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The rise of the New Sincerity in contemporary American fiction has largely been read on terms provided by a handful of early proponents. This article contends that more complex formulations of the notion are necessary if it is to remain useful as a descriptor for important qualities of recent texts. Among issues in need of greater attention are the implications of the New Sincerity for historical awareness, a topic I pursue via consideration of William T. Vollmann's grappling with literary history. I argue that Vollmann's works offer more than the pastiche that allegedly defined historical consciousness in postmodernist fiction. His intertextual engagements with Edgar Allan Poe are especially valuable for modelling some of the ways recent fictions bypass postmodernist ahistoricism in favor of connections to a usable past, and, especially, a usable literary tradition. Readings of Vollmann's 'The Grave of Lost Stories' (in several editions) and 'The Cemetery of the World' show how he employs research in the textual archive as a figuration of relations to the past that can serve the ends of renewal and recovery.

Keywords

William T. Vollmann; Edgar Allan Poe; Archive; Literary History; American Literature; Gothic; Contemporary Literature; New Sincerity

David Foster Wallace's 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993) remains a touchstone piece for arguments that one strand of contemporary fiction is marked by a commitment to sincerity, in response to the endemic irony of postmodernist texts. While Wallace and his critics offer valuable insights, viewing his generation as narrowly defined by the terms of 'E Unibus Pluram' risks a dangerously reductive critical apparatus, one that elides the lack of consensus with regard to how the New Sincerity and its implications are best realized aesthetically. Among the less-remarked of these implications is the importance of the New Sincerity for literary history. Fredric Jameson famously articulated the problems of historical awareness in postmodernity: 'Cultural production ... can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world.' Instead, 'we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history.'¹ The import of these remarks is damning for literary texts. Rather than a living tradition, postmodernism leaves authors with a historical awareness that offers only opportunities for simulations of dead styles via pastiche. William T. Vollmann stands as a striking example of an author who has taken steps to work through the challenges of literary-historical connection Jameson describes. Vollmann's form of the New Sincerity is not entirely one with all others, but his devotion to empathy and the value of fiction in fostering it are a sure point of congruence. Furthermore, his treatment of literary history is remarkable in that among his achievements is the recovery of earlier aesthetic forms and modes as a living tradition. As such, his fictions demonstrate no detachment from the past, but a persistent devotion to revitalizing the past as a means to renewing engaged fiction in the present.

In 1990, Larry McCaffery asked Vollmann which contemporary authors he admires. His

response is provocative in several ways, not least in that it basically ignores – with the arguable exception of Vladimir Nabokov – all of the major figures of post-1945 American fiction.

William S. Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon, who may, given the nature of *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987), be expected entries on a list provided by Vollmann in 1990, are nowhere to be found. Also absent are the other usual suspects of maximalist, encyclopedic metafiction, such as John Barth and William Gaddis, and any younger peers Vollmann met early in his career, like Wallace. Perhaps even more intriguing, and more to the point in this article, is that Vollmann's sense of 'contemporary' encompasses at least two centuries. Such an expansive view of the literary moment allows him to assert that, among his contemporaries, 'Hawthorne may be the best.'²

The pre-eminence of Nathaniel Hawthorne on Vollmann's list points readers in the direction of nineteenth-century American literature and provokes reflection on Vollmann's conception of an American literary tradition. Given his oft-expressed interest in foreign literatures, a view of Vollmann as participating in a narrowly defined national tradition would be misrepresentative. Yet, his openness to a remarkable number of international influences is part of what makes the question of his relation to his American literary predecessors particularly intriguing. For any critic to describe the growth of a properly American tradition is an ever-more-fraught effort, but those figures F. O. Matthiessen credits with its invention – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Hawthorne, and Walt Whitman – still demand accounting. Furthermore, their relevance to Vollmann cannot be overstated: he also mentions Melville in his reply to McCaffery, and Jonathan Franzen has asserted that Melville and Whitman are the most appropriate points of comparison for Vollmann.³

In the following pages, I consider connections between Vollmann's fictions and the works of a

nineteenth-century author conspicuously absent from Matthiessen's accounting: Edgar Allan Poe. Like Hawthorne and Melville, Poe is included in Vollmann's list of admired contemporaries, but his case remains something of an exception for critics. He is regarded by many as 'our greatest bad writer,' and his works do not sit comfortably in the mapping of American literature offered by Matthiessen and his disciples.⁴ What the figure of Poe does embody is a counter-tradition to that represented by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman: he can be read alongside Hawthorne and Melville as a figure of Dark Romanticism; the celebration of his work by such authors as Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé suggests that his troubled native reception may be due to the fact that his writing is more suited to foreign than domestic standards; and, he must occupy a prominent position in any commentary on American gothic literature. In short, Poe's place in American literary history is both highly problematic and indisputably important, and his contested reputation is what makes him such an appropriate choice as a case for exploring the sense of literary tradition that emerges from Vollmann's works.

My more specific contention is that Poe and the tendencies of gothic literature offer themselves as a lens through which one can assess Vollmann's deep, if troubled, engagement with America's literary history, an engagement that presents American literature as the offspring of two incompatible impulses: one generative and erotic, the other stifling and self-destructive. The following readings of Vollmann's 'The Grave of Lost Stories' and 'The Cemetery of the World' aim to demonstrate that Vollmann diagnoses both literary achievement and the historical archive as seductive illnesses, very much in keeping with Jacques Derrida's arguments regarding the archive as enacting both conservation and violence. The American literary history Vollmann tacitly affirms is, in this sense, at once damning and redemptive; authors must constantly risk

destroying themselves and the genealogies on which claims for an American literary tradition may be built, but they do so with the profit of participation in that very tradition. Consequently, engagements with the literary past are in Vollmann's texts more than an exercise in postmodern pastiche; instead, his fictions indicate the terms on which the present can be conceived as a liminal zone, a moving threshold in which the past continually proffers itself to creative ends that rely upon historical connection.

Vollmann's gothic

Vollmann's combinations of fiction and non-fiction, as well as of fiction's various traditions and modes, have resulted in hybrid texts largely resistant to generic or modal characterizations. Nevertheless, his works display numerous debts to the gothic novel. One could turn, for instance, to the *Seven Dreams*. This series of historical fictions devoted to rethinking the American past includes meditations on grotesque corpses, cannibalism, torture, and ghostly hauntings. Such characteristics serve cumulatively to suggest that to read Vollmann as operating entirely outside of the gothic tradition is rather to miss the point. Françoise Palleau-Papin recognises as much in the introduction to her collection of essays on *The Rifles* (1994), ascribing some of its ancestry to such pieces as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.⁵ A similar point is expanded into a revealing reading of the novel by Catherine Lanone, who argues Vollmann employs gothic tropes as a means to explore the gendered, racial, and political terms of imperialism.⁶ Her argument is developed with reference to Vollmann's deployment of the gothic both as a genre with origins roughly concurrent with the high-water mark of European colonialism, and as a shaping force on event and character in the often-phantasmagorical narrative that is *The Rifles*. This demonstrates that the gothic is not something Vollmann employs only when the text at hand is governed by the

mode's conventions, as in the case of most of the pieces in his collection of ghost tales, *Last Stories and Other Stories* (2014). Instead, his historical and other fictions draw on gothic conventions with some regularity, and to a diversity of ends – among others as a way of exploring ideological hauntings, as a means to approach the ghosts of his personal past, and as material for unsettling the readers' expectations with regard to such literary conventions as genre.

Examples of the latter intention abound in Vollmann's works, and not always in texts that engage the gothic across their entirety. Take, for example, the appearances of abject bodies in Vollmann's prostitute writings. Daniel Lukes has made the point with reference to figures from books like *Whores for Gloria* (1991), *Butterfly Stories* (1993), and *The Royal Family* (2000) that Vollmann's prostitutes pass along their illnesses to their customers, undercutting johns' claims to virile masculinity via a cross-gender sharing of physical deficiencies and decay.⁷ Similar claims might be made with reference to many of his other characters, like the Boarding Care Men of 'The Blue Yonder,' of whom Vollmann writes:

when they fell asleep in the afternoons their flesh did fall into dimness; their chins doubled and tripled, their fingers dangled, and their hair grew down their shoulders with the airiness of hanging ferns. When they woke up again, life continued to fall out of them. They had crooked black mouths. Acid sweat ate holes in their stiff scaling socks. Their bulging bellies bloomed with hernias like immense chestnuts.⁸

Such passages both display Vollmann's debt to the gothic and anticipate the development, as his career proceeds, of increasingly complex considerations of the relations between the living and the dead, and between the literature of the past and that of the present.

Vollmann's Poe

If a lifelong tendency toward gothic horror in Vollmann is undeniable, so too is his acknowledgement – presented early and periodically reasserted – of its traditions in America. *You Bright and Risen Angels* may in some senses best be understood as a cyberpunk extravaganza, but it alludes to several authors whose place in the annals of American gothic fiction is well established. The first page of the novel offers a fantasy about the narrator's revivification of Ambrose Bierce in Mexico,⁹ and readers later encounter a tale told by Mr. White about the adventures of one Ichabod Crane, who has been transmogrified into 'a bastard Jewish halfbreed'¹⁰ and 'nigger sax player.'¹¹ The tale supplements White's corporate imperialism with celebratory claims for racial purity, thereby instituting the grounds for a strident ethnic nationalism and adding another register to the score of his troubling schemes. Poe likewise appears in the book, and while references to him and his works serve less as material for narrative development than do those related to Bierce and Washington Irving, he and his words are a means to offer comment on the main plot from narratively oblique angles: he is quoted in a footnote,¹² gets paired with H.P. Lovecraft as the subject of an academic conference,¹³ and lends a passage from 'The Spectacles' as an epigraph.¹⁴ Allusions to Poe and his works populate many of Vollmann's later books as well, but a survey of those moments is perhaps less useful than consideration of a work in which his place is most central: 'The Grave of Lost Stories.'

'The Grave of Lost Stories' first appeared in *Conjunctions* (1989), and also stands as the concluding story of *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs* (1991). It draws on Poe's poems, stories, and other writings, and features Poe as protagonist. The dramatic situation can be sketched quickly: Poe, delirious from strain and, presumably, alcohol, spends his days attempting to complete fictions, thus bringing them to life and saving them from an otherworldly pit of

despair known as the Grave of Lost Stories. This Grave, a ‘concentrated vortex of corruption,’¹⁵ is repeatedly described with all the vague and miasmatic detail one might expect from a gothic tale, as when one reads that ‘There was a stifling horror about the place, about which hovered the most vile and pestilential fumes.’¹⁶ The Grave is packed with decomposing skeletons of stories, which Poe imagines as ‘composed of variegated vertebrae the hue and sheen of black crystal.’¹⁷

While some might argue that the historical past is prohibitively foreign to the present, Vollmann counters this position with a vision of the author as part of a continuum, a participant in a tradition rather than a belated footnote or frustrated aspirant to it. As Vollmann’s Poe seeks to write the stories into life from out of this Grave, he sometimes hears them ‘struggling desperately to breathe.’¹⁸ His literary inspiration, it therefore seems, is a means for their inhalation – but not their inception. The situation is intriguing as a vision of literary origins, not least due to its conception of creation as an act of recovery. The stories precede the author, and while they are neither fully fleshed nor self-sufficient, they do have a life independent of Poe. Near the conclusion of the text, Psyche (who is a posthumous incarnation of Poe’s wife, and serves a role akin to that of Virgil to Dante or the Sibyl to Aeneas) tells Poe that he ‘should not destroy the paper of the dead Stories because that hurts them,’ suggesting that his failure to complete one of them is not its end.¹⁹ The untold stories exist, in other words, both before and after the author, and await salvation by some – but no specific – pen. That Poe or anyone else in particular wrote them into existence is finally a matter of relative insignificance; what matters is that the tales get told. This vision of literary creation proposes that creation must call forth that which advertises itself as available even as it remains segregated from the common realm of existence. The writer must in this sense be a psychopomp or necromancer, working magic that negotiates the divide between the accessible and the hidden, and the act of writing is, in turn, not so much a matter of

invention as re-inscription.

Furthermore, Vollmann establishes a mutually generative relation between creator and story; this incestuous relation between the author and his tales – which are at once offspring and seductresses – reinforces a sense of close connections between the literary present and the literary past. Stories appear to Vollmann’s Poe in the guise of some woman in distress, and they bear the name of figures from one or another work concerned with a doomed (and usually beloved) woman, such as Madeline Usher, Ligeia, Lenore, Ulalume, Morella, or Berenice. In the few passages in which Poe’s attention is drawn away from his own increasingly weak creative and physical state – with regard to the latter of which sexual impotence is suggested (‘he is not a man in the full sense of the word’²⁰) – the dying story-women find their parallel in the dying Mrs. Virginia Poe. Poe’s wife was, famously, significantly younger than Poe and his first cousin, and her decline due to tuberculosis runs in tandem in Vollmann’s presentation with the miseries endured by Poe’s heroines. That he addresses his wife as ‘little Sis’ reinforces a sense that accusations of both the impropriety of his marriage and the erotic charge and incestuous nature of his compositional process are very much on the mark.

Vollmann’s dramatization of the creative moment is hardly a naïve presentation of an untroubled relation to the past. Set against the seductive, if transgressive, eroticism of Poe’s creative act is an increasingly powerful destructive impulse. The wards of the Grave are guarded by a demonic ‘*Vulpine Presence*’ that either frustrates Poe’s completion of the tales or condemns their protagonists to suffering and death. The creature interferes with Poe’s compositional process, as when he tries to write ‘Morella’: it ‘pursed its black lips and blew upon the paper so that it fluttered like an ocean ... and Morella was gasping with asphyxiation.’²¹ It follows him, too, away from his writing desk, ‘striding alongside him with its arm about his waist.’²² The demon

with which Poe struggles is not only an external haunt, but a definitive part of Poe himself. It comes with him into the room of his dying wife, ‘so that when he bent down to kiss her lips it did the same, breathing into her nostrils until she whispered that terrible smell, Eddie and he said ... I I I.’²³ This increasing nearness of Poe and his nemesis ultimately sees the two collapse into one, so that when he looks upon the tomb of Ulalume, he declares ‘I *killed* her,’ and recalls ‘how the suffocation had been consummated.’²⁴ If the speaker of Poe’s ‘Ulalume’ finds himself unwittingly at the grave of his beloved, Vollmann’s Poe finds himself at the grave of his beloved victim. The union of erotic affection and death in one object alludes to Poe’s claim in ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic of subjects, but it also foregrounds the degree to which his creative urge is, in Vollmann’s presentation, a destructive one. Insofar as his heroines suffer and die, Poe’s stories live by virtue of the negation of beauty, and thus one part of what he tries to save is condemned in the interest of poetic power.

While the erotics of Vollmann’s text dramatise a problematic but generally productive impulse, they also explore the degree to which interaction with tradition threatens to overwhelm the author. The close of the text extends this conflation of the productive and the destructive, but turns it upon the writer himself. The reader is earlier given hints that the *Vulpine Presence* mutilates the female characters at the center of Poe’s tales and poems when it cannot entirely prevent them from coming to life. When this mutilation happens to Berenice, Poe’s response to her disfigurement (she has the vicious teeth of the Demon) is ‘would to God you had died!’²⁵ Hearing this, the creature turns upon him, declaring: ‘No, it is *you* who should have died. Write it.’²⁶ Poe’s concession to this demand seems a suicide note, but one signed with the intention of preserving the tale. When, at the story’s end, Poe is abandoned by Psyche at the grave of Ulalume, he unlocks the door and rushes in, intending to join the entombed ‘with the fiercely

radiant joy of self-destruction.²⁷ The seductive nature of this motion toward death is made explicit when Vollmann writes that ‘the tomb would open for him like a vagina,’ but that conviction is finally grounded in a misunderstanding, for ‘the interior was a wedge-shaped *cul-de-sac* lined with spikes . . . an instant later, the wall-jaws closed upon him.’²⁸ The Demon that haunted him wins in the end, destroying the author by means of the promise of union with his art—even while the latter persists in the tomb, awaiting its next communicant (a later one of whom is, of course, Vollmann himself).

The manner in which Vollmann presents Poe’s attitudes to the feminine is particularly interesting given that those attitudes drive the economy of artistic invention in so many of Poe’s tales. Many critics have explored the ways in which Poe’s creative urge relies on destruction of women. Some more recent readings, however, have argued that Poe may nevertheless be regarded as something akin to a proto-feminist. Leland S. Person, for example, views the violent attitudes toward women as only a first step in Poe’s creative process. For critics such as Person, the desire for women is a veil for a desire for self-preservation that is, paradoxically, one with self-destruction. When the woman is destroyed, Poe’s narrator’s obsessive desires turn back upon themselves, causing a dissolution of boundaries between desiring (masculine) subject and desired (feminine) object.²⁹ This dissolution generates an I that is an Other; it is a destruction of the self that is also a preservation of the self. In dissolving the gender of the subject, the process makes renewed space for the presentation and preservation of the feminine.

Vollmann dramatises this creative process of destruction and rebirth, but he also conflates it—via the pre-existence of Poe’s muse-fictions – with a meditation on the relation between the artist and tradition. The call to destruction is not only the clarion for the obliteration or circumvention of earlier authors, but – as Vollmann’s presentation of Poe is likewise a presentation of himself

in relation to Poe – also the self-immolation of the contemporary author. In this sense, the tradition speaks only when the author offers himself as material that may be overcome by it. When the creation of art derives from such a moment, one in which the present is preserved by being subjected to the rule of destruction, the tradition is extended. In this manner, destruction is the means to what Vollmann offers as a vision of one sort of success: the preservation for future pens of the tradition embodied in the tales.

***The Grave of Lost Stories* artist's book**

Vollmann has, across his career, periodically produced very-limited-edition artist's books under the aegis of his own CoTangent Press. These texts range in scope from broadsides to elaborate book objects, typically include extensive decoration and illustration (and variants within an edition), and sometimes feature unpublished writings. 'The Grave of Lost Stories' was released in a CoTangent edition of two hundred, of which a handful are deluxe copies, produced with the assistance of Ben Pax (1993). That this story in particular warranted a CoTangent production in addition to traditional publication finds, among its justifications, a fact that is particular to Poe. As Priscilla Juvelis has explained, the artist's book emerged in the 1800s, and numbered among its first examples works by Édouard Manet. In conjunction with Stéphane Mallarmé, Manet produced in 1875 a bilingual, illustrated edition of about ninety copies of Poe's 'The Raven.'³⁰ Vollmann's decision to enshrine the story that most directly employs the figure of Poe thus nods to the international publication history of what is perhaps Poe's most successful poem.

In deluxe copies of *Grave*, the story's play between creation, destruction, and preservation is presented in a material form more provocative than any allowed by the pages of a traditionally printed text. *The Grave of Lost Stories: 1809–1849* is bound in metal and stone; copper covers

are joined by steel hinges and overlaid with marble. The object is remarkably heavy, and larger than all but the biggest of trade books. The edges of the interior are lined with cows' teeth set upright, as if the covers of the tome were jaws, suggesting those of the story's *Vulpine Presence*. Within this dental palisade, one finds four hand-painted wood engravings and the (slightly revised) text of the story printed in multiple fonts by Alastair Johnson. In addition to the deluxe edition, Katherine Spielmann mentions a portfolio edition that was particularly elaborate. In this instance, handwritten pages alternate with illustrations made from poisonous pigments, and a grotesque electrical apparatus is attached to the book: 'pickled squid in bulbous cylindrical specimen jars wrapped with wires running to a primitive transistor.'³¹ The book object works as the grave itself: the tale rests inside its marble sepulchre, entombed until an audience is willing to listen to its cries for attention. With its juxtaposition of a promise of secret knowledge and off-putting weight and gruesome decoration, it seduces and prohibits entry in equal measure.

The very materiality of the book object explores playful tensions among a handful of intersecting dualities. Again, I submit that this playful exploration can be read not only as a negotiation of certain problems deriving from Poe's works, but of literary history in general. Michael Hemmingson asserts that Vollmann's use of end matter can be profitably read in light of Jacques Derrida's arguments regarding archive fever, and I would extend the point: Derrida's concepts could be applied to much else transpiring in Vollmann's works.³² In the case of *The Grave of Lost Stories*, Derrida's description of the competing drives that shape and define the work of the archive are particularly germane.

Among Derrida's concerns is the archive's expression of a tension between revelation and concealment, a tension that Vollmann's CoTangent publication of *The Grave of Lost Stories* stages quite dramatically. Although the archive promises revelation of the origin, it relies for its

own preservation (the preservation of the archive, not of that which it contains) on its obscuring the true appearance of the original. The revelation of the ‘*archē* ... in the nude’ would be an effacement of the archive, for ‘*the origin*’ could then speak ‘*by itself*,’ with no need any longer for the archive.³³ In other words, one part of the archive’s authenticity derives from its revelation of its own existence, and of its concomitant advertisement of itself as the home of the truth. The archive’s authenticity is thus grounded in secrecy; its heart (its contents) remains difficult to access and navigate. In keeping with this aspect of the archive, the obdurate mass of the marble-and-metal binding of *The Grave of Lost Stories* cannot easily be overlooked. Indeed, the book is difficult even to move – it asserts its presence and suggests to all who touch it a seductive permanency reminiscent of the Grave of Lost Stories from which Poe calls forth his tales. On the other hand, its very massiveness, the teeth lining the interior of the book, and such features as poisonous paints, deter access to its contents. The fetishism of book as object here reveals presence, while that which is seemingly promised by the revelation – some truth won from the grave – recedes.

The Grave of Lost Stories embodies the competing drives of preservation and destruction that Derrida declares are another set of terms on which the archive can be understood. The metal binding and marble covers suggest that the book object might be – doubtless indeed is – more durable than the conventional paper and board wrappings used for most texts, including earlier publications of the story. It offers itself as material memory, keeping the contents safe for later consultation, just as sepulchres both prevent harm from coming to the remains of a corpse and stand as memorials, thereby helping to preserve the body and person of the dead. The obverse of this impulse is, again, a destructive one. The archive in this sense enacts the work of forgetting and repression, exercising its authority as an act of exclusion, as Derrida suggests in observing

that the archive's power has been from the first 'a place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*,' a privilege connected to the power of those hierophants allowed access to the contents of the archive and thus accorded the honor due to legitimized hermeneuticians of the law.³⁴ Vollmann's development of the CoTangent book is, in this sense, perpetrating violence against his earlier versions of the text. While mass-produced copies are inscribed via reiterable electronic type, the limited edition, hand-crafted successor erases its ancestors. The revisions to the text (however minor) exclude some measure of their predecessor drafts, and the illustrations and material artifact in general deny the value of the literary magazine and the paperback publications of the text. Any prior version, the CoTangent edition implies, is deficient, not worth preserving, and consequently excluded.

A third point of congruence between Vollmann's project and Derrida's argument concerns more directly an existential dilemma manifest as a frustration of historical presence. Seen positively, Derrida proposes, the archive suggests a mutual satisfaction that the present and the future can offer one another.³⁵ Vollmann's marble book offers itself as a model of responsibility on the part of the present to the future, asserting 'we in the present have decided that this is work we will do for those who inhabit the future; the preservation may involve something of us, but it is for them: we give ourselves to them.' The anticipation is that the future will respond in kind, taking up the offering and returning it to the present in a more complete and satisfactory form, one fleshed out with the perspective of hindsight and a view of the whole of the present that is obscure to those in it. This latter promise of the archive is that of clarity. At the same time, these promises of communion between past and present via the archive are the etiological foundation for a profound sickness – archive fever. With its other promises come the archive's suggestion that it can allow a return to the origin, to an ideally ordered past moment that contained the potential of

which all that has followed is the result. To respond to this suggestion is to become feverish with a desire for the origin, and its power. This ‘*mal d’archive*’ is a ‘compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic’ desire to recover the ‘place of absolute commencement.’³⁶ Such a desire not only demands one disavow the present but shows that one has succumbed to the most invidious temptation of the archive, a blind celebration of the archive’s hierarchies, technologies of classification, and elision of incompleteness and exclusion. In the case of Vollmann’s book-object, the entombment of the text reminds readers of this danger, even as it provokes interest via its promise of access to that which – because of the rarity of the book and the cultural valences of its trappings – offers some hermetic power.

The preceding analysis of ‘Grave of Lost Stories,’ in its several incarnations, hopefully illustrates the depth of Vollmann’s engagement with the gothic, especially when focused on a representative of a national literary tradition. In the case of his handling of Poe, Vollmann’s sense of his native artistic inheritance is informed by an interplay of destruction and creation, and obliteration and rebirth, that the earlier author modelled and to which he is, in Vollmann’s hands, subjected. In the next section, I argue that even though Vollmann’s use of gothic conventions in relation to the problems of the archive are hardly limited to the negotiation of the literary past narrowly defined, artistic creation and the problems of inscription remain for him part of the problem even when the terms on which the past is engaged are expanded.

The gothic Americas of *Last Stories and Other Stories*

While ‘The Grave of Lost Stories’ represents a strong early example of Vollmann’s exploration of the gothic, it only hints at what Vollmann can offer in an entire book dominated by the mode. The tales collected in 2014’s *Last Stories and Other Stories* are given over to relations between

the living and the dead that are almost always magical. Among the texts the book offers are a handful set in Querétaro, Veracruz, and Buenos Aires. The presence in the collection of stories set in these locales is notable in part because they stand as some of Vollmann's few portrayals of Latin America. Vollmann's readers will have noted that the five published volumes of *Seven Dreams* (1990–2015), although ostensibly a history of North America, have featured almost no action south of Jamestown. His other books – *Imperial* (2009) of course excepted – also remain somewhat closed to Latin America. A number of stories in *The Atlas* (1996), a few from *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs*, a section of *The Book of Dolores* (2013), and a handful of pages of the final volume of *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003) offer text and images that derive from his experiences in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Colombia, but these are slight presences in his body of work. In this sense, these Latin American stories in *Last Stories and Other Stories* are exceptionally valuable: they provide some of the few means by which Vollmann's readers can judge whether or not compatible his visions of Latin America and its past are compatible with the portrayals of Canada and the United States in the *Seven Dreams* and elsewhere. These Latin American stories are significant for another reason: they follow the lead of 'Grave of Lost Stories' in employing the gothic as a means to explore the way histories might fall prey to the dangers of the archive. Indeed, seen in this light, these stories may even be regarded as self-chastisement on the part of Vollmann, an acknowledgement that his record of New World experiences and literatures has often written out Latin American experience in its accounting of America's cultural past and present.³⁷

That the gothic is especially suited to evocation of that which has been excluded from the historical archive, of what has been a prohibited presence in written histories, has been proposed by a number of critics, including Teresa A. Goddu. Goddu asserts that the gothic can destabilise

conventional notions of the literary canon and of the nation itself.³⁸ When she turns to the historical past more generally, she observes that potential critiques of the American past are sometimes undercut by denials of American history in general, a move that frustrates the possibility of historical critique by disclaiming entirely its intended object. For Goddu, the gothic has the power to interrupt such closed circuits by virtue of its preoccupation with anxiety, violence, fear, confusion, and guilt – the very sorts of things American histories typically repress.³⁹ If, as she claims, this is true for the history of the United States, how much more of the case must it be when that national history is placed in its hemispheric and transoceanic contexts? My contention in the following reading of ‘The Cemetery of the World’ is that Vollmann extends his use of the American gothic tradition to explore the heritage of New World places beyond the United States. In so doing, he foregrounds the powers of the gothic mode that Goddu argues make it so important to consideration of American histories: its ability to draw forth from among the gaps in received history the violence that helps maintain the archive and the historical narratives built on the basis of its authority. This engagement demonstrates, too, his revival of an earlier mode as more than pastiche, and rather a vital means to present a living tradition.

Vollmann’s Mexico: ‘The Cemetery of the World’

In some senses, ‘The Cemetery of the World’ is not so obviously concerned with American literary predecessors as is ‘The Grave of Lost Stories.’ Yet, it is very much a return to the earlier story’s preoccupations with the relation of the writer to the past, the simultaneously erotic and self-destructive nature of American writing, and the problems of the archive. Indeed, the exploration in ‘The Cemetery of the World’ of the power, promise, and danger of the archive is possibly even more suited to a reading in terms of Derrida’s discussion of the subject. Perhaps most importantly, ‘The Cemetery of the World’ demonstrates that appropriate relations to the

past can serve the ends of artistic renewal and that reconnection to historical sources is not only possible, but absolutely essential for creation.

The tale is set in Veracruz, and the opening explains that the city was long known as ‘the cemetery of the world’ because of its many plagues. As one might expect in a gothic tale, Vollmann offers numerous unsettling settings and events, from amputation and decaying buildings to visits to a *bruja* and the presence of a supernatural woman and child who make meals of her lovers. In describing one of the latter, Vollmann writes, with a nod to the monsters and mutilations of the gothic, that he ‘lay glossy and swollen like a roasted chicken, ants all over him, a great leaf on his face.’⁴⁰ His appearance echoes the description of the city’s plague victims, who ‘failed almost infallibly, first swelling until their rings cut deep into their fingers and their faces bulged with pus, so that at the moment of decease they often wore the fleshy-lipped grimace of an Olmec head.’⁴¹ The deployment of such relatively superficial characteristics of the gothic tale are hardly in themselves the point, as is increasingly evident when the postcolonial critique they serve emerges. The grotesque deaths contained ‘within’ the city’s ‘unsanitary walls,’ the narrator asserts, are perhaps the result of ‘a curse’ that ‘exhaled itself undyingly from the bloody soil’ because Veracruz was ‘founded in 1519 by Cortés himself’ on the site of a town destroyed by the conquistadors.⁴²

The walls of the city thus offer themselves as something like the walls of an enormous tomb – it is a product of colonial destruction, and that destruction has been revisited on later populations of the city in the form of plagues – but I would suggest that these walls are akin as well to the space of an archive. As Derrida explains, the archive is established by both a power of preservation and a power of exclusion. To the extent that Veracruz persists, it is a monument to Spanish colonial efforts. The founding of colonial Mexico is everywhere in its streets, from the Spanish spoken

there to the buildings amongst which its population moves. At the same time, the presence of the colonial city is an elision of part of the pre-Contact world, an erasure of the town of Quiahuyiztláin and its population.

Furthermore, this archival aspect of the place is reinforced by the work of the story's protagonist, Ricardo Ramírez, who is identified as 'A cocky sailor of archives.'⁴³ Ricardo comes to Veracruz to investigate local records for material relevant to his dissertation on folk legends. He is heartbroken, having recently been abandoned by one Adela, and this emotional state has produced two results: he has thrown himself into his academic work, and he has succumbed to a general hatred for women. His erotic desire for women, in other words, has been transferred to the archive, and what he finds in the documentary history of the place is a parallel to the decay that afflicts the bodies of Veracruz's citizens. The records are 'dwindling like melting ice-shards, verso words showing through, blots spreading and darkening'; they are so damaged by worms that Vollmann repeatedly compares them to wedding lace.⁴⁴ The attention given throughout the text to the state of the records Ricardo consults works like the obstinate materiality of *The Grave of Lost Stories*, returning readers to awareness that records have been preserved, that the archive does in fact exist and extends an invitation to encounter the truth. The comparisons of the documents to wedding lace reinforce the invitation's erotic appeal, much like Poe's attraction to his dying heroines in 'The Grave of Lost Stories.' At the same time, the later text's preoccupation with the decay of the records implies that the curse of Veracruz's bloodstained ground has been visited upon the documentary archive as well as the figurative archive of the town itself. Consequently, Vollmann's portrayal of the documents highlights not the archive's positive promise, but the destructive powers of exclusion and omission by virtue of which it exists.

Furthering this sense that the archive is both seductress and grave, and in what seems an overt nod to Derrida, Ricardo succumbs to a fever after coming to Veracruz and immersing himself in the archive, and the illness develops in parallel with his research. The particular objects of his quest are ‘the “autonomous” and “universal” elements of Mexican legends,’ a goal that drives him to seek the Ur-tale from which the Mexican imagination has grown.⁴⁵ In abandoning ‘his own half-lived life’ in preference for hints of this cultural origin, he throws himself into the hands of the plague of Veracruz, and of archive fever.⁴⁶ Furthermore, he welcomes the archive’s shortcomings, as the gaps in the record allow ‘our hero’ to ‘interpolate whatever he liked.’⁴⁷ These interpolations are increasingly shaped by Ricardo’s emotional distress, identifying parallels in the Mexican past for the romantic betrayal he suffered at the hands of Adela. Consequently, he becomes obsessed with gathering information about La Malinche, whose history he regards as ‘the nation’s founding legend.’⁴⁸ In Vollmann’s presentation, the ghost of Malinche is conflated with La Llorona, and in Ricardo’s feverishly misogynistic eyes, the synthesis of these legends provides a suitable figure not only of Mexico’s, but also of his personal, past.⁴⁹

Ricardo’s preoccupation with Malinche as a figure of national origins, frustrated romantic life, and general obsession with the decaying past of cursed Veracruz culminate in an encounter with an embodiment of all of these aspects of the tale. His feverish search for information about Llorona leads him to explore some abandoned buildings, where he encounters this ghost of La Malinche in ‘the most evil house ... like a castle. Over there on Hidalgo and Callejón California.’⁵⁰ At this moment, and for the first time since his loss of Adela, he experiences a ‘sudden lust.’⁵¹ Llorona is unquestionably a dangerous spirit, a figure of the malicious destruction that typifies the curse that afflicts Veracruz. Nevertheless, she is for Ricardo an

object of desire, and, while she normally destroys those she encounters, Llorona becomes Ricardo's lover, and they have a child.

With the discovery of Llorona as a living presence from the past, an alternative at which the archive hints but denies in its very presence, Vollmann's story shifts from a record of decay to one that considers how opening oneself to the dangerous ambiguities of the past can lead to renewal and creation. The birth of the child, in particular, emblematises the production of new (if rather unusual) life from out of the personification of the troubled past of Mexico and the elisions of its history. Unlike the detestable Malinche of whom Ricardo learns in the archive, Llorona, 'being immortal, was still fresher than the fringed arches of banana leaves,' and she eventually goes so far as to leave him in order to avoid having to destroy him.⁵² At their final meeting, she gifts him with a leaf that, when made into tea, will allow 'life' to 'go differently for him' after their relationship.⁵³ And, it does: 'he suddenly loved women—all of them. Not long after that, he completed his dissertation, for which he received highest honors, and a publishing contract with a feminist press.'⁵⁴ Furthermore, he enters into a happy marriage and becomes the 'artistic director of the provincial folklore troupe,' which stages plays and musical presentations.⁵⁵ One notes that these achievements each bring him into more positive relations with the feminine, with his vocation of folklore, and with his own creative powers. In short, in coming to erotic terms with the founding mother of Mexico, Ricardo renews himself.

Unlike Poe in 'The Grave of Lost Stories,' who is finally destroyed by his erotic attraction to the necrotic, Ricardo negotiates his self-destructive attraction to his dangerous lover with great success. His tale ends with a description of his theatrical masterpiece, a 'wordless performance entitled "Salvation."'⁵⁶ In this play, a number of men walk through a maze while being stalked by death. When only one man remains, and death is almost upon him, 'out came a lovely

death's-head woman.... The young man flew delightedly into her arms, and she enfolded him just in time to spare him from her rival.⁵⁷ The production brings fame to Ricardo and allows the tale to return to the question of artistic production. In trading his fascination with the archive, which is self-destructive because it so thoroughly honors the equivocal terms of that technology, for participation in a folk tradition that honors that which the archive and related histories omit, Ricardo honors the excluded and the abject. He thereby models how history can be transformed from a tool of destruction to a means for production.

The gothic tales 'The Grave of Lost Stories' and 'The Cemetery of the World' demonstrate Vollmann's engagement with a mode that he has explored most deeply on terms that take shape in relation to Poe. Insofar as this is the case, these stories present a view of the past that suggests some of the ways Vollmann negotiates his national literary history. In both cases, the attachment to that which can persist only on the thanatic terms of the archive – the dead past that remains a tool of hegemonic power and which the archive obscures – is revealed as counterproductive. On the other hand, an engagement driven by an erotic impulse of discovery and creation brings to life, literally in these magic-filled stories, new work grounded in New World traditions, whether those of the American gothic, pulled gasping for air from out of the Grave of Lost Stories, or the darker side of Mexican folklore, dug out of the bloody earth of postcolonial Veracruz.

The more recent story, in particular, is notable for the degree to which it emphasises the need for local response to global crises. The recovery of La Llorona not only redeems the reputation of La Malinche, it also saves the man who recovers her. In this way, the tale suggests that archive fever – including that version of it manifest as a preoccupation with the origins of any particular national literary tradition – can only be overcome by focusing on an effort to meet the tradition's

promise of clarity with regard to the past via devotion to historical connection in the present. Like the *Seven Dreams*, which trades slavish adherence to the facts of the historical record for a symbolic history truer than that offered by the archive, Vollmann's treatment of the literary tradition sees past texts as suggestive in both their content and in their silences, and he puts both to work in service of celebrating and clarifying the past. In Vollmann's stories, this transformation of America's national literary tradition becomes the grounds for participation in it by this most global of contemporary American authors, and models one means by which the authors of the New Sincerity can develop their response to postmodernism.

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Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 25.
2. William T. Vollmann, in Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson (eds.), *Expelled from Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2004), p. 36.
3. Jonathan Franzen, 'A Friendship,' in Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (eds.), *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), p. 282.
4. E. L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe: The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 9.
5. Françoise Palleau-Papin, 'Introduction: Un Balzac californien,' in Françoise Palleau-Papin (ed.), *William T. Vollmann: Le roman historique en question, Une étude de The Rifles* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011), p. 15.
6. Catherine Lanone, 'Sources primaires et réécriture postmoderne,' in Françoise Palleau-Papin (ed.), *William T. Vollmann: Le roman historique en question, Une étude de The Rifles* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011), pp. 35–45.

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7. Daniel Lukes, “‘Strange Hungers’: William T. Vollmann’s Literary Performances of Abject Masculinity,” in Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (eds.), *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 265–6.
 8. Vollmann, *The Rainbow Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 399.
 9. Vollmann, *You Bright and Risen Angels: A Cartoon* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 3.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.
 11. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 421.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 446.
 15. Vollmann, *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs* (New York: Grove, 1994), p. 296.
 16. *Ibid.*, pp. 295–6.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. Leland S. Person, ‘Poe’s Poetics of Desire: “Th’ Expanding Eye to the Loved Object,”’ *Poe Studies* 34, nos. 1–2 (2001), p. 5.
 30. Priscilla Juvelis, ‘William T. Vollmann: Artist’s Books’ in Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (eds.), *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), p. 288.

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31. Katherine Spielmann, 'The Book as Apparatus: William T. Vollmann's Special Editions,' *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993), p. 65.
 32. Michael Hemmingson, 'Beyond the Book: William T. Vollmann's End Matter (Appendices, Glossaries, and Extra Texts),' in Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (eds.), *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), p. 333.
 33. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 92.
 34. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
 37. A point for future investigation will be the degree to and manner in which Vollmann's career grapples with the Boltonian thesis that Latin America should be studied on roughly the same terms as the United States and Canada. As I suggest in the main text, much of Vollmann's work so far has partitioned the Americas, but there are many signs that this is changing. Antonio Barrenechea's *America Unbound: Encyclopedic Literature and Hemispheric Studies* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016) offers an insightful explanation of the debates surrounding and implications of Bolton's work.
 38. Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 8.
 39. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 40. Vollmann, *Last Stories and Other Stories* (New York: Viking, 2014), p. 316.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
 44. *Ibid.*
 45. *Ibid.*
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
 47. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
 48. *Ibid.*, 302. La Malinche was an indigenous woman who served as translator for Cortés. She also became his mistress and bore him a child. While there have been attempts to redeem

the historical Malinche, the traditional attitude is that she was a traitor to her culture, guilty of miscegenation and of abetting the success of the conquistadors. Octavio Paz explains in *El laberinto de la soledad* that Malinche is a representation of ‘las indias, fascinadas, violadas, o seducidas por los españoles’ [‘the female Indians fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards’]; consequently, she is a figure of the Mexico that emerged from the conquest and, to the extent that it is shaped by outside influences, of Mexico today ([New York: Penguin, 1997], p. 82.).

49. Folktales about La Llorona relate that she drowned her children while in a confused state, and consequently she walks through the night – usually near rivers – wailing as she searches for them (Anna M. Sandoval, ‘Unir los Lazos: Braiding Chicana and Mexicana Subjectivities,’ in Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez (eds.), *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002], p. 217).
50. Vollmann, *Last Stories and Other Stories*, p. 309.
51. Ibid., p. 312.
52. Ibid., p. 314.
53. Ibid., p. 320.
54. Ibid., p. 322.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 323.
57. Ibid., p. 324.