

EGGY 190 Inherits The Earth

*The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich:
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
And lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill,
To set them among princes,
And to make them inherit the throne of glory:
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
And He hath set the world upon them.*

I Samuel 2:7-8

Felix Pedro James Lionel Edgar Smith Randy Bill Lee and John. Anyone you know? How about Egghead Naster Coco Adig Flick Houg Mandrid Dieco Chunks Smilt Lonie Deddy Biri and Tawan? Can you ask Rorti 141 and Cleche 163 and Eggy 190 and Efro 63 and Manolin 103 and Roro 136 and Izzy 16 what their numbers represent? Would Buj 61 or Nica I or Mini 139 tell you?

All these people plus thousands more recently made their marks in Manhattan, while public officials noted their emergence with mounting alarm. "An epidemic," said one administration spokesman; "we're stepping up police-work," said another. All pray for a technological breakthrough but experts agree "it won't be easy." Costs involved rose from \$300,000 in 1970 to \$500,000 in 1971. Sober citizens, demanding to know what is happening in their city, were told only "Subway Graffiti." [See articles in the New York Times, 2 July 1971, 11 February 1972.]

Attempting to understand this phenomenon, psychologists explain that insignificant people are asserting their identities; sociologists add that anonymous men are communicating with society at large. No one, however, has attempted to discover why these multicolor, non-obscene, apolitical, unsolicited directories have appeared at this time. Is the suddenness of this graffiti's appearance significant? If it is, why and how?

If our experts studied the total picture of Manhattan graffiti they would realize the inadequacy of their explanations. Men asserting their identities tell us so, writing "Joe's the Greatest," or "Kev is known," or "Chee Chee Was Here." Men wishing to send society messages always have done it directly: "Hi Susan," "Please Don't Feed the Rats," "Merry Christmas from Joe," "I love you" ... "Who Cares" ... "I Do." Obviously the names and numbers we see today indicate an entirely new phenomenon in our midst.

Little is known about this new decorative form. When, for instance, do the names appear? No one contacted has observed a name being written. None of the experts have been more fortunate: unless written in the intervals when subway lights momentarily dim, these names, expert conclude, appear spontaneously. An elderly gentleman from Staten Island believes the signs to be miraculous manifestations, like the crosses of light said to appear in certain bathroom windows in Brooklyn and the Bronx. More down to earth students of the names point out how graffiti gangs could infiltrate the storage yards at night, decorating empty buses and subway cars in the moonlight. From 3:00 to 5:00 am are favored hours for graffiti, they say. Envision a sleeping city ruled by egomaniacs.

A greater mystery surrounds the existence of an abandoned, sealed and unreachable subway platform nonetheless covered from floor to ceiling with names. At first I speculated that here (91st Street on the Broadway Line) the authorities had banished all those caught writing on walls, imprisoned them to scribble out their final hours. Yet no one, I later learned, has ever been caught. How did the names get there? A subway conductor interviewed denounced high school students who walk down the tracks to the abandoned station: *"They walk on in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are out of course,"* he mumbled, quoting the 82nd psalm. But I wondered if he were an impartial observer: on the innermost walls of his locked conductor's compartment Mask 141 had painted his mark. The conductor, I suspected, desperately needed secular culprits.

These names were explained by one veteran cabdriver as the common man's status declarations; numbers which frequently follow indicate the writer's home street as well as serving to denote rank, like M.D. or Esq. or Ph.D. If true, what then determines status for those living on the avenues? Do avenue dwellers resort to qualifying adjectives, like Phil the Greek or Big Time Cochee? Do they identify themselves with the nearest cross street, or unable to decide which street is closer, write Baby Papo 182-183, or Pips 106 ½? Do they instead resort to genealogical distinctions, like Blue I, Nada I, Kid Shaft, Junior Jr., Pinkie II, Tabu II and LTD III?

Little is known of this new version of an ancient practice. I found myself alone in the belief that something more than meets the eye is occurring here; little more than a hunch motivated further search into hidden meanings of this new wave of wall-writing. There had to be a reason that only names and numbers, rather than obscenities, appeared now, but only after

thousands of names were examined did any coherent picture emerge. At first all that I discerned were some curious correspondences.

Yet patterns emerged. Names suggest elemental forces for a future struggle, I saw, like Wisdom 138, Evil 51, Power, Atom 139 and Star 103. In support of this discovery I noted how military personnel and their weapons announce their presence and readiness to fight: Sarge 131 and Sailor 109 and Stone II, Stick 103, Rod, Dagger 136, Torch 193, Bullet-3 106, Bam Bam 103, Zap 126, Bomb 161, Flak, The Big Tube. Myth and fiction, history and nature contribute their fiercest combatants: Satan 136, Atlas, Ra 184, Angel 113, Hitler II, James Bond 103, The Red Baron 133; Snake, Cobra, Lion 153, Moose 152, Eel 159, Rat, Goose, Poochie, Sparrow. Individual warriors declare their qualifications for battle: Savage Nomad 184, Savage Skull, Crazy Cross 116, Crazy Cruss 136, Cool Cliff 120, Cool McCool, Sly 204, Lucky 175, Flash 191, and Invisible.

Added together these clues point to an impending war! Could this be possible, I asked? Although previously isolated or buried amidst many common names, the clues have nonetheless been before our eyes for years; who, I wonder, has noticed? In retrospect I can see how we've been constantly warned of impending struggle; who, I again ask, has listened? New Yorkers are notoriously blasé. The Old Testament prophet Joel warned his people, "*I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke,*" but today he'd be describing a routine day in Manhattan. No wonder these painted names are dismissed as ordinary graffiti.

Once I had penetrated the apparent randomness of the names, and armed with my suspicious, I sought the testimony of an insider. Because secrecy and caution are prime requisites of wall writers I spent fruitless days seeking an informant. Finally I located Eggy 190, who broke the mystery open wide. Eggy 190 is eighteen years old, 5' 4" and a solid 150 pounds; Eggy 190 is very tough. I found him on the uptown Broadway local with a suspicious bulge in his shirt pocket. It was a felt-tip permanent marker. I approached him carefully. Eggy 190 looked edgy. I convinced him I wasn't a cop, producing my own felt-tip pen to ease his concern.

I explained my suspicions. Eggy 190 agreed to talk. He talked of war, of second comings and saviors; he pointed to the names of Moses of 147 Street, Black Jesus 147, Allah 117 and Buddha 125 on the car's walls. He spoke of the People, of the poor rising up and the meek inheriting the earth.

Eggy 190 really meant it. Years of loose talk about heavy changes, Revolution, and the Age of Aquarius had combined in his head with apocalyptic and evangelical references to the Second Coming. On our ride Eggy 190 pointed out the signs which proved to him how all the great religious leaders of the past had now been simultaneously resurrected to help free their peoples.

“Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city,” Eggy 190 read from a printed card he carried in his pocket. “Zepaniah 3:1,” he added; I promised to look into it more thoroughly.

We arrived at Eggy 190’s stop; I got off with him. After waiting until the crowd cleared he carefully printed his name on a brand new gum machine with his maroon marking pen. I tried to question him further, but Eggy 190 became edgy again and left. Our talk provided no specific dates for the struggle nor statistics about warfare, but I came away with many leads. After tracking them down I was able to piece together the following vision of our collective futures.

The subway graffiti, inscribed by Eggy 190 and “The People,” reflect a religious revival taking place in America. Nominal replacing the traditionally obscene subway graffiti signifies the moral cleansing taking place in this particular doomed “oppressing” city. Writers on walls, I learned, have been newly baptized into the faith and publicly declare dedication to their cause with their inscriptions.

Yet this public witnessing is merely one function the graffiti serves. Eggy 190 believes quite literally that the poor are going to inherit the earth. Therefore, he and his co-signers quite prudently mark subway cars, gum machines, and other public facilities to claim their rightful share of their inheritance in advance. Is this the latent Marxism of the New Testament made manifest, Biblical anarchism revealed at last? Although all my early suspicions had been correct this newest angle resolved some hitherto unanswered questions as well.

Eggy 190’s revelations proved that the new style graffiti is new in both content and function. Its assertiveness is militaristic, its permanence legalistic. Now that the oppressed masses have declared their presence and their combat readiness, only completion of the Holy Struggle delays redistribution of wealth. Following victory, inheriting the earth will merely mean tracking down and possessing one’s previously posted stakes.

Seen in this light current graffiti makes a great deal of sense as claims for future ownership. The type of mark obviously reveals clues of priority. Relative permanence, ranging

from chalk to paint, indicates degree of faith: writing implements are awarded by the priestly hierarchy, not purchased as has been suspected. Hence bans on the sale of paint spray cans to minors would be fruitless. Traditional religious schisms and contemporary factionalism account for the multiple claims on specific objects, as is frequently observed. Obviously direct correlations exist between object size and number of name-claims.

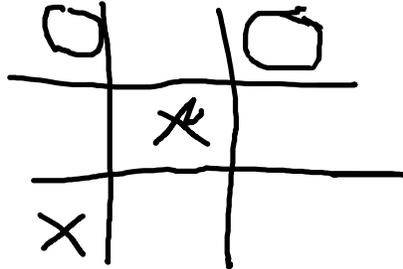
What will happen in the future? Let us accept this evidence in favor of a great religious upheaval followed by a fierce struggle, with eventual elevation of the poor and the meek into seats of power. Let us admit that it is difficult for us to predict exactly when this great event will take place, and grant that it could be either apocalyptic or revolutionary, caused astrologically or economically, marked by World War or World Peace, augured by the Second Coming or the first flying saucer. Precise details and exact dates are beyond knowing, although there exist alarming private predictions,. The significant questions for all of us are what will happen at that time, whenever it comes, and what can be done now in preparation for that day?

It is not difficult to imagine the social chaos to be caused when Moses, Buddha, Allah and both a Black and a White Jesus simultaneously reveal their living presence in the streets of Manhattan. After the initial amazement, religious hysteria, and opening (sectarian) battles for rights of possession, and the eventual acceptance of a new rule by the poor and the meek, individual claimants will make themselves known and all public property will become private. Eggy of 190 Street will clam his 2 1/3 subway cars, his 5 city buses, his 7 gum, candy and ice cream machines, his mail storage box from 177th street, his 13 trash cans, and perhaps also the 8 old ladies he has come into contact with in the last few years. Eggy 190 will have inherited the earth. Goods left unclaimed by Eggy and his brethren will be auctioned off at Shea Stadium.

What can the common, law-abiding, non-graffiti writing citizen do about the present situation and this future prognosis? The answer, sad to say, may be: Nothing. New York City's eventual downfall has been predicted so many times, and in such a variety of finishes, that the solution outlined above may not be such a bad one after all. And furthermore, there are signs now appearing which seem to be tempting the righteous into the paths of the scribblers.

The following tell-tale sign appeared on a Madison Avenue building in the 70s, an area normally free of any names or graffiti save those grandly chiseled into marble facades. Yet chalked there on the wall, tempting the hitherto uninvolved passersby, was an uncompleted tic

tac toe game just begging some incorruptible citizen to add the winning naught. Are there many among u who can continue to resist such temptations with the stakes so high?



If many succumb, this break in traditional urban inhibition may turn the entire metropolis into a vast scrambling criss-cross of private claims. Since the disposed have appropriated public property, the more well-off will attempt to redistribute the fruits of private wealth. Executives will seize private bathrooms; advertising men will hunker onto favorite bar stools. Dogs in Central Park will expand their territorial markings while their owners claim trees, walkways, and benches. Old ladies shall subdivide Schraffts. Artists may sign skyscrapers, architects designate plazas and malls. The frenzy will come upon us all. Bank clerks could mark each bill they touch, librarians sign every volume. Social workers will attempt to possess clients, as banks possess debtors or muggers victims.

Tattoo artists will realize sudden wealth. Sign painters shall run for office. Lovers shall repossess carved trees. Poetry may find sudden favor as the power of the word becomes obvious. New industries will rise to meet new demands, marketing brighter colors, bolder stencils, more powerful spray paints.

And there will come a day when no space in the city will remain unclaimed. Every available surface within New York will proclaim bold marks of ownership like an over-subscribed office get-well card. All the names will collectively petition the observing deities who shall appear publicly to lead their charges. The occasion promises to be a hectic one – I recommend you make plans to observe it from the safety of your private subway car. It can be arranged. Eggy 190 will be ready, after all. And you?