

American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease

William T. Vollmann

“Approximately 90% of neoplasms originate within 2 cm of the anterior midline of the mouth.”
—Dr. Rodney Million and Dr. Nicholas J. Cassisi, *Management of Head and Neck Cancer: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1984), p. 251.

As this quotation shows, the mouth is a veritable fount of pestilence, vomiting forth its unclean words to infect all who are not armored with ignorance and earwax. Worse still is when the virus is sealed into a cartridge, positioned with a click of the pen-button, and squeezed through the ball-point onto a sheet of permanence, where spores of words wait gleefully for library centuries until they can attack new victims. Of course there are also saintly books which heal us with word-light; yet these are now sparse. Indeed, the American scene suffers from a plague of writers careless and even putrid. With the assistance of many learned doctors of oral and anal health, I now propose to set forth our responsibility, and some rules for reform.

This first requires that I set right all the woes of the world.

The Failure of American Society

It is a commonplace that our United States are in decline. On the part of our government we have at best a shortsighted reactive strategy to specific events, lacking in any vision which might influence basic causes. As for the governed, our apathy and misinformation grow hourly. The terrifying increase in random violence and racism of all colors bespeaks a nation polarized halfway to impotence. From homelessness to schools where nothing is taught, from impending environmental disaster to continued environmental assault, our failures illuminate us as Selves incapable of comprehending others.

Our policy toward Nicaragua demonstrates that we cannot put ourselves in a Nicaraguan's shoes. Our laughable War On Drugs does not address the question of why people use drugs, or what people might do instead. Our suppression of abortion is not even hypocritical; it is simply, astoundingly, blind. And we truly have the “leadership” we deserve, for when we see the Other, what do we do?—Suppose that you do not rent whores, and a whore approaches you in the night-lit street, brave and desperate. Suppose that a member of some cult sets out to convert you. Suppose that someone begs you for money.—No, suppose simply that someone sits down beside you in your subway car and begins to talk to you. In how many cases will you answer?

The Failure of Humanity

To fail this test is only human. But survival and happiness depend on knowledge. And knowledge can only be obtained through openness, which requires vulnerability, curiosity, suffering.

The vicious Christian ignoramuses who are determined to end abortions in our country are cousins to the Muslims who preach murder, the Maoists who restore order in China beneath their tank-treads, the terrorists who shoot tourists in Peru or Sri Lanka. These will have their day, because they use force. But ultimately they will be defeated by force, and it will be a force they do not know. Why? Precisely because they will not know the Other. As long as they do not know it, how can they guard against it?

We must take care not to be like them. How can we best do this? By knowing them. By understanding without approving or hating. By empathizing.

How best to do this?

The Glorious Ice-Cream Bar

Through art.*

[* Here one might argue that it would be more efficient simply to be GOD, or failing that, to join the CIA. However, the first is not within our power. As for the second, it has now been established that our spooks are wrong as often as our meteorologists.]

A Rhapsody of Desserts

Art takes us inside other minds, like a space capsule swooping down across Jupiter while the passengers can see strangeness and newness through the portholes, meanwhile enjoying all the comforts of Standard Temperature and Pressure.

Of all the arts, although photography *presents* best, painting and music *convey* best, and sculpture looms best, I believe that literature *articulates* best.

THE PRESCRIPTION (WHICH MUST INEVITABLY SOUND DULL, LIKE A DOCTOR'S COMMAND TO TAKE MORE EXERCISE)

We need writing with a sense of purpose.

Generic Drugs Rejected

What about beautifully useless books, like the French *Maldoror*?—They too have their place. But there is too much writing, nowadays that is useless WITHOUT being beautiful.—On the other side are those scarcely mentionable works which strive to be useful and fail in proportion to be beautiful: “socialist realism.” In our own country we rarely fall into that mistake, but it does happen, as in the spots where *The Grapes of Wrath* is mildewed.

In this period of our literature we are producing mainly insular works, as if all our writers were on an airplane in economy seats, beverage trays shading their laps, faces averted from one another, masturbating furiously. Consider, for instance, the *New Yorker* fiction of the past few years, with those eternally affluent characters suffering understated melancholies of overabundance. Here the Self is projected and replicated into a monotonous army which marches through story after story like deadly locusts. Consider, too, the structuralist smog that has hovered so long over our universities, permitting only games of stifling breathlessness. (The so-called New Historicism promises no better.)

So how ought writers fulfill their role, and *accomplish* something?

The Rules

1. We should never write without feeling.
2. Unless we are much more interesting than we imagine we are, we should strive to feel not only about Self, but also about Other. Not the vacuum so often between Self and Other. Not the unworthiness of Other. Not the Other as a negation or eclipse of Self. Not even about the Other exclusive of Self, because that is but a trickster-egoist's way of worshiping Self secretly. We must treat Self and Other as equal partners. (Of course I am suggesting nothing new. I do not mean to suggest anything new. Health is more important than novelty.)
3. We should portray important human problems.
4. We should seek for solutions to those problems. Whether or not we find them, the seeking will deepen the portrait.
5. We should know our subject, treating it with the respect with which Self must treat Other. We should know it in all senses, until our eyes are bleary from seeing it, our ears ring from listening to it, our muscles ache from embracing it, our gonads are raw from making love to it. (If this sounds pompous, it is perhaps because I wear thick spectacles.)
6. We should believe that truth exists.
7. *We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves.*

William T. Vollmann's books include Rising Up and Rising Down (McSweeney's) and Europe Central (Viking).