

Reflexive Graffiti

Certainly we all admit to being readers of contemporary graffiti, and occasionally we may go further and attempt to discuss and analyze what we see. Most published considerations tend to be classificatory if descriptive, sociological if analytical, psychological if speculative. We know that location in large part determines the kind of graffiti one will find: messages generated by relatively stable and local populations are predominantly situational and impersonal, except for the usual sexual solicitations. Messages written by transient visitors, found in highway and mass transportation facilities, national parks and monuments, tourist attractions, and the like, tend to locate their authors within the codes of identity, space, and time (i.e., "*Bill Brown from San Antonio, March 22, 2006*").

Furthermore, we have observed that contemporary graffiti tend of focus either upon their context (restrooms with activities associated with bodily functions, classroom desks with the phenomena of boredom, institutional walls with reactions to bureaucracy, public telephones with solicitation messages, and so on) or the identity and qualities of their authors. The one category communicates information about the nature of the social and imaginative worlds inhabited by the inscribers; the other elaborates upon the nature of the inscribers themselves.

If graffiti is allowed any textual status at all, it is as epigrammatic wit. The author-inscribers, unnamed or else hidden within opaque names of unfamiliar strangers, make poor subjects for speculation; they become the unknown and hence unknowable givens behind a text studied by itself without further concern for whomever generated it. With most graffiti, concerns of authorship are irrelevant to enjoyment of the text, but for some graffiti a biographical query may be the central question the text evokes.

Although graffiti is generally viewed in sociological or psychological terms, it is also profitable to think of it in terms of archeology and autobiography. Studying graffiti is abstract archeology, recreating the unseen from its remaining traces. In attempting to intuit unseen human predecessors from fragments of the past, we can attempt to recover the missing consciousness with as much confidence, humility, and tentativeness as archeologists claim when making ancient societies appear from their pot shards and kitchen middens. What is most interesting for me is studying the interrelationship between present readers/viewers and past text, or, as often happens, past graffiti writers who live through their texts.

Unlike members of ancient civilizations, whose garbage heaps and burial grounds were not created with future observers in mind, graffiti writers, of whatever civilization, by their act of public inscription, obviously are interested in constituting themselves as writers, thereby designating all who follow, as readers. In this sense all graffiti can be considered autobiographical fragments, albeit frequently anonymous autobiography. This perspective considers the peculiar experience of reading graffiti, often like eavesdropping on the most intimate and unguarded moments of another person. Much graffiti holds this autobiographical interest for the reader, even with the author forever unknown, for in one sense the graffitic text is

not only fragmentary evidence of a life but it is also the complete, whole, and total available evidence of this life. We may know very little, but that little is all we ever can know.

The subtleties of the original writer's relations to unknown future readers are especially interesting. Beyond the exhibitionism, defiance, and indulgence any graffitic act signals, those graffiti that use the subjective pronoun "I" in any way, identifying their authors as part of their message, emphasize the autobiographical dimension and thereby create for readers a peculiar paradox which has not been considered before.

The simplest kind of such self-consciously autobiographical graffiti, which we might call self-graffiti, uses "I" but is otherwise specific in its reference. "*I love Mary Smith,*" for example, merely replaces the lover's public and legal name with the anonymous – but for the writer identical – referential term. In fact, John Doe, Mary Smith's lover, is more likely to think of himself as "I" than as "John Doe," so his graffito is more the public inscription of a private thought than a bold announcement of his passion. Were Mary to see this writing she would never be certain who so truly loved her, and she might, in fact, have sharp words for John evading responsibility for his love—unless, of course, she suspected the "I" might not be John but someone else.

Mary never can know for sure, however, and her potential dilemma helps us to focus upon the special nature of all "I"-subject graffiti. "I" is what linguists call a shifter; its peculiar characteristic is that the term has no reference outside its immediate usage, and is, itself, entirely impersonal and even irresponsible. The "I" who loves Mary Smith is potentially everyone who reads the sentence, for the "I" of the graffito merges indistinguishably with the "I" of the reader's own self-referential usage, so that even though the reader may not know a Mary Smith, or not the Mary Smith, or if knowing a or the Mary Smith may not actually love her, reading the graffito involves the reader, at least during the act of reading, in the same commitment of language (if not feeling) that John Doe, the original writer, must have felt., (Unless of course John Doe didn't mean this Mary Smith, or didn't really love her, etcetera.)

The question of the specificity of language is important in determining reader response to graffiti, but no simple correlations are possible. Although in the example just discussed "I" is capable of shifting reference, and Mary Smith is extremely specific, the possibility of there being more than one person named Mary Smith, with each Mary Smith having multiple admirers, creates a situation in which the unspecified "I" is more specific than the specified "Mary Smith." In this sentence "I" can only apply to one who both loves a Mary Smith, a rather small class, and who has written or read this message upon the wall, an even smaller grouping. The Mary Smiths of the world are too numerous and undifferentiated to be identified by this graffito, except when their individual admirers write or read such public declarations.

An example such as "*I did it,*" that contains unspecific terms as both subject and complement, must be read as being so specific that it can refer only to a single person, the graffito's author, who "did" whatever "it" may have been. If "I" refers to writing "I did it" on the walls, then we

have an example of what I shall call self-conscious graffiti, in which the writer's awareness of her or himself as author forms part of the inscribed message.

Robert Reisner and Lorraine Wecheler in *Encyclopedia of Graffiti* (Macmillan, New York, 1974) quote this example: "*I am here and you isn't / Now you is here and I isn't*" (p.198). In this example, reasonably clever but not terribly complicated, there can be no confusing the reference of the "I" and "you" unless the reader surrenders existential status. The "I" who was here can only refer to the original writer, unlike the "I" who loved Mary Smith who may apply to different individuals. This "I" wrote and is gone, as duly noted, identifying him or herself specifically, although anonymously.

In this example it is the term "you" that floats from reader to reader, for each new reader becomes, while reading, the specific reference of the graffito and while so identified is placed in a very definite relationship with the unknown but singular "I"-author of the text.

A second example Reisner and Wecheler quote is even more interesting in its self-awareness, for here the very identity of the writer depends upon the lack of identity of the "I" pronoun: "*I am anonymous, help me*" (p.198). The anonymous "I" is identified only by its awareness of its anonymity; the command "help me" doesn't even write out the implied "you" that would be the reader—any and every reader. Using "I" to replace a proper name usually frees the text from the limits of the specific, but as we can see, at the same time it maintains the reader's awareness that there is only one individual, the actual writer, to whom the term "I" really belongs. The unnamed writer has chosen anonymity, for whatever reasons, but remains as individual and specified as if actually named.

In this second example the text denies the possibility of naming while reinforcing the inevitability of the writer's uniqueness, for here only an "I" who is not only anonymous in the context of this inscription but anonymous as his or her very claim to identity can be rightfully linked to this text. We have, by considering anonymity the primary fact of existence, and not merely the circumstance of inscription—a reading heightened by the undifferentiated cry for help—identified the actual "I" as an absolutely unique although eternally unknown individual. When perusing this message a reader is not likely to internalize it, or let its "I" overlap or blend with the reader's "I," because the command calls attention to the reader's role in this conceptual interaction, and the final reference to "me," if applied by the new reader to him or herself, would shift the entire message into a new dimension in which the reader acknowledges anonymity and appeals externally for help. This is unlikely, for the reader's identity and self awareness has been heightened by the unwritten "you" of the "[you] help me" command. The self-conscious "I" is thus only potentially a shifter—in these examples we can see that it has a specific, although unknown, reference.

What I term reflexive graffiti does not obey these limitations, and in defying them makes the awareness of self transcend the individual writer and apply, at least potentially, to every reader. The simplest example of this category is "*I am here,*" a deceptively simple assertion of identity by the original writer. Although we know this statement was the work of a specific individual,

her or his anonymity is not self-consciously specified as it was in the "*I am anonymous, help me*" example quoted before, so that the "I" of this example is genuinely free to shift from reader to reader. The present tense used here makes the assertion "I am here" as true and valid for every reader as it was for the original writer, so reading this graffiti becomes an acknowledgement of present, an affirmation of location, and an assertion of identity for the reader. Every reader cannot help but identify his or her "I" with this trace left by the anonymous and absent original author, and in repeating the original assertion the reader merges with the consciousness of the original author, differentiated only by the detail of not actually having made the inscription. Thus, even though it is unlikely that without this message later visitors to the location would assert themselves in this precise way, its written existence forces all subsequent readers to perform this act of identity. Such a graffiti thereby establishes a continuously evolving transfer of immediacy and identity despite the actual distance and separation from author to reader.

Reflexive graffiti are distinguished from self-conscious graffiti by the reference of the graffiti's predicate. In reflexive graffiti the predicate refers to the act of, or circumstances surrounding, the reading of the graffiti's text, and by so doing enables readers to apply the unspecified "I"-subject as well as the activity indicated by the predicate to themselves and their own situations.

Considered in other terms, the autobiographical act of the original author is read by subsequent readers as a biographical clue, something true for all examples of graffiti, but it also is read simultaneously, and even more powerfully, as an unavoidably autobiographical act for the reader. The original act involved writing, the subsequent ones consist of reading, but the content is identical. Of course the intentions differ: writing "I am here" is conscious autobiography; reading some else's "'I am here'" begins as conscious analytical biography but simultaneously becomes an assertion of one's own autobiographical awareness. What can be seen almost as a trap actually serves as a powerful communication, and almost a communion. The distant unknown author continually shares with his or her readers the most fundamental bond of identity and self-assertion, so that the sharing of the "I" breaks down whatever distance and time separates the two individuals, even beyond the grave. This "I am here" message, if not a guarantee of immortality, certainly qualifies as a potentially endless re-evocation and rebirth for its author, despite its actually anonymity and deferral of identity.

A similar message cast in the past tense, "*I was here*," is also interesting for the complex relationship it establishes with its readers. For clarification it can be compared with two grammatically comparable examples, "*Joe Smith was here*," and the famous "*Kilroy was here*" graffiti of World War II. Kilroy, of course, is a unique example, for "*Kilroy was here*" deliberately created a collective persona whose effect was to be inclusive rather than exclusive (as it would be with a saying such as "*Joe Smith was here*"). Kilroy served as a temporary alternative identity for many soldiers; the act of recreating the graffiti, thus insuring its ubiquity, granted the writer membership in a collective wartime experience and provided a necessary anti-authoritarian diversion. (During the Vietnam war the most common graffiti, "*FTA*," standing for "*Fuck the Army*," served the same purpose; the loss of innocence is only too obvious.) Although Kilroy is a specific name, it had no specific referent, and could shift to include every

writer of the phrase, for indeed, when they wrote "*Kilroy was here*," they were, for the moment, Kilroy.

But Kilroy as a universal pseudonym was a special case, requiring knowledge of the joke for its effect to be realized. "*Joe Smith was here*" and "*I was here*" both refer to only one person, an historical rather than an imaginary one. Reading "*Joe Smith was here*" automatically distances the reader from the writer (unless the reader is himself named Joe Smith, or familiar with a Joe Smith) and maintains the reading act within a strictly biographical context. No confusions of identity or transfer of consciousness are intended, evoked, or possible. The graffito remains a simple statement of fact, long after the visit during which it was created took place, and it will be a true statement forever more.

Interestingly, Joe Smith, in writing for the future, used the past tense and thereby denied the present moment of inscription. When Joe Smith first wrote, he more accurately should have written "*I am here*," trapping future readers in a recreation of his present, as described above. But writing "*Joe Smith was here*," although it denies his identity during the act of writing, guarantees it during future acts of reading. Except for a rare coincidence of names, Joe Smith can never merge with his readers.

The author writing "*I was here*," like Joe Smith, similarly denies the present reality in favor of future accuracy, but the "I" subject has the effect of erasing the author's identity, even in anonymity. Reading "*I was here*" constitutes the reader as subject, and therefore the grammatical equivalent of the writer, and also involves the reader in the same denial and transformation of the present into a future-oriented past that the graffito's genuine author originally performed. Thus, not only does the author of "*I was here*" displace her or his identity into that of future readers, but the author's original act of writing, which, as we have seen, is a denial of identity, becomes the identical denial for the later reader. What we have here is a double identification of present reader with past author, combined with an infinitely deferred merging of identity with reality. To read "*I was here*" is to assert one's self and then deny it, as present is projected into future for the purposes of an unknown other's recollection.

Understanding this complexity establishes the reader's bond with the original writer who created this chain of assertion and denial, deferral and projection, and also reestablishes the biographical reality of the original autobiographical act of writing "*I was here*." So what is first written as impossible autobiography by the original writer must first be read as a real autobiography of its reader, and then recognized as impossible autobiography of his reader, before being understood to be actual, although empty, biography of its author.

If this simple text isn't sufficiently complicated, consider its negation, "*I was not here*," quoted by Reisner and Wechsler (p.391). Here the reader is presented with an impossible situation, the graffitic equivalent of the liar's paradox ("this statement is a lie") in its simultaneous affirmation and denial. For this graffito to have any meaning it must be negated, since if the author was never there he or she couldn't be the author. However, as we saw, had the statement been truthfully phrased "*I was here*," it would be equally impossible, for it denies the present during the moment of inscription. The author could have written "*I am not here*," denying the present

but establishing a truthful, although a short-lived, future, for as we have seen subsequent readers must appropriate the "I" and by so doing displace themselves into their own absent futures. As written, though, "*I was not here*" forces the reader to acknowledge the writer as "the person who was here and denied being here by writing '*I was not here.*'" In this case the fact of writing, known by the trace of the original inscription, proves to be a more meaningful and revealing kind of datum than the actual content of the text. With this understanding we are back with the archeologists, whose treatment of surviving artifacts has consistently asserted how eloquent may be frames and forms, even though long emptied of content and reference, if examined with the proper eye.

The motivation of those who have indulged in reflexive graffiti is probably unrecoverable, nor can we know whether the examples quoted here were created spontaneously or deliberately planned in attempts to ensnare the attention of future readers. That they do so is clear, and that they establish between author and text, between text and reader, and between author and reader extremely subtle and complicated interrelationships should now be apparent. Using "I" as shifter to establish reference without identity, and limiting reference to the act and circumstances surrounding the reading of its text, are the characteristics of reflexive graffiti. The consequences of these characteristics, which make this category of graffiti so fascinating, are to raise and play with profound questions of identity and specificity, and by shifting reference and identity, to defeat all conventional constraints upon both temporal and spatial boundaries in writing. For a few short words scribbled upon a wall these are impressive achievements.