

# The W/wall(s) in Contemporary Fiction

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## Abstract

By analysing William T. Vollmann's novel *Europe Central* in the light of Virginia Woolf's views on identity and the interconnectedness of private and public worlds expressed in her 1938-essay "Three Guineas," the paper aims at showing the role contemporary fiction assumes in the post-communist era. As the contemporary novelists have become acutely sensitive to the topical issues of the contemporary world, they started addressing them artistically with a view to identifying the causes of conflicts and accounting for the traumatic effects these have on the modern individual.

**Keywords:** *contemporary fiction, the Wall, the Iron Curtain, walls, frontier*

The fall of the Berlin Wall can be viewed as one of the major political events in the contemporary history of the Western world. Associated with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it marked the beginning of a new stage in world politics as "[i]t removed the chief structural basis upon which post-war politics had rested, thereby transforming the nature of international relations."<sup>1</sup> Followed by the demolishing of the Iron Curtain, it politically put an end to the conflict between communism and capitalism and "[a]fter 1989, we are much less likely to think about alternative, and desirable, futures in terms of the contest between communism and capitalism."<sup>2</sup>

The fall has been accompanied by the remapping of societies and cultures, as well as by the reconsidering of individual and public identities in a world whose most obvious characteristic has become its frontierlessness. The immediate consequence of the actual and symbolical destruction of the Wall was the rethinking of the German society, whose cultural features tend to be shared by most societies in the contemporary context. As Patricia Hogwood notes,

The East German community, already faced with the novelty of a multi-German identity, was simultaneously confronted with the development of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. The latent and overt xenophobia expressed in the eastern Länder can be seen as an indication of identity confusion in the face of globalizing cross-pressures.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Graeme Gill, *Democracy and Post-Communism: Political Change in the Post-Communist World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Kennedy, *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation, and War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Hogwood, "Identity in the Former GDR: Expressions of 'Ostalgia' and 'Ossi' Pride in United Germany," in *Globalization and National Identities: Crisis or Opportunity?*, Paul Kennedy and Catherine J. Danks, eds. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 66.

Identity issues become central to the conceptual map generated by the new geopolitical dynamics. The nineteenth-century explosion of the Empire was followed, in the subsequent centuries, by an equally powerful phenomenon of implosion which “coincided with searches in different contexts for new identities politically, culturally and socially [...]”<sup>4</sup>

In the post-communist era, in which “the major conceptual challenger to Western liberal democracy seemingly disappeared”<sup>5</sup>, serious and more insidious conflicts are likely to torment the new democracies: “[o]utrage over incivility and immorality can still mobilize movements or revolutions in the name of substantive rather than procedural rationality, in rage rather than reason, in resistance rather than reconstruction.”<sup>6</sup>

The openness of the contemporary world has permitted an unparalleled multiplication of cultural encounters that have not been experienced ever since nineteenth-century imperial history. Yet the more the visible frontiers open, the more the invisible frontiers close and contribute to the individuals and countries building even taller walls around themselves. For Kennedy, 1989 meant “contest, but not about the countercultures of capitalism and socialism. The contest rests in the meanings of nations and their nationalisms.”<sup>7</sup> Rushdie went even further seeing the fall of the Berlin wall as “the worst-case scenario of the frontier of the future: the Iron Curtain was designed to keep people in. Now we who live in the wealthiest and most desirable corners of the world are building walls to keep people out.”<sup>8</sup>

Under these circumstances, it has become increasingly significant to be able to identify the sources of conflict and understand the nature of human relations in an effort to “[...] deepen the emancipatory potentials of civil society, even as xenophobic and violent visions also find fertile soil.”<sup>9</sup> John S. Dryzek, and Leslie Templeman Holmes considered that since 1989 the post-communist world has been confronted with “economic catastrophe, ethnic warfare, civil conflict, political instability, and lingering and sometimes resurgent authoritarianism.”<sup>10</sup>

The contemporary world will have to look for its major problems in the heritage of imperialism and colonialism, with all the subsequent small or great wars it generated, with all the visible and invisible frontiers it lowered and raised.

In the contemporary cultural context, whose most obvious characteristics are diversity and openness, inevitably accompanied by heterogeneity, contemporary fiction succeeds in proving its indispensability as a cultural product by looking for new energies in the investigation of, and coming to terms with, the legacy of colonial times. It also derives new creative energies from locating itself “in the interstices – the spaces between national cultures, genders and histories.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lars Ole Sauerberg, *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature. The Implosion of Empire* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), viii.

<sup>5</sup> Graeme Gill, *Democracy and Post-Communism: Political Change in the Post-Communist World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Step Across this Line,” in *Step Across this Line. Collected Non-fiction 1992-2002* (London: Vintage, 2002), 415.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, 2.

<sup>10</sup> John S. Dryzek and Leslie Templeman Holmes, *Postcommunist Democratization: Political Discourses across Thirteen Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

Artistically encouraging and turning to good account a dialogue between modernism and postmodernism, contemporary writers attempt to strike a proper balance between the major tenets and strategies of postmodernism and the central viewpoints and techniques of modernism.

The contemporary novelists' approach to literature, their explicit interest in how private space relates to public space in an effort to prove that "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected"<sup>12</sup>, as well as the assumption that the attitudes and mentalities that characterize the contemporary world are in most cases rooted in those fostered by the nineteenth and twentieth-century value systems, encouraged us to start our interpretation of contemporary fiction in the post-modernist, post-colonial, post-communist era from the views that the modernist Virginia Woolf expressed in her essay "Three Guineas". Woolf's interpretation of human relations in the modern cultural context, in which the most violent political and military event was World War II, can offer a better understanding of the contemporary literary phenomenon within a broader cultural framework. It also contributes to our identifying the role contemporary fiction assumes in order to legitimate itself in the contemporary context. Contemporary fiction aims to offer the Western world the chance to come to terms with its past and consciously assume its consequences. Contemporary fiction is essentially a literature of travel over, or across the walls, frontiers and precipices of mankind's history, which Woolf identifies and analyses in her essay.

The fairly optimistic tone of the 1924 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", in which Virginia Woolf remarked that "[...] on or about December 1910 human character changed"<sup>13</sup>, gave way to the sombre and gloomier tone in which, a year before the outbreak of World War II, the writer voiced her worries and fears in an essay that seems premonitory of what was going to be the world's condition in the aftermath of the war. The modernist signalled the threatening presence of precipices that keep individuals apart and hinder communication between cultures:

It is now that the first difficulty of communication between us appears. Let us rapidly indicate the reason. We both come of what, in this hybrid age when, though birth is mixed, classes still remain fixed, it is convenient to call the educated class. But ... those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it.<sup>14</sup>

The precipices Woolf identified became unimaginably deeper during and after World War II and came to be known under a variety of names. The Ribbentrop - Molotov Pact, the Hitler - Stalin Pact, the Berlin Wall, or the Iron Curtain, all pointed to divisions and the impossibility of communication.

Having correctly intuited one of the major sources of conflict to affect the society in the aftermath of the war, Woolf considered it essential to inquire into the nature of fear, which she associated with the loss of freedom in private life as much as in public life. With all her experience of the nineteenth-century system and the consequences of World War I, the writer was in the position of asserting that fear is generated by

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Three Guineas," in *A Room of One's Own/ Three Guineas* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 270.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Hogarth Essays, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, edited by Leonard and Virginia Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Woolf, "Three Guineas," 118.

ethnocentric attitudes and undoubtedly nurtured by totalitarian ideologies. The conclusion she reached is “[t]hat fear, small, insignificant and private as it is, is connected with the other fear, the public fear, which is neither small nor insignificant [...]”, which for her “[...] suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other.”<sup>15</sup>

Woolf went further and dared blame herself, as much as anyone else, even more than she blamed Hitler, both for the disasters of the past World War I and of the future World War II. She assumed responsibility not necessarily for the desire and willingness to wage a world war but for the dangerous, inherently human, attitudes and tendencies likely to lead to innumerable insidious wars between individuals. Contemplating Hitler’s figure in a photograph, she becomes fully aware that “[...] we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure.”<sup>16</sup>

Optimistically, Woolf presumes that by becoming conscious of dangerous attitudes at work in human relations, such as otherization, stereotyping, prejudice<sup>17</sup>, ethnocentrism<sup>18</sup>, individuals can stop being “[...] passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by [their] thoughts and actions [can themselves] change that figure.”<sup>19</sup> She felt thus inclined to draw attention to difference and the consequences that one’s being indifferent to it might generate. Consequently, she addressed issues of identity and otherness, revealing diversity as the main characteristic of her, as well as our, contemporary world. She identified one of the major sources of conflict in the individuals’ not being willing to accept that “[...] though we look at the same things, we see them differently.”<sup>20</sup> She also pointed out that “[...] in our age of innumerable labels, of multi-coloured labels, we have become suspicious of labels; they kill and constrict.”<sup>21</sup>

What Woolf revealed as a major hindrance to communication between individuals and cultures continued being a source of potential conflict in the aftermath of World War II. After the war, the cultural context has become, even more visibly, hybrid and heterogeneous, which accounts for an increased interest of the contemporary writers in the Other, geographically, historically and ideologically.

By analysing William T. Vollmann’s novel *Europe Central*, I will try to show that contemporary novelists have become acutely sensitive to the topical issues of the contemporary world and they started addressing them with a view to identifying the causes of conflicts and accounting for the traumatic effects these conflicts have on the modern individual.

Contemporary fiction explores the cultural context and tries to provide answers to the problems tormenting the contemporary world. In the aftermath of the Second World War, in the post-imperial era, the numerous political, social and economic changes broadly covered by the concept of globalization have generated an even more acute

<sup>15</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 270.

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 270-271.

<sup>17</sup> See Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde, John Kullman, *Intercultural Communication. An Advanced Resource Book* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xv.

<sup>18</sup> See Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York, London: The Guildford Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 270-271.

<sup>20</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 118-119.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 266.

awareness among artists of the walls and precipices separating individuals and nations. Rushdie perceived the end of one world and the beginning of a new one in 1989:

The collapse of communism, the destruction of the Iron Curtain and the Wall, was supposed to usher in a new era of liberty. Instead, the post-Cold War world, suddenly formless and full of possibility, scared many of us stiff. We retreated behind smaller iron curtains, built smaller stockades, imprisoned ourselves in narrower, ever more fanatical definitions of ourselves – religious, regional, ethnic – and readied ourselves for war.<sup>22</sup>

Under these circumstances, the writers' concern, which they consciously translated into their artistic duty, is to "scorn the limitations that frontiers represent." This could be done by investigating the impact the Wall and its fall have had on the contemporary individual, but it could be even more illuminating for the contemporary context to see the ways in which the numerous invisible walls or frontiers are constructed religiously, racially, socially, or ideologically.

William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central* offers insight into the problems of the contemporary world by relating them to their historical causes, but, more importantly, by seeing them as dependent on and generated by attitudes and mentalities which are not contemporary world-made, but rather inherent in human nature. The novelist's intention, similar to that of many contemporary writers, is to

scorn the limitations that frontiers represent, drawing freely from whatever wells they please, upholding the principle of free exchange knowledge. The open frontier, created by the bringing-down of walls, has been and remains a symbol of other openesses.<sup>23</sup>

Vollmann seems to realize that the contemporary context, against which he creates and which he tries to investigate in *Europe Central*, is deeply informed by the world's historical legacy. Consequently, his main interest is in the past, focusing especially on World War II and the way it affected personal and public lives. By exploring the ideologies related to World War II and its aftermath, Vollmann manages to provide a better understanding of the present and the contemporary society. It is precisely the legacies of fascism and communism that the novelist attempts to investigate, with all their trail of ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotypes that will contribute in the post-Iron Curtain, post-Berlin Wall, post-communist age to the even more acute division of nations and alienation of individuals.

An in-depth analysis of human nature will reveal, as Ian McEwan has pointed out, that "we are capable of acts of extraordinary love and kindness, inventiveness and mutual aid. On the other side, we are capable of acts of extraordinary destruction."<sup>24</sup> The realization of the complexity of human nature, which, in my opinion, means moving beyond the dead end of postmodernism and a return to the humanism of modernism, makes contemporary novelists conscious of the role of art in general and literature in particular. In one of his interviews, McEwan himself has expressed a similar belief, in the following terms:

<sup>22</sup> Rushdie, 426-427.

<sup>23</sup> Rushdie, 426-427.

<sup>24</sup> Ian McEwan, "Interview - Face and Doubt at Ground Zero," accessed April 3, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/interviews/mcewan.html>.

I think one of the great tasks of art is really to explore that. ... I personally think the novel, above all forms in literature, is able to investigate human nature and try and understand those two sides, all those many, many sides of human nature.<sup>25</sup>

Vollmann is aware of how important it is for mankind to know its past, to get rid of individual and collective ignorance, which he identifies as one of the major sources of evil in the contemporary world. He is confident that “literal histories are essential [as] a literary portrayal of an historical event can bring out other sides, can make it somehow more immediate to the read.”<sup>26</sup> The American novelist seems to voice Woolf’s idea that each and every one of us is as guilty as Hitler was, if only for remaining ignorant and indifferent. “Everyone’s always looking for someone to blame. It’s always easier blaming someone else for your problems than solving them yourself.”<sup>27</sup> The contemporary writer goes even further and puts the human tendency to over-generalize and make judgements based on interest rather than on emerging evidence down to ignorance: “A lot of it has to do with lack of information.”<sup>28</sup>

Vollmann’s findings are associated especially with the American context, but they can well be extrapolated to any other and explained by an appropriate investigation of human behaviour and general human tendencies:

[...] most Americans are pretty ignorant, because the media just portrays Americans to America, so that’s all we know. So a lot of people can’t tell the difference between a Sikh wearing a turban and a Muslim wearing a hijab. So when you don’t have information and somebody from this category has done something wicked, it’s very human to think that everyone from this category is dangerous.<sup>29</sup>

The views and opinions the writer expresses in the quoted interview also represent the rationale of his creative endeavour. Vollmann takes full advantage of novel writing to perform an in-depth analysis of human nature, on the one hand, and of the contemporary context, on the other. *Europe Central* explores and analyses the problems of the contemporary world and of the individual by a thorough investigation of the historical events associated with World War II and its disastrous impact on the body of Europe:

Now’s the time, because tomorrow everything will have to be [...] *obliterated without warning, destroyed, razed*, Germanified, Sovietized, *utterly smashed*. It’s an order. It’s a necessity. We won’t fight like those soft cowards who get held back by their consciences; we’ll liquidate Europe Central!<sup>30</sup>

The war generated the political and ideological remapping of Europe and created the premises for the future walling off and division of the territory. Europe became the manoeuvring site of army men and politicians who believed that they had the right “to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do.”<sup>31</sup> The identity of Europe further became a matter of political encoding:

<sup>25</sup> Ian McEwan, Interview.

<sup>26</sup> Tony Dushane, “An interview with William T. Vollmann,” November 2005, accessed April 3, 2012, [http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005\\_11\\_006908.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005_11_006908.php).

<sup>27</sup> Dushane.

<sup>28</sup> Dushane.

<sup>29</sup> Dushane.

<sup>30</sup> William T. Vollmann, *Europe Central* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 175.

Behind the wall, rubberized black tentacles spread across Europe. Military maps depict them as fronts, trenches, salients and pincer movements. Politicians encode them as borders (*destroyed, razed, utterly smashed*). Administrators imagine that they're roads and rivers.<sup>32</sup>

Through various intertwined narratives, the American novelist inquires into the nature of fear, which he sees as one of the major causes of the world's problems during or after the war. The whole novel is permeated with fear, fear of one's inner abyss, fear of the other.

What Vollmann makes it his literary duty to do is to reveal the sources of evil, to investigate the mechanisms of power inherent in totalitarian ideologies, to identify the relationship between the private and the public life, to understand how fear, under innumerable forms, contributes to keeping individuals and nations apart.

Unlike other contemporary novelists who focused especially on the fall of the Berlin Wall, investigating both its causes and its consequences<sup>33</sup>, Vollmann seems to be more interested in the construction of the Berlin Wall and the raising of the Iron Curtain. He considers both events as closely associated with the atrocities of Nazism during World War II, especially the Holocaust, as well as with those involved in the painful Stalinization of Europe after the war.

Both Nazism and Stalinism were political manifestations of evil that shared views according to which

It's better not to investigate evil things too deeply, [...] not only for your safety and ours but also because evil deserves to be respected! Would you strip a leper of his clothes and expose him? Would you call attention to the ugliness of someone who owns the power to do you harm?<sup>34</sup>

By means of the fictionalized accounts of the lives of Dmitri Shostakovich, Käthe Kollwitz, Anna Akhmatova, General Andrey Vlasov, Friedrich Paulus, the writer crosses the meandering and fluctuating frontiers that shaped Europe's and the world's identities in the aftermath of World War II and that do account for the still chronic problems of contemporary society. Vollmann refrains from seeing the world in black and white and avoids the constraining and damaging function of labels. He is more interested in refining the readers' knowledge of history and helping to prevent historical amnesia, as

Strik-Strikfeldt insists in his postwar memoirs that it wasn't until he was a prisoner and an American sergeant assaulted him with photographs of Dachau that he learned that *in German concentration camps there had been such as in no other camps in the world. [...] the world still does not believe that these thugs managed to conceal their crimes from a great part of the German people. The Western world refused to believe it – just as we, at that time, refused to believe in the betrayal of freedom by free America.*<sup>35</sup>

The Wall is a symbol of fear, suggestive of lingering mentalities and dangerous attitudes, which have nothing to do with a certain place or a specific moment of time. They are inherent in human nature and associated with mankind's propensity to self-destruction. It is ultimately related to the darkness of the self, so laboriously and

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<sup>32</sup> Vollmann, 7.

<sup>33</sup> See Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* (London: Vintage, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Vollmann, 467.

<sup>35</sup> Vollmann, 291.

methodically investigated by the modernists. Prompted by the particular case of general Vlasov, Vollmann generalizes about human condition and it being related to and conditioned by visible and invisible walls:

General Vlasov, who fought first against Hitler, then against Stalin, met a kindred death. Was that “worth it”? What about [...] the soldiers on both sides who perished merely because their respective Supreme Commands from fear, vanity or incompetence forbade retreat? Or, to take the case still further, what about the random deaths that we die in peacetime?<sup>36</sup>

The question formulated in *Europe Central*, “How can the conscious mind know what the unconscious is up to?”<sup>37</sup>, is answered by reference to Chancellor Adenauer’s views and Europe’s and the world’s political and military evolutions after World War II:

[...] what’s behind the Iron Curtain is the reptilian brain, the primordial, amoral system of involuntary control which, located at the very base of the skull, can and must be dispatched by NATO in a surgical, missile-based *Nackenschuss*; only thus may Germany, which is Europe and therefore all of us, become whole again. (This is also what the Führer used to say.)<sup>38</sup>

Vollmann’s bracketed comment seems to reinforce Woolf’s idea “that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected [...]. [...] that we cannot dissociate ourselves from [Hitler’s] figure but are ourselves that figure.”<sup>39</sup>

The subtle irony with which the same comment is formulated offers an indication of how generally human, rather than associated with a certain ideology, the tendency to dominate and control is, which makes the task of contemporary writers even more urgent. Contemporary fiction should become one of the most efficient forms of communication between cultures so that it could finally contribute to individuals being no longer “passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure” and this mainly because “[a] common interest unites us; it is one world, one life.”<sup>40</sup> More importantly, literature should constitute itself into a refined form of knowledge of both one’s self and the Other and lead to the realization that

Human nature, the human heart, the spirit, the soul, consciousness itself – call it what you like – in the end, it’s all we’ve got to work with. [...] The work we have to do is with ourselves if we’re ever going to be at peace with each other. Without a revolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Vollmann, 411.

<sup>37</sup> Vollmann, 538.

<sup>38</sup> Vollmann, 539.

<sup>39</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 270-271.

<sup>40</sup> Woolf, “Three Guineas,” 271.

<sup>41</sup> Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*, 172-173.



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## Zidul / urile în proza contemporană

Pornind de la romanul scriitorului american William T. Vollmann *Europe Central* analizat prin prisma ideilor despre identitate și despre legătura necesară dintre spațiul public și cel privat formulate de Virginia Woolf în eseul „Trei guinee” scris în 1938, articolul își propune să prezinte rolul pe care literatura contemporană și-l asumă în perioada postcomunistă. Conștienți de problemele cu care se confruntă societatea contemporană, scriitorii contemporani încearcă, prin literatură, să identifice cauzele conflictelor și să evidențieze efectele pe care acestea le au asupra individului modern.