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“My text is no more than a pack of lies.”  
Fictional Pacts in William T. Vollmann’s  
*Seven Dreams*

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**Abstract** – The aim of the article is to ponder, from a narratological perspective, on the fictional pacts in William T. Vollmann’s *Seven Dreams* series, i.e., on the virtual contract through which the author gives the reader, whether explicitly or not, instructions about the way in which his texts should be read, and that the reader, in turn, should follow to coherently process textual contents. By focusing on *The Ice-Shirt*, the first novel in the series, I will try to demonstrate how such a pact proves to be a problematic one, especially in that, throughout the whole text, fictional and non-fictional elements are constantly blended. Moreover, my aim is to address how on the reader’s part a ‘flexible’ approach, i.e., an approach that recognizes and builds on such a compresence of elements, allows him to navigate a text that reveals to be hybrid in nature.

**Keywords** – William T. Vollmann; Fictionality; Paratexts; Historical Novel; Metafiction.

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### 1. A “Californian Balzac”?

As many scholars and literary critics have repeatedly pointed out, William T. Vollmann’s books are works of extreme complexity which often defy attempts to critically circumscribe their form as well as the logic behind such complexity. For instance, in 1993, at a time when Vollmann’s critical reputation was in its infancy, Larry McCaffery suggested that by virtue of their formal configuration Vollmann’s novels seemed “to aspire to the status of hypertext” (McCaffery, “A Conversation” 21), while Tom LeClair, a few years later, postulated that Vollmann tended to conceive his texts “as information systems, as long-running programs of data with a collaborative genesis” (LeClair 14).

Over the years, claims such as these have been reiterated, often paired with remarks concerning, on the one hand, the peculiar way in which Vollmann provides material for his books,<sup>1</sup> and on the other hand, his prolificacy. In this vein, Françoise Palleau-Papin describes Vollmann as «a Californian Balzac», in recognition of the author’s “ambition to represent a society in its totality” and his *prolixité*, given that over the course of around three decades Vollmann has published sufficient works to “fill up a library” (my trans.). More in general, it could be argued that the representation of the author as eccentric and complex, of “[t]he writer as a larger-than-life-editorial-man-of-action” (Hemmingson xvi), has become a popular lens through which to approach the author and his works. However, though this has certainly contributed to Vollmann’s repute beyond the restricted circle of U.S. literature scholars, such biographical enquiries risk curtailing the rigor of the studies devoted to his work to the extent that they involve focusing attention on the genesis and process of his literary production rather than on the texts’ intrinsic dynamics.

This article does not intend to confront all these dynamics, nor Vollmann’s oeuvre as a whole. Rather, my aim is to investigate from a narratological perspective one of his first published texts, *The Ice-Shirt*, and more specifically to explore one of its main aspects, namely its combination of fictional and non-fictional elements. In particular, my aim is to map the *fictional pact* which Vollmann seeks to make with his readers. With this term I here refer to the virtual contract which is supposed to regulate the way in which a work of literature is read by its recipients, and that is usually formulated, as Gérard Genette has remarked, in the textual thresholds, i.e., in the so-called paratexts (see *Paratexts*).

<sup>1</sup> For example, references have been often made to the fact that Vollmann spent a long time in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco in order to narrate the life of its inhabitants, and especially of prostitutes there; that *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, published in 1992, was the result of his experiences in Afghanistan during the conflict between mujahideen fighters and Soviet troops; and that, more recently, he started to cross-dress and to develop a female double in order to explore femininity (an ambition to which *The Book of Dolores* testifies). Vollmann was highly aware of critical and public interest in his way of working. In 1993, he stated that “Others have built a mystique around my activities” (McCaffery, “A Conversation” 10).

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

In the following I will thus focus my attention on such thresholds, both those that materially surround the text (in Genette’s terms, the *peritext*), and those circulating around it, especially in the form of auto-comments (what Genette calls the *epitext*). I will highlight how, instead of inviting the reader to sign an unambiguous pact, the paratexts of *The Ice-Shirt* instill doubts about how to coherently process textual contents. Moreover, I will consider how the fictional pact established in the paratexts is further complicated when the reader enters the text. Finally, in the last section of the article I will put forward a possible way to conceptualize from a theoretical point of view the blend of fictional and non-fictional elements in *The Ice-Shirt* as well as in Vollmann’s oeuvre more broadly, and especially in the *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*, the imaginative historical cycle (of which *The Ice-Shirt* is the first instalment) in which Vollmann seeks to retell the history of the North-American continent.<sup>2</sup>

Thus said, before we begin, I must clarify that the aim of this article is not to critically exhaust *The Ice-Shirt*, nor the *Seven Dreams* more in general; rather, what follows should be read as a collection of provisional remarks whose aim is to trace one of the many critical paths that could be taken through Vollmann’s work.

## 2. At the thresholds of the *Seven Dreams* (I)

Let’s start from the beginning, from the moment in which the reader approaches *The Ice-Shirt* and derives a sense of its genre and intent. Of course, talking about the reader as an abstract entity deprived of cultural, gender and historical traits entails some risks, since it can lead to neglect important aspects concerning the process of reception of textual contents. For methodological practicality, I will refer here to the reader as a sort of prototypical subject who approaches texts by virtue of both a series of competences learned through the exposure to literature (see Culler 131–52), and of his “natural” background as well, namely, of his tendency to “actively construct meanings and impose frames on their interpretations of texts just as people have to interpret real-life experience in terms of available schemata” (Fludernik 12).<sup>3</sup>

Opening the book, the first thing that the reader comes across is the praise for the author, which alludes to the generic status of the book: what we are going to read is the first of “a series of seven *novels* . . . exploring the collisions between North American native populations and their colonizers and oppressors” (emphasis added). There follows a handwritten map, here reproduced in fig. 1, which represents, although approximately, the territories where the story will take place; or at least this is what we may infer from the indication at the bottom-left of the image, where it is also stated that the map is “true,” and that, paradoxically, has been “engraved on sight” by someone named William The Blind.

To properly understand to whom this name belongs, we must turn two pages that reproduce the titles of both the book and its larger series. There, we find another frontispiece (see

<sup>2</sup> Only five of the seven books planned by Vollmann have been published so far, namely, *The Ice-Shirt*, *Fathers and Crowns* (1992), *The Rifles* (1994), *Argall: The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith* (2001), and *The Dying Grass* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> A final methodological remark: I have worked with the paperback edition of the book, which presents no substantial differences from the hardback edition, except that the blurbs and the praises for the author of the former address from the outset the fictional nature of the text. From now on, page numbers of the quotations from the book are indicated between parentheses after each quotation.



“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

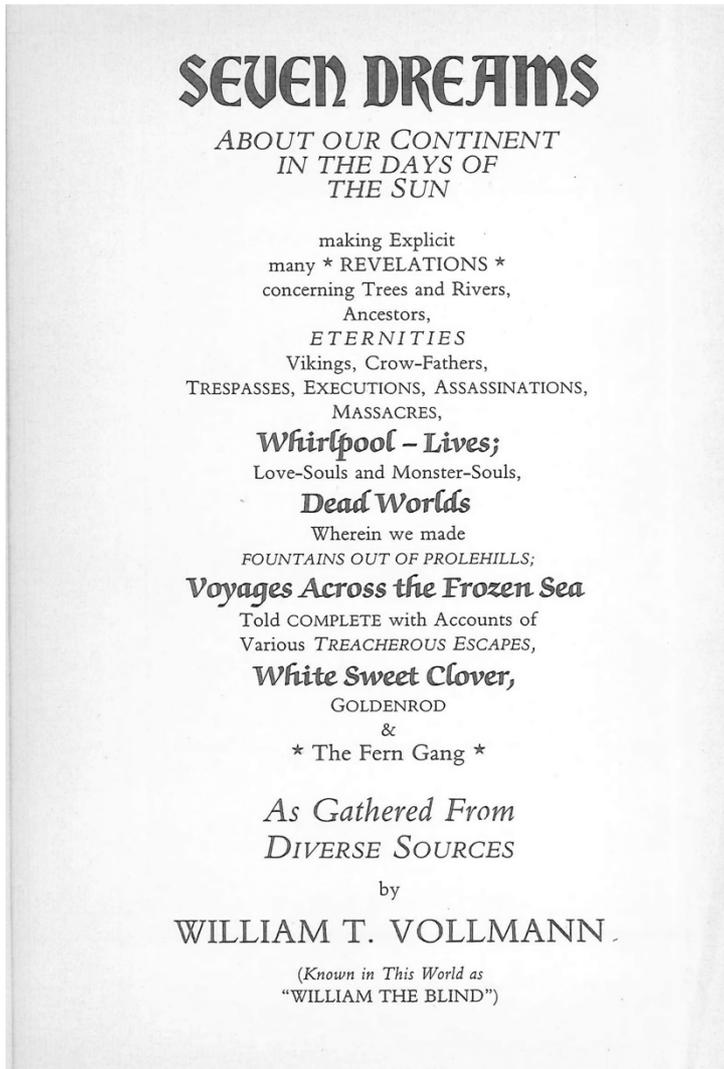


Fig. 2. The fictional frontispiece of *The Ice-Shirt*.

epigraph taken from Nicolò the Younger's *The Discovery of the Islands of Frislanda, Eslanda, Engroenlanda, Estotilanda & Icaria; made by Two Brothers of the Zeno Family: viz.: Messire Nicolo The Cavalier, and Messire Antonio*. Written in 1558 and printed in Venice, this text and its intertextual deployment here casts doubt on the authenticity of William's account, given that, for a long time, this sixteenth century travel narrative has been considered a hoax, with most historians concurring that "Nicolò Zeno had never actually set foot on the place" (Savvas 98).

The fictional pact we are invited to sign thus proves problematic, not just since the liminal space of the book in which it is formulated seems to be already a

boundaries here are provisional, approximate, unreliable and wrong," and that "n]onetheless, I have furnished them, for as my text is no more than a pack of lies they can do no harm."

In other words, it is suggested that what we are about to read consists of a reconstruction in the form of a dream of the history of Wineland, i.e., of North American territories, and that this dream has been 'realized' by the author of the book who overtly poses as a storyteller, or, better, as a bard—who indeed are often represented as blind. For the sake of clarity, we may call him a narrator, even if from a narratological perspective this term is not wholly adequate, as we will see later on. Moreover, William the Blind suggests that we should not take seriously his dream, being *no more than a pack of lies*. And it should also be noted that this assertion is implicitly reinforced by what immediately follows, namely an

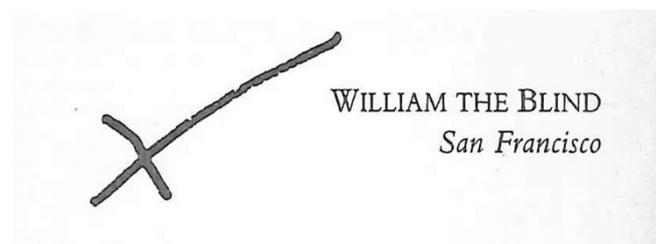


Fig. 3. William The Blind's signature in the *Preface of The Ice-Shirt*.

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

fictional one, but also because the narrator, i.e., with a large margin of narratological approximation, the author in disguise, invites us not to trust his storytelling abilities; in a sense, he seems to discourage us from suspending our disbelief. Whereas Balzac (or, better, Balzac’s narrator) famously claimed, at the outset of *Le Père Goriot*, that “*All is true*” (2; emphasis in the original), here William The Blind seems to proclaim, conversely, that *all is false*.

### 3. A «grey zone»

In a sense, however, things are not that complicated. After all, despite the unusual arrangement of the peritextual elements, nothing suggests that what we are reading is not a work of fiction. The way in which we enter the text does not thwart our recognition of its fictional status. Admittedly, what we are confronted with is an author who self-consciously plays with his own figure, with novelistic conventions, and with the way in which readers typically approach narrative texts. In other words, *The Ice-Shirt* seems to present itself as a metafictional work, and as such it should not trouble readers, who are nowadays acquainted with metafictional moves and ‘strange’ ways of introducing narrative contents. And yet the genre of the text as well as the peculiar location of its putative narrator are not so easily ascertained insofar as the fictional pact proffered by the author at the level of the peritext is further complicated when we enter in the text, as we will see in a moment.

To briefly suspend our discussion of the novel’s paratexts, and in order to understand the broader design of both *The Ice-Shirt* and the *Seven Dreams* series, it is worth taking into account the ways in which Vollmann has described his work, paying particular attention to his suggestion, on various occasions, that the novel should not be understood as a mere work of fiction. For instance, he has stated that “[i]n no way will *Seven Dreams* be a factual history of the dispossession of American Indians. It will, however, be erected upon a foundation of fact” (McCaffery and Hemmingson 448). Elsewhere, he has consonantly posited that he “did want readers to feel confident that if they picked up, say, *Fathers and Crowns* [i.e., the second volume of the series], they could be pretty sure that every detail about Micmac and the Algonquin Indians had been rendered as correctly as I could make it” (McCaffery, “Pattern” 136). Most revealingly, Vollmann has asserted that the *Seven Dreams* is “a work that lies in the grey zone between fiction and history” which he calls “symbolic history,” and that “[e]ach of its seven volumes is a self-contained work meant to beguile and entertain, but also to instruct by presenting a poetically true interpretation of real events” (McCaffery and Hemmingson 447).

These declarations of intent are not isolated. Over the years Vollmann has often reaffirmed his aim to explore “where we as Americans have come from and how we’ve changed” (McCaffery, “A Conversation” 12), at the same time advocating an ethical commitment to maintaining the fidelity to the historical record—an ambition that Vollmann has fulfilled both by carrying out research on primary sources and by traveling to the places where the historical events narrated in each book of the series took place.

Vollmann’s professed authorial intent is interesting here for two interrelated reasons. On the one hand, his emphasis on in-depth historical research and on his intention to elaborate an ‘instructive’ work seems strikingly inconsistent with the overtly mendacious nature of *The Ice-Shirt*. On the other hand, the author’s sense of his work occupying a zone between fiction and history draws attention to the mixture of historical and fictional elements at the core of the *Seven Dreams* series. And though these remarks are anything but new (the historical novel as a genre, in fact, is based on such principles), they are nonetheless remarkable given the date when they were formulated, namely at the outset of the Nineties, when the debate around historiographic metafiction (the deliberate and often playful confusion of history and fiction that marks the work of authors as diverse as Salman Rushdie, E.L. Doctorow, and Robert

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

Coover; see Hutcheon) was intersecting with tendencies to reconsider the relevance of the boundaries between these two domains, as attested by the publication, between 1990 and 1991, of two texts now considered as milestones in the fictional/factual debate, namely Dorrit Cohn’s “Signposts of Fictionality” and Genette’s *Fiction & Diction*.

#### 4. At the thresholds of the *Seven Dreams* (II)

With these considerations in mind, we can now return to where we left off, at the initial thresholds of *The Ice-Shirt*, to note that after the preface and the epigraph analyzed above, a table of contents is introduced which indicates that the book is articulated in four parts, followed by a sixty page section consisting of five glossaries, a chronology, various sources, and more than one hundred and thirty notes. On the same page, it is also pointed out that whereas glossaries and chronologies “are conveniences, to be used if needed,” “[t]he Chronology serves as a mnemonic,” and the source notes “may be ignored or skimmed; their function is to record my starting points, which may interest travelers in other directions” (3). If we move to this section, however, we are presented with more than merely some indication of Vollmann’s points of departure. Indeed, besides the case in which a given character’s actions and feelings are commented, or specific aspects of the story are the object of the author’s reflections,<sup>5</sup> endnotes seem to fulfill two main functions. The first is to provide readers with references to the sources behind the story, parts of which are often directly quoted, and with additional bibliographic information about events, characters and locations.<sup>6</sup> The second is to indicate when sources have been manipulated for specific purposes, as when, in relation to a passage concerning a Norse king, we read that “[t]here is, of course, nothing to suggest that the real King Harald became a reigned or impotent King once he had achieved his end. I have felt free to change his character to suit me” (401). To this end, another endnote details that a number of historical events have been combined “into a single apocryphal incident” (401), and additionally, in many other notes, the process of literary invention is overtly exhibited, as in the case of an episode revolving around the character of Thorgunna, a Hebridean witch that is declared to have been drawn, as a young women, “from a redhead of my acquaintance; the old Thorgunna is modeled after a redheaded corpse at the hospital” (405; in the acknowledgments at the end of the book it is further specified that “Ms. Andrea Juno, co-editor of *RE/search* magazine, served as a model for the form of the young Thorgunna,” and that “[a] redheaded corpse at a hospital very obligingly rounded out the picture”; 415). Tellingly, in the note that introduces the section of sources and notes, it is stated that the aim behind the *Seven Dreams* “has been to create a ‘Symbolic History’ – that is to say, an account of origins and metamorphoses which is often untrue based on the literal facts as we know them, but whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth.” And in the same note we can read that in order to achieve this aim the text conflates the accounts given in the *Tale of the Greenlanders* and *Eirik’s Saga*, two of the most important Nordic sagas,<sup>7</sup> that it often alters the places where the events narrated took place, and that the

<sup>5</sup> For example, at page 36 a footnote states that “The Norse word [for concubine] is *frilla*, a pretty word which contains in it the swish of frilly skirts,” while at page 86 another footnote warns readers that “In those days [i.e., in the mythical time when Inuit culture was founded] you had to be careful what you thought, because your thoughts would come true.”

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the text, a number of footnotes are also inserted. Whereas endnotes provide bibliographical information, footnotes provide clarifications about geographical collocation of places, meaning of Greenlandic words, etc.; however, this distinction is not always maintained.

<sup>7</sup> As Peter Christiansen has remarked, Vollmann “has taken the outline for his book from these two short family sagas of 20 to 30 pages each and expanded them into a novel of 415 pages” (52). See

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

notes have been inserted “so as to provide those who desire with easy means of corroborating or refuting my imagined versions of things, to monitor my originality, and to give leads to primary sources and other useful texts for interested non-specialists such as myself” (397).<sup>8</sup>

The allusion to the symbolic nature of the text, as well as the oxymoronic idea of a truth emerging from the imaginary manipulation of historical sources (which is indeed consonant with the classical adagio about the truths fiction can provide access to), clearly recalls Vollmann’s public declarations about the project behind the *Seven Dreams*. This being the case, we are led to suppose that it is to Vollmann himself, and not his fictional alter-ego, that we should attribute the words we read in the

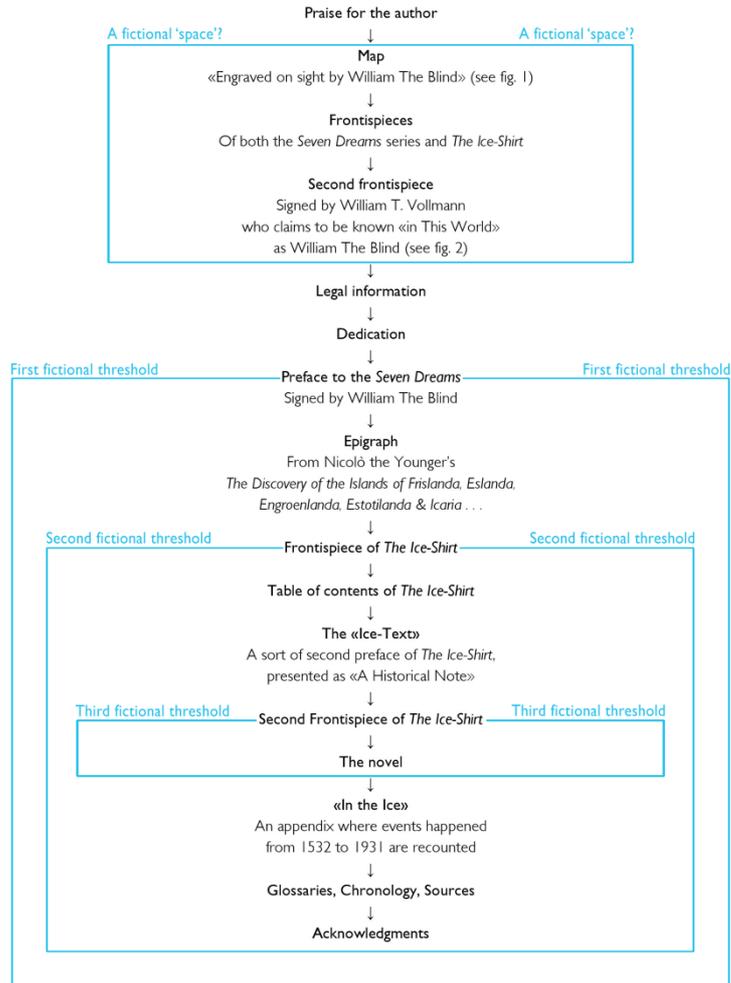


Fig. 4. The paratextual design of *The Ice-Shirt*.

appendices of the text. More interestingly for the task at hand, the contents of the endnotes and footnotes are in stark contrast with the assertion about the supposed provisional, approximate and unreliable nature of what we are going to read. A contradiction which is even reinforced, in a sense, in the “Ice-Text,” a kind of second preface—and, in fact, another threshold to be trespassed—that follows the table of contents. Here, after having established the *Book of Flatey*, a “great graveyard of [Nordic] tales” (8), as a text-base upon which further confluences and divergences will be measured,<sup>9</sup> William The Blind first, in godlike fashion, seems to impose to the story to self-shape by commanding “these story-isles to burst into flower!” (10). And

Christiansen more in general for some of the ways in which Vollmann managed Nordic sagas for both thematical and dramatic reasons.

<sup>8</sup> Funnily enough, in the note before the chronology at the end of the book we also read that “Various scholarly works on the Vikings written in the past hundred years often clash about dates; so I have interpolated here as best as I could, always devoutly hoping to provide you with knowledge adequate to the demands of any cocktail party” (385).

<sup>9</sup> This is a pattern recurring also in the other volumes of the series, each of which presents at its outset a source-text upon which the story is constructed.

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

both in a continuation of the botanical metaphor, and as a means of summarizing his way of proceeding in subsequent pages, he adds: that “if they do not, no matter, for I will seed them with my own imagination: – Upon the rockiest chapters I will plant the moss of my speculations; through the moss my asphodels and orchids will rise, fertilized by that poor dead bundle of a hundred and thirteen calfskins. . . .” (10).<sup>10</sup>

To briefly summarize, *The Ice-Shirt* is presented from its very first pages as a work of invention. A number of expedients are employed in order to draw our attention to its constructed nature. However, the last part of the text, which seems to mimic the structure as well as the accuracy of historical essays, seems to drive us outside fiction. Paratexts, thus, provide contradictory indications to the reader as to the way in which the text should be approached. Moreover, the overall design of the book further complicates attempts to understand whether at specific moments we are inside the fiction, at its borders, or in a sort of intermediate position, as the diagram provided in fig. 4 attempts to synthesize by taking into account the novel’s many frames and the liminal interpretive positions they create.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Inside *The Ice-Shirt*

Up to now, we have registered what happens in the paratexts of *The Ice-Shirt*. The following two sections are concerned with how the fictional pact sketched above is developed once these thresholds are trespassed. More generally, they are interested in how the material Vollmann has read and collected is deployed in order to tell the story. In order to do so, various aspects should be considered, the first of which has to do with the temporal scope of the story, as well as with its subject—the history of how around the tenth century A.D. the Norse came to discover Vinland (present-day North Eastern American territories), and attempted unsuccessfully to colonize them as well as to subjugate their indigenous inhabitants, which they christened with disdain as *Skrælings*. The novel, however, goes back in time to a mythical era so remote that it is impossible to ascertain when the story effectively begins. Among other things, this implies that years and decades are covered in a few pages, at times—with sort of hyperconcise summaries—even in a few lines, but also that pages often consist of plain action, of a number of events that follow each other seamlessly, as it can be seen by the opening lines of a two page section that covers about seventy years (from ca. 870 to ca. 940):

After the Yngling Kings were broken, their descendants fled the country for fear of King Ivar, and so came to Norway, trading white birch-forests for fields of white corn. The Changers raged everywhere. Their lives grieved them now, so that their purpose became to grieve all others, except the young sons who kissed their hands. Between King Ingjald and King Harald Fairhair now passed seven generations, in which Bear-Kings were spear-thrust, Wolf-Kings went a-Viking, and the ringing of shields told the hour more reliably than bells, for these had not yet been

<sup>10</sup> After this second preface, another image is inserted that proves more problematic to describe than the other ones in the text, first of all because its nature is unclear (it seems to function as a sort of third frontispiece summarizing the “Diverse Dangers and Discomforts” that William the Blind has undertaken or will undertake—the quality of the image prevents from deciphering all the words printed).

<sup>11</sup> The blue boxes in the lower half of the diagram indicate the fictional thresholds readers come across throughout the book, as well as the storyworlds they are supposed to be introduced into once these thresholds are crossed. The box in the top half of the diagram indicates a space whose nature is ambiguous, in that fictional elements coexist with non-fictional ones; or, better, fictional elements seem to undermine a space that according to Genette should pertain to the publisher of the book (see *Paratexts* 16–36). Just the praise for the author, the page with legal information and the one with the dedication can be identified as clearly non-fictional. The arrow-shaped symbols in the diagram represent the direction in which the book is supposed to be read.

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

invented. Yet everything was congealing. The Bear-Shirts were wearing out, and the Changers were only men. (27)

In passages like this, it is likely to be difficult for readers to access the story, since causal and logical links are very weak, and characters are presented as mere actants in a way that frustrates attempts to attribute them a consciousness.

However, this is not the only way in which characters are presented. The fourth part of the novel, which revolves around the attempts by Greenlanders to conquer Vinland, is illustrative in this sense. Here the story has a plainer rhythm, and characters are presented with recourse to typical novelistic techniques. For instance, many dialogues are introduced, motivation is given for their actions, and often we are introduced to their inner world: we know what they think, feel, perceive and also dream. Take for example the following passage, where the death-bed thoughts of Thorstein Eiriksson, “an unlucky man who tried to reach Vinland but was blown hither and thither by unfavorable winds” (369), are reproduced:

and it seemed to Thorstein Eiriksson as he died that the moon was coming closer and closer to the window until he could see nothing but a coldly shining ball looming over him; what he actually saw was the grieving face of Gudrid bending down to take his death-kiss; and he felt her breath on his lips and suddenly remembered her on their wedding-day when she took a silver hairpin, whose head was a golden dome crowned with gold, and smiled at her husband and put up her loose maiden-hair, she covered her head like a married woman, and Thorstein, seeing the change in her, was grieved because he loved her hair and felt that it was his fault she must put it away, for she looked more than ever like a nun in her head-cloth; so now this passionless nun-head approached him like the moon, refreshing his eyes with light; and Thorstein could not tell whether he was falling into the moon or whether the moon was falling down upon him but he felt lost and lonely in the white light and jerked his body trying to swim out of it, so that Gudrid thought that he was pushing her away and stepped back, cut to the heart, and all at once the white light became silvery, and men black, and he was dead. (158)

Of course, a passage like this one marks a departure from both the domain of history, in which the only possible “language” is that of “nescience’ . . . , of speculation, conjecture, and induction (based on referential documentation)” (Cohn 789), and from the original texts as well, since sagas do not provide, as Vollmann has himself acknowledged, “any detailed exposition of feeling and motive” (400). In other words, Vollmann fills the gaps: but not the ones concerning historical events, which indeed remain open;<sup>12</sup> rather, it is the psychological gaps, concerning the inner thoughts and perceptions of historical characters, that are filled—an operation that should be studied in more detail not just in itself (after all, it is a common feature of the historical novel to represent the inner life of historical characters), but also because the process of consciousness attribution concerns men and women very distant from our vantage point, and whose mind style is hard to ascertain whether or not is close to ours.

Throughout the text, however, many other narrative modes and styles are employed: pages consisting of detailed descriptions are alternated with very succinct summaries, and with fragments essayistic in tone or lyrical in kind. Consider, for instance, this passage, where it is explained that “[a]ccording to the great Macrobius, the world is divided into five zones, two alone of which are inhabited by men, for at either pole is a zone of fatal cold, and at the equator is a zone of burning and torridness, so that only two rings of temperate clemency, separated from each other by that hot mid-girdle, can be possible to dwell upon” (46). It is strikingly different in form and tone from the following excerpt, in which the thoughts of a character

<sup>12</sup> Faithful to his intention to not distort historical record, at some point Vollmann writes about a minor character (named Jorund Ulfsson) that “(What Jorund died of I cannot tell, for there is a wormhole in that part of the manuscript)” (62).

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

are described as “a succession of stars that wheeled about in his skull-sky like die moon and the sun, chasing each other through all the lovely hells” (88). They are so different, in fact, that they seem to be the result of two very different ways of mediating narrative contents.

We shall come back on this aspect in the next section; for now, it must be noted that these different forms and styles are part of a broader tendency by Vollmann to constantly disrupt the narrative flow. The text as a whole is fragmented in a series of often formally and thematically contrasting paragraphs (each one with a title and sometimes with an additional indicator of the time at which the narrated events took place),<sup>13</sup> which often seem to invite readers to find possible resonances between them, as with the beginning of the second part, in which an Inuit creation myth revolving around two Brothers and the sexual transformation of the younger one is interwoven with an account dated 1987 and titled “San Francisco Transvestites” in which the experience of two transvestites is recounted (see 85–100). Similarly, the many epigraphs inserted at the opening of sections and paragraphs, coming from sources as diverse as Medieval sagas and touristic brochures, magazine articles and CIA documents, are sometimes combined as to produce logical short circuits. This is the case with one of the first passages that recounts the attempt by Greenlanders to colonize North Eastern American territories, which is opened by a quote from Edward Pellham, a sailor and author of a 1631 pamphlet entitled *Gods Power and Providence*, paired with the words pronounced in 1987 by an alcoholic on a bus (223). Similarly, we should take into account the many handwritten maps and images introduced in the text, as well as the footnotes and the endnotes we have already discussed, which “serve as more than simple scholarly references, . . . , for they clearly also have a deliberate function in the book as *object*, constituting a part of the fabric or aesthetic of the book” (Savvas 97; emphasis in the original).

## 6. Porous Borders

There is another aspect, however, that progresses our sense of the text as inherently disrupted, namely the persistent voice of the narrator as he comments on events, directly addresses readers, and reflects on his method of literary production. Following the indications given in the first pages of the book, we should attribute these comments, reflections and addresses to William The Blind, whom we have so far considered the narrator of the story. However, as I have anticipated, to call him a narrator is not an unproblematic move, to the extent that the narrator usually defines a figure, clearly distinct from the real author, who is responsible for the mediation of narrative contents, which he reports as if he knew them.<sup>14</sup> This idea is not entirely maintained in *The Ice-Shirt*, not just in that the figure of William The Blind is not clearly separated from Vollmann’s persona, but also because such a figure is temporally, spatially and ontologically ambiguous in as much as he reports what we are reading, constantly parading his

<sup>13</sup> To Larry McCaffery Vollmann has declared that his work “tends to be composed of building blocks that aren’t exactly self-sufficient but are at least individually cast and machined” (20). Madison Smartt Bell has suggested that Vollmann “uses the short vignette as his fundamental building block, though he is able to arrange them in considerably more complex and comprehensive designs” (40).

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Margolin, who summarizes the most common position among literary theorists stressing that the narrator “is a strictly textual category” that “should be clearly distinguished from the author who is of course an actual person” (par. 1); moreover, the narrator should be intended as a sort of “substitutionary speaker” for the author “who performs the macro speech act of reporting and who is solely responsible for all claims, specific and general made in his report” (par. 3.6). This definition is not shared by all narratologists. See Patron for a short summary of other ways of looking at the question.

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

acts of invention.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, if we are to conceptualize him as a narrator, we should consider him as omniscient; but this characterization contrasts with his presumed role of historian. As Dorrit Cohn has remarked, “historians do, after all, live in the same (homo-) world as their narrative” (790). And after all, we are perfectly aware that the historical research behind the novel and the manipulation of the sources which the narrator constantly parades have been made by the real author of *The Ice-Shirt*.

But the distinction between the real author, his supposed alter-ego and a fictional narrator clearly distinct from both of them is further cast under suspicion by the fact that throughout the text a number of passages are dated 1987, the date around which Vollmann traveled in the places where *The Ice-Shirt* is set, an experience that seems to be directly reported in such passages. Furthermore, besides the traces disseminated throughout the text that should drive readers towards this conclusion, in the last part of the novel, in a passage titled “Slab-Land” and dated 1987, the narrator reveals that his name is “Bill,” and this revelation is followed by a handwritten portrait of Vollmann himself (see fig. 5). Based on this revelation, which further conflates the figures of William The Blind and of the real author, we could assign to the author many of the images that appear in the text, which seem to have the main function not to illustrate specific aspects of the storyworld, but rather to document the process of constructing the book, to leave on the surface of the text the traces of the work behind it (see, for instance, figs. 6–11).

Put otherwise, the novel prevents us from clearly discerning between the author, his alter-ego and the narrator, as well as to ascertain the fictional or non-fictional status of what we are reading, asking us to endlessly revise our perception of its contents. Sometimes, when the text gives us access to dimensions inaccessible to historical research, it may arise the impression that what we are reading is a fictional account; but in passages like the ones dated 1987, such an impression dissolves. In these passages, the pact elaborated with the initial paratext—i.e., *The Ice-Shirt* as a dream made by William The Blind—is not maintained anymore, as we are confronted with the ‘behind the scenes’ of the novel, with its ‘making of’, in a sense. And when we move to the final section, or when we draw our attention to the footnotes, we can have the impression of reading an essay, or even a ‘true’ historical account. In this sense, one way of comprehending the novel’s dizzying play of fact and fiction might be to assume that what we are confronted with throughout the whole text is an author who through a number of different resources sometimes fosters our impression that what we are reading is a fictional account, and who, at other times, plays with his figure producing an alter-ego, but who often also clearly moves us outside fiction to introduce us to what is at least in part a self-conscious account of the process of producing the work we are reading.



Fig. 5. A portrait of the author at p. 282 of *The Ice-Shirt*.

<sup>15</sup> It must be said, however, that elsewhere in the *Seven Dreams* William The Blind and William T. Vollmann are neatly separated. See e.g. the Foreword of *The Dying Grass*, consisting of two texts signed by William The Blind but dated respectively 1877 and 1878.

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

To this extent, one could also argue that, when confronting with a text such as this, it is not useful to adopt straightforward, unidimensional interpretive positions, trying to define once and for all the nature of a work that from different directions mixes and undermines generic and conventional borders. Even a diagram such as the one displayed in fig. 4 proves too static in its attempt to trace boundaries that are constantly crossed and that ultimately prove to be porous. In each of the zones delimited by the blue lines non-fictional elements can be found, thus undermining any attempt to make consistent or rationalise the ontological meaning of each of the thresholds postulated. As Toon Staes has remarked in relation to *Imperial*, another work by Vollmann, as well as to other texts published in recent years, “The

absolute distinction between nonfiction and fiction arguably no longer functions as a global interpretative frame for these texts” (179), since these texts “invite the reader to approach them at times as nonfiction, at times as fiction” (187). Instead, it is perhaps more meaningful to reflect on the use of fictionality on the part of the author, i.e. on the way rhetorical resources concerning the invention or imagination of states of affairs are deployed in order to transmit the contents of a work. And in this sense, it may be worth considering that if a “skillful author of nonfictive discourse may take any technique that is currently assumed to be exclusive to fiction and make it function to nonfictive ends” (Nielsen et al. 67), then it is likely that the same is true for the opposite case, namely, that “Global fictions can contain passages of non fictionality” (67).<sup>16</sup> If we assume that *The Ice-Shirt* is ‘just’ a novel, then this latter is the case; if we do not put so much stress on such a generic marker, acknowledging that paratextual cues “may be ambiguous and not all-decisive” (Nielsen et al. 67), then things may be more nuanced. *The Ice-Shirt* can thus emerge, as the author has suggested, as a work hybrid in nature, lying somewhere in a kind of transitional zone where the fictional or non-fictional status of the text can change from page to page, thus forcing readers to carry out continuous cognitive shifts in order to navigate its contents. Even if it would be mere speculation to draw conclusions about how readers respond to the fictional pact that the author submits to them,<sup>17</sup> it is likely that in confronting with *The Ice-Shirt* readers have to navigate its contents page by page, implicitly acknowledging that what they are in front of is a composite text where fictional and non-fictional elements play equal part, and that the suspension of disbelief is probably not the

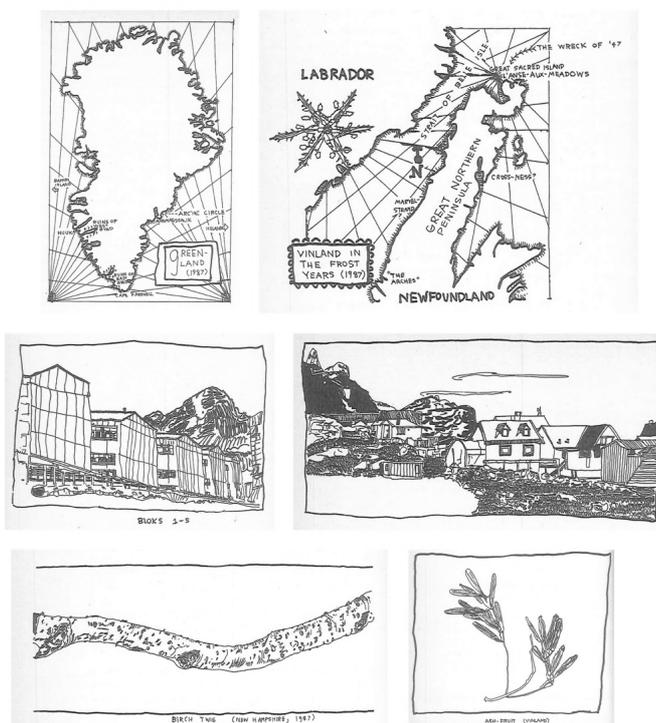


Fig. 6–11. Images taken (from top-left to bottom-right) from pp. 80, 338, 116, 118, 212, and 246 of *The Ice-Shirt*.

<sup>16</sup> On this aspect, and more in general on the question of global and local fictionality, see Phelan, ch. 3.

<sup>17</sup> As Genette has ironically put it, “the term [contract] is obviously highly optimistic as to the role of the reader, who has signed nothing and who can take this contract or leave it” (*Palimpsests* 9).

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

most useful way to proceed through it. Instead, what Vollmann’s novel seems to require from its readers is the ability to balance immersion and disbelief, the awareness that what they are reading is a multi-layered work where contradictory elements can be found.

## 7. An Array of Contradictions

In the end, the fictional pact elaborated by Vollmann in *The Ice-Shirt* is made the object of a constant negotiation, declaring to readers that this is a text that defies many of the novelistic rules to which they are typically accustomed. And yet, as Savvas has remarked, “any pact made with Vollmann seems a pact made with the Devil; for rather than commitment to genre, the “transtextuality” of his books functions to deliberately promote, or provoke, generic instability” (98). Ultimately, any attempt to interpret *The Ice-Shirt* (and the other instalments of the *Seven Dreams* as well) resorting to narratological categories is not just uneasy, but also unsatisfactory, since contradictions seem to lie at the heart of the text, acting as a sort of structuring principle.

Vollmann’s whole oeuvre, after all, may appear as an array of contradictions, and the image of the writer it returns to us proves to be Janus-like. At the same time, Vollmann seems encyclopedic in the scope of his interests as well as in the ambitions behind his literary enterprise. This remains the case even if he often seems naïve in the way he tries to give shape to those interests and ambitions, presenting himself as a kind of self-trained historian (and sociologist, journalist, anthropologist) who among other things aims to retrace the history of an entire continent starting from his personal experience.<sup>18</sup> He nonetheless seems to be ethically committed in his enterprise, hopeful about the possibility of reconstructing how things have exactly happened—and indeed some critics have looked at the texts that compile the *Seven Dreams* series as new forms of historical novel, more engaged with historical truth and less concerned with fictional detournement (for example, see Wisner). But at the same time, as we have seen, Vollmann also seems to be extremely free in his manipulation of historical sources. In a sense, generalizing somewhat, Vollmann seems perfectly postmodern—what is more postmodern, after all, than an author who works as if boundaries between genres, text types and hierarchies of values did not exist?—but at the same time at odds with the caricatural image of the disengaged postmodernist writer that has been critically imagined over the years. It is no coincidence, I think, that in the same year *The Ice-Shirt* was published, and three years before the publication of the long celebrated “E Unibus Pluram,” the essay in which David Foster Wallace emphasized the need for U.S. writers to overcome the narcissistic loop of postmodernism by eschewing “self-consciousness and fatigue” (193), Vollmann wrote a short article in which he first noticed, not differently from Wallace, how “the structuralist smog . . . has hovered so long over our universities, permitting only games of stifling breathlessness,” and then listed seven rules for writing, the first of which was that “[w]e should never write without feeling,” the last of which was that “*We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves*” (“American”; emphases in the original).

Thus said, what is perhaps more interesting is that, looked at from a distance of about thirty years from the date of its first publication, the internal discontinuities and formal contradictions of *The Ice-Shirt* seem to have anticipated many of the tendencies of recent literature: autofiction, and the fictional distortion of the authorial self more generally; the conscious and not just playful *mélange* of history and narrative; the exhibition of the production mechanics

<sup>18</sup> Among other things, Hemmingson reports that “Vollmann envisioned *Seven Dreams* while writing *Rainbow* [i.e., *The Rainbow Stories*]. He noticed there were many parking lots in the San Francisco Tenderloin where prostitutes congregated and conducted business. He wondered what the land was like before all the parking lots were paved, before the continent was colonized” (31).

“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

behind the text, and of the writer not just as a the subject who is making up what we are reading and that thus reveals its constructedness, but who also reveals his involvement with it; the tendency to conceive the text also as an *iconotext*, and to produce texts that defy the boundaries between genres and, to some extent, between media. Each of these aspects were anticipated and at the same time pushed to the limits at the beginning of the Nineties. Maximalist in the truest sense of the word—and first of all in the idea of the novel as a kind of cauldron in which everything can be put simmer and stew, or as a virtual place where contradictions can find a place and not necessarily be resolved—, Vollmann’s whole oeuvre may give the impression that it is anything but a laboratory product. On the contrary, its pages seem to invite us to see them as the result of the struggle of a writer who constantly tries to give shape to an overwhelming subject matter with the purpose of artistically transfiguring it.

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“My text is no more than a pack of lies”

Filippo Pennacchio

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