
Review by Tim Barnes

The very foundations of Christian fundamentalism crumble under the argument of this book. Biblical scholar Bart D. Ehrman uses the principles of textual criticism, the evaluation and examination of manuscripts, to wipe away almost any trace of the divinely inspired in the New Testament. _Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why_ takes the divine hand in the Bible (it focuses on the New Testament) and turns it into clay, the kind of which humans are made, flawed and limited.
Christian fundamentalism makes me nervous, as a human being and as a teacher. As a human being, I am appalled by the social principles it espouses. They’re anti-women, anti-gay, politically conservative, and militaristic. As a teacher, it troubles me that Christian fundamentalism excludes the Bible from the realm of literature.

To speak of God as a fictional character or the contradictory representations of Jesus in the Gospels questions fundamentalist Christianity. The foundation for this is the fundamentalist belief that the Bible is free from any error, a principle called “inerrancy,” be it historical, theological, or scientific. God wrote it and God is right.

Well, Ehrman deconstructs that notion, dismantling the basis upon which inerrancy is claimed by throwing doubt on the documents whereverupon the hand of God is supposed to have writ. He looks at the craft of the scribe, the copyist, the person in charge of reproducing the word of God, and proves the process fraught with problems that changed what was originally written.

Interestingly enough, Ehrman came to his calling as a biblical scholar from beginnings as a fervent fundamentalist who was driven to biblical scholarship by a desire to read the actual word of God. This led him to the study of Greek and Hebrew and to graduate school. The book begins with a biographical introduction in which Ehrman recounts his “conversion” to the textual study of the Bible. At Princeton he wrote a long, “convoluted” term paper in which he tried to resolve a contradiction in the Gospel of Mark. Mark quotes Jesus to say that King David ate the grain of the temple priests when Abiathar was high priest. 1 Samuel 21:1–6 has this happen when Ahimelech, Abiathar’s father, was high priest. His professor, a good Christian, wrote on his paper, “Maybe Mark just made a mistake” (9). This broke the dam and Ehrman came to see the Bible as “a very human book” (12).

The cover of Misquoting Jesus shows a medieval scribe in a red robe at a desk, quill in hand, copying a text. That’s the central problem that Ehrman examines. It is the problem that obscures the signature of God, the copying of texts by human beings. The importance of text to Judaism and to early Christianity made them unique in the polytheistic milieu of the ancient world, but it wasn’t until 367 C.E. that Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote a pastoral letter to the Egyptian churches recommending the twenty-seven books that now form the New Testament. For hundreds of years, there was no official canon, no testament that was called scripture. But there was a lot of copying.

Early Christian texts were copied by amateurs, people who wanted the texts for themselves or their community. They were not professional scribes and so “in the earliest copies, especially, mistakes were commonly made in transcription” (57). The copying by flawed copyists upset scholars at the time and has left us with “three forms of the text: the original, the error, and the incorrect attempt to resolve the error.” Mistakes proliferated and were repeated. Sometimes they were corrected and sometimes the error snowballed and worsened. And so it went, Ehrman notes, “For centuries” (57). What we have today and what the Bibles we have been reading for centuries have, are not the original or the first copies of the originals but “copies of copies of the copies of the copies of the originals. What we have,” Ehrman asserts, “are copies made later—much later. In most instances, they are copies made many centuries later” (10). This problem has led some textual critics to claim that speaking of an “original” text is pointless because the original is “inaccessible” to us (58).

A particularly astounding example of the copying

![Bart D. Ehrman](image)

---

The Sylvania Review

Spring 2007

Vol. 1 No. 3

Copyright © 2007 by The Sylvania Review

Scott Dionne, Editor
Chory Ferguson, Design & Production Editor
Andrew Wicker, Design & Production Editor

The Sylvania Review is the literary newsletter of the Division of English & World Languages at the Sylvania campus of Portland Community College. We publish short reviews of books, music, drama, and film, as well as articles on professional activities of faculty in the division. Issues appear in the fall, winter, and spring.

Submissions: If you think you might be interested in submitting a critical review or professional article, e-mail your suggestion to sdionne@pcc.edu. Any instructor, administrator, or staff member within EWL is invited to write a piece, especially adjunct faculty.

The Sylvania Review is now published in both print and online versions. The black-and-white print version is distributed free of charge to faculty and staff of the EWL Division; the color online version is available free of charge to everyone at [http://www.pcc.edu/sylvaniareview](http://www.pcc.edu/sylvaniareview).

The Sylvania Review
Division of English & World Languages
Portland Community College
PO Box 19000, Portland, OR 97280-0990
Phone: 503-977-8003 • E-mail: sdionne@pcc.edu
Web: [http://www.pcc.edu/sylvaniareview](http://www.pcc.edu/sylvaniareview)
error concerns the woman-taken-in-adultery passage from John 7:53-8:12. This passage is not found in "our oldest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John" (69). It was, apparently, popular folklore in the oral tradition surrounding Jesus and at one point written in the margin of a manuscript of John. A scribe, thinking it was meant to be part of the text, copied it in. Indeed, the story appears in different locations in the New Testament manuscripts because other scribes did the same thing. A similar thing happened with the last twelve verses of Mark, the ones in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, the disciple, and ascends to heaven. These verses are not in the early manuscripts of Mark and were added to harmonize Mark with the other Gospels.

A Greek text of the Bible, known as the Textus Receptus, used by the translators of the King James Bible, was produced by Erasmus in rather a rush in 1555. He used, Ehrman tells us, manuscripts that were “not necessarily reliable” and “produced some eleven hundred years after the originals” (80). This is how the story of the woman taken in adultery and the last twelve verses of Mark, and a number of other things, including the doctrine of the trinity, got into the Bible.

A second problem, related to the problem of copying, is that there are an astounding number of variant reads of New Testament texts. In 1707 John Mill produced an edition of Stephanus’ 1550 Greek New Testament, based on a version of Erasmus’ text, that presented variant readings from available manuscripts, citations, and versions of the New Testament. There were 30,000. At this point that search, expanded by the discovery of new manuscripts, looks like this:

Some say there are 200,000 variants known, some say 300,000, some say 400,000 or more. We don’t know for sure because, despite the impressive development in computer technology, no one has yet been able to count them all . . . it is best simply to leave the matter in comparative terms. There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament. (89-90)

The holograph of the divine would seem to be almost completely obscured.

The problem of determining the most original manuscripts passed through a series of scholars whose contributions Ehrman outlines. The problem boils down to “making decisions about which textual readings are original and which represent later changes made by scribes” (127). The determination of error, of whether something was changed and a choice must be made between different readings, is particularly interesting because it seems to fit with a larger principle, one that came up at a recent inservice. The principle for determining error, developed by Johann Bengel, is “Proclovi inscriptioni praeest ardua”—the more difficult reading is preferable to the easier one” (111). When scribes altered their texts, they were likely to try to improve them, harmonize them, and make them more orthodox, more consistent. The original text would likely present a more puzzling, more complex, reading. In search of the word of god, the scholar must be biased toward complexity.

The other fascinating aspect of the search for originals is that manuscripts run in families and are associated with particular locations. Those associated with Alexandria and the famous library are noted for their accuracy and consistency. There are principles for determining the genealogy of manuscripts and not all manuscripts are of equal value in the hunt for the hand of god. The fanatical scholar Constantine von Tischendorf searched libraries east and west for manuscripts, discovering the Codex Sinaiticus, “one of the truly great manuscripts of the Bible still available,” in 1844 (119). The Codex was found in the convent of St. Catherine at the foot of Mt. Sinai. It was the “earliest surviving witness to the text of the New Testament,” copied in the mid-fourth century (120).

Determining which texts are original involves external and internal evidence. The former involves evidence for the trustworthiness of manuscripts—date, geographical location, reliability (good genealogy). This involves external evidence: date of manuscript (if reliable), geographical location (local variants are suspect), reliability of manuscripts (Alexandrian manuscripts are more reliable than others), and internal evidence. Internal evidence asks these kinds of questions: Does the reading seem like what the author might have written based on his style? What reading would a scribe be likely to have created (connected to Bengel’s principle of difficulty)? Based on this kind of evidence, Ehrman looks at three passages in the New Testament that seem to have been altered from the original: “whether Jesus was said to feel compassion or anger in Mark 1:47; whether he was calm and collected or in deep distress in Luke 22:43-44; and whether he was said to die by God’s grace or ‘Apart from God’ in Heb. 2:9” (149). In all three cases, the versions of the

Continued on page 10
A man I knew, a writer named Owen Greenly—of small but respectable reputation—told me over dinner one night that he had decided not to publish his new novella, whose critical scene contained two men, as he put it, “happily sodomizing each other.”

He said that he felt it necessary to await the death of his mother before allowing this novella to go public, despite his editor’s urgings to go ahead with it. I’d been introduced to Owen’s mother. She’d had him somewhat late in her life and was now nearly eighty. She was a bruiser, with thick bowed legs that looked like they would make short work of climbing over anyone in her way. But Owen didn’t see her like that. He spoke of her breathiness, her brittle bones, the vulnerable pink skin that showed under her scanty hair. It was as if he were describing a baby.

“The manuscript would kill her,” Owen said. He stroked his grizzled chin, lost in an idea for a moment. “She may in fact think I’m still a virgin.”

Cautiously, I decided against laughing. I had known Owen only a couple of months, and couldn’t yet count on his reactions, even though we had begun one of those friendships that felt close right away. We were at a cheap Greek restaurant, and when he brought his glass of wine to his mouth, his hands shook. Going back down towards the dingy tablecloth, they were even worse, but that didn’t stop him from nodding at the wine bottle in a way that conveyed I was to pour him one more.

“I wonder,” he continued, “if you can understand how shattered my mother would be if she were to read it?” He looked at me, gauging my ability to comprehend such a thing.

“But, of course,”—I felt ridiculous saying it—“your mother, being your mother, cannot be a complete stranger to sex.”

After a sip he said, “Lavinia’s idea of sex and mine share no common ground. I believe she was willing to undergo the experience leading to my existence only because there was no alternative. I am fairly sure she clutched her rosary while I was conceived. Whereas my sexual activities have produced nothing but my pleasure.”

“Maybe she’d surprise you,” I said.

Owen shook his head grimly. “She needs to be protected.”

“From?”

“From understanding me. From guessing what I’ve been up to.”

I watched Owen eat his gritty oysters—I could hear the sand grinding against his teeth—and refrained from arguing with him. To protest his reasons seemed too intrusive, too personal, and he himself seemed a little helpless to me—choking and spilling sauce on his tie, making too-polite and therefore ineffective attempts to gain the attention of the young and uniformly lovely wait staff.

If he wanted to put aside his manuscript, why shouldn’t he?
The next day I was at my desk, trying to write a letter to my father, but mostly thinking about Owen. It depressed me that people could be locked into such struggles with their parents. Or perhaps it depressed me that there was so little struggle, only the neat trade of his self-effacement for her unbroken comfort.

I imagined a scene: Owen and Lavinia, out for a wholesome country drive. Suddenly, their bountiful bucolic peace shatters when a religious billboard flashes by, stating bluntly the fate of sodomizers. Lavinia pales and grips her purse so tightly her fingernails whiten. Owen, seeing her distress, gestures towards the retreating billboard and says, “I always wondered what that word meant, didn’t you?” She smiles gratefully and leans back with relief, color returning to her face at the news of her aging son’s unbreached innocence. She resumes her enjoyment of the ride.

And Owen? What does he feel? Is it all just majestic trees and soft hillocks and lazy crisscrossing streams, or does his heart beat faster at his lie, as if at an attack to his body, a threat to his own outline? Does a wave of depression pin him that much more heavily to his seat?

“Everything’s fine here, Dad,” I wrote at the top of the page, and then got stuck, since that seemed to cover everything, in sort of the same way that a thick piece of tape applied over the mouth does. My pen had made blots on the paper and I seemed to be pressing harder than I meant to, as if to break through the crust of what father wanted to hear and down into the things I knew he didn’t.

Lavinia kept drifting into my mind. The time I met her she was wearing one of those transparent plastic rain bonnets tied over her puffy bluish hair. Inside that wavery old mind, I thought, is the information that men sometimes put their sexual organs into each other for purposes of pleasure or even love.

I knew she knew this. And yet, if this was the case, why couldn't Owen publish his novella? Was it so awful for her to know that he knew, too? Why must this fact of human existence, of Owen’s existence, remain forever unspoken between them? Why did she have the power to make Owen pretend? He was a grown man.

The next time I ran into Owen we went into a coffee shop and he told me a true story he’d overheard that he was thinking of stealing to turn into a book. It ran like this: A family named Smith had been living for a year on an island where they practiced a hermetic, rustic approach to existence with all that usually entails: stacks of woolen underwear, home-schooling around a big hand-carved oak table, badly-made sputtering beeswax candles—the whole bit.

After a year, during which she showed every indication of being all right with this program, their little girl, Veronica, began to scream bloody murder for playdates with friends and smooth peanut butter (the kind you don’t have to stir!) and real kindergarten and a pink canopy bed.

“The child is right, of course,” Owen said. “That peanut butter you have to stir is horrible. Drips oil all over the counter, rips the damn bread.”

“But what's holding that other kind together? It's just glued into an emulsion, an unnatural permanent emulsion. It's disgusting.”

“Well, we must each be true to our own selves when it comes to choosing peanut butter, if no where else in our lives,” he replied in a serious tone. He took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. “I don’t think this is what I ordered,” he said, peering into his cup suspiciously.

“Well, take it back then,” I said. “Or I’ll take it back for you if you want.”

“Oh no. I wouldn’t want to trouble them.” He glanced behind the counter at where the bored barista stood rubbing her arm, on which a newish-looking tattoo of a skull gleamed.

I watched Owen eat his gritty oysters—I could hear the sand grinding against his teeth—and refrained from arguing with him.

“They won’t care,” I said.

“Who am I,” said Owen, “to insist on my own way? I wasn’t raised to make a fuss.”

I shrugged. “So, will these Smith people give little Veronica her canopy bed and her hydrogenated peanut butter?” I asked. “Now that she’s made her feelings known?”

“Fat chance,” Owen said. “They are reeducating her
with a reward system of goat milk caramels and long tiring hikes in the woods."

“And as for what she wants?”

“She is being taught not to know what it is she wants,” he said bluntly, surprising me. I smiled at him, narrowing my eyes at his willingness to put it just that way, but he looked away. He took another sip of the coffee, and swallowed it slowly, almost painfully.

A few weeks later I was invited to the home of a woman named Yvonna who was hosting a small party. She was in the theater world. Owen had met her, and he told me he suspected her (in addition to her other vices) of being completely illiterate, since she was too frantic and high-strung to adjust her mind to the receptivity necessary for reading.

Anyway, at the party, the combination of central heating and some sort of retro alcoholic punch I was drinking made me very thirsty. I wandered into the kitchen to find some water. A sheet of paper was taped to the expensive, industrial-style refrigerator, obviously penned by Yvonna’s son, a tow-headed third-grader named Archie I had been briefly introduced to when I arrived. At the top of the page was the single word, “Affirmations,” and underneath were instructions to repeat this list three times a day without fail.

This was the list, in dutiful third-grade penmanship:

1. I don’t need a best friend.
2. I don’t need a dad.
3. At least I’m not dead.

It had been a long time since I had read anything nearly as good as this list. Nothing stood between the writer and the writer’s feelings. Nothing. It occurred to me that all the sound and fury of everything we try so hard to accomplish is effort put in the wrong direction. The only work that’s necessary is to undo everything, to scrape off and take apart and break down until we are left with whatever was there before we began, in such desperation, to cover it up.

THE NEXT TIME I RAN INTO OWEN WE WENT INTO A COFFEE SHOP AND HE TOLD ME A TRUE STORY HE’D OVERHEARD THAT HE WAS THINKING OF STEALING TO TURN INTO A BOOK.

It brought instantly to my mind the summer I was fifteen, when I told my father I wanted to write. I stumbled over the words, invaded by the bizarre idea that he had been given the foreknowledge that I would fail miserably, perhaps through some sort of official letter he had received on the subject and perused at length. He asked to see one of my stories, and I did give him one, after using almost half a bottle of liquid paper to remove anything I thought might upset him.

I handed him a lumpy, disjointed piece of prose, from which dry white flakes must have come loose as he read, exposing flashes of what I had wanted to cover. The story was about a quartet of teenaged mermaids who all drown on a beach while trying to become human. It ended with a kind of cinematic God’s-eye view of the beach and the flashing lights of the ambulances and the dead mer-bodies laid out “like bloated seals.” I can’t remember what he said after reading it. And really, who could blame him for not knowing what to say?

In the cab on the way home, I wondered about Yvonna. She had been so brave to allow her child’s feelings to be plastered on the front of her shiny industrial refrigerator—to accept little Archie Pye’s announcement of pain just as he gave it. Wouldn’t most parents have slipped those devastating affirmations into a drawer, seeing them as way too unsuitably revealing for company to glimpse?

I thought about what Owen had said about this woman’s possible illiteracy and it came to me why her acceptance might be so complete, so unruffled: Maybe she hadn’t actually absorbed Archie’s meaning. Maybe she took him literally, and concurred with the surface of his words: At least I’m not dead, he wrote, and in a sense that could be seen as a positive thought. Though I knew, from reading his affirmations myself, that he aimed them at his mother’s heart as an arrow seeks its mark.

A few days after Yvonna’s party I got a terrible call from a friend of Owen’s named Louis. He told me, as gently as he could, that Owen had died.

He had been starting down a staircase in his house when he had a heart attack. The image of him at the top of the stairs, not yet descending—for some reason I saw him holding his unpublished “happy sodomy” novella in his hands—was absolutely clear in my mind. Louis told me that Owen had spoken of me with fondness, as a new friend whose company he had been enjoying, and I cried a little when he said so.

At the service at Owen’s mother’s cramped old house, a number of people I didn’t know gave short speeches, of the formal kind that seem too polite to illustrate very well the living person they’re meant to comment on. Lavinia Greenly’s rooms were overheated, even given the cold. In addition to the percolating radiators there was an unnecessary fire blazing in the grate, so that people removed their suit jackets and openly fanned themselves. Out of the fire tiny shreds of blackened paper arose steadily, so that we had to sweat at them like flies. I watched them lift and hover, and wondered—and then worried that I already knew—exactly what it was that Lavinia had burnt to create such an effect.

My suspicions were confirmed when Louis approached...
William T. Vollmann is the Rob Zombie of American fiction, the novelist so fresh, strident and brilliant that everyone else seems like a garage band. Like Rob Zombie—the post-rock musician who always seems to be one paradigmatic guitar stroke ahead of the pack—Vollmann never rests on his laurels. A new Vollmann novel always seems to reinvent the novel-writing game.

Every generation has its own “difficult” novelist. The Lost Generation had Joyce. The Beats had Malcolm Lowry. We ’60s-era Baby Boomers had Pynchon. While today’s publishing industry continues its twenty-first-century project of manufacturing the perfect novel—a novel so easy to consume its taste and digestion would go unnoticed—the digital generation has embraced the very imperfect novelist William T. Vollmann as their Writer-to-Be-Reckoned-With.

Vollmann is attractive to young readers because of this perception of difficulty. Vollmann’s fans are enthused at the challenge of attempting one of his 700+ page novels the same way my generation got excited over the prospect of conquering Under the Volcano or Gravity’s Rainbow. I know this from having read several fanzine-type websites devoted to the Vollster. There is a website, for example, devoted to reading every one of Vollmann’s novels. The enthusiasts behind this effort are under the false impression that Vollmann has published over sixty books. They may find themselves having over-prepared for their ascent—not up Everest, but Mt. Hood.

Europe Central, Vollmann’s eighth novel, treads what was once a forbidden water: to write a war novel when the novelist has never fought in a war. The great war novelists of the past two centuries have always been soldiers themselves—Stendhal, Günter Grass, James Jones, Tim O’Brien. Vollmann has decided to breach the golden rule of war writing and write his own accounts of war, based not on an actual experience of soldiering, but scholarship. Vollmann has said in an interview that the motivation to write this novel was a personal one. As an American with German ancestry, he wished to confront the collective-guilt demon that had been haunting him. Whereas war novels have traditionally been composed out of a need to witness and depict, Vollmann had written Europe Central as an act of catharsis.

Europe Central sometimes has the feel of War and Peace with footnotes. Vollmann is often compared to Pynchon, an accurate comparison for what it’s worth, but this novel is obviously striving to be Tolstoyesque in its scale. While Europe Central doesn’t quite have the enormous cast of characters as War and Peace—what, five hundred?—it comes awfully close.

Vollmann’s novel tells the story of World War II from dozens of perspectives, all of them German or Soviet. The English, Italians, French, and Americans are all but absent in this telling. For an American writer to

**World War II, Duly Noted**

Review by Scott Dionne
omit the American story in retelling World War II seems a bit odd, but then this is part of Vollmann's M.O.
In the historical novel Argall (part of a seven-volume series on early American native history called Seven Dreams), for example, he tells the story of Jamestown in an Elizabethan voice. It is a bit of a shock to encounter an American tale told by an American in an imported voice. That he manages to pull this off—a sustained attempt to stay in Shakespearean mufti for hundreds of pages—is testament to genius at our language.

Europe Central is structured upon a clever parallelism, whereby eighteen sets of stories are told, with each set containing a Soviet tale and a German one. These tales he calls “Pincher Movements,” a clever pun as the stories sort of act as shock attacks on the nerves of the reader. This structure lends a dialogic force to the novel, as though the war were a surreal argument between two mythic giants locked in fierce, murderous debate in their mythic backyards. The novel is also paced differently than most war novels, which tend to try to freeze time in order to make sense of warfare. Europe Central tracks through the years of war in Central Europe at a bullet’s pace.

Most of the reviews that I have read on this novel have taken it at face value that the thirty-six tales express the same number of perspectives. However, I find that the voice in each of the tales is more or less the same as all the others. Although he may be telling a story from the perspective of, say, the Nazi Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, the story still has that characteristic Vollmann tone: one part Éric Bogosian, one part Spalding Gray, with a dash of Henry Rollins. This is fairly characteristic of Vollmann’s fiction, even his historical work. A Nazi officer recounting his work at a death camp in the smarmy, coolly detached voice of a Po-Mo performance artist...well, I would understand if this wasn’t your cup of tea.

If I had to nominate a serious fault in this novel, I’d point to the problem of its poly-voicedness. In what is obviously a noble attempt at creating a narrative of an entire world war from as many points of view as a single narrative can possibly gird, Vollmann has created a work of omniscience and harmonious tonality. While I sense he did not aim for this effect, it nonetheless all comes across sounding like Vollmann talking through thin masks of persona.

Speaking of tonality, what holds all these separate “Pincher Movement” storysets together is a meta-tale—the story of the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. Shostakovich’s story is played almost like a symphonic work of its own, with the smaller stories acting as interludes. The Russian composer makes for an ideal symbol for Vollmann’s novel. He represents modernism in all its complex facets. Two of his symphonies symbolize the yin and yang of life as a Soviet artist during the 1940s.

His Seventh Symphony, later titled The Siege of Leningrad, was approved by the Soviet authorities for its uplifting, patriotic rendition of Hitler’s attack on Leningrad in 1941 (unlike Vollmann, Shostakovich wrote his piece from personal experience; he was in Leningrad when the Germans attacked). Even Stalin liked the Seventh. Then there is the Eighth Symphony, written in ’43. By this point, Shostakovich, like many of his fellow Russians, were beginning to lose hope in both the war and Stalin’s grasp of reality. (Although only twenty-four months separated 1941 from 1943, in Russia they represented vastly different expectations about the war.) The undertones in the Seventh that suggested Stalin’s greatness gave way to overt tones of extremity and violence. It was this symphony that eventually led to Shostakovich’s being officially banned by Stalin. He would probably have met the same fate as many fellow artists and ended up in a gulag or with a bullet in the head, but because of his stature, Shostakovich received only the minor punishment of having his career ruined. (Stalin was superstitious about destroying larger-than-life artists; this is why a small handful of artists such as Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak were dealt with—relatively speaking—with kid gloves.)

The narrative on Shostakovich is, in my opinion, the strongest part of this novel, with his explications of the various symphonies, how their compositions were immediate expressions of Shostakovich’s intertwined private and social lives (he was involved in a triadic relationship with Elena Konstantinovskaya and the filmmaker Roman Karmen). Several reviewers of this novel have argued that the Shostakovish story is the weakest link in this novel, that Vollmann’s treatment of the love affair seems more a distraction than a contribution to the overall story. While it is true that Vollmann isn’t well suited for romance—there isn’t enough violence in it to keep him interested for long—for me Vollmann’s depiction of the intersecting stories of these Soviet artists, including the poet Anna
Akhmatova, how they struggled to keep some semblance of a private life, a romantic life, when all around them their ideals were crumbling down like the walls of Stalingrad, made the 811-page novel a worthwhile labor.

Indeed, I take the opposite stand from most reviewers of this novel. The war scenes seem the weakest, even though they represent a significant part of the tale. The section of Operation Barbarossa seems more like a cribbing from the history books that Vollmann is careful to cite in his notes. (One cannot accuse Vollmann of plagiarizing; he is more than willing to reveal to the reader every index card’s worth of notes he compiled for the making of this novel!) There is an interesting Pincher Movement story about Kurt Gerstein, the Nazi SS officer who was responsible for gas supplies to the death camps. Midway in the war, Gerstein, like practically every other military leader in this novel, loses his ideals. He then bravely tries to single-handedly sabotage the Holocaust by destroying shipments of Zyklon B, under the pretext that the gas had spoiled prior to shipment. Gerstein is one of the most unique and perplexing of Nazi personalities, and one can understand Vollmann’s fascination with Gerstein’s complex, ethically conflicted personality, not to mention his “edginess,” a character quality that fascinates Vollmann no end. But like many of the other military characters in this novel, Gerstein’s rendering is mostly for the sake of asserting Vollmann’s essential claim about the war: that it is difficult if not impossible to know exactly who is and isn’t morally culpable in times of war. The irony of this novel, which holds everything together like a girding iron, is that everybody from the top down—perhaps even Hitler and Stalin—seems in on the gruesome cosmic joke that this war is a foolish mistake of biblical proportion. For Vollmann, the Eastern Front was a war that rose up like a tidal wave and carried everyone off to a sea of madness. There were no survivors. While this novel is a meditation on war and morality, I found myself, ironically, reflecting on the morality of the novelist. On the surface, one may regard a footnoted war novel to be an exercise in literary ethics. Surely a novelist who bothers to note his sources is doing something right? But by including citations and documentation, the line between history and fiction is blurred, sometimes to an aggravating degree. Where Vollmann has chosen to cite and document a source for the sake of historical accuracy, I find an escape into willing suspension of belief. Where he has omitted a citation, I become skeptical of the veracity of the scene, which is a meddlesome intrusion into the reading experience. An example:

In the Pincher Movement titled “The Second Front,” V. I. Chuikov, Marshal of the Soviet Union, the “hero of Stalingrad,” who—once examining troop movements of the German enemy—finds an Achilles’ heel, smiles, and then quotes a couple of lines from the poet Marina Tsvetaeva:

“You can’t withstand me, for I’m everywhere at dawn, beneath the earth, in breath, in bread! I’m omnipresent. That’s how I’ll win your lips!

The minor officer that Chuikov recites this snippet to hides his wince, for Tsvetaeva is officially on Stalin’s black list of corrupted authors. It’s a great little scene, its irony capturing the futility of Sovietism—even the demi-gods of the Soviet Union sometimes f-up! But did it really happen? This scene receives its customary footnote (there are over sixty pages of notes to this novel, by the way), but only to inform the reader that Vollmann has decided to truncate the lines of the poem. What is missing here is a note on the historical truth of this scene between Chuikov and his underling. Had there been no footnotes whatsoever, I wouldn’t have had to wrestle with this quandary. Indeed, as one reads this huge book, he is, page after page, forced to grapple with this question.

It has become something of a fashion these days to include footnotes in novels. Vollmann is by no means alone in this habit. As a reader, I prefer them out. They spoil the fun of the historical novel. I want my novels imagined, not documented. I assume novelists are doing their homework and I don’t need to see their
works cited page to give them their credit. But the cat’s out of the bag—footnotes are all the fashion now. Whether it is a fad that sticks remains to be seen.

It is an understatement to say that Vollmann is a prolific writer. Since October 11th of 2005, he has published four books. (One has to go by months, not years, when charting Vollmann’s course of publications. For example, between October 11th and November 14th of 2005, two books were released.) It wouldn’t surprise me if another is released shortly after I finish writing this piece. Which raises what I perceive as a problem with his work: a haunting sense that the work is only partial in its completion. What I call the “Vollmann Effect” is the feeling one gets after reading one of his big-mamma novels that the novel, as impressive as it may be, is mostly the fulfillment of a conceit or strategy—a working out of an idea for a truly great novel. As impressed as I am with Europe Central, I have to confess that what I’m left with is the strong impression of Vollmann’s ability to create a symphonic unity out of so many different stories. To make something atonal—a world war—into something tonal. It’s quite a feat. I am both impressed and untouched. I won’t be rereading the novel.

Vollmann was able to arrange an almost unheard-of contract for the making of Europe Central: there was to be no editorial laying-on-of-hands when he submitted the manuscript. Penguin agreed to the stipulation. Vollmann was concerned that any sort of editorial reworking of his text would alter the novel’s exceptionally unique personality traits. Europe Central paradoxically makes both the case that Vollmann is a confident, amazingly skilled writer who can write an epic novel solo and that editors are an indispensable member of the composing/publishing team.

I am planning to reread Ian McEwan’s staggering novel Atonement. It too is a war novel written by a writer who never experienced war. Unlike his American peer Vollmann, McEwan has spared the reader the footnote.

I should clarify that Atonement is not technically a war novel; only a section of the book treats war, the tragedy of Dunkirk. This section, however, is such an exceptional piece of war writing it could practically stand alone as its own novella. McEwan plays a much safer, more conventional game with his war fiction—limited third person pov, social realism, etc. But it is also some of the best fiction writing I’ve read in years.

In the last issue of The Sylvania Review, I left off with the question “Does William T. Vollmann deserve consideration for the Nobel Prize in Literature?” He certainly deserves our respect. Few writers are taking the chances he is taking. But if I were to magically appear on the Swedish Academy’s committee—what fun that would be!—I would have to wrestle with how Vollmann’s work tends to leave me cold. Aren’t novels supposed to strike both pathos and logos chords in us? It would also seem irresponsible to give Vollmann the nod when I believe deep down in my heart that Ian McEwan is the greater writer. Even if he isn’t the cutting edge.

**MISQUOTING JESUS**

*Continued from page 3*

New Testament we commonly read, based on external and internal evidence, are not the original versions. Jesus does respond angrily to the man with the skin disease; he didn’t sweat blood on the Mount of Olives; he died apart from god. These are serious alterations and influence our understanding of Christian theology. Esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, we have been misinformed.

Manuscript changes, some of which were incorporated into the Bibles we read, were, not surprisingly, influenced by social forces and issues operating at the time: the role of women, the conflict between Jews and Christians, the influence of paganism, and the beliefs of Christian sects. The 1 Corinthians passage (14:33-36) which famously abjures women to keep quiet in church and ask their husbands if they want to know anything is thrown into doubt by the internal evidence. The passage appears in different places in Corinthians 14 in different manuscripts and, as well, it does not fit in its immediate context, a discussion of the role of Christian prophets. Several other anti-women changes seem to have been alterations of the originals as well, if the manuscripts closest to the originals are, indeed, more trustworthy. We see that the phrase, “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11, Luke 3:23), was likely changed from “You are my son, today I have begotten you” in order to counter the Ebionite belief that Jesus was adopted by god and taken...
Continued from page 6

the group I was standing with and mentioned that he had delivered all of Owen’s manuscripts, including the unpublished novella, to Lavinia the day before.

Because there were so many people with “artistic temperaments” present, there was a feeling that it was expected of us, a mandatory duty, to talk of sex at a memorial service. We discussed a new film that was being released—one we agreed was interesting only because of its aggressive sexuality. Then Louis told us a story about when he was a teenager and he and his friends got ahold of an illustrated pornographic booklet from the aptly named Netherlands. When he came home from school and went to his room to find it, he saw that the booklet had been moved from where he had

concealed it. It could only mean his mother had come across it, since his father never entered his room. Louis deduced she must have encountered it while dusting.

He was so horrified by the idea that his mother knew her son was looking at these outrageously filthy pictures that he went to the trouble of writing a fake essay to make his possession of the pamphlet look like part of a school project. The title he came up with for this essay—he was thrilled that he still remembered it—was: “A Closer Look at Pornography: Threat or Menace?” He then carefully arranged this fake essay, with its title visible, on the living room coffee table under a stack of schoolbooks, so that his mother would see it.

After Louis left I went to put my wineglass in the sink.People were leaving and outside it had begun to snow. Through the window I watched the beautiful rise and fall of the flakes as the air currents buoyed them. It was falling thicker by the moment, and those bundling into their cars put hands to their brows as if that would help them see. My mind was full of questions:

1. Did Louis’ difficult, casual arrangement of his essay on the living room table work? Did a great flood of relief course through his mother’s heart?

2. Is the story really about Louis’ mother, or even mothers in general? Or is it about the self-concealment with which we all sometimes hold our relationships together—horribly, unnaturally, sort of the way Frankenstein’s head is held together with rusting bolts in old cartoons?

3. When, at what moment, does it become clear to some children that their life’s work will be creating a false self that a parent will love?

The snow grew thicker and people began to leave, worried about navigating home through the whiteout, afraid of not seeing what was right in front of their faces until it was too late.

Lavinia, a strange square lace handkerchief over her head (Owen once said: “Does she think she’s a table?”), kept urging the last of us to stay and to eat more food. She pushed a piled-up plate into my hands, though I protested. I picked at little rounds of soft dough filled with potatoes and thought about Owen and how kind he was.

I wondered if there were any way to let Lavinia know what I suspected her of, but it was beyond me. She was acting the way that some people do after funerals, maybe in the first flush of being released from all duties.

He would wait to be himself until later, when to do so would not threaten anyone.

Lavinia, a strange square lace handkerchief over her head (Owen once said: “Does she think she's a table?”), kept urging the last of us to stay and to eat more food. She pushed a piled-up plate into my hands, though I protested. I picked at little rounds of soft dough filled with potatoes and thought about Owen and how kind he had been.

I wondered if there were any way to let Lavinia know what I suspected her of, but it was beyond me. She was acting the way that some people do after funerals, maybe in the first flush of being released from all duties.
to the beloved. She had gathered those of us that were left into the kitchen and was herself eating from a large plate, her cheeks bulging. She looked youthful, far away from dying, and I had the crazy, stricken thought that maybe she had eaten Owen's novella and grown strong on it, the way people used to believe that the flesh of their enemies, if they could obtain it, would make them invincible.

When I left I looked back towards the windows of the house as I got into my car. Owen had made a gamble, and the gamble was this: He would wait to be himself until later, when to do so would not threaten anyone. But his later never came. Through the veil of the curtains I saw Lavinia's figure, now alone, still seated at the table.

She was the audience he cared most about, the one for whom he really wrote, and perhaps she had been right to burn the novella after she read it, since no one else could be as pierced by it as she. I could see that she was bent over, holding her head in her hands, and I wished—is this cruel?—that he had lived to see this moment.

COMING IN THE FALL 2007 ISSUE OF THE SYLVANIA REVIEW:
LeCarre’s Literary Masterpiece

CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES

Scott Dionne is a descendent of the ancient Gauls, which explains why he never tires of cassoulet, a decent vin de pays, and Georges Simenon novels. Like most French people, he is slightly constipated in a well read sort of way. He takes reading books and listening to good music very seriously. For him, putting out The Sylvania Review is purely an act of passion, which seems very French.

Tim Barnes has taught in the PCC English Department since 1986. On his sabbatical in 2004-2005, he read the Old Testament, New Testament, and all the Apocrypha. He has recently returned to being the chair of the PCC Sylvania Creative Writing Department.

Ron Ross has taught writing and literature at PCC since 1999. He's been writing poetry since his first girlfriend left him; it's gotten a little better.

Maria Caruso has won a number of awards for her writing, including an Oregon Literary Arts Award and an Ian St. James Short Fiction Award. She lives with her husband and daughter in Portland.