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The handwriting is on the wall for some

A way for those without power to find a 'voice.'

"To be is to do," Socrates. "To be or not to be," Shakespeare. "To do is to be," Sartre. "Do be do be do," Sinatra.

You might think such universal wisdom drawn from 25 centuries of western intellectual experience could only be acquired from specialized reference works in a university library. You would be half right. I learned all this in the early '80s in the Thomas Library at Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia. But my source was an anonymous hand that had succumbed to an irrepressible impulse to express these thoughts in magic marker on the walls of the ground floor men's room.

Graffiti can be defined simply as messages written where they shouldn't be. We generally associate graffiti with marginalized people who take to the walls of buildings, restrooms, underpasses and subway cars in order to let others know that they are alive and what they are thinking. Often our lives would be no poorer without such knowledge.

Graffiti empower the dispempowered. They can be innocently humorous, such as the Bryn Mawr graffito, which shares with us the writer's views on the decline of culture and reveals him, or his own unacknowledged source, to have a modicum of learning, wit and style. They can be offensively sexist, like some graffiti I read in the men's room of the old Antone's on Guadalupe. Or they can be frightening and aggressive, like the gang graffiti sprayed in the halls of the decaying apartment building in the Bronx where I lived for a year.

If we believe the Bible (Daniel 5:1-30), God uses the last kind of graffiti. At a luxurious feast for his nobles, wives and concubines, Babylonian King Belshazzar was horrified to see a detached hand scrawling a cryptic message on the fine plaster walls of his royal palace: "MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN." Daniel provided the exegesis. Belshazzar's days had been numbered by God, and the number was less than one.

The earliest uses of graffiti in literate western culture are surprising. The first graffiti, beginning ca. 750 B.C., are written by members of the elite, mostly in the context of symposia. A symposium combined the drinking of a fraternity party with the debauchery of a men's club and the intellectual exchange of a monthly reading group. Or it might be the other way around.

One such graffito was scratched by a self-styled wit onto a wine cup found on Ischia in the Bay of Naples. It identifies the cup as the famous cup of Homeric king Nestor, a cup so large only heroes of Nestor's generation could lift it. The graffito announces that whoever lifts the Ischia cup will win a prize: Aphrodite will torment him with sexual desire.

In modern Athens, unlike Austin, public graffiti is highly politicized and color-coded. This is consistent with the idea that two Greeks discussing politics constitute three political parties. Red stands for communists, green for socialists, blue for center rightists. The far right eschews graffiti altogether. Ultraconservative royalists nostalgically write ZETO O BASILEUS, "Long Live the King." The king has long lived in exile. Anarchists use black paint for a witty variation: ZETO EGO. Read correctly, the message is existential: "I am searching." Read ungrammatically, it is a kind of intertextual pun: "Long Live Me!" The closest thing I have seen to political graffiti outdoors in Austin is stencilled in red spray paint on the sidewalk outside Rowell's Boot Repair in Hyde Park. It declares: "TODOS SOMOS NINJAS." And I thought all of us in Hyde Park were liberals.

In modern Austin, you'll find no graffiti in the men's rooms at the Four Seasons, Headliners, or C.C.'s at Windsor and Exposition. I have checked all three in the past month. These places are frequented by empowered folks. But step into the men's room at Quack's in Hyde Park and you'll find many political and cultural graffiti. One now on display features the spelling 'seudo-intellectual,' corrected by a second hand as 'swado.'

The spelling may get better at the University of Texas, but graffiti still reflect social stratification. There are no graffiti in the plush restrooms near the athletic director's skybox in Royal Memorial Stadium, the provost's office in the UT Tower or various dean's offices in splendidly remodeled Gebauer Hall. But in the decrepit men's room on the ground floor of Waggener Hall, where philosophy and Classics are housed and taught, you can read "Ivory Towers Are Empty and Useless, But Extremely Powerful." The guy spells OK, but he has a lot to learn about modern life.

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