vollmann writes: 'like many other insane people I long to be considered 'balanced.'” "Imperial" is balanced, in an obvious and respectable way, because Vollmann always tries to present both sides of every issue. But so do many journalists. If I think Vollmann is 'insane,' I don't think so in the way he apparently intends, which is that he's excessive, obsessive, compulsive, and dedicated without limits. I think he is 'insane' because his enterprise depends on not thinking in any plausible way about any plausibly reflective reader.