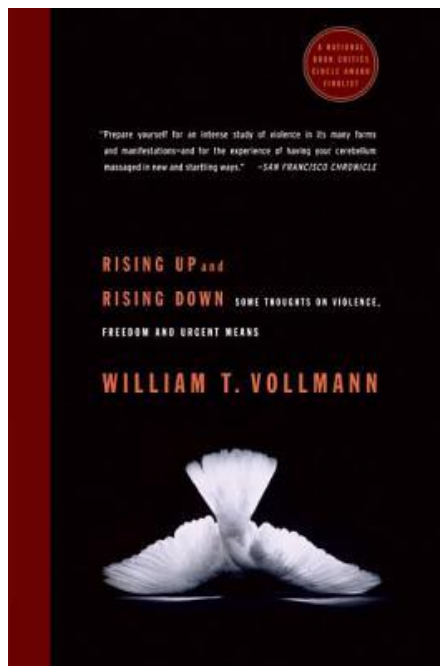




Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means

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Twenty-three years in the making, **Rising Up and Rising Down** (the original, published by *McSweeney's* in October 2003, spans seven volumes) is a rich amalgam of historical analysis, contemporary case studies, anecdotes, essays, theory, charts, graphs, photographs and drawings. Convinced that there is "a finite number of excuses" for violence and that some excuses "are more valid than others," Vollmann spent two decades consulting hundreds of sources, scrutinizing the thinking of philosophers, theologians, tyrants, warlords, military strategists, activists and pacifists. He also visited more than a dozen countries and war zones to witness violence firsthand -- sometimes barely escaping with his life.

Vollmann makes deft use of these tools and experiences to create his Moral Calculus, a structured decision-making system designed to help the reader decide when violence is justifiable and when it is not.

Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means Details

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From Reader Review Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means for online ebook

Robert Wechsler says

280 pages into the abridged edition of this opus, I can't read another word. It's as if I had taken a hike along a trail that was boggy from the beginning, but which seemed to grow slowly boggier, my boots sinking deeper into the muck, the difficulty of lifting them tiring my leg muscles until I couldn't take another step. But unlike being in the middle of a swamp, I could simply put the book down. I didn't have to find a dry space or tree limb to rest on until I could follow the trail back to where I started.

This is not to say that this book is not worth reading, that Vollmann's writing isn't brilliant and his ideas valuable. It's the excess that got to me, and this in the abridged edition. The excess and the randomness and repetition, the wandering nature of his mind even in the midst of a highly-organized structure. And there was my attempt to skim and take what I wanted, tripped up again and again by stories and thoughts and quotations. I would like to have read the entire book, and some day I might come back and finish it, even if it takes two or more periods to accomplish this.

Darwin8u says

"My own aim in this book was to create a simple and practical moral calculus which would make it clear when it was acceptable to kill, how many could be killed and so forth -- coldblooded enough, you will say, but life cannot evade death."

-- William Vollmann, Rising Up and Rising Down, p291

I feel a bit crazy by taking on this endeavor, but having recently finished a couple of Vollmann's longer novels (Europe Central and The Dying Grass: A Novel of the Nez Perce War), I was seduced by his mind and his writing. I was especially captured by his humanity. I've owned a copy for years, but have seen this set of books appreciate faster than my 401(k), so I decided to check out copies from the library. Problem? Not many libraries carried this locally and it appears universities aren't very friendly with lending to mere local libraries. Thus, I engaged a friend who works at ASU to check out copies for me. So far, for me, this has been ideal.

Volume 1: Meditations/Introduction/Definitions

Vol 1 is basically a framework and introduction. In many ways, just starting from the Table of Contents, this book reminds me of four books:

1. Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
 2. Frazer's The Golden Bough
 3. Montaigne's The Complete Essays
- But especially:
4. Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy

Funny enough, part of the reason I put off reading this book till now is I am fairly close (200 pages) to finishing Burton's massive 3-part exploration of all things sad (Anatomy of Melancholy). I think, properly,

Vollmann is doing here with *Violence* what Burton did with *Melancholy*. EXCEPT. Except, that Vollmann, by his own explanation is trying to feel out through information, experience, data, visual aesthetics, etc., the moral equation surrounding violence. When is it justified? By who? For what? This is not a book you breeze through. The subject and depth should dissuade anyone who isn't a huge Vollmann fan, a masochist (Vol 4), or interested in 3k pages peering into the sometimes dark corners of humanity. Perhaps, I own a bit of both. We shall see.

One final note >> It was fascinating to see Vollmann reference the Unabomber two times (maybe three?) in this first volume. This is interesting since just a couple years ago it came out in an essay by Vollmann for Harpers that for years the FBI thought Vollmann might BE the Unabomber.

Drew says

Let me just start by saying that if I were somehow given the authority to make a list of books that people "had" to read, *Rising Up and Rising Down* would be on that list. Now, I imagine the majority of people would be angry at me for assigning such an oversized*, overwrought book, but I swear it's worth it. Of course that promise doesn't tell you much, so I'm going to do what I never normally do and summarize a bit.

Rising Up and Rising Down is really a lot more specific than its subtitle would lead you to believe. It's an exercise in trying to determine or uncover a "moral calculus" which would help one decide when it would be appropriate to use violence. The assumption other authors might make here would be "violence is at least sometimes appropriate." But Vollmann isn't content with that low level of rigor; he takes it upon himself to prove that complete nonviolence, in the style of Gandhi, is not the best approach for the everyman. Of course, it's a pretty inductive/speculative proof, consisting basically in saying Gandhi would have been totally screwed had he been facing the Reich instead of the raj--Hitler probably would have been okay just killing him and all of his followers. But it does make intuitive sense; humans certainly aren't hardwired for nonviolence, so probably only Gandhi and Jesus and maybe Martin Luther King Jr. would have trouble with Vollmann's stance on this.

Then he goes on through a series of historical figures and tries to interpret or imagine their moral calculus, if they have one. The abridgment has pretty substantial sections on Napoleon, Julius Caesar, Abraham Lincoln (which is particularly good), the Marquis de Sade, and a handful of others. I assume the unabridged version has many, many more. This exercise is relatively effective, especially for figures closer in history to our own time, like Lincoln, who actually comes out looking pretty good.

After that, Vollmann brings together his moral calculus, which takes the form of an outline giving various defenses and justifications for violence. He reminds us that this is only what he's come up with, and according to our own beliefs, our moral calculus may be, and maybe should be, different. But he's been so reasonable this whole time that it's hard to take any issue with his calculus, which I'd think would work well for just about any American--the degree to which our political systems influence our individual beliefs leads me to think that Vollmann's highly individualistic calculus may not work so well in other countries.

Everything after this point could arguably be called a failure, as far as what the book's original aim supposedly was. What we expect here is Vollmann going from country to country doing "case studies"--basically observing violence and trying to determine whether said violence is justified or not. These case studies comprise the bulk of the unabridged version's length, whereas they're only a few hundred pages (!) in the abridgment. So I feel a little uneasy calling the little piece of them that I saw a failure, except for the fact that I absolutely do not mean it in a bad way.

Here's what I mean by failure. Vollmann says early on that he is going to withhold his judgment on whether what he observes is justified or not, in favor of letting the reader apply the moral calculus. But I suspect the real reason he withholds his judgment in most of these cases is the same reason that I do: it's impossible to know enough about what's going on in most of these places to make an informed judgment. And, as an outsider twice removed, I, the reader, would feel incredibly arrogant were I to make that judgment.

If you went to a country in the guise (half-truthful, I guess) of a journalist, a country where you suspected a certain group of people were being oppressed, how could you find out whether they really were or not? First of all, it's dangerous where you are; for all you know, if you go around asking too many questions, you may end up dead. You most likely won't be able to distinguish the different ethnic groups creating the tensions, so talking to the wrong people could be a problem. So you do what Vollmann does, and hire a prostitute** to be your tour guide. But here's the thing: who's going to talk to you? Whatever they're afraid of is definitely more powerful than you (the journalist) are, so what do they stand to gain by telling you about their problems? Nothing, of course, and they have their life to lose.

This is basically what seems to happen to Vollmann when he goes to Thailand; nobody's willing to tell him the things he most wants to know. Sometimes they tell him exactly the opposite, which could invalidate the testimonies of the few honest and fearless (or stupid) people he runs into who do tell him things. He wanders around the country on the vaguest of hunches, trying to find capital-T Truth, and failing.

And this, by the way, is one of the really commendable things about Vollmann. There are plenty of people who are willing to go to great and dangerous lengths to find Truth, but they usually don't do it without some assurance that Truth will be there, at the end, waiting for them. Vollmann, on the other hand, is smart enough to be pretty sure he's never going to find Truth, but he *goes anyway*. Thus why he sits starving in a foxhole in Sarajevo for weeks, getting shot at every time he tries to leave the place, and obtaining no greater justification for the violence than a Bosnian's testimony that "Serbs are evil." The main thing he finds out on his extensive*** peregrinations is that most of the people who are actively engaged in violence are not exercising a very complex moral calculus. But can you blame them? Moral calculus is a luxury most of them can't afford. And Vollmann, being a reasonable guy, doesn't blame them either.

So what these supposed case studies turn out to be is just a series of really heartbreaking vignettes, showing poverty, violence, hatred, etc. etc. ad literal naus. Yes, Vollmann's motives and his execution are both commendable, but is he really helping anyone? It seems, at least from the abridgment (I hate having to keep mentioning that I read the short version, but it's necessary), that he is not, aside from the relief and/or vindication people may feel at the fact that an American journalist is taking interest in them to a point where he's willing to brave their conditions. So the takeaway point, although I'm not sure he ever comes right out and says this, is that it's really hard to apply your moral calculus to violence that's being perpetrated by others, since you can never know all the factors. You can only apply it to your own potential acts of violence--this is where it's most useful.

Long story short, and I know I've been saying this a lot lately, but *read this book*. The abridgment seems to be a lot easier to find, and cheaper to buy, and is plenty long already, and nobody except a really hardcore Vollmann fan is going to give you trouble for it. And if you like it, you'll want to get and read the unabridged version anyway.

*Because it is big, whether you've got the abridgment or not.

**There's not much evidence in the book that Vollmann's native female companions in these countries are actually prostitutes, but if they were, it'd be a smart move. Who else knows a lot about the country in question, can go anywhere and talk to anyone, and (probably) won't kill you in your sleep?

***Thousands of pages devoted to this stuff, in the unabridged version, remember.

Hadrian says

(Right-click, Open image in a new tab)

"It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be."

-Judge Holden

Rising Up and Rising Down is a monolith.

Comprising some three thousand pages of dense philosophy, history, journalism and thought, compiled over some twenty years of wandering the dusty scarlet corners of the earth - *Rising Up and Rising Down* dares all others to challenge it. The sheer size and monomaniacal devotion of this work tempts me to make comparisons to other gargantuan literary studies - Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Campbell's *Mythology*, Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Vollmann, however, lance in hand, charges towards the windmills of one of the most enduring institutions of human nature - our eternal temptation to commit violence and harm on one another. One recalls an epigraph from *Blood Meridian* - in an Ethiopian archaeological dig, a 30,000 year old skull was found to be scalped.

The first section of the book, comprising some 1500 pages, is the exposition of the 'Moral Calculus' - the theoretical justifications - it is no surprise that many of them are excuses.

In order, they are Defense of Honor, Class, Authority, Revolution, Race, Creed, War Aims, Homeland, Ground, Earth (all distinct categories), Animals, Gender, against traitors, and finally Deterrence, Retribution, Revenge, Punishment, to Cause Fear, because of Loyalty, and finally because of Sadism or Expedience.

There are some causes such as 'Fate' or 'Moral Yellowness' which are automatically unjustifiable. That is, "I had to do it", or "They just 'look' bad."

One interesting prelude to this calculus is on the 'aesthetics of violence' - how power and weapons can be considered elegant, controlling, even having sex appeal. We see lovingly detailed sketches of his own weapons, and their histories. Ceremonial daggers and pistols. This might also tie into how gender is tied into violence, or how violence or coercion is used in sex. This is all before a certain *Twilight* fan-fiction became a bestseller, of course, so he has to refer to alternate sources. One includes a Japanese pornographic comic where the barrel of a pistol is used to simulate the act itself.

The majority of these case studies are historical. Here we see Lincoln, agonizing over federalism and authority, but fighting the great crime of slavery. And here we see Trotsky, devoting his life, sacrificing one man in ten on the altar of a new world, and to build a system which would ultimately consume him. Lincoln is not justified at first because he is asserting federal authority over a dissenting minority, but he becomes justified for ending the crimes of slavery. Trotsky is justified perhaps because he wants to end the Russian tyranny and save the workers, but less so as he begins the mass purges which Stalin would later refine into a deadly art.

Lincoln and Trotsky are only two individuals, of course, and Vollmann cites hundreds, from Achilles and

Hannah Arendt to the Unabomber, Pancho Villa, and Xerxes.

As a demonstration, Vollmann compiles long strings of quotes, a continuum of ideologies, quotes from historical sources and interviews. The range from ancient Greece and Rome and China and medieval Korea and Japan to Nazis, communists, Americans, Serbians. They run the spectrum from full pacifism and non-violence to extermination and genocide. We see the old eternal justifications of homeland, creed and self-defense, and newer ones, of environment, gender, and animals.

Vollmann's moral code, which I have transcribed and posted here, is an unusual one. It is both extremely prescriptive, yet granting many exceptions to the principles of 'imminence', 'proportionality', and 'discrimination', all of which are unfortunately extremely subjective. So what is the underlying purpose of it? To serve as a grasping incomplete answer to the most fearsome and eternal of questions?

The second segment of the book moves from the theoretical to the practical.

In his typical self-effacing modesty, he apologizes for choosing areas which will no doubt be obsolete in a few years time - but in that aspect, he is completely wrong. Nearly every single one of these proved to still be violent in ten years time, and will be worthy of further, more complete study in a hundred. Yemen still bleeds under drone strikes. Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even, in an uncanny coincidence, Colorado, which, twelve years after Columbine, is victim to another senseless attack of madmen with automatic weapons. Even after public outrage, these attacks continue because of a small moneyed authority, which I cannot even call 'corrupt' because their actions are all perfectly legal.

Speaking of the latter, his essay on Columbine a masterpiece of venom, where the 'vultures' of the mass media violence-projection complex come in, package tragedy, and broadcast it. But they are selectively sympathetic, taking pictures of a few sobbing photogenic Aryan children, perhaps a grandmother in her wheelchair, then speculating and glorifying the killers into some sort of crazed leather-clad anti-heroes, then moving onto the next tragedy, ignoring that a few hundred may have died in Colombia in the same period, for example.

Perhaps the most admirable trait of Vollmann's, and the one which very few will dare to imitate, is his almost-suicidal will to research and immerse himself within the environments and settings of his study. He goes to war zones, gets his car blown up by mines, cowers for a few hours while his friends bleed and gasp and snipers peck at him. He sees cavernous brothels and rescues a prepubescent girl sold to them. Interviewing Yakuza men, terrorists, warlords, Afghans, Arabs during the hated Iraq-II invasion. Well aware of death around him, but perhaps accepting of it. Meditates upon it. Death is ordinary.

But here, the intricate crystalline calculus shatters. Almost all of the propositions and axioms require personal information, thoughts, motivations. These can be speculated in the historical cases (but even then only partially), but in modern times, the final judgment remains wholly uncertain. The sheer complexity of situations, which can easily escape even the best and most well-equipped journalists, still eludes Vollmann with his history and psychology. When Vollmann asks questions, many of those asked lie or evade the question entirely. Warlords and terrorists and freedom fighters are all, in their minds, very justified in what they do. What we can get is a sense of the 'fog of war', of how difficult is to embark upon a search for truth.

What sort of things does Vollmann try and teach us? He is first skeptical of creeds, of authorities, ideologies and dogmas. Most often they are pleasing lies of futures yet to come, in order for tyrants to make their own ends.

He is a firm advocate of self-defense and the rights of the individual, which is naturally quite justified in the war zones he visits - but, in the interest of objectivity, he shows us other people who believe these things. And again we see how noble ideas become twisted. The second amendment, personal independence and

federalism? But we see how these become excuses for hate, from Christian militias in the Northwest, and the war-mongering draft-dodger Ted Nugent, who keeps multiple sub-machine guns and a taxidermied monkey used as a pincushion.

So what does this leave us?

As an expose and chronicle of human violence, this book is a grand success. We know violence exists. It is complex. It always has been. He categorizes it, but it is not made clear by divine fiat. As an explanation or cure? It is a failure. Violence cannot end by observation alone.

The calculus, broadly reaching in principle, is tangled in exceptions and rules and caveats. In some distant future it might be more applicable, if we have shed our human proclivity for violence. But Vollmann deserves credit for such a study, for giving us a glimpse the momentum and force of violence throughout human history, and at characterizing it for those of us who, in the peaceful comfort of the industrialized world, try to hide it or separate ourselves from it, or worry about it only on the comforting glow of modern conveniences, and can never really experience it, thankfully enough.

This work is both necessary and inaccessible. Necessary because it informs, to a startling degree, what violence is and what its reverberations are, and what sort of lies people will say to justify it. Inaccessible because violence is not a pleasant subject, and one which most would prefer to ignore or distort it into a noble lie or a myth.

I speak entirely in grandiose terms in this mere review, but it is impossible to speak otherwise. Violence will continue, and violence will not solve it. Violence is easy. Peace is hard.

Cody says

“AS WE GO UP WE GO DOWN”

This will be long.

EXPOSITION

Rising Up and Rising Down had sat on my Vollmann shelf—four-plus feet in length and out of room—for six months, a gap of black grinning sickeningly at me like missing teeth in a bully’s smile. ‘You’re not up to this,’ it taunted. And indeed I wasn’t—I had made that fatal error of relegating it to aesthetic rather than artistic value. Only now, 3298-pages later, do I realize what a disservice—no, a dishonor—I did it by putting it off. You deserved better, WTV.

APOLOGIA

In the wake of my predecessors and betters—Nathan, Hadrian, Mark Sacha, Brian Dice, etc.—I have to acknowledge that I cannot add anything to the meritorious dissection of this rarest of undertakings. The attempt to reify violence and create a moral calculus demanded that WTV call upon more disciplines than I can even name. Thus, for the truly helpful review I recommend you search these far more erudite readers’ encomiums. These lickable and lovable brains have done us all an invaluable service in their painstaking analyses and truly added to the conversation that RURD should engender. I can only fall back into my natural disposition and share with you my personal testimony and experience.

AN OBSERVATION

It’s funny that we Vollmanists refer to *Rising Up and Rising Down* as ‘RURD,’ given his stated dislike of

acronyms (cf. PULO/PLO). BWTFAYGTDIALT (but what the fuck are you going to do, it's a long title).

EXPOSITION CONTINUED

So why now? It was a combination of things. First and foremost, Friend RB (to whom I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude) questioned why I had owned it for so long and still it sat; a legitimate question if ever there were. Secondly, seeing ATJG's progress, in combination with the above, started to make me feel guilty (thank you as well, ATJG). Why was I sitting on this highly-sought collection when so many would give their eyeteeth for a chance just to read it, much less own it? And so it goes. Late two Friday night/Saturday mornings ago I read the first few pages and reappeared here 18-days later. My entire self has been given over to RURD, and now I feel a sense of listlessness. What am I to do now that I can't unsee what WTV made so brilliantly clear to me?

AN ASIDE

I've never called WTV by his Christian name in any of my previous dozen or so reviews of his books. I don't know the man, have unfortunately never met him, and accordingly didn't feel we were on a first name basis with one another. I do now. After this, I reserve the right to call our beloved author by his common name, as he holds absolutely nothing back and I feel welcomed into his succor and embrace. So thank you, Bill.

"WHAT MAKES A MAN START FIRES?"

So what does it all mean? In a word, everything. I've never had so transformative a reading experience in my life, never been so wholly captured by a book's thrust. I stand agape and prostrate now that I'm finished. "When is violence justified?" Why not count sand at the beach! The uninitiated need understand: RURD attempts to synthesize its impossible task from every possible angle. At 3300-pages, it's too brief. It could benefit by doubling its size, all the more room for Vollmann to expand and expound his truly guileless endeavor.

The first four Volumes deal in theoreticals ("Justifications"), the last two in case studies ("Consequences"). Which you prefer will depend on your personal taste. This truly is an embarrassment of riches, a veritable *Choose-Your-Own-Vollmann* as all of his many styles make appearances. If you're higher minded than I, you'll revel in his analysis of, say, Robespierre. I'll be at the salad bar with the whores and the White separatists.

AN ASIDE (CONTINUED)

We Vollmannites often marvel at how genuine a human being he is. RURD is the last word on that subject. His endless self-effacement and acknowledge of both his project and his own shortcomings are *the* standard-bearer for people everywhere of how to comport yourself with dignity. Conversely, the dignity that he affords others—oftentimes people who have never before been its recipients—is enough to bring tears.

WHICH REMINDS ME

I've never cried reading a book. I don't know if I've dispossessed some essential human(e) component, or just that the medium doesn't lend itself to that particular activity for me. That said, the photo essay of the children in Iraqi hospitals (the girl whose stare, so like my daughters', will forever haunt me) and the essay regarding Francis in Bosnia made my eyes well-up. I do not doubt that many of you will find similar experiences within. It is good that we be reminded of this all-too-real suffering.

AN ASIDE (TERMINUS)

I hazard a guess, informed by our common meeting ground, that we Vollmanniks live lives far different than those covered in the "Consequences." How strange, then, to find one essay take place less than 15-minutes from my house. Try as we might to ensconce ourselves behind our many battlements, RURD lives everywhere as it is the essence of violence.

EPILOGUE: SANGUINE MARGINALIA

Blood, so much blood—rising up and down like a river in the rainy season. This new Season of Blood. To read it as quick as I did required that I devoted myself fully to it. I put off work, family, friends and, here's the important bit, sleep. I would stay up well after the family had gone off to bed, the sun lightening the horizon as I smoked and devoured, only to wake up again far too soon. I sacrificed any semblance of a sleep pattern just to cram in a few more pages, a couple more chapters. RURD had ensnared me. The toll would be paid.

On the night of the 14th day of reading—having had a maximum of 4-hours rest for too many nights in a row—I rolled out of my bed so dead asleep that I smashed my face open on the nightstand. I don't exaggerate in saying that blood was gushing out of my nose faster than I could wipe it away—so much so that it dyed the front of my t-shirt. After stuffing cotton ball after cotton ball (they soaked through quickly) up my nostrils, I finally stopped the bleeding after a little more than an hour (the same time it took for the handful of aspirin, Aleve, and ibuprofen to break-up the symphonic gangbang of a headache). I went out through the kitchen doors to smoke and, of course, grabbed Volume V of RURD on my way to the backyard—nostrils fully-packed with cotton.

After reading for 20-minutes or so, I checked the status of my staunching and all seemed good. I lit another cigarette and resumed my reading. A few minutes in, one purpled diamond of blood fell from me and landed towards the margin of the page. Had this happened in Volume I, maybe even II, I would have been crestfallen—my precious, signed and caricatured RURD was irrevocably, unimpeachably not near perfect! Oh, no! Damn this vale of tears!

As it were, I simply raised the page I was on to prevent further saturation and watched mesmerized as the bloodflower blossomed into an idiosyncratic mark of beauty. After all of my voyeurism of other's suffering from my privileged remove, it seemed a small price to pay. RURD earned it, and I did in turn. Blood attracts blood, seeking its own level as it rushes like a wave through the many-scapes of the world. I must remember to un-clot my senses long enough to take in the savage beauty of existence before I go under evermore.

Scott Gates says

This book is kind of about power more than violence per se, but I guess power is nothing more than the ability to inflict violence on others (as I think some skinhead said in one of WV's other books, maybe *13 Stories and 13 Epitaphs*).

In his other nonfiction work, Vollmann has displayed an endless capacity for talking to people who have no idea what's going on (cf. *Poor People, Riding Toward Everywhere*, and to a lesser extent *Atlas*). *Poor People* was the extreme example of this, and Vollmann admitted as much from the get-go: if you're desperately poor, your perspective is likely pretty poor as well. Perspective is the luxury of those with money.

But (the abridged) *Rising Up Rising Down* is different as far as this goes: When Vollmann's talking to people who are directly involved in inflicting violence, they actually have a good sense of what's going on, usually because they have a very developed set of justifications for their actions (and also because their lives may depend on their decisions). There's an antinihilist thrust to Vollmann's argument (and there's a long-ish quote from Solzenhitzin for backup): For Vollmann, there's always a reason for violence (even Columbine is seen as a corrupted type of self-defense).

(Solzhehnitzen thought that “Iagos”--i.e., people who inflict violence for no real reason--don’t exist in the real world. This strikes me as dead wrong, but what do I know.)

There is a deluge of quotations from big names supporting this or that view. The result is often stilted and/or dizzying. Also there is a deluge of randomness in the series of paragraphs (which won’t be unfamiliar to WV fans), and some of the paragraphs come off like: “Oh yeah, and Ghandi also said this. Come to think of it, that’s kind of like what Lincoln said, which sure is different from Trotsky’s stance. Then there’s what John Brown thought...” and on and on. Most of it has to do with ideologies and justifications for violence.

In fiction, such a chaotic deluge can be enlivening and serve to mimic in a more realistic way the complexities of thought and existence (*Fathers and Crows* and *Europe Central* are magnificent examples of this); but in WV’s nonfiction, it sometimes comes off as lazy or just unedited ramblings (or, more likely, it’s just that it’s coming from a guy who works on no less than three insanely long works at a time, for no less than twelve hours a day).

It sort of seems as if WV has no guiding outlook whatsoever, that he’s jerked around by one view after another. Of course on some level this is to his credit; he is not an ideologue and thus does not broadcast a totalizing metaphysics that deadens the nuances of actual situations.

And yet he does draw conclusions from his case studies, but then there can always be another case study or instance added, so that there is no real end to the conclusions that can be drawn. Hmm, I’m not sure if this is a criticism, since I can’t clearly explain how the overall thrust of this book seemed to be lacking. I guess I don’t know what I expected.

Anyhow, the above sheds light on why the best parts of RURD are the sketches of actual places Vollmann spent time at, since it’s within these that he is freed from the attempt to come to conclusions (which is really antithetical to his mode of writing and thinking) and is able dig in to violence as a part of daily life, sans the abstractions and ideas. For example, when a priest from the US first moved to a not-entirely-pleasant ghetto in Kingston, Jamaica, he says something like this:

“When I first moved here they didn’t really like me. Now and then they’d throw a dead body into my backyard.”

The sketches of Kingston and the Balkans are superb, enthralling, depressing pieces of writing, and WV with his big heart and sometimes-outlandish sense of humor is a great voice for these things. There are no lists, rules, or quotes from bigshots in this section, and you’re left with WV’s frantic descriptions of the crazy situations he puts himself into.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

For interested readers without access to the unabridged, six volume *Rising Up and Rising Down* who are not satisfied with the abridgment (“I did it for the money”), there are a few more items which can be cobbled together for a more complete picture of the RURD project.

For the first four volumes, those which develop the Moral Calculus through an ethical questioning of a large variety of Moral Actors, we’ll have to settle for the selections in the RURD abridgment ; that material is not heavily treated anywhere else in his *corpus*. But the journalistic pieces collected in their full, unedited forms (their appearance in a variety of periodicals were nearly always hacked into shortened form) in volumes six

and seven can be seen reworked in a number of Vollmann's other books. Yes, he does have a tendency to recycle the same materials, putting them to work for different purposes.

The Atlas contains fictional variations of many of his world-travel experiences.

Poor People covers similar territory under the rubrical question, "Why are you poor?"

You Bright and Risen Angels addresses the question of revolution, the "rising up" of the title of that mammoth work.

Europe Central could not have been written had he not first written RURD.

An Afghanistan Picture Show, of course, is where the entire project began.

His journalistic travels show up elsewhere as well, for instance in *The Butterfly Boy* ; but the above five books taken together with the abridgment might be a close second to having access to the entirety of RURD.

Following is the text of a letter sent by Bruce Trigger to William T Vollmann regarding the Moral Calculus portion of *Rising Up and Rising Down*. Trigger was professor in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University. Vollmann consulted with him throughout the writing of *Fathers and Crows* and also relied upon him for portions of RURD. The letter is dated 14 September 2002 and can be found on page 120 of volume MC of RURD.

From a Letter of Comment from Prof. Bruce Trigger

There is, however, something missing which you may wish to deal with in another book or not at all. When I was younger I thought there was little to be said for the superiority of the Golden Rule in its Christian form (Do unto others ...) over the far more widespread negative version (Don't do unto others ...) Indeed Shaw's observation that tastes differ made me think the negative version was probably the better one. It seems to me now, however, that one can formulate lega-style rules about what people can and can't do about defending their rights but self-interest will go on construing those rights to mean whatever the construer wants. What is needed is an underlying consensus about how modern societies should be run ... Curiously we already have this standard in that most ignored and reviled document *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), which set out minimum standards for the legal, political, economic, social, and cultural treatment of human beings everywhere. No country has ever lived up to the standards of this declaration but I find it a most remarkable statement of ideals we should be living up to. I also believe that if there are still people around a millennium hence who can read and write they will honour this declaration as the supreme accomplishment of the 20th century and the one that made the survival and growth of civilized life in the third millennium possible. John Humphrey and the other people who drafted it will be remembered by the general public when Hitler, Churchill and others are known only to specialists who study the Pre-Really-Civilized era. I believe in cultural diversity but I also believe that this diversity must be grounded in respect for each human being and each human being's right to develop and flourish--the first aspiration of the Enlightenment and the first to be abandoned by those people whose political power grew from the Enlightenment. I don't believe such universal values undermine cultural pluralism; on the contrary they can enhance it by counteracting the hegemonic forces that are economically and socially corroding the basis on which cultural pluralism flourishes and hence are limiting freedom of choice. What I think I am trying to say is that it will only be when people can be brought to agree about issues such as these that your calculus will really take hold and provide a basis for judging human conduct. How to get issues of this sort even discussed is of course a bit of a question. But until this happens my terrorist is going to be someone else's freedom fighter.

[end Trigger's letter]

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be read here :: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

This book is very long. It has many pages stuffed between its covers. Not only that, but almost all of those pages are brimming with *words*. Much like *War and Peace* and 2666 it is lengthy and also has a spinal width that shirks all sensible notions of modesty. It is a tome nearly identical to *Infinite Jest*, another thick book shamelessly filled with many words and pages. David Foster Whaaaaat?? This tome is also extremely tome-like and highly reminiscent of the Pulitzer Prize defying book *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is a doorstop (it could even stop, like, a really heavy door--like the hefty stainless steel ones I have on my Working Man's barn out back) like, say, *Ulysses* and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which are also both very long and amassed with precious tree-flesh. Much like Adam Levin's *The Instructions* this book is something not so much to be *read* as is to be fashionably *lugged along* (like a kettle weight or a broken leg) on various public transit systems and raised--with trembling and deception barely masked--upon the aching wrists of disingenuous bandwagon-hoppers. Fuckin' lyin' cunts, all of them.

Oh, indeed, this book is big. And long. And a tome. Tome. Tome. Tome. All tomes are created equal, of course. At one's local bookshop one would head to the Long Books section to find this book among other such Mandatory Slogs. The Literary Elites insist that you read such books. *The Holy Bible* and *The Recognitions* are also nearly indistinguishable from the pure bluster of such contemporary postmodern exercises in excess.

Also, this book weighs too much. It broke my bathroom scale when I was staring at it while taking an Everyman's shit one day.

Why won't the big ol' bad Cabal of Literary Elites just leave us good, normal, Salt of the Earth Folks alone and stop forcing us at pen-point to endure these over-hyped, naked-Emperor-exposing bricks of words? They're merciless in their insistence. Just yesterday I was accosted by a wild pack of academics and professional writers who nearly bled me to death from the many paper cut wounds they inflicted with their MFA certificates. Snarling, pompous, bloviating monsters they are, one and all.

Was it *Underworld* by (that most denuded of Emperors) Don DeLillo, or (the evolutionary biologist) E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* that I was last forced to read under such duress? I can't remember because they're all more or less exactly the same in their overwrought thickness. Did I mention that such books could stop a door?? Well, they could, and boy am I clever to point this out.

These books, while as long as the Nile and Amazon combined, are as shallow as the glistening sheen of spittle-mist left upon the buttock of one of their "genius" authors by their fawning acolytes. We true down-to-Earthers know what's up, however: there is no *there* there. Aha! We've seen through the bullshit and have worn out our sturdy pseudo-Blue Collar backs from oh so much self-patting. If only the DFWs, DeLillos and Vollmans of the world could be just as humble and matter-of-fact as we! The fucking *snobs*. Well, good thing that those of us with a heavily calloused finger firmly placed on the pulse on what *real literature* is can take the piss out of all these intellectual con-artists. It's all fucking bollocks, mates.

Mr. Vollmann's "opus" recalled *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* much like *Against the Day* strongly reminded me of *The Bhagavad Gita* because they all took more than a few hours to read. I think that the so-called "American Psychiatric Association" is only slightly less self-indulgent than Vollman, Pynchon, Ancient Indian Religious Authorities et al, though just as verbose and egomaniacal and overpraised by snooty lit-fic types.

So what's this book about? Lengthy, flashy White Male Narcissism? Yeah, that's probably its filthy little secret for us Plain and No-Bullshit Readers to decipher. Or is it "a history of and series of meditations upon violence" or some such silly elitist hot-air musings? Who knows. I can't be bothered to find out because lifting the thing's a serious test of my tendons and the first page doesn't immediately make me ejaculate with pure harmonious Entertainment Value.

Sorry, Vollmann. Call me when you write an easily digestible feather-weight pamphlet about sexual adventures and/or rock 'n' roll music, you pretentious twat.

Greg says

Note: This review was written about 7 years ago on another website. I'm just copying and pasting it here so that it can live with my more 'modern' reviews'. The 'reviews' on this website were supposed to be 'consumer friendly' and help people make educated decisions about buying products, maybe that explains some of the awkwardness here. The voting system on that site also forced me to stay more on topic than I grown used to writing here on goodreads.com.

A couple of years ago William Vollmann released this book in a beautiful unabridged version. It was 7 volumes and over 3300 pages. I wanted the book. I had a set in my hands and the decision between eating for the next month or getting the book was a tough one, but physical survival won out. Now Harper Collins has released a very abridged paperback version of the book. Clocking in at 700 pages, this is less than a quarter of the original, and only served to whet my appetite for the now even more expensive original version.

What is this book about?

Violence. When is it justified to use violence as a means for an end? When is it unjustified? What are the different reasons people have resorted to violence. Are there times when non-violence is unjustified? Violence in it's many facets, from the atrocities of Hitler and Stalin to the 'oh to mundane' everyday gangs that urbane places deal with.

Why would one want to read this book? (or 'Why would I (not really I, the person writing the review, but I guess presumptuously I the reader, as if I could speak for you) want to read this book?')

I don't know. I loved the book. I thought that the book was fascinating on two separate accounts. The first half of the book reads as a history of violence. A very well written history novel told with an attempt to fully flesh out the motives behind some of the more troubling moments of history, but written with a novelist's eye for language. The second half of the book is a series of 'case studies', or rather first person reports from some of the worst regions in our Modern World. From his descriptions of being holed up in a youth hostel on the border between Croatia and Serbia, to visiting the Killing Fields of Cambodia and walking through the no-man land in a gang warfare Jamaican city--Vollmann writes with a sense that brings the reader right with him to this unimaginable places. In these horrific places he meets the people living out these unfortunate moments of history, and tries to answer the why the violence is going on from both sides. The sympathy of the reader moves from one group to another, atrocities abound and in the end of almost all the case studies the reader is facing one of the only possible truths of violence, that it's incomprehensible and oblique the closer you get to it. The clear-cut answers disappear, and the victims and executors switch sides till justifications become almost meaningless. But still Vollmann entices the reader to ask the big questions of why.

Will reading this book make me a happier person?

No. Pessimism will most likely abound. Sorry.

But are there pictures? I like pictures.

Yes, there is a series of pictures entitled, "If Everyone Hates Violence Why do These People Look So Happy" (or something like that). A series of portraits of people and their weapons, mostly looking quite happy. It's an interesting point of the book that sums up the slightly disturbing elements present. Vollmann doesn't take the high road and outright condemn violence. He admits to his own ownership of many guns, and that he carries guns on him even when he's home to guarantee his safety.

Yeah, but if there's pictures of people with guns is Ted Nugent in any of them? I like the Nuge.

Yes he's there, smiling with his son.

So is this right-wing, NRA nonsense?

No.

Liberal?

Nope not liberal either. It's one of the few books dealing with a topic like this that I have ever read that is really achieves a high level of objectivity. Vollmann seems genuinely concerned to see all the sides to any of the situations he looks at.

So anyway (this is me speaking not me pretending I'm the reader), this book is an incredible piece of work. The writing is stunning, the subject matter incredibly engaging, and even if you're not that interested in violence per se, it's a wonderful overview of the history of the world (seen through the lens of War, but a lot of history really is about war). From the Ancient Greeks to contemporary Conflicts Vollmann immerses himself and the reader in the situations and the result is a truly great piece of literature.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

A Lot of Kisses

"I know he's probably a genius and everything, but Bill's just such a sweetheart. He puts so much of his desire for goodness into his books. So in a way, it's as if each letter of every word he writes is like a little kiss. I guess that's a lot of letters in this particular book. He's a very generous man."

Carla Bolte, Vollmann's designer at Viking

<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/an...>

Tales of Morality and Imagined Nations

It's common knowledge that Bill Vollmann has long been attracted to whores as the subject matter of his fiction and journalism.

After reading *"The Rainbow Stories"* (1989), I was disappointed that he hadn't investigated the moral and legal context within which his band of whores, non-conformists and transgressive protagonists lived, worked, inflicted pain and suffered abuse.

If this context wasn't a focus or concern for Vollmann in that book, it is definitely front and centre in *"RURD"*, at least at the level of violence in general and killing in particular.

Indeed, it seems that his interest in whores specifically is not just prurient or empathetic, it's largely because their circumstances lie at the intersection of philosophy, morality, politics and law.

By the time the abridged version of *"RURD"* was published, these issues had occupied his thoughts and writing for at least 23 years.

The Modus Operandi

"RURD" is effectively divided into three sections, although the design of the project doesn't readily reflect this.

First, Vollmann takes a number of historic figures and inducts abstract principles, rules and maxims from their example.

Then he builds a moral calculus out of these abstractions, some of which are absolute, the rest being relative (and represented by conditions, qualifications and corollaries).

Lastly, Vollmann gives us a number of journalistic studies of his experience of violence around the world, ostensibly so that we readers can judge or assess the violence on the basis of his calculus.

Exemplary Historical Figures

Most of the historical figures (such as Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, the Marquis de Sade, Robespierre, Cortez, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Hitler and Gandhi) are of major contemporary interest. However, Vollmann hamstring himself by using them primarily to develop and advance his abstract propositions.

To be honest, I would have preferred to read less constrained essays about each figure. Vollmann's take on them is fascinating. Just as a biography often reveals just as much about the biographer as the subject, it is in these essays that, incidentally, if not deliberately, we learn most about Vollmann the man, and Vollmann the author.

I didn't find the process of induction from the facts to be particularly convincing. I question whether Vollmann really started with a blank sheet and constructed his moral calculus from the facts. I suspect he had a fair idea of what he wanted to say and where he wanted to go, right from the very beginning.

This is not to criticise his methodology too severely. It's just to say that he could have structured both the abridgement and his work as a whole far more persuasively without the artifice.

The Moral Calculus

The moral calculus is a list of abstract propositions and exceptions.

Hadrian has posted it here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

The abridged version doesn't contain the analysis by which the propositions were reached. Like the Ten Commandments, they are supposed to be self-evident and self-explanatory.

Some of the rationale is contained in the first section of the abridged version. I assume that the rest is in the unabridged version.

For anybody who has studied any law, what remains is tantamount to the ratio decidendi, the reasons for the decision, stripped down to the bare bones.

It is anticipated that these ratio will guide future moral agents, decision makers and judges.

Flaws in the Calculus

If there is a flaw in the calculus, it is simply that he leaves too much detail in his moral formulae. It's almost 80 pages long.

Vollmann hasn't simplified his equations. Not every situation that can be encountered needs its own unique principle. Some of the principles are just more precise or specific examples or applications of higher principles. The lower principles can be inferred from the higher ones. This is presumably why we have Ten Commandments, rather than 110.

Vollmann recognises that his calculus is flawed. He both challenges and invites readers to come up with their own versions and/or correct his flaws. Ultimately, this is the greatest respect you can pay his effort.

Here is an attempt at an abbreviated (and slightly amended) version that omits much of the detail of his version without sacrificing its logic:

(view spoiler)

The Moral Foundations of Criminal Law

Violence is one of the issues dealt with by criminal law. The legal treatment of violence is based on philosophical or moral principles. However, these principles are embodied in legislation that is sometimes filtered through the politics of the government of the day (for example, a law on pornography will probably reflect the morality and politics of the current government, whatever its complexion, rather than a long-term consensus that has emerged in society).

I was disappointed that Vollmann didn't seem to consult any Penal or Criminal Codes in his research or analysis.

The moral foundations of the criminal law have been a subject of both legal and philosophical analysis for almost a thousand years, if not longer in some jurisdictions.

There is little in Vollmann's moral calculus that would be unfamiliar to a student of criminal law, let alone a practising criminal lawyer who hasn't totally forgotten their training.

My attempt at an abridged calculus highlights the distinction between violence committed by an individual on their own behalf and violence committed on behalf of the State.

It also draws attention to the justification of violence in both domestic political situations and international relations.

Domestic Crimes of State

This is where Vollmann's proposals are most interesting.

What right do we have to rise up against an incumbent government?

When do we have the right to kill people in support of our desire to overturn the pre-revolutionary State?

Should a pre-revolutionary State have the right to kill those who rise up against it?

Conversely, what right does a post-revolutionary State have to kill counter-revolutionaries who wish to undermine it and revert to the previous socio-political system?

At what point should a post-revolutionary regime allow political opposition? When should its actions be justifiable according to normal non-revolutionary standards?

When should a post-revolutionary dictatorship become democratic?

When should violent crime against the State be punishable by imprisonment rather than execution?

Is the death penalty justifiable in any circumstances?

International Crimes of State

On the international front, what right does one nation have to invade another? Should it have to formally declare war?

Should it be entitled to support or arm rebels or revolutionaries in the other nation?

Should it be entitled to invade a nation for the purposes of "regime change"?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, what are the conditions of legitimate violence?

Can we develop a moral calculus that applies equally to the United States, Russia, China, Serbia, Croatia, Israel, and Palestine?

Judge for Yourself

The calculus is intended to be a moral code for us to adopt and apply.

The third section consists of journalistic studies of various violent hotspots in the world where Vollmann has spent time.

I didn't feel that these studies were particularly successful, except as well-written stories that could have been in glossy monthly current affairs magazines (which is where some of them first appeared). In the abridgement, they seem to be tacked on, whereas in the unabridged version, they might have been better integrated into the work as a whole.

Without having seen or read the full version, I suspect that the 3,300 pages would have been better split into at least three discrete works, based on the conceptual framework of the project.

This would make it easier to digest and more affordable, thus hopefully increasing the potential readership for Vollmann's ideas and creativity.

As it is, I fear that the abridged version is too compromised (view spoiler) and the unabridged version too big an investment for even serious readers.

Suggestions for the Intimidated

If you're remotely interested in the subject matter (but afraid to jump right in), check out the moral calculus itself at Hadrian's link above.

Apart from that, I'd recommend that you read what Vollmann has to say about the Marquis de Sade and his writings.

While I infer Vollmann has a lingering soft spot for Trotsky, I suspect that he sees more than a little of himself and his concerns in de Sade:

"He is very funny and brilliant and elegant sometimes; he writes sentences as delicious as a spoonful of vanilla icing; but he is one of the most selfish people on earth..."

"He rails, vituperates, gloats, fantasises, chuckles, masturbates, dreams...he dares, he searches, he casts the lamplight of his intellect into the dark tunnels of self-obsession..."

For all his Vollmannous self-indulgence and intellectual self-obsession, it's the light cast by this particular work that gives the greatest insight into his empathy, his moral vision and his commitment to some form of revitalised social contract.

VERSE AND WORSE:

The prose pieces below are improvisations or riffs on passages or ideas of Vollmann.

Saturday in the Park

Before I met my wife, a radiation oncologist, there was an article in the paper about a woman who had barely escaped being raped in the park. It was the park where the Asian woman and her dog, a golden retriever, went for a walk, usually while I was preparing dinner, often three or four times a week. I didn't tell her about the article, and as far as I know she didn't see it. One night, they went for a walk about 5:30pm. Half an hour later, the dog returned alone. It whined at me and tried to grab my sleeve. I opened the drawer of my writing desk. There was the .45, shiny, heavy and black. It was loaded with Golden Sabre cartridges. I had never fired it in anger. The dog and I ran to the park. It was still light, but only just. The gates had closed, and we had to crawl through an opening in the fence. He took me to a clump of bushes. Two bodies were lying on the ground. I could make out the back of a man's head, then I saw that his trousers were pulled down beneath his knees. He was holding a knife to the Asian woman's throat. Her face was already bloodied and bruised, and her unseeing eyes were full of tears. I moved as silently as I could towards them, gun already cocked. I was about to shoot him in the head, when the dog started barking. The man turned around and looked at me, increasing the pressure of the blade on the Asian woman's throat. I think I heard her gurgle. What else could I do, but pull the trigger? The first cartridge caught him just beneath the left eye socket and wiped the smile off his face. I fired two more shots, this time in anger, then I put the .45 down and pulled his lifeless body off the Asian woman. Only now did she start to scream. I don't know whether in that moment she recognised me, whether she hoped that I might save her. I swept traces of his brain and blood and bone from her face and neck and chest, and saw that most of the blood was her own. I got up, not knowing what to do. I rolled her on her side, and ran for help. The dog chased after me, barking, as if I was abandoning the Asian woman to her fate. Perhaps, as it turned out, he was right.

Friend Bill's Conundrum

Could my treatise be
Too egoistic?
My experience
Impressionistic?
Is my broad vision
Hypermetropic?
What if my opus
Is just myopic?

My First Wife

I met my first wife in my second year Political Science class. She was trying to emigrate from Eastern Europe. I loved her, but I married her while still a student, so she could obtain Australian citizenship. After 12 months or so, I sensed her disappointment that I seemed to be more interested in theory than practice. I went along to a few of her discussion groups, but to be frank I didn't think much of her comrades. Their interest in theory seemed to be even less than my interest in praxis. I stopped going, and left her to her own devices. Their meetings switched to weekends, first Friday nights, and then overnight, and then all weekend. She described them as camps. I took her at face value. I believed her. I didn't even suspect her of having an affair with one of our, I mean, her, comrades. Our life apart from our separation during these camps continued as normally as any other modern marriage. Except that one day, after one of her comrades picked her up and drove off, I got in our car and followed them at a discrete distance. Pretty soon, we were on the highway, heading west. It was already dark and there were plenty of cars on the road. I wondered what

would happen when they turned down a side road. Instead, just before we reached the national forest, they turned into the driveway of a private farm. I drove on, did a U-turn and stopped opposite the entrance, while I tried to detect a number on the gate. I could only make out three of the four digits, before realising that another car coming from the city was about to turn into the driveway. I committed the number to memory, as I resumed my journey back home. As far as I know, she never suspected that I had followed her that night. I didn't say anything or do anything about it. That is, until two ASIO agents arrived on our front doorstep three months later. At first, they were quite civil. They just wanted to know where my wife was. I told them I didn't know. They laughed, and said that every man should know where his wife is. Their demeanour changed. I won't say they did anything violent. They didn't. However, something about them implied that they would, if push came to shove. I told them about the farm and the three digits I could recall. One of them made a call. The other one left and returned fifteen minutes later with two bottles of wine and some pizza. They talked to me about their families, but not about their work. That was private and confidential, they laughed. About 9pm, the first agent received a phone call. He passed the phone to me. "Are you Ian Graye?" "Yes," I replied. "Well, Mr Graye, I regret to advise that your wife died this evening while resisting arrest." They wanted me to come down to ASIO Headquarters to identify her body. I barely recognised her in military fatigues. But her nose, her eyes, her lips, her hair, I recognised them. All six of her comrades were shot and killed that night. It never made the media, so I'm a bit sketchy on the detail. Three months later, a day before what would have been our wedding anniversary, I received a letter from the Director-General of ASIO that thanked me for supplying information that led to the detection and extermination of a terrorist group. I don't know whether he realised that one of the members was my wife. She had kept her maiden name.

Aloha says

"Death cannot be experienced either by the dead or the living."

-William T. Vollmann, Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means

William T. Vollmann reflected on death as he walked through the Paris catacombs of bones and skulls of those who used to be of soft flesh, smiles and tears. Some of the skulls came from those who died of natural death such as from ailments and aging, and some from accidents. Others died of violence, the self-violence of suicide and the violence of murder. Violence can include the slow death of denying the body what it needs to survive, or the vicious destruction of the body. Intimately entwined with death is the question of what happens to the consciousness after death.

Paris Catacombs

What is the morality of death? When it is natural or accidental, there's grief and survival. When murder is unjustified such as when a sociopath takes the life of an innocent, there is rage. Is murder ever justified? Rising Up and Rising Down (RURD) meditates on the justification for violence and murder in the bloody history of the world. In a vicious loop, that question of what happens after death has led to justification for violence as in the case of war and persecution over religious beliefs. This is but a subset of the justification for violence to defend our rights as we live on this earth. How does violence express itself? It "frequently expresses itself by means of the destruction of flesh. The real aim of violence is to conquer, direct, instruct, mark, warn, punish, injure, suppress; reduce, destroy or obliterate the consciousness within the body."

In researching on the web for my review of Vollmann's 3,298 pages magnum opus, I saw news of ongoing clash between Syria's Ba'ath regime and the rebels, Burma sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslims, violence during a protest for better pay for teachers in Brazil, and gang rape in India. Further research into the world's past revealed pictures upon pictures of genocides and executions displaying massive destruction of beautifully evolved bodies and minds. The destruction seemed meaningless but must be meaningful to those justifying murder. What drove people to commit destruction upon their fellow human beings? Why they did it is unclear and complex, but one thing we can be certain of is that death simply is final.

Syrian Genocide

Can we defend our rights by nonviolent means? Leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King showed us that we can counter violence with nonviolence effectively. Gandhi's moral calculus states:

1. "It is better to die helpless and unarmed and as victims rather than as tyrants."
2. "The purer the suffering, the greater is the progress."
3. "It may be that in the transition state we may make mistakes; there may be avoidable suffering. These things are preferable to national emasculation."
4. "We must refuse to wait for the wrong to be righted till the wrong-doer has been roused to a sense of his iniquity."
5. "One must scrupulously avoid the temptation of a desire for results."

Non-violence resistance assumed the humanity in the opposition. It also asked for the ultimate sacrifice of the self if needed. What if the opposition lacked that empathetic bridge that would stop the violence if destruction and sacrifice were massive? What if the moral was to protect one and one's own at all cost? The ultimate sacrifice had to be for something. Vollmann pointed out that such Gandhian ideal can lead to senseless martyrdom. If violence against nonviolence does not stop, then "counter-violence is justified."

Birmingham, Alabama 1963

How do we defend our rights with counter-violence? We defend by using weapons. In warfare, we torture to get what we want out of our enemies. We maintain our power through fear. All this for the preservation of the state. Guns, swords, knives and vaginal (anal and oral) pear, things that are of hideous cruelty are aestheticized. "To aestheticize is to distance, hence to reclaim...We can make visual and emotional associations removed from murderousness. We can touch the vaginal pear without employing it..[T]here's the amoral fascination of engineering for any purpose." Weapons become beautiful in the power it guarantees. Weapons are functional.

Office Weapons

Mentally visiting history and current events, and revisiting the chaos of the war-torn areas where he worked as a journalist, Vollmann tried to make sense of man's justification for murder. The first half of RUD analyzed the actions of contemporary and historical figures such as Trotsky, John Brown, Gandhi, and militant environmentalists. The seven volumes included a "moral calculus" that Vollmann formed from the causes, the actions and the effects of these events. With the "moral calculus", he considered the justifications for violence. Each event was laid out with details of the moral culture and environment the actors were in,

some from personal interviews. With these thought experiments, the reader was invited to cross the empathetic bridge, see through the actors' eyes, and imagine the justification for violence in such an environment. Vollmann gave us local influences and plenty of details to visualize people, objects and events as they were.

When is violence justified? For us "lonely atoms" and our social contract with other "lonely atoms", we start with Justified Choices of the Self with 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 the case of any variance, do the more generous thing."**

Whether or not to violently defend itself against violence;
Whether or not to violently defend someone else from violence
Whether or not to destroy itself.
Whether or not to help a weaker self destroy itself, to save it from a worse fate.

This caveat of the Golden Rule is assumed throughout RURD:

The Golden Rule is justified only when applied to acts which all parties affected agree will contribute to their conception of goodness, or when the dissenting party is a bona fide dependent of the moral actor. Otherwise it easily becomes the Zealot's Golden Rule (see Hadrian's **List of Moral Calculus**).

Like the flaw of Gandhi assuming that non-violence and good will prevail over evil, Plato's ideal city-state assumed that a just governance will always bring harmony to its citizens. His utopia will have most of the citizens slaves to the state. The elite Guardian class will make most of the decisions for the "child" class. The reality of events was more like Machiavelli's the end justifying the means, which was the reverse of Gandhi's moral calculus, "One must scrupulously avoid the temptation of a desire for results." In the thought experiment of the moral calculus, the end did justify the mean depending on whether the danger to self or others was imminent. History have shown that human nature have sown more Machiavellis than Gandhis, and justification for violence can come from the irrationality of circular reasoning. In the end, the lonely atom's social contract with other lonely atoms is a fine balance of Gandhian morality, Plato's power to the state, and Machiavellian self-preservation.

Volumes II-IV is devoted to the justifications, using historical and contemporary events. In Vollmann's moral calculus, the simplest justification for violence is suicide and euthanasia, which is the destruction of the self and assisting others in the destruction of the self, since the lonely atom is free to make the personal choice of whether to self-destruct or not. An offshoot of this, consenting adults are free to act as they desire, such as in sadism and masochism. By that Armin Meiwes should go free since it's consensual. Weiwes is a cannibal and his victim wanted to be eaten. Other justifications for violence are more complex.

Defense of Honor - Inner/outer honor comparison of individual, family and group. Examples: Violence against the dishonor of rape, which sadly includes violence against the victim for being raped; the Charge of the Light Brigade; Sun-tzu executes a concubine who embarrasses him; Joan of Arc; Napoleon; D.E. Abbot's honor-battles in an American reform school; Soviet infantry urged onward at gunpoint; Chairman Mao's doctor confesses his own dishonor.

Defense of Monuments - Saddam Hussein's prevalent image in Iraq.

Defense of Class - Karl Marx and ants; nomadic vs. agrarian; haves vs. have-nots; status according to sex, birth, money, race, etc.; violence in implementing Communism; Mao, Trotsky, Stalin. Communism's ideal

of saving the working class ended up being tyranny and mass murder.

Defense of Authority - Lincoln and the secession of the South. "Lincoln was a very consistent man, and I believe that I do him no injustice in simplifying his position as follows: The wrong of slavery must not be extended (which slaveholders took as a threat to starve them out); its abolition would delight him, but ending bondage must take second place to union and constitutionality." In short, Lincoln has to consider ending slavery vs. holding the country together.

Defense of Race and Culture - Comparison of the rising up of John Brown and Martin Luther King mostly. "John Brown's actions at Harpers Ferry I therefore consider largely admirable, if not immediately effective (although Martin Luther King at Selma was nobler and more effective; and Gandhi after Amritsar was noblest of all). His actions at Pottawatomie sicken me;..." While John Brown's violent stand against slavery was admirable, he broke the caveat to the Golden rule and became a zealot.

Defense of Creed - Religion, the Constitution, among others. "Defense of creed is such a very dangerous justification for violence because faith, by way of proving itself, so often refuses to descend to the level of logical prove. This leaves faith's end and means unsusceptible to outside judgment...Faith equals extremism. Hence Christ-Gandhi-Joan-Napoleon-Cortes-Lenin-Hitler."

Defense of War Aims - Like defense of creed, defense of war aims becomes a slippery slope that threatens to veer toward being unjustified as enemies are either given mercy or killed, as friends or foes are determined. As example, WTV gave the complicated machinations of Julius Caesar, his peers and successors. "...Caesar's war crackles meaninglessly on, until Marc Antony's dead, Cleopatra's dead, Lepidus is crushed and banished, Pompey's last son's broken, the Republic's dead in word and deed..."

Defense of Homeland - Main example is against the Nazis. Interesting quotes from varying sources to justify violent defense against foreign aggression. Defense against imminent aggression is easier to determine than proactive defense. The Gandhi quote of nonviolence is very interesting but will lead to massive slaughter if a psychopath like Hitler decided to decimate all Indians.

Defense of Ground - Unlike defense of homeland, defense of ground is where you stand and not necessarily at your homeland. War is wherever you make it. Most interesting is Cortes vs. the Aztecs. The Spaniards came to the new land, Bernard Díaz: "to take a look at the great Montezuma-in fact to earn our livelihood..fortunes."

Defense of the Earth - WTV doesn't approve of some tactics by militant environmentalists such as tree spiking that can harm people. His recommendation is to establish "Detection Squads to establish scientific imminence then Education Squads to educate. In case of unclear scientific imminence, Vollmann would "rather act locally, revocably, nonviolently and alone, making intimately limited moral choices...watch the world go to hell than trust somebody else's techno-moral calculus to sentence anybody to death and damnation."

Defense of Animals - WTV thinks human takes priority over animals but does not condone animal suffering needlessly. He defends medical research and other research to better human lives.

Defense of Gender - Female circumcision (WTV refused to use the word "mutilation") was considered with defense of race and culture. In particular, the Somali Aman's experience was used as an example of how culture can have the Somali people regard the circumcision as an important rite of passage instead of as victimization. "One reason why in Rising Up and Rising Down I have been so careful to give white separatists and others of that ilk more than may seem to be their due is because, as stated for defense of race and culture, diversity is best served by *local homogeneity and global heterogeneity*."

Defense Against Traitors - Violent defense against traitors is justified “against a deliberate or accidental agent of danger-in other words, as imminent defense” and “Against a deliberate agent of danger, as a personal, punitive or didactic act.”

Defense of Revolution - “Liberty without equality would bring a society into a paradise of the Social Darwinists, in which the able rich would be free to grow richer, while the impoverished would be free to starve. Equality without liberty would consist for its part in universal slavery. Exponents of those two respective hells would be, I suppose, Caligula and Pol Pot. Liberty must balance equality, identify with it, *equal* it.”

Other justifications for violence: i) Deterrence, Retribution, Revenge ii) Punishment iii) Loyalty, Compulsion, and Fear iv) Sadism and Expediency v) Sadism, Masochism, and Pleasure vi) Moral Yellowness vii) Inevitability.

Some of these are self-explanatory since they’re common human actions during time of strife to justify violence. In Sadism and Expediency, the torturer’s pleasure and satisfaction is mixed with loyalty, revenge, deterrence and other justifications. An example of sadism and expediency is couched in the 1740 Louisiana law, “In case any person shall willfully cut out the tongue, put out an eye, or cruelly scald, burn or deprive any slave of a limb or member, or shall inflict any cruel punishment other than whipping or beating ... or confining or imprisoning such a slave, every such person shall...forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.” Its relation, the pleasure of S&M is a well-known cultural facet thanks to the Marquis de Sade, but his S&M included rape and compulsion which are unjustified. Moral Yellowness (the guy can’t help himself because he’s evil) and Inevitability (it can’t be avoided) are, in Vollmann’s eyes, always unjustified.

The second half of RURD, the thick volumes V to VI, is of most interest to me since it reveals Vollmann’s talent for building empathetic bridges wherever he is, traveling as far away as southeast Asia to the fringe societies within the U.S. A good precursor read to his more mature journalist’s point of view is **An Afghanistan Picture Show** that showed an idealistic young man who wants to help the world.

Victims of the Khmer Rouge

Southeast Asia - “The aim of the Khmer Rouge was almost sublime. They had a slogan: *When there is rice, there is everything*. In the end, they wanted there to be nothing but rice. So survivors told me.” We get vignettes of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot through the eyes of the people, piecing reality through their filtered impressions, distorted or not, under a government’s rigorous self-sufficiency program that led to famine and cruelty. As WTV interviewed the Cambodians still under the Khmer Rouge (red), we get interesting opinions on whether they prefer the Rouge or the Khmer Sar (white), the U.S. backed government that was overthrown by the Rouge. The citizens revealed that both forcibly take from them, but the reds “set only one price. The whites were always taking. No matter how much you gave them, they needed more.” From the Cambodia killing fields Vollmann traveled to the gangs of Long Beach, California. The well-behaved Cambodian children controlled under a long tradition of respect for their parents find themselves losing respect for them. Their parents now looking like backward peasants who can't speak English, powerless to protect them from the Hispanic or black gang members or bullies. They empower as Asian gang members like their tormentors.

Other stories in this region has Vollmann and a photographer in Bangkok bumbling around trying to buy young prostitutes to rescue them for release to a shelter. A large number of the prostitutes were from impoverished tribes and Burma, some underaged and some in sexual slavery. Whenever a family needs money, a girl is sold into sexual trade, sometimes for things as unnecessary as electronic goods. It became a

lost cause. As Vollmann told his friend, "Let's drop it...Because we're not missionary."

The most thought-provoking was in the Burmese jungle following the "Opium King" Khun Sa's den. Vollmann pondered on the DEA's anti-drug pressure affecting the impoverished people who rely on the trade and thereby promoting drug lords to hero status. "My friend...compared Khun Sa with the tobacco company R.J. Reynolds. Both had to make a living...sell addictive poisons...But here is the difference...Executives at RJR...have other jobs they could take and other things they could sell...The Opium King's minions do not. They cannot go anywhere else; nor should they be required to leave their homeland. And to stay where they are, they must have guns..." Khan Sa had a point, "If there were more addicts...it's not my responsibility; it's the fault of the DEA. If you want to know how heroin comes from Shan State to the U.S., don't ask me, ask the DEA..If I grow opium and am responsible for it, then the American President and the Thai Prime Minister must be responsible, too. If you have to blame anyone for criminality, then President Bush might be liable..."

The section on the Yakuza was not as amazing as their myth had me believe. They're not much more than an organized gang composed of society's outcasts who need protection and belonging. Mr. Suzuki said that the Yakuza is a "negative service industry,...when other people can't solve a problem, we do."

Europe - Vollmann moved through the Republic of Croatia to Kosovo. "The amazing thing about this three-cornered war, as I keep saying, was that every possible combination of alliance and hatred existed. At the beginning, Serbs were fighting Croats and Muslims. Then Croats were fighting Muslims and Serbs. (Then) Muslims had begun to fight Muslims in Bihac; and throughout Bosnia the HVO, the Croatian Defense Organization, was forming a unified command of Croats and Muslims..."

(Word count maxed, please continue to Review of Rising Up and Rising Down.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Rising Up and Rising Down is correctly compared to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. At least so today ; in one hundred years, who can say. Both are massive, multi-volume works which intimidate in their physical presences. Both have a very short, simple question in mind to address :: When is violence justified? ; Why did the Roman Empire fall? Neither question is easy to answer. Both works are intensely erudite ; both authors very much attending to the manner in which the words go down upon the page. Here's a difference -- Vollmann recognizes the likely failure of his work, recognizes that despite the aspiration to a universally valid calculus, his moral calculus can only be limited to the best he can do ;; Gibbon's work was definitive at the time and he didn't take humbly to his detractors (cf. his *Vindication*).

Rising Up and Rising Down is a 3300 page opus, twenty years in the writing. Vollmann began writing in 1982 when he journeyed to Afghanistan to see what he could do to help the Afghani's defend themselves against Soviet aggression ;; the product of that journey, and what may be understood as Volume 0.5 of RURD, is *An Afghanistan Picture Show* ; the adolescent beginnings of RURD being a confession of utter failure to "save the world." The unpublishable RURD was more or less completed by 1997 ; but a few years later, in what will likely count as his most heroic decision as a publisher, Dave Eggers scratched out some numbers and committed to publish RURD in 2003. Some updating, some fact checking, and unfortunately inadequate copy-editing -- RURD saw the light of day in the form of 3500 beautifully bound exemplars at US\$120 each ;; today, several times more on the second-hand market. Here too a contrast with Gibbon's work ; while *Decline and Fall*'s first volume experienced six editions between 1776 and 1789, RURD exists in a single first edition -- readership has changed over the centuries.

Not quite true ;; Vollmann produced an abridged edition of RUD for Ecco Press in 2004 (which even went into paperback), “for the money” and so that at least some folks might actually read it. The abridgment is both fortunate and unfortunate. Fortunate simply for having some of this massive work widely and affordably available ;; but most unfortunate because it cannot but obscure the narrative and argumentative threads of the complete treatise. For instance, the abridgment contains the complete Moral Calculus [available [HERE](#) thanks to Friend Hadrian’s efforts] in the form of summary propositions intricately and logically organized, complete with definitions and such, but the propositions themselves are barren when removed from the context out of which Vollmann has developed them. One is left with a merely shallow understanding of how each element of the Calculus is intended to operate ; the life blood of the system of justifications (and what is the moral but our very life blood?) is mostly drained, leaving us with only a handful of examples of his methodology. Too, the second half of RUD, the Studies in Consequences which occupy volumes V and VI, is reduced to fewer than 200 pages ;; and this later half of the complete work is where Vollmann the journalist is most roundly represented. More on that. But meanwhile and until McSweeney’s works up a second edition in some form--any form!!--most readers are left with the choice of an unsatisfying abridgment, or hoping for the fortune of having an adequate library in the vicinity.

A word about justification. Some readers and reviewers seem suspicious about Vollmann’s project of justifying violence, of asking when violence might be justifiable. Let me be clear -- if we are moral actors (and some neo-Nietzscheans might deny that we are) then we are concerned with whether our actions are right or wrong ; if our actions are justified, we are right, if not, not. In the alternative, that is to say, if we are not moral actors, there is no question about justifications -- my might makes me right. The moral question about our actions is always threatened with expediency -- we do it because it works ; I get what I want, no question whether it is right or wrong, justified or not justified. But, if we believe that what we do and why we do it matters, then we are concerned with moral questions, and we are concerned with justifiability : what is it about my actions and motives which make this action a right action and that one a wrong action? Many of us citizens of democratic societies are concerned about the question whether our governments are acting morally or whether they are merely pursuing raw self-interest and aggrandizement of power, covered over with moral-sounding platitudes -- we are asking whether our governments’ actions against (Afghanistan/Iraq/Syria/ETC) are morally justified or simply expedient. And the burden of proof is always on the moral actor ; even upon submitting a course of action to the analytic knife of the Moral Calculus, a suspicion continues to haunt any such justified violent action ; there is no moral compunction to commit any specific act, there is not Demand! but rather a limitation. With something like the Moral Calculus at hand we have some advantage for distinguishing between self-defense (justified) and mere self-interest (justified or not depending.....)

Beyond the rights of lonely atoms, justification of violence becomes by no means straight forward. A few of Vollmann’s beginning points which should indicate that the Moral Calculus which would justify acts of violence is non-expansive:

- 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 the case of any variance, do the more generous thing.*
- The First Law of Violent Action :: *The inertia of the situation into which we inject ourselves must always be given the benefit of the doubt. Look before you leap.* which can be restated: *Assume any potential victim of your violence to be as worthy of self-preservation as yourself, until that assumption has been disproven by the remainder of your moral calculus.*
- The Rights of the Self :: To violently defend itself, or not; To violently defend another, or not; To destroy itself or preserve itself; To violently destroy another who would be better off dead; To violently defend its property, or not.
- Violence is Justified :: 1) In legitimate self-defense or the defense of other human beings against imminent physical harm (“legitimate” and “imminence” both require definition); 2) In defense of individual rights (see above); 3) In defense of self-respect; 4) In construction or maintenance of legitimate institutional authority 5) In obedience to legitimate authority; provided only that there is ethical commonality between the giver of the

orders and one who is ordered, and that the indications in (1) and (2) apply; 6) When a number of categories of self-defense can be legitimately invoked... The more conditions in this section satisfied, the better; 7) In defense of proportionality; 8) In imminent defense of freedom of speech.

Consider the foregoing a rough sketch of the principles from which Vollmann begins his investigations. Also, note his precaution against justifiability :: “When one commits violence, it is more likely that it will be unjustified than justified. Therefore, I would advise that if an act seems by the rules of section 6 [“When is violence unjustified?”] to be classified as evil, it should be treated as suspect at best. On the other hand, if the act seems to obey all the rules for justification listed in section 5 [“When is violence justified?” from which my extracts just above], it should be treated as--somewhat less suspect. At its most noble, an act which passes all the tests of section five can only be said to *tend* toward being justified. Since these rules necessarily remain vague, and their interpretation open to opinion, no one test is sure; and 5.1.6 [the more categories of self-defense invoked, the better] should be kept in mind.” For the entire Moral Calculus, please see Friend Hadrian again, [HERE](#).

For the remainder of this review I’d like to simply indicate what is contained within the unabridged RURD. For despite having been a Vollmanniac for a few years now, I had little understanding of what exactly was going on in this most legendary of his books. I would like to think that by providing my own version of a table of contents I might entice a few other folks to seek out--by hook or by crook--an opportunity to visit this book in its seven volume glory, even if only to create one’s own abridgment. Broadly speaking, the book is divided in half ;; “Justifications” (volumes II-IV) and “Studies in Consequences” (volumes V and VI). The second half is what I am more keen on pressing into your hands because it is more explicitly the kind of thing which only Vollmann does and wherein one will find several of the Vollmann legends fully written up (such as the story of his purchase/rescue of an underage prostitute in Thailand), whereas the first half is the kind of historico-ethical study which could be taken up by anyone interested in the question in general.

Volume I

Two introductory pieces :: Three Meditations on Death and Introduction ;; The Days of the Niblungs

Definitions for Lonely Atoms contains six essays ::

--On the Aesthetics of Weapons

--On the Morality of Weapons

--Where Do My Rights End?

--Where Do My Rights Begin?

--Where Do Your Rights Begin?

--Means and Ends.

Justifications (volumes II through IV)

In each of the following chapters Vollmann undertakes to examine when violence may or may not be justified in defense of some principle or interest. He engages each topic in relation to one or more “moral actors,” often historical characters such as Lincoln, Trotsky, Caesar, Napoleon, John Brown.

--When is violence justified or unjustified in relation to :

Section I : Self Defense

Defense of Honor

Defense of Class

Defense of Authority

Defense of Race and Culture

Defense of Creed

Defense of War Aims

Defense of Homeland

Defense of Ground

Defense of the Earth

Defense of Animals

Defense of Gender

Defense against Traitors

Defense of Revolution

Section II : Policy and Choice

Deterrence, Retribution, and Revenge

Punishment

Loyalty, Compulsion, and Fear

Sadism and Expediency

Sadism, Masochism, and Pleasure

Section II : Fate

Moral Yellowness

Inevitability

Evaluations

Four Safeguards :: 1) Make sure you are justified in as many of the above categories as possible; 2) Render your cause attractive to as many diverse participants as possible; 3) Combine experience and theory; 4)

Acknowledge context carefully.

Remember the Victim!

Studies in Consequences -- These case studies have a questionable, vague, or accidental relationship with the first half of RURD. Despite what one may expect, Vollmann does not employ his Moral Calculus to evaluate the moral actors in these case studies. Rather, he is seeking to understand what, if any, moral calculus these moral actors may possess, when do *they* believe violence justified? These twelve hundred pages showcase Vollmann The Journalist, listening to his subjects and bringing them to voice ; he is here not the armchair ethicist whom we saw in the first half of RURD. Of all of RURD, these two volumes most deserve a second edition.

Southeast Asia (1991-2000)

“The Skulls on the Shelves” -- Vollmann attempts to contact and interview Pol Pot; background to his novel *The Butterfly Boy*.

“The Last Generation” and “Kickin’ It” (Cambodian American); both investigate Cambodian youth gangs in California. Q: When is violence justified? A: When someone fuck us up!

“I’m Especially Interested in *Young Girls*” (Thailand) -- The legendary story of Vollmann and his friend Ken purchasing/rescuing an underage prostitute. He still “owns” her; even has a receipt from dad.

“But What Are We To Do?” (Burma) -- Bill seeks, finds, and interviews Khun Sa, The Opium King and leader of a Shan separatist movement. Yet another piece of geo-political history about which I knew nothing.

“Yakuza Lives” (Japan) -- Are the Yakuza evil?

Europe (1992, 1994, 1998)

Three essays about former-Yugoslavia. Included here is the incident which cost the lives of two of Bill’s journalist friends, with he himself escaping by some inexplicable motion of luck.

“Where are All the Pretty Girls?”

“The War Never Came Here”

“The Avengers of Kosovo”

I have never understood what happened in the former-Yugoslavia in the 1990’s. I am only slightly comforted by the fact the Bill has not been able to make sense of it either.

Africa (1993, 2001)

“The Jealous Ones” (Madagascar)

“Special Tax” (Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Vollmann says that his portrait of Africa would have looked very different had he been sent to different

countries. As it is, he was sent to these two countries. These two essays may be the point at which Bill finds himself most deeply in despair. They are harrowing stories.

The Muslim World (1994-2002)

“Let Me Know if You’re Scared” (Somalia) -- Vollmann accompanies military on missions to disarm militants and to provide safe passage for humanitarian aid. --We are soldiers, not police!

“The Old Man” (Malaysia) -- Vollmann tracks down and interviews Hadji Amin, leader of PULO. Vollmann is the only journalist to have interviewed him. Do you know who Hadji Amin or PULO is?

“The Wet Man Is Not Afraid of Rain” (Iraq) -- This is 1998 and the effects of UN/US sanctions would appear (to me eyes) to be a war crime.

“With Their Hands on Their Hearts” (Afghanistan) -- This is 2000. We need more Americans to have the love, respect, and understanding of Islam which Bill has.

“Everybody Likes Americans” (Yemen) -- September 11, 2002. No, not many like Americans. Given Bill’s love for the followers of Islam, this is a painful essay. In fact, it is very important to find out “why they hate us” but we can only do that if we learn to speak and be heard rather than to continue to shout, deafen, and kill.

North America (1988-2000)

“Laughing At All Her Enemies” (USA) -- Amerindian suicide.

“You Gotta Be A Hundred Percent Right” (USA) -- The Guardian Angels, a citizen’s anti-crime patrol organization with no money and which practices citizens arrest.

“Whack ‘Em and Stack ‘Em” (USA) -- A portrait of Ted Nugent, the only ‘celebrity’ Bill’s interviewed.

“Dey Bring Dem Bloodstain Up Here” (Jamaica) -- Violence in the Kingston ghettos.

“Murder for Sale” (USA) -- Reluctantly Bill covers the Columbine massacre, and then too the NRA convention is in town; an excellent analysis of vultures.

“Guns in the USA” -- Want to know why Vollmann is a gun nut?

South America (1999, 2000)

“You Never Know Who is Who” (Columbia)

“Papa’s Children” (Columbia)

These two essays are almost as harrowing and despairing as the two from Africa.

Perception and Irrationality

“Nightmares, Prayers, and Ecstasies” (USA) -- Can the irrationality of religion function as a bulwark against the irrationality of violence? Bill investigates voodoo, hoodoo, and santaria.

“Off the Grid” (USA) -- Right wingers in Idaho and Montana. Some despicable creatures here, but are they harming anyone?

“Thick Blood” (Japan) -- The Untouchables desire equal rights.

Shall we characterize Vollmann’s journalistic work? It is like no other. His questions tend to not receive informative answers. He interviews whom we can. He reports to us what they say, preserving even the broken English of his translators ;; this is the respect for voice which I’ve spoken of previously in regard to *Fathers and Crows*. His reports are not definitive characterizations of anything. Many essays are merely reports of his failures, his difficulties. This is humble work. It is work which has taken him to places many of us didn’t even know existed. It is a collection essential for understanding William T. Vollmann.

Who should read *Rising Up and Rising Down*? War mongers and peace-niks ; journalists ; ethicists and philosophers ; **CITIZENS** ; politicians ; goodreaders ; Vollmanniacs and assorted detritus of societies ; You Bright and Risen Angels ;

{proofing, editing, and perhaps more later ; but isn’t this enough?}

{And as always, I'd like to thank Friend Brian Dice for making it possible for me to read the entire seven volumes many years before I thought I'd have the opportunity. Thank you, Brian}

Garth Risk Hallberg on RURD from his Year in Reading report:
<http://www.themillions.com/2012/12/a-...>

"I did something crazy this year. I blew half of a freelancing check on the complete, seven-volume edition of William T. Vollmann's 3,000 page essay on violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down*. (What can I say? It was either that or diapers for my children.) I remain deeply conflicted about my fascination with Vollmann. I know there's an obvious case to be made that he's not a good writer. I also think he might be a great one. To my surprise, given its length, RURD is one of his more carefully crafted books. In its learned monomania, it reminds me of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. To a contemporary audience, its style of argumentation may feel bizarre; I keep thinking of an archaeologist sitting at a table, sweeping a pile of sand from one hand to the other, waiting for artifacts to emerge in the middle. But when Vollmann arrives, after many divagations, at a point, you don't feel like you understand; you feel like you've lived it. (For this reason, I cannot imagine the 700-page abridged version making any sense at all.) And if Violence seems like too broad a subject, consider this: it's a head-fake. The essay's really about Everything.

"Or so it seems to me at present; I'm only two volumes in. RURD is destined, probably, to join *The Book of Disquiet* and *The Arcades Project* and *The Making of Americans* as one of those books I read and read and never finish. But I'm grateful to the weird pressure of *A Year in Reading* for giving me the impetus to start."

Griffin Alexander says

Never thought I'd say it, but after reading the 700 pages of the abridgment, I think this book very well may merit the 3,300 page unabridged edition. Some of the editing choices on the part of Ecco to bring this book down to a more accessible length have (I think, having not read the text in question outside of this abridgment) seriously chipped away at the process of discourse/documentation that is being got at by Vollmann here. I can only wait until I am can get my hands on the full text to really weigh in.

As for Vollmann himself, though he acknowledges his perspective as being inherently informed by his white-/Western-/male-ness he nonetheless falls into traps of regrettable discourse especially in Section II (his accounts of case studies) that remind the reader of those red-flagged passages commonly deemed colonialist and pandering. These moments are isolated and exist in often stretched similes. Nonetheless, they are here and need to be spoken about, as I'm sure Bill would agree.

****UPDATE:** checks in the mail on the 7-volume edition. This is now a to-read of the highest order.**

Brian says

Volume 1: Meditations Introduction Definitions (Apr 21 - Apr 24, 2013)

Is there a moral calculus, a true-meaning social calculation, that one might use as a standard for committing violence? Is it possible to sift through the assholes and ash-heaps of history, all that bloodshed and grief, to find the building blocks of the demons of our worser natures? Whether a reader believes he is successful or

not, William Vollmann has made that 17 year investment into hell to attempt to understand, even the most fleeting possibilities of real meaning, the violence that rules humanity.

"I wanted to find a base point below which we couldn't go - the *floor* of evil," states Vollmann. I've been reading this book for three days; the last two nights I've had terrible dreams. I'm only reading it - WTV lived it, researched it, got inside its treacly innards and demanded to know "Why?". This isn't an easy read, but I think it's an important one. Grappling with the terrible parts of our humanity is as essential as embracing the best bits.

Volume 2: Justifications for Violent Defense, Part 1 (Apr 28 - Sep 28, 2013)

While reading Vollmann's non-fiction there are many times that I feel that he is part Anthony Gotto, part Franz Mesmer: he can juggle so many diverse lines of thought and reason without dropping the thread - all the while keeping the reader engaged and wildly turning pages in an almost hypnotic transe. Even if we aren't 100% with him - if we can't keep up with the arcana and head-spinning references, or we aren't exactly sure we agree with him - Bill is never bashful about the fact that he is driving that train. And these boxcars: Defense of Honor, Class, Authority, Race and Culture, Creed - they are loaded with learning, horrors, hope.

Friends Nathan, Aloha and Hadrian will all have more sage and important things than me to say about these books. If I might, though, I'd like to share the most profound piece of personal learning I've taken away from Volume 2:

We're all familiar with the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. As an adult I've often felt that this Rule might not be so applicable in our flat world. I'm a white guy in America - how do I know that if I treat a Turkish woman in Istanbul the same way that I would want to be treated that I wouldn't be wildly offending her? Bill has noodled on this and has writ an important update to the Rule:

Empath's Golden Rule: *Do unto others, not only as you would be done by, but also as they would be done by. In the case of any variance, do the more generous thing.*

I like that quite a bit. Thanks, Bill, for this - I'm looking forward to being challenged by you in the next Volume of your magnum opus.

Moral Calculus Volume (Oct 5 - Oct 14, 2013)

It was somewhere around the halfway point of WTV's moral calculus on violence that I put the book down and said out loud, "Just who the fuck is this guy?"

I came to RURD wanting to learn. I didn't want to just read this text, I wanted to understand - be taught - at the feet of someone who has seen so much violence and death first hand that he lived these pages as much as he wrote them. My last violent confrontation was when I punched and tackled overweight Joey Labarbra when he told me how babies were made. The violence of that event, and the shame on my father's face when I told him why I started a fight - and his confirmation that Joey was right - are memories fused together that I'll call the end of my innocence. Sex and violence. Why did it have to happen like that?

34 years have passed and I have avoided every type of willful violence possible. I am not just a pacifist, I'd like to also think that so much of the world's violence occurs because of each person's willingness, or not, to participate in the daily and ongoing realities of violent confrontation. It isn't just for frontline soldiers or barroom pugilists, it is for armchair readers, too. So my willingness to let Vollmann under my skin forced me to face some very real and hardened personal filters. There is a time for violence. And if I don't admit that,

and come to grips with my own personal Moral Calculus (MC) on violence, what will happen if/when the day comes that violence is required by me to save my life, the life of a family member, the life of a friend, the life of a stranger, the life of an enemy? This isn't pissing in the wind. This is life.

So I had to take a break from this series and seriously think about my approach to violence. In the intro to his own MC, Vollmann makes clear what the reader is about to experience is his own attempt to clarify and refine his approach to the employment of violence and that the reader shouldn't take it as gospel. Each person should create their own personal MC. If I really wanted to do this, I needed to read more, think more, speak aloud the words those feelings were creating and hopefully begin a fresh approach to this subject. It's a long work in progress, but I am ready now to return to RUaRD and continue with WTV's next volume on his ode to violence.

Volume 3: Justifications for Violent Defense, Part 2 (Jan 5 - Dec 16, 2014)

I began 2014 with the goal to sip from the River Vollmann rather than wade in it. With a newly enacted policy of only one volume of RURD per year I felt more free to take the paths off the main trail to increase my education and improve my approach to Bill's take on violence. This course proved fruitful and fulfilling - I'll replicate it in 2015 with the next volume.

The 500 pages of Volume 3 encompass WTV's take on justified violence in defense of War Aims, Homeland, Ground, The Earth, Animals, Gender, Traitors and Revolution. The first two sections sent me on a multi-book investigation on Ancient Rome; my great ignorance of this period of history necessitated an in-depth study for me to really challenge myself on the author's opinions. He spends a lot of time with Julius Caesar - his reflections on that man paint a picture quite different than the overly masticated and regurgitated 21st century version commonly known.

But it's Vollmann's *Defense of Animals* section in this volume that has become my favorite part of this series so far. The author really struggles with his Moral Calculus on the subject; his writing is honest to the point where you can almost sense him throwing his hands up in despair. This is the type of writing I want to read when we are talking about something as important as human violence: there are no easy answers. WTV's empathy with both native Greenlanders and vegans makes the reader realize one Moral Calculus does not fit all. And to place our morality on someone else in their culture is borderline reprehensible.

My copy of Volume 3 is pretty beat up. It has traveled with me across three continents this year and logged over 30,000 miles. I didn't spill anything on it (thank the Maker) but its dog-eared, bent spine visage looks very little like the book that started the year in my backpack. I wish I could pay it back for how much it has taught me.

Volume 4: Justifications for Violent Defense, Part 3; Evaluations (October 17, 2015 - April 11, 2016)

Volume IV of RURD completes Vollmann's explorations of Violent Justifications. There's violence committed as deterrence, retribution and/or revenge; punishment; sadism/masochism; moral yellowness; inevitability. Among others. I spent the most amount of time in this volume in the *Deterrence, Retribution and Revenge* section, especially in the very human, hypocritical and somewhat true invocation of **Tu Quoque**, that debasement of the Golden Rule (i.e. do as you have been done by) that is certainly no judicially accepted defense and yet humans are constantly employing it – at a personal, corporate, government, global level. Vollmann lays out the Lawrence of Arabia employment of Tu Quoque against the Turks; he quotes Eisenhower invoking the sentiment, walks through the Nazi employment of Tu Quoque (“We killed Jews and the Russians killed Poles, and the Russians aren't being indicted, so neither should we”) – and then offers this:

Tu Quoque is not a justified defense for unethical acts of violence unless those acts have been consensualized into an ethos of acceptability. (underline mine)

I found this concept the most difficult of dozens of brain wrenching Vollmannisms in RURD. When our society “accepts” unethical acts of violence we have lost. I can only imagine Vonnegut’s reaction to the bombing of Dresden in the Allies’ enactment of Tu Quoque. And we see this daily, in all places of the planet – from revenge cop killing in Dallas to every armed conflict. Dear God and baby Jesus I never want to be a part of a species that creates an ethos of acceptable justification for unethical acts of violence. At that point, we are just goddamned cursed animals and deserve whatever we have coming to us.

The most fascinating side reading from Volume IV was Krushchev’s memoirs. I see it is possible to still get a second-hand copy of this amazing work online; anyone that lived through the Cold War and wondered just what in the world was going through the minds of the Russians – this book is definitely for you. Highly recommended.

The last two sections of this Volume are two important sections of Vollmann opinions: Evaluations (on Safeguards and Victims). Vollmann posits these four safeguards of “Justification of Violence in Self-Defense”:

- 1) The greater number of categories an act of self-defense can legitimately invoke, the more justified it will be;
- 2) The greater the variety of participants an act of self-defense attracts, the more justified it is likely to be;
- 3) Experience alone, and theoretical grounding alone, are insufficient foundations for any moral calculus (e.g. Just having experience, especially in a dogmatic, doctrinal mindset, produces parochial conclusions)
- 4) Context must inform the act that we judge, but ought not to predetermine the judgment

I have taken a long break from RURD to read other things – both RURD referred and not – but I have to be honest that the concept of Tu Quoque and its consistent human application laid me so low that I was afraid to have another Vollmann brain bomb ignite and make me feel hopeless for humanity. I still have two more volumes to go, and yes I’m looking forward to completing the

Lee says

I own this shit, signed. I give it five stars just for its existence. Not like I've read it yet. One day when I settle into my upstate rocking chair, my velvet smoking jacket, when I cultivate a taste for brandy, hunting dogs, rifles, prostitutes, genocide, the north pole . . .
