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A Pilgrim’s Progress to Slab City in *The Royal Family* by William T. Vollmann

Françoise PALLEAU-PAPIN*

RESUME

Le roman *La Famille royale* de William T. Vollmann dépeint les villes de la Côte ouest des États-Unis en une épopée dantesque, une descente aux enfers à la recherche du salut dans la déchéance. Chaque ville représente une philosophie, une structure de l'espace mental dans l'espace urbain. Le roman élabore une dialectique conflictuelle entre San Francisco et Sacramento pour l'essentiel, mises en regard de Los Angeles et de Las Vegas plus brièvement. Au bout de son périple urbain, la quête métaphysique du héros déchu s'achève à Slab City, une utopie dont le dénuement et l'âpre poésie restent ouverts à tous les possibles.

Keywords: William T. Vollmann; *The Royal Family*; San Francisco; Sacramento; Las Vegas; Slab City; Salvation Mountain; Dante; Quest; Dialectic; Cityscape; Mindscape; Utopia

Vollmann’s long novel *The Royal Family* (780 pages) mainly opposes two cities, San Francisco and Sacramento, and two narrative structures: a sprawling narrative telling the story of the rivalry between two brothers and a structure of short chapters defining a precise narrative space made up of distinctive vignettes. The novel spins the extended metaphor of a cityscape as a narrative space, around the opposition between a traditional city, San Francisco, where the so-called "royal family" of whores and pimps and drug-addicts live, and Sacramento, defined as a railroad network, a shopping mall of a city without any character or history and breeding middle-class conformity, where the heroes’ mother lives. The contrast between the two cities is a source of anxiety to the main focalizing character Henry Tyler, one of the dueling brothers. To the authorial narrator, it is an object of satire. Wavering between the first and the third persons, both the narrator and the main character are forever comparing the two cities, riding the rails or driving back and forth between them, setting the two cities against each other in a contest or joust. A few incursions to Los Angeles or to the Las Vegas underworld help to define what those cities mean and how they provide characterization and define narrative progress in Vollmann’s most urban novel. More than a criticism of Californian cityscapes, Vollmann revives the medieval vision of Dante’s journey to the Inferno, a major intertextual source here, to examine his country’s tortured and conflicting contemporary mindscapes. We will see how the novel comes to a resolution in the

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utopia of Slab City, after a dialectical progress wavering between San Francisco, Sacramento and Las Vegas.

**Cityscape and characterization**

For the hero and the author, San Francisco is the great city, and Vollmann provides a sketched map of his own before opening his narrative. Sacramento and Las Vegas are only foils, appearing often enough but as negative counterparts to San Francisco. The latter is pictured as a city with a personality, a history and a character of its own, which serves characterization in return. A street or a neighborhood defines a character, a philosophy, an outlook on life. The legendary figure of the prostitute Carol Doda appears from the start, as in any guidebook, connecting Henry Tyler to the underworld of prostitution in which he will lose himself. The red light on his answering machine seems to flash as brightly as Carol Doda's famously red neon nipples over her strip-tease bar door: "like one of Carol Doda's nipples back in the old days on the neon sign for the Condor" (13). The city is a setting with a historical background against which the drama will unfurl: traditional, small scale prostitution is destroyed by the larger scale exploitation of severely handicapped underage girls in Las Vegas, and Tyler who witnesses the change becomes a homeless man and dies. In the course of his enquiries, the private eye Tyler falls in love with the so called "queen of whores", also known as Africa or the Queen, who provides protection and comfort for the addicted prostitutes under her wing. She is the Tenderloin personified, San Francisco's famously shady district, in which corrupt police officers could afford to eat expensive cuts of meat like tenderloin in local restaurants because the mob greased their paws so profitably. Her face reflects the district:

> the Queen's features were plain to him now: flat, steep, hard and blank like one of those high Tenderloin brickfronts studded with dark curtained windows whose lurking inmates could see out and not be seen, brickfronts painted with names of long bankrupted businesses, walls dropping remorselessly down to steel gratings and dull parking meters and then dark and dirty streets. (461)

The Queen and the city share a sense of mystery, can "see out and not be seen", and most importantly, she is the prisoner of her way of life, like the "lurking inmates" of the Tenderloin living in the secrecy of their interlopers' world. Both the queen and the district carry the traces of their history before the laws of the market erase them; the Queen's face is like the "Tenderloin brickfronts" and the qualifiers "long bankrupted" or "remorselessly" apply to both with as much pertinence, setting the tone. The novel begins after the end, as it were, lingering on traces of a past which has already been "long bankrupted" like the short-lived shady businesses of the Tenderloin.

Likewise, the other characters are best embodied by a street with its distinct idiosyncrasies, like nondescript, flexible Tyler: "Perhaps he could become Eddy or Ellis Street—or, better yet, some brief grey alley lost somewhere south of Market,— And John? Here there's but one answer, and in keeping with John it's truly a
magnificent one: Geary Street" (569). His brother John is best defined by Geary Street, which connects the expressway to the Financial District, via the Tenderloin. A whole section, Book XXVII, is devoted to Geary Street as portraying John Tyler. The street is compared to the streets famous for their corruption, like Market Street. The long description opens in a very traditional form, imitating the descriptions of the nineteenth century, with a touch of historical realism verging on naturalism, which sounds ironical in context: "The tale of Geary Street is the tale of life itself, which begins, as did the first prehistoric unicellular organism, at the ocean" (570). The street is said to grow like a person from childhood to adulthood: "At this stage, the infant pavement carries with it only diminutive pastel-painted cube-houses for its toys" (570). The street is described as a go-between, pandering from one district to another, from prostitution to finance, as well as a narrative hinge between the various strands of the stories, connecting the various characters together: "But already, striving to outdistance the repose of these seaside beginnings, where planktonic destinies allow for nothing but flotation and cool grey submission, Geary Street strains to carry and to convey, to facilitate, to make business happen, to go between" (570). The street is a hub for the novel, connecting the two brothers, and the various narratives, in a pseudo-naturalistic manner. The place has a very Latinate guardian spirit: "and as early as Thirty-Eighth Avenue I've seen the first panhandler, wrapped in silver fog, listlessly overlooking grey pavements, hoping for nickels, dimes and quarters to congeal out of grey and silver air. He is the genius loci or tutelary deity of Geary Street. He is Business" (570). Then follows a long and very lively description of Geary Street and the districts it runs through such as little Russia or Little Korea, all in what sounds like a naturalistic manner, but with a twist. It turns into a brief characterization of the authorial figure, in a short self-portrait vignette. According to the narrator, Geary Street is "an overlooked artery", and this prompts the following lapse from characters to author to readers:

—yes, the overlooked—what a fine category! Failing private detectives with their envious cars, self-pitying child molesters who want to "explain" themselves to every stranger at every bar, customerless prostitutes, lawyers who haven't yet made full partner, and I myself, described in the introduction to the Japanese translation of one of my novels as a "minor writer"—oh, sting!—and yourself, reader, who suffer from this world's deficient appreciation of your qualities—and for that matter all of us living creatures, for up to now we've been rudely overlooked by death—.... (569)

With a great deal of self-derision, the author shows that the novel's cityscapes are offered as a mirror to us all. From the third person characters to the first person of the narrator as an authorial figure, and to the second person reader addressed reflexively as "yourself, reader", the text uses reflexive, meta-narrative devices to involve everyone in a self-analysis. The city provides a characterization device like an extended mirror for all of us to contemplate ourselves, and the novel also takes part in the reflexive process, drawing our attention on its form in meta-narrative passages full of derision, as in the mouth of the character Dan Smooth, a pedophile: "If this were a novel, I'd scream here comes the suspense!" (545). Mocking the
form, the author thus reminds himself and us that all is vanity, but that looking into a mirror is a necessary mortification to purge our vanity. Deriding the form of the novel reminds us that the book may be something else than a novel in the nineteenth-century sense of a romantic tale of fiction, and that it may come closer to a metaphysical and poetic journey in the manner of Dante’s Divine Comedy, or even a counter pilgrim’s progress going against the Puritan vision of a City on a hill.

A quest
In the physical and metaphysical progress of the heroes, the suspense is not geared toward the ending, the road is all. The cities offer a place to inhabit for a moment and a philosophy to ponder on along an initiation journey; when the characters embark on a quest for healing doomed to failure, Henry Tyler muses:

What would heal him? Nothing in the Sunset district, that was for sure... Of course there was little to do on Pacheco, where he lived, but after Pacheco the alphabetical pavements went Quintara, Riviera, Santiago and then Taraval, which was a busy street, at least for the Sunset; it was the mirror image of Clement Street or maybe Geary Street in the Richmond district across the park. Taraval Street sometimes soothed him. Before he knew it, he’d driven there. (265)

The words "heal" and "sooth" show that the soul is diseased. Tyler may be the narrator’s alter ego, looking for salvation in the alphabetical signs his city sends him in its street names, in his wanderings along streets mirroring one another but not answering his quest for company and soul bonding. The character’s alphabetical quest for the right street mirrors the author’s quest for a narrative form befitting his Post-modern pilgrim’s progress to a celestial city of his own making.

In his wanderings and his quest for an elusive cure in Sacramento, Tyler crosses the Acheron-like river of the underworld: "And so on his way to the yellow-orange freight cars of the Union Pacific, land-ships of freedom, thrilling the lonely souls who rode them from broken promises to promises not yet broken, ferrying the dead souls from one sunset to another, carrying the fearful and the hopeful out of law’s imminence" (699). The chiasmus of the expression "from broken promises to promises not yet broken" is concise, spanning over a large period in very few words, showing the desultory progress of this counter pilgrimage. In Tyler’s initiation journey, city paths are full of hurdles and stumbling blocks. In San Francisco for example, a tunnel is described as a leviathan with its "shiny-scaled" surface: "They kept walking, street to side-street to alley, and then suddenly they were in a tunnel that Tyler had never seen before, shiny-scaled like the Broadway tunnel upon whose walls crawled the ghosts of cars and the squiggly fire-lines of reflected tail-lights..." (134). People enter the tunnel "in single file" and disappear inside: "Far ahead of them, he saw a shaveheaded woman carrying a suitcase. She vanished into one of the square tomblike openings which had been so occasionally spaced into the yellow walls" (134).

Likewise, the cityscape is charged with medieval signs of the presence of evil: "He turned into the Tenderloin. Secrets wept behind grilles’ richly patterned
speckles of pure silver and pure black, which resembled the pewter beads in the store called Gargoyle on Haight and Masonic" (80). The expression "richly patterned speckles" draws our attention to the crafted art work, "speckles" being specks or flecks of contrasting color which seem to have a "pattern" or design here, as if man made, like pewter beads. Everything and anything gets sold there, sex like any other merchandise, and commerce is an object of "worship", with a possible pun on the word "whore" concatenating the idea of worship with sex worshipping: "It was a white, foggy afternoon crawling with obsequious light, which must have been why the darkness between buildings refused to be worshiped, let alone lovingly touched" (39). Here daylight is the enemy of love and sex, of "whore" / worshipping.

The city proves antagonistic to the characters, or simply stands for the manifestation of the characters' personal grudges and inner struggles. When Henry Tyler is described as vomiting the city, his soul comes directly out of his body in a physical outpour onto the street, spreading outward: "A rush of hatred for everything he saw spewed out of his soul, spreading like the concentric circular patterns of the subway station’s tiles until it had reached the farthest building that he could see. Everything stank" (133). The "circular patterns" may recall Dante’s journey into the Inferno, and they echo the narrative structure of the novel, which revisits locations, as the character keeps moving back and forth between the cities of his life.

The cityscape is a mindscape of intense spiritual and bodily experiences; it is where one meets evil face to face, either in the meanness of criminals or simply by traveling aimlessly on the subway, inside the belly of the beast in the eternal night of the subway tunnels which devour Tyler:

Just after the inbound L Taraval line leaves Taraval for Ulloa, its tracks curve in, along with other ingathered routes and ways, right before the Philosophers Club offers its green neon shot-glass to the foggy night, gapes West Portal, whose arched palate hovers above the tooth-pillars which separate outbound and inbound lines. The gullet of that mouth goes on and on, all the way downtown to Embarcadere, where one can transfer to the beast’s intestines, the Bay Area Rapid Transit, and continue on under the Bay itself to Berkeley, Richmond, Hayward or Walnut Creek. West Portal’s long dark grooves echo with faraway voices and uselessly travels. (610)

San Francisco may be the heart of evil, but at least it has a heart, unlike its counterpart Las Vegas whose heart is a mechanism of exploitation, or its disemboweled counterpart Sacramento, dubbed "Car City" or "Mall City", or "a city without a heart" (89-90). Book XVI, "The Queen of Las Vegas", is entirely devoted to the city which is condemned as fake and a-historical, a teeming bed of mediocrity in which everything is corrupted, including meaning, as the ecstatic crowds cheer what Henry Tyler finds meaningless: "The crowd cheered, clapped, leaned forward smiling; this meant so much to them" (371). In scathing terms, the character describes the Hotel Luxor he stays in as the epitome of the whole city: "Already as Las Vegas spread her thighs before him like a collage of silicon chips on the tan plain, he saw the black pyramid of mediocrity like a dull jewel, the Sphinx crouching out in front" (369). Tyler uses parataxis (not connecting the two objects
"the black pyramid" and "the Sphinx crouching out") to emphasize the meaningless and kitsch jumble of styles which vainly try to make up for Las Vegas’s lack of character. Worse, the whole function of the emblematic sex emporium at the heart of the city is described as a well-oiled machinery of exploitation:

Then there was a sliding panel behind which special cameras and telescopic lenses gave him a twenty-four-hour view of the guts of Feminine Circus, the engine room ceilinged with vast pipes shuddering, messes of heavy boilers, gauges, boilerplates; the utility halls of burning hot corrugated metal, the disposal rooms manned by illiterate, moustached, oily-fingered crews who ran and sweated in sandals, hauling shrouded bundles to the grinder well, the Lobotomy Factory’s diesel-powered unshielded belts turning, their condensers sucking up the desert water table; then more shuddering pipes, whirling spools, grey shouts he couldn’t hear... (419)

The style echoes Pynchon’s most intense moments, condensing a lot in an enumeration, making the madness palpable, if not understandable. We are left with more questions than answers in this description. What is the "Lobotomy Factory" mentioned so casually, as if it went without saying that the prostitutes in the "Feminine Circus" had all been lobotomized? The place is described as a huge robot, predatory and out of control, not only ethically threatening, but a danger for the whole environment, "sucking up the desert water table" until no one can drink or live anymore. In this passage, the women of the "Circus" are unnamed, and their suffering is silenced by the rumble of the machines who loudly proclaim their omnipotence over anything human.

Similarly, although less violently so, Sacramento is described as a city without people, under the reign of things such as cars and retail outlets. The proprieties of California’s capital are scornfully denounced as a hypocritical cover-up: "Again he drove to Sacramento with its black parking lots given meaning by cars, its malls so thoroughly placed and identical in composition that every three or four miles one thought to be back at the same retail outlets no better or worse than the cigarette-burned pillowcases of San Francisco’s whore hotels; and the night was hot and still" (129). Sacramento is a tomb of a city and its inhabitants are ghosts, as a comical demonstration makes clear. Once Henry Tyler is murdered in Sacramento, he becomes a ghost, and meets his dead sister in law and a hobo, and asks them questions about their ghostly identity:

Is everybody dead around here? said Tyler.
I don’t know about you, said the hobo.
Well, how would I know?
Do you cast a shadder? Said the hobo. They say that’s the most reliable test. ... I ain’t cast no shadder ever since I got good and dead and buried.
They’re phasing out this yard, Tyler said. I used to see so many trains here. Now it’s going to be new houses, and where that trestle bridge is down there, that’s going to be a mall.
That’s why we’re here, the hobo said. We all been phased out. (755)
This humorous demonstration aims to prove that Sacramento is a city of the living dead, of people who seem to be alive, but cast no shadow in the sun. In science fiction vocabulary, they have been "phased out", they have disappeared or changed state by phases, they have been withdrawn from use by stages, and have gradually become the ghosts of their former selves, just as the "trestle bridge" becomes yet another mall. And as a coda, one might add that significantly, Los Angeles is only described for the cemetery where the character Irene is buried, in short descriptions such as this: "Los Angeles, where Irene's grave was doing well on that hot and smoggy day at Forest Lawn with the lawn mowers roaring" (91). The city of the Angels is literally one of the dead, and where a grave is "doing well", better than the unmentioned living, while the mechanical repetition of the word "lawn" stresses the lack of life of a place defined by its cemetery.

Slab City

Between the two rival cities, San Francisco and Sacramento, the mall city of the living dead, akin to Los Angeles in its lethal qualities, the hero turns to a city of another kind in his quest for a possible outcome to his philosophical wanderings. Once he becomes a hobo and starts hopping freight trains to get around toward the end of the novel, he visits Slab City several times, a utopia of a city, a no-place, where he seems to come to terms with himself. Tyler hears about Slab City from the "wise tramp" Waldo who has never been there, and whose name may suggest a form of homage to Ralph Waldo Emerson, but the place is no Walden. It lies not far from the most polluted river in North America, New River, and the dead Salton Sea which kills any fish or birds in or near it, as Tyler remarks on his way to Slab City: "The Salton Sea stewed and stank unseen at his back" (731), with enough sibilants to hiss at us convincingly.

Slab City is an actual place, but it is a "City" in terms of project and ideology, not population rate, because it is a scantily populated desert camp in Southeastern California, located between Imperial Valley and the Chocolate Mountains. It is often negatively defined as what it no longer is, as an abandoned World War II base. It takes its name from the concrete slabs which are left from the abandoned Marine barracks: once the frames have been pulled down, only the foundation slabs remain. A resident explains to Tyler the history of the place: "Back in World War II, General Patton had these kind of camps all over the desert. After they moved out, the Navy moved in and then the Marines took over. That slab over there, that was a hospital. Then they shut the whole thing down and sold it. My slab, that was the officer's latrine. And this lot here, that's the parade ground" (732). Slab City is the ghost of a city that never was, where the residents ironically name places according to what they once might have been, the glory of the parade ground leveled off to that of the latrine now that the words carry no meaning, now that the site is decommissioned and uncontrolled, without any modern comfort such as running water or electricity.

Defined negatively, it is a place which does not exist, a utopia, and looking at the positive side of the coin, it is a blank slate to start anew. A resident emphasizes the sense of liberty he feels in the place: "Anyone can drive in and park. This is America" (732). Yet his companion corrects the positive outlook, stressing that this
is also the place where one gets stuck for lack of financial means: "I'm stuck here this summer because my motor home needs work and I can't afford it" (733). The place appears in Jon Krakauer’s book *Into the Wild*, and it is featured in the 2007 film of the same title as a haven for post-hippies and a place of refuge for the poor. In Vollmann’s novel, several passages stress that it is a dead end for the poor: "He went to Slab City. The angry man and his mother were still there. – Once you get here, it's hard to get back out, the angry man said. It's like a hole" (763). Life is more like survival, below the poverty line and in extreme temperatures. As a young woman who managed to leave Slab City explains to Tyler: "In the winter you’d wake up with frozen feet. In the summer those slabs would be scorching. And scorpions and ants and everything. Strange, strange people. I hated every minute of it" (731).

Part of the strangeness this former resident finds in its inhabitants may come from their use of antiphrases. Their only weapon against poverty is irony, which the residents use freely in the way they baptize the various parts of town: "Now the left side over there, they call that Poverty Flat. On the right, that’s called High Rent Area. Actually, the names are reversed, just to keep people amused. In the High Rent Area, people live kind of hand to mouth" (732). That irony may be the first step the characters take to define life on their terms and progress toward meaning.

In this place on the fringe of society, Tyler makes an enlightening experience which is depicted poetically, marking the end of his wanderings. He is first dismayed by the tacky and and contrived appearance of Salvation Mountain: a small hill which the actual resident Leonard Knight has been covering in paint, concrete and adobe over hay bales and old tires for the past twenty years. It is a piece of land art made to the glory of God which Tyler finds odd at first:

The landscape in which it stood (in company with its tamarisk tree and its two trucks which said REPENT) could have been Hebrew, but the mountain itself resembled an aquatic amusement park, because its bulk of desert dirt had been painted in white and blue streaks to resemble water. The mountain itself, with all its colored slogans bulging like breasts, was composed of dirt, hay bales, and colored latex paint, which felt smooth and cool under his hand. On the mountain’s chest, a scarlet heart, tricked out in white adobe letters, said to him: JESUS, I'M A SINNER. COME UPON MY BODY AND INTO MY HEART. He ascended to the summit-cross, and in place of inspiration discovered more dogged artifice, where a long dry ridge marked the watermark of a lake which had vanished four centuries before, and hay bales and paint cans were discreetly laid, ready for the next good work. (732)

The mountain is fake, but not so much as a Disneyworld sham, rather as a clumsy attempt to give a sense of the geological past with the remark on the dry lake, at least to Tyler’s eyes. The evangelical ascent leads only to "more dogged artifice" at this stage. Yet as Tyler moves on further East, past Salvation Mountain, and past the center of Slab City down to the Canal level, he comes to "the Drops, or as some called it, the outback, where the true squatters lived" (733). In this place of extreme destitution, there is no refuge from the heat, no shade, and the residents hide
in the day time, moving about only at night, like "vampires" according to the others. The place feels like an end of the world wilderness, and it is precisely where Tyler meets a John the Baptist figure: "Ten minutes' footwork further out into the Drops he met a thin, bespectacled, beatific man with scraggy long hair who walked steadily in the hundred and fifteen degree heat, swinging his black-greased hands, his bare torso tanned almost to negritude" (735). The character's skin color, "tanned almost to negritude", actually marks the end of Tyler's quest. He has been looking for his beloved "Africa", the queen of the Royal Family, although she died long before he reached Slab City. Finally, once at the Drops, literally the lowest point in Tyler's downfall, he has a vision of pure goodness in the man's pity for him: "Drop Eleven is the last, said Clyde, sincerely sorry for him, and at that moment Tyler felt that the man's kindness was as immense as the scarlet heart on the white breast of Salvation Mountain" (736). The best image he can conjure up to convey his enlightenment is the fake "scarlet heart" on Salvation Mountain, resuscitating a kitsch version of Hawthorne's scarlet letter in the sky. Like Hawthorne's characters, he comes to terms with his humanity and with the human stain of the original sin in a heavenly vision in the stars, à la Vollmann this time: "Later he sat out by Salvation Mountain, with the Milky Way spread out as rich as a stain upon the sky; and stars, stars, stars! Salvation Mountain was like a ground sloth, a hunkered down elephant or maybe a snail barely poking its head out of its shell, all whitish and jigsawed in the night" (736). That is ecstatic poetry in prose. Echoing Hawthorne's twilit visions, the narrator finds his own lyrical expression on Salvation Mountain. After long wanderings in San Francisco, Sacramento, Las Vegas or Los Angeles, the haunted character finally chooses as his own a visionary city, the Salvation Mountain of his mind being very different from the Puritan City on a Hill, as it does not prescribe or proscribe, but liberates the restless and shelters the free. His impossible city of sorts is at once extinct like a megatherium or ground sloth, that gigantic extinct terrestrial mammal, it is bulky like an elephant, moveable and frail as a snail, and changeable and "jigsawed" like his visions in the night. It is a work in progress, a place of creation uniting mixed metaphors. It lies open to meaning and further elaboration, like a radical tabula rasa of freedom, unlike the exhausted cities of Southern California which destroy their inhabitants. Slab City is not a city of the living dead but a city of the dead living again, on new premises, as chapter 590 makes clear, quoted fully here: "I like the slow, nice, quiet life, Waldo had said. No adventures, no drama. It is the last spot on earth. --And he'd spread his hands, there in his underwear" (766). The rhythm of that sentence progresses leisurely, step by step, giving a sense of balance and freedom. Having cast off the superfluous encumbrances of life, free of the consumer's frenzy and of society's pretenses and exploitations, the eremitic character Waldo stands "in his underwear" and "spread[s] his hands" in a benediction, not without humor. He is ready to start again in his new paradise, having found a haven of grace in destitution and a lyrical haven of poetry on the stark slabs of Slab City. Like Tyler's, his subdued lyricism keeps in mind the memory of the difficult progress through the pitfalls of the cities he has left behind, and his poetical expression is all the greater for what he has been through.
What is at stake in the hero’s search for a city of his choice in The Royal Family is the beating of a heart, expanding metonymically from the conjunction of its inhabitants to the surroundings. From Sacramento, the "city without a heart", where alcoholics have exchanged friendship for the bottle as a heartwarming device, the ghost of Tyler moves to the gigantic heart of Salvation Mountain. In San Francisco, the heart of the Queen of Whores has been destroyed by greed. Los Angeles is only the burial place of a fake love story, the inclination Tyler felt for his deceased sister-in-law. Las Vegas has mechanized the heart’s desire for love in a sadistic exploitation of women as sex slaves. The dialectic move of Tyler’s quest can be summarized in two quotations, between a dire lack and an odd sense of fulfillment, between Sacramento and Slab City, and I would like to gather the strands of this long novel in the following pairing of quotations, to let Vollmann’s prose resonate once again in this coda. The first quotation expresses the author’s viewpoint in the first person, while the second quotation’s capital letters reproduce Leonard Knight’s words, already quoted above, which anyone can actually read on the Salvation Mountain of his making in Slab City, Niland, California:

Sacramento is River City, they say, because it spreads its poisons, sterilities and occasional charms at the confluence of two rivers, but to me it remains Railroad City even if only in my wishful thinking; now it’s Car City and Mall City above all, city of hellish replications of arcades, gas stations, convenience stores, city without a heart, a strangely empty place whose downtown, once sunk down to river level, has turned its nineteenth-century boardwalks and Chinese doss houses into underground passageways invaded mainly by homeless sojourners and addicts of antique bottles (Peef’s Crystal White, The Perfect Family Soap) …. (89)

On the mountain’s chest, a scarlet heart, tricked out in white adobe letters, said to him: JESUS, I’M A SINNER, COME UPON MY BODY AND INTO MY HEART (732).

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