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York's graffiti: hidden genius or rude vulgarity?

Leora Aisenberg

Societies are often measured by the written words they produce. These words, be they found in a literary masterpiece or on a bathroom wall, build a lasting impression out of ephemeral creativity.

Self-expression on walls is not a modern phenomenon. However, since the days of caveman drawings and Egyptian hieroglyphics, the state of the art seems to have declined to "for a good time call Ralph".

One need only occupy a stall in the men's washroom to discover that the merits of graffiti are debated by the "artists" themselves.

Graffiti, contends one writer, is an art form, and hence might benefit society greatly "if exhibited at appropriate venues".

According to John Becker, the Vice-President of Student Affairs, the most objectionable graffiti surfaces in the tunnel, where certain sections are regularly repainted.

The University's general policy dictates that anyone caught damaging property must pay for it. However, Becker noted, "we rarely catch the culprits."

"Since about three or four years ago, the spate of objectionable graffiti seems to have abated considerably," he added.

While the incidence of derogatory dicta may have declined, general scribbling seems to be on the upswing:

Ann Landers advice

● Although this kind of graffiti

is a more common sight in female quarters, dilemmas such as "Help! I'm in love with a married man" and "should I continue to fake orgasms?" are typical examples.

I need a hero

● Located for the most part in the tunnel, this bland fare egresses from the minds of those who wear their favorite rock groups emblazoned on their chests and pride themselves on being hangman experts. Standard examples include "Frank Zappa lives", "Take off, eh", and "Scotty, beam me up".

Locker room

● Remember the boys in sixth grade who blew up prophylactics and then burst them like balloons? They are the ones writing those goodies unfit to print, and the girls are no less lewd. This is only a mild sample: "She offered her honor, he honored her offer, and all night long he was on her and off her."

Pseudo-profound

● Judging by the calibre of penmanship and depth of meaning, these idioms are probably written by frustrated students who feel the need to refute their cerebral inadequacies.

Such witticisms include: "Iggy is God's concubine", "Wait for the Puritan revival", "Video is the life of our death", and "Sisyphus is a pusher".

"Anti-generic" brand

● The most conventional kind of graffiti is comprised of hearts, sometimes adorned with arrows, which contain inscriptions such as "Bob loves Darryl" or "Kathy

and Leroy 4-ever". Sometimes these self-confessed lovers progress to full-fledged statements: "Live for now, the happiness of the moment, or else your love will become tangled in a web of detail."

Why do people derive pleasure from writing their name, or for that matter, anything, on the wall? As Psychology professor David Wiesenthal asserts, "No one really knows."

Wiesenthal notes that "there really isn't much in the way of hard fact"; most of the research that exists is speculative.

One theory suggests that graffiti is a method of "expressing territoriality" — delineating one's personal space. Another proposes that writing on walls is a way to "lash out against an oppressive social system."

Prof. Wiesenthal points out, these theories are based on studies of crowded urban settings, and are far more applicable to a New York ghetto than to York University.

Whatever the reasons behind it, the psychology professor does not find York graffiti especially enlightening. The only example he liked was found on a condom machine: "This chewing gum tastes awful."

Awful taste may in fact be the norm for graffiti practitioners. Some critics contend that the writing on the wall renders the language impure.

The word "graffiti" is a case in point; although it is in actuality the plural form of "graffito", graffiti is today used as the singular.

Nevertheless, the graffiti debate continues. Is it the poetry of hidden geniuses or the rude scrawl of vulgaritarians?

Perhaps this ambivalence is best exemplified by the washroom scribe who wrote: "I object to all graffiti."

Libertarians urge a new and liberated lifestyle

Mike Guy

"The end should be the maximum feasible liberty," Peter Danielson says when explaining his Libertarianism. "When there is a conflict between liberty and another value, liberty comes first."

Professor Danielson feels he is a rare political animal among York faculty, claiming that most of York's professors are more socialist in their views. Libertarianism is an ultra-right political view; one which resulted when some 19th century liberals became more statist.

"The government's only function in society," said Danielson, "is to protect people from violence, fraud and coercion." In the libertarian society, individuals would be free to engage in prostitution, unlawful drug use, homosexuality, and any other activities that do not bring harm to others.



Evan Adelman

Libertarian Peter Danielson.

"The government should not tell people what to use their money for," said Danielson, adding that, if the drug addict becomes ill or dies as a result of his heavy drug taking, it is unfortunate, but the government should not have the right to restrict anyone's liberty to abuse drugs."

Another right which the Libertarian denies the government is the power of taxation — even for welfare purposes. Danielson states that, "Libertarians are not against the poor. We just feel that people should not be forced to pay taxes. If money fell from the heaven, we would happily give to those in need."

It seems that massive

incidents of poverty would result in the Libertarian's world. But Danielson reasons that this does not have to be so, since there are many who give to charity, and there are usually family members to give assistance. Realizing that poverty will be with us forever, the Libertarian does not try to fight it.

Not all Libertarian ideas are revolutionary. Some concepts are evolutionary — aimed at working within the system until it changes — such as tolerating the government and its taxation programmes, as in the case of the voucher system. At present, the government collects taxes for schools, then provides education services. Under the voucher system, the government would continue to pay taxes, but would not have to provide the services. With education taxes that the government receives, it could give each family a one thousand-dollar voucher for each school age child, leaving entrepreneurs to supply the schooling service.

"Just as families shop for clothing and food, they would have to shop for the proper school for their children," explains Danielson.

Another evolutionary libertarian concept is the "rush hour remedy." An article written by R.S. Taylor titled "Rush Hour Remedy", in the Libertarian magazine, *Reason*, explains that pricing could prevent traffic congestion. Citing the traffic situation in Singapore as proof, *Reason* says that if motorists had to pay a toll in order to travel via the main highways during the peak hours, fewer people would drive. "Singapore, a city plagued by chronic traffic congestion, had the amount of its rush hour motorists decrease from sixty-five per cent to forty per cent, within seven years," said Taylor.

It is quite possible that the libertarian society of maximum liberty may one day exist; whether it comes about by revolutionary or evolutionary methods is not significant. As Danielson says, "All things are possible. Libertarians have faith in the power of ideas, and through ideas we try to make people aware of the constraints on their liberty, hoping they will act."

Hoser contest update



Welcome back to Excalibur's Bob and Doug Short Beer Writing Contest. For all you anxious beer-heads who have been doing the hozer routine on us, we'll be announcing the winners in the first issue after Reading week.