

William T. Vollmann on Writing Poverty

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Who or what is responsible for your condition? The rich? Destiny? Yourself? The American writer William T. Vollmann posed this question to poor people in every corner of the world. Part social survey, part moralistic essay, *Poor People* examines how poverty is measured and represented, reaching troubling insights into the dark side of poverty – for those living it and those observing it alike.

Under review: William T. Vollmann, *Poor People*, Ecco 2007 (*Pourquoi êtes-vous pauvres?*), translated from the English by Claro, Paris, Actes Sud, September 2008, 300 p. 25 €.

The most recent book by William T. Vollmann to be translated into French presents itself as a collection of testimonials drawn from a vast comparative study concerning the experience of poverty. Central to the book is a question concerning the manner in which poor people account for their poverty. Why ask this awkward question?

{{{A Feeling of Guilt}}}

From the outset, Vollmann situates his approach in the tradition of Walker Evans and James Agee's renowned book, *{Let Us Now Praise Famous Men}*. More precisely, the writer extends its vision of poverty, starting with what he believes it has neglected: feelings of guilt. Indeed, for Vollmann this feeling serves as the overarching theme of a

global survey of the different ways in which poverty is experienced and represented. What can a writer who, unlike George Orwell or Jack London, has no first person experience of poverty possibly have to say about this subject? Vollmann opens his discussion by recognizing his insurmountable exteriority vis-à-vis the situation of poverty. It is precisely here that he locates the origin of the guilt felt by those who confront it. To understand poverty, one must thus carry out a more thorough investigation and examine this feeling. In these conditions, and lacking any firsthand experience of his subject, Vollmann recognizes that only two possibilities are open to him: *{to show }* and *{to compare}*. These constraints on the writer's ambition and power invite drawing a parallel with social scientific work on the question of poverty.

What results does this approach yield? First, it reveals that responses to the question "Why are you poor?" vary from one part of the world to the next. Next come the interpretations of those who are not poor (nor seek to become so, which would in any case falsify the situation). The activity of interpretation is immediately presented by Vollmann as proper to those who are not and cannot be poor. This is the origin of their guilt towards the poor. In the words of Céline: *{The poor never or almost never ask why they have to put up with everything they put up with. They loathe one another and that's that.}*

The incongruity of the question that gives this book its French title and the feeling of guilt that accompanies it thus constitute the two mainsprings of the moral experiment around which *{Poor People }* turns. While it is a deeply reflexive book and can be read as a sort of philosophical voyage, it is nonetheless grounded in a genuine survey. Vollmann had to pay those he interviewed so that they would tell him their story, of course, and was only able to see them for a short time (one week). The collection of interviews, observations, statistics, photographs and definitions as well as the constant recourse to comparison nevertheless offer the reader much ethnographically valuable material. Indeed, in a way that may seem at first glance paradoxical, the conditions under which Vollmann collected this material – a sociologist or ethnologist would certainly consider it a data set – are much better presented than is the case in many more properly "scientific"

works, which typically give less attention to the subjective and reflexive dimensions of the production of knowledge.

World Tour of Poverty and Its Reasons

Poor People opens with a series of encounters with poor people in various parts of the world: Thailand, Yemen, Russia, China, Japan and so on. There's Sunee, an elderly woman who, in the close quarters of a shanty town, tries to forget her work and life through frenzied recourse to alcohol. There's Wan, a melancholic phantom who wanders the neighborhood of a train station in an animalistic stupor. There's Natalia whose husband, fortune and happiness were stolen by a gypsy (if, that is, she hadn't already lost them before the spell was cast).

Each of the interviews that Vollmann conducted (for a fee and with the aid of an interpreter) with a poor person and his family reveals poverty's dual nature. Examined against the backdrop of its social context, the precisely described material reality of poverty appears inseparable from the mental or cultural interpretation of those who are subjected to it. This first part of the book can be read as an overview of the reasons that are invoked to justify poverty. First and foremost among these is fate, destiny, Karma.

The notion of destiny appears more often than any other reason in the words and accounts recorded by Vollmann. He in this way shows the incredible moral force that references to "fate" – that inexplicable explanation – contain. For poor people, the appeal to destiny is a way protecting themselves from various subjective judgments. Destiny appears to be the obvious explanation because it precludes the judgments of merit, fault and guilt that haunt poor people and those who discuss them. It protects poor people, allowing them to attribute part of the guilt inherent to their situation to its workings.

One of the great strengths of this part of Vollmann's book is that it brings to light the reasons offered by individuals without for all that obscuring the incoherence of their accounts or the improbability of the difficulties they invoke in responding to the question, "Why are you poor?" This precision draws the reader into a dizzying consideration of the

difficulty of assigning words to this reality without interpreting and thus deforming it. It also echoes ethnographic work that has shown that hallucinations or a loss of the sense of reality are part of the experience of extreme poverty.

Poverty is first and foremost what the author calls “miserable sub-normalcy”, the inability to satisfy a set of socially created needs. Vollmann does not simply record the reasons invoked by poor people to account for their condition; he also draws upon them in the course of an examination of poverty’s various dimensions.

{{{The Grammars of Indignity}}}

The second part of Vollmann’s book, which is entitled “phenomena”, is also the most analytical. The writer’s reflexive examination of the materials he has gathered – and thus of himself – directly depends on the categories that serve to define poverty. Vollmann thus begins by mentioning the dimensions of poverty as it is defined by the United Nations: *{short lives, illiteracy, exclusion and a lack of material resources}*. To this list, the writer juxtaposes his own: “invisibility; deformity; rejection; dependence; vulnerability; pain; indifference; alienation”. This second inventory is not opposed to but rather deduced from the former, official one and calls into question the dimensions remarked upon by the poor themselves. The author in this way displaces the notion of poverty, revealing a series of dimensions that also happen to be central to contemporary questions in the social sciences. Vollmann adds an interesting remark that serves to justify a literary approach to poverty, observing that poverty’s various dimensions can be incompatible: though at first glance mutually exclusive, invisibility and deformity are alike related to poverty.

It is in these passages that literary writing has the most to contribute to a conceptual examination of poverty. Identifying the subjective dimensions of poverty allows one to engage in research of an anthropological nature. The comparison of cultures and the perception of differences invite a consideration of the relativity of signs. To illustrate this type of reasoning, consider the first category studied. How does Vollmann answer the following questions, both of which are fiercely debated in the social

sciences today: what is invisibility and what is its relation to poverty? In general, a poor person is invisible because no one wishes to give him something to eat, somewhere to sleep or feel guilty for his existence. In order to improve this minimal definition, the author asks what an Afghan woman in a {*burqa*} encountered during the Taliban period could have in common with a drug-addicted prostitute, glimpsed performing fellatio on another drug addict in the maze of a Californian truck stop: what do they have in common, if not this invisibility? Intermingling reflections on the various poor people he has met across the world, Vollmann then attempts to untangle the knot of prejudices, resentment, ignorance and guilt that gives rise to poverty. Reversing the moral perspective that is commonly adopted in the West, he claims to be more favorably disposed to the Afghan woman's reasons for invisibility. Where she is the "accidental result of fanatical literalism", the toothless, drug-addicted prostitute in the Californian truck stop is subjected to a "relentless system known as segregation that is based on the mutual invisibility of classes". Vollmann thus goes very far indeed in the interests of adopting a de-centered perspective and achieving understanding. He accepts the following proposition: it's in the name of women's well-being and the respect that is accorded them that the Taliban treat women as they do. This cultural relativization here serves to better bring out the extreme character of the drama of women's poverty in this specific context and to radicalize the definition of the dimension of poverty under consideration, that of invisibility. But when poverty becomes physically unbearable, begging – that is to say, drawing attention to oneself – remains an option:

<quote>He shows himself; he is free to hoodwink and extort; if he is sick or dying of hunger, his face will show his distress. It is something that constitutes no guarantee of success, as any poor person will tell you – but imagine that the law required him to dress in blue or in black and forbade him from approaching anyone. Not only would his needs remain unknown, but the same would hold true of his poverty.</quote>

In Afghanistan, under the Taliban regime, begging was made illegal for women in the name of respect for them. Despite the respect that he feels for the men who invited him to discover their culture, the writer thus returns to {*the limits*} – that is to say, the threshold of indignity and inhumanity that the {*Taliban*} crossed in their treatment of poor women.

The two subsequent parts of Vollmann's book reconsider "choices" and "hopes", those other unseen but decisive dimensions of poverty. For to say that the poor have a choice, however constrained it may be, is to preserve the humanity they are constantly denied, whether materially or symbolically. The book ends with a section entitled "owners". The author returns to the feeling of guilt that is provoked by the vision of extreme indignity. The rich man's seclusion, his return to himself, reader and author alike, is a basic, indispensable and inherent given of knowledge that lacks transformative capacity. This last chapter opens with moral considerations concerning the insurmountable character of the frontiers created by inequality, the undecidability of what is exchanged between a rich man and a poor man and conversely. In the first sense, when and how can a rich man know that he has helped a poor man when he has sought to do so? In the other sense, what could the rich man understand about the poor man's status as a person: it had been limited by poverty; would the poor man's choices have been different had he not been poor? Is the poor man fundamentally defined by his poverty? Alongside disenchanted conclusions concerning the exclusion of the poor and the moral misery inherent to wealth, Vollmann indicates, almost surreptitiously, the irreducible contribution to his thoughts: throwing light on the dark side of poverty, that of the person who lives it as well as he who observes it. Returning to the figure of Sunee, the "lifelong alcoholic" encountered in Thailand who invokes Karma to explain her situation, Vollmann recognizes that "her dark side is probably related to my own dark side when I look at her." This may indeed be the only way to restore equal dignity to the other.

Whether he is considering the question of poverty, as is the present book, or other dimensions of human experience such as violence, as in a forthcoming major essay, Vollmann attains specific knowledge for which moral experimentation is the mainspring and aim. He gives a particularly convincing example of this form of writer's knowledge. As Jacques Bouveresse[[Jacques Bouveresse, *{La connaissance de l'écrivain. Sur la littérature, la vérité et la vie}*, Paris, Agone, 237 p.]] recently reminded us, literature is the bearer of an uncompromising knowledge of self and language. The particular interest of his reflexive approach is that its scope is also irreducible to the knowledge that can be acquired by social science concerning a phenomenon like poverty. And this because it radicalizes the

methods used: showing and comparing. Because social inutility is a postulate of literary writing, the writer's knowledge deepens the conditions of possibility of research and invites social scientists to doubt. In the best sense of the term, Vollmann's work constitutes a fruitful and salutary challenge to the way in which we represent poverty.

Translated from french by **Ethan Rundell**.

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