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Graffiti: A Lion in the Holy of Holies (Word Hoard Speaker Series)

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The Enlightenment cast long shadows. As north-western Europe centred itself as the *ménage à moi* of Enlightenment, an “unenlightened periphery” was thereby established—a corresponding geography of darkness. The Enlightenment’s bipolar “centre” and “periphery” were further posited in temporal categories; the former is articulated as “advanced” while the latter is “delayed, underdeveloped, backwards.” The logic of this binary structure enabled the power relations of a more recent *ménage à trois*: imperialism, colonialism, and modernism. According to Thomas Docherty, the discourse of the centre was exclusively privileged by this trio until postmodernism established itself as the “discourse of the periphery” (445). Beyond the diachronic processes of cultural mimesis—in which “the center, though claiming to be in disintegration, still operates as a center” (Richard 468)—what is a literature that is constituted by the dark matter of the periphery? Rather than the white ink of *écriture féminine*, what are the cursive lines of a text written in menstrual blood? At the antipode of the gold leaf empire of signs, what is the prose scribed in the seams of a decomposing corpse? *Here* is a literature that writes back to the centre *avant la lettre*, invading the centre with the peripheral before, during, and after the movements of Postmodernism. HIC SUNT LEONES—*here there are lions*—marking the coordinates of estranged territory, the *place* of the profane signifier. Serpents, scorpions, and dragons still brood in the margins of literary

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**Graffiti: A Lion in the Holy of Holies**

by Jamie Rooney

I’m amazed, O wall, that you have not fallen in ruins, you who support the tediousness of so many writers.
—Pompeian Basilica graffiti, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

All that is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once freed, does it not fall to ruins in turn?
—Guy Debord on Freud, *The Society of the Spectacle*

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maps, conspiring at the edges of the text, the world as text. For, the lines below engage in a cartographical palimpsest, a map which “exactly covers its territory” (Debord 31).

Walking on papyrus, roving through the leaves of grass, a lettered course has been charted by Leif Schenstead-Harris’ “A Walking Tour of Light.” Accepting the invitation to saunter—“one of the small decencies” (108)—I begin by following Schenstead-Harris in interrogating the discourse of the centre, while my later arguments unfold the mappings of the peripheral lives and prose that “cannot be deconstructed,” because they have already been torn from the “warp and weft of the world, the text” (108). As an etymological compass pointing towards a luminous centre, “sauntering” is derived from the Middle Age wanderers asking charity, going à la Sainte Terre, to the Holy Land, until the children, out of joy and awe, exclaimed, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer,” a Saunterer—a Holy-Lander (Thoreau 23). As the Sainte’s logic dictates that every walk abounds for a civilization greater than the last, Oscar Wilde includes in this route the fated destination of every Saunterer: “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing” (141). Wilde reveals the compass’s settling needle, the direction of the approaching course via the equivocal etymology of “sauntering”: sans terre, “without land or a home,” u-topia (Thoreau 23). Following Schenstead-Harris’ heliotropism, the walking tour of light turns to the solar metropolis: The City of the Sun.

Tommaso Campanella’s sans terre further the extent of the stroll hitherto marked only by textual traces in the cartographic palimpsest (the academic’s footnote fetish, the walker’s footprint fetish). To paraphrase the previous exchange with Schenstead-Harris, the temporal ordering of worldly light and the illumination of the universal chronological structure are predicated on God’s expression of a sign, the invention of the divinely-decreed linguistic unit: the Signifier'. Landing in Campanella’s The City of the Sun, the tour continues by localizing the legacy of this divine signifier:

Grandmaster of the Knights Hospitallers: Prithee, now, tell me what happened to you during that voyage?

Genoese Sea-Captain: I have already told you how I wandered over the whole earth . . . I came upon a large crowd of men and armed women, many of whom did not understand our language, and they conducted me forthwith to the City of the Sun. (26)

As an anticipation of the Enlightenment’s age, Campanella proposes a radical hierarchy of the chaosmos. The solar city is centred on a telescoping of the cosmos, while the peripheral darkness is accorded the accoutrements of chaos. Campanella’s metropolis is comprised of seven circles “named from the seven planets” (27), centred on a distinct summit: “on the top of the hill . . . there rises a temple built with wondrous art” (29). In the temple is a “very large dome, built with great care in the center . . . contain[ing]
another small vault . . . which is right over the altar . . . there is but one altar in the middle of the temple” (31). This altar, of course, centres a “large globe, upon which the heavenly bodies are painted, and another globe upon which there is a representation of the earth” (32). The principles of sustaining the cosmos, argues Roger Caillois in Man and the Sacred, necessitate a precise social centring of the sacred structure, sacred representations, sacred signifiers: “the center would seem to be the clear and comforting abode of the pure . . . the sacred powers reside in . . . the village square where the altar . . . is erected” (52). Accordingly, the centre’s centre—the paintings of the heavenly bodies and earth—is a system of signifiers; the globes centrifugally establish the city’s walls as the background, surface, and support for the writings of authority.

Corresponding to the solar city’s innermost structure, the vault is painted with “all the stars of heaven . . . with their proper names” (31), the temple lamps bear the names of the seven planets” (32), and the interior wall of the first circuit features “all the mathematical figures . . . the laws, the origins and the power of the inhabitants [of every country] and the alphabets the different people use” (33). Theorizing the influence of this organizing principle, Caillois extols, “The forces that animate the life of the village and exalt its glory are thus supported by its centre . . . [t]hey move centrifugally, radiating out of the idyllic space replete with sanctity” (52). As an initial index of the radical bipolarity of the “centre” and “periphery,” Campanella situates the globes at the precise centre of a city whose painted walls must be stormed seven times by “an enemy” (29), for “[t]his circling encloses the beneficent powers on the inside” (Caillois 53). The city’s system of signifiers is localized as the centre, established as “the material and active base for the sanctity that diffuses outward to the circumference” (52). Sauntering, as prescribed by Schenstead-Harris, still strives forth to order—to the place of order and to accomplish order—in the solar city: “the boys learn the language and the alphabet on the walls by walking round them” (Campanella 41).

In the legacy of Genesis’s divine signifier, the solar city seeks to “objectify, to project to the stars, in a word, to divine the source of power” (Caillois 91), since its system of signifiers is sacralised by its author, the “great ruler” and “priest” Metaphysic. Under Metaphysic’s purview, the metropolis’s master of liberal arts and schooling “causes the exterior and interior, the higher and lower walls of the city to be adorned with the finest pictures, and . . . verses” (Campanella 33). According to the Benjaminian function of creative authority, Metaphysic—the ritualistic king, “a sacred personage” (91)—produces the city’s signifiers in the cultic fabric of tradition, endowing them with an auratic quality: “The sacred,” declares Caillois, “is . . . a mysterious aura that has been added to things” (20). Qualifying the cultic aura of the signifiers—because “the more sacred [arts] are taught in the temple” by walking around the “sacred definition of beneficence, or of magnanimity, or of another virtue” (Campanella 101)—Caillois affirms, “The sacred cannot be subdued, diluted, or divided. It is indivisible and always

The Unrecyclable
a totality wherever it is found” (23). Therefore, as the “smallest fragment of a relic possesses all the power of the total relic” (23), the city’s signifiers in each verse, letter, and morpheme, are endowed with all the ritualistic power of the painted globes, the altar, the vault, the dome, and the entire temple in the centre of Campanella’s seventh circle. Reaching the radical centre of The City of the Sun, a new course may be negotiated out of the solar labyrinth: fortunately, a thread has been laid to follow back to the periphery; unfortunately, dragons, vipers and basilisks still prowl the circumference, the margins, the edges.

In the spirit of returns, the path articulated by Schenstead-Harris necessitates an unfolding of Campanella’s The City of the Sun, for every map, as every word, contains its opposite in itself: Campanella’s black, peripheral, holes. Here, the compass needle spins errantly, heliotropism turns on itself. Here, one grasps for the contours of Schenstead-Harris’ “unforgettable,” “the unwitnessed lives whose darkness cannot be deconstructed because it has already been torn from the warp and weft of the world, the text” (108). Excommunicated to various (compass) degrees, these untraceable forms are defined by their bordering form(ulation)s:

[The people of the city of the sun] are unwilling that the State should be corrupted by the vicious customs of slaves and foreigners. Therefore they do business at the gates, and sell those whom they have taken in war or keep them for digging ditches and other hard work without the city, and for this reason they always send four bands of soldiers to take care of the fields, and with them there are the laborers. (Campanella 32)

These (un)written absences—the personages of the slave, the foreigner, and those unarticulated by Campanella—are the antipodal coordinates of the city’s king-as-God, the central authority. Here, Campanella’s citizens, doing “business at the gates,” attempt to separate their privileged eu-topia (Sainte Terre’s Holy Land) from the abhorrent u-topia (sans terre), constructing and maintaining the “centre” and “periphery” in Caillois’s “watertight compartments” (91). The sacred place, the spatial coordinate, is kept ignorant of every trace of profanity (HIC SUNT LEONES). For, the threat of touching those darkened lives—the black holes in the map—is precisely the threat of becoming void. “The profane,” Caillois writes, “in effect, alters [the essence of the sacred], causes it to lose its unique quality—the void created by the impression of the formidable and fleeting power it contains” (21). As the auratic system of signifiers radiates centrifugally for the city’s painted surfaces, what is the literature that forays in the opposite direction, “writing back to the center”? What is this profane prose, which is as “poor and bereft of existence as nothingness is to being” (Caillois 21), an “indeterminate” and “contagious” set of signifiers, which emerge from the darkness of the periphery?

Myth’s entanglement with story, foregrounding Caillois’s lines on Campanella’s map, is halted in course before “the story of
origins imprudently turns itself into the origin of the story” (Mihăilescu 2). Recognizing the diachronic geography of the sacred centre and profane periphery, the mythical structure of Campanella’s city (and its auratic system of signifiers) is mapped onto modernity’s spectacular surface. Attesting to the continuation of this binary logic, Caillois argues that the layout of “modern cities even makes understandable, through a fixed plan, the part mythical and part objective value” of separating the domains of the sacred and the profane (53). At the centre of the contemporary metropolis are the symbols of divinity, power, and authority, whereas the flanking peripheries are marked by establishments of decrepitude, prostitutes, and the occasional dragon: “Thus, the opposition of pure and impure, in passing from the religious to the secular domain . . . has retained the ancient topography of supernatural principles—good at the center and evil at the periphery” (54). The modern walker’s “synesthetic sentiment” of the city, asserts Roland Barthes, “requires that any urban space have a center to go to”—to saunter towards:

For many reasons (historical, economic, religious, military), the West has understood this law only too well: all its cities are concentric; but also, in accord with the very movement of Western metaphysics, for which every center is the site of truth, the center of our cities is always full: a marked site, it is here that the values of civilization are gathered and condensed: spirituality (churches), power (offices), money (banks), merchandise (department stores), language (agoras: cafes and promenades): to go downtown or to the center-city is to encounter a social “truth,” to participate in the proud plenitude of “reality.” (Empire of Signs 30)

Under the influence of the industrialization and mechanization of disintegrated collective life, the domains of the sacred and profane have evolved into a modern social polarity. Guy Debord argues that this phenomenon of separation—as the deficiency of real social activity in a rigid hierarchical structure—is the alpha and omega of the modern spectacle. “Power,” Debord writes, “draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the beginning,” for the “category of the sacred” has diachronically validated the cosmic and ontological ordering of worldly phenomena in order to privilege the interests of the centre, the central (25). Contextualized in this diachronic re-mapping, Campanella’s sacred city of signifiers is translated into the churches, government buildings, courthouses, theatres, museums, monuments, and infrastructure of the metropolis’ topographical centre. Debord asserts that these “material reconstruction[s] of the religious illusion” have become the “most impenetrable and rarefied” (20) aspects of modern life. The intensively protected and revered surfaces of the auratic temple become the legally regulated and civically respected walls of the modern city centre. As “specious form[s] of the sacred” (25), these spectacular reconstitutions remain
enveloped in the “taboo” characteristic of traditionally sacred objects; it is precisely these central surfaces that become the backgrounds, supports, and canvases for the literature of the periphery: graffiti.

Ironically entitled The Faith of Graffiti, Norman Mailer’s seminal text advances the foraying of the marginal into the mappings of the modern metropolis:

Graffiti [looked as if it] would take over the world; a movement which began as the expression of tropical peoples living in a monotonous iron-grey and dull brown brick environment . . . painting the walls over with the giant trees and petty plants of a tropical rainforest . . . [T]his plant growth [continued] until every institutional wall, fixed or moving . . . which looked like a prison (and all did) was covered by a foliage of graffiti. (27)

Mailer’s extended metaphor of the graffiti jungle grows directly from Caillois’s localization of the profane in the outer-ecology of the marginal: “Little by little, the influence [of the centrifugally radiating forces of the sacred] are replaced by that of the malevolent and mysterious presences of the brush, whose converging pressure is in danger of engulfing everything” (Caillois 52, emphasis added). Graffiti, a literature of the impure edges, pariah signifiers that foray into the institutional surfaces of the privileged city centre. The menstruating woman, the embattled warrior, the sorcerer, the criminal, the putrefying cadaver, and the “unwitnessed lives” are the essence of periphery, the rainforest, the brush—graffiti is written in their defiled and defiling substances, in the most taboo of spaces.

Walking away from the Holy Land—en quittant la Sainte Terre—the exiles of Zion raise their unmelodic lament: “If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill” (Psalms 137:5). For, the maintenance of the temple, the auratic system of signifiers, necessitates the prowess of the skilled hand, the right hand—the writerly hand. The dichotomising lightning bolt of the centre and periphery cuts through the human body. This bipolar structural opposition is “analogous” (53), asserts Caillois, to the double being of homo duplex: a person contains its opposite in itself. Localized in the luminous empire, the right hand has a place, a people; it is above—the raised hand of the Lord on Judgement Day—hovering with the “white figure of the good guardian angel” (Hertz 100). The right hand designates the privileged position of the aristocracy, the disguised angel, the saved one who “shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69). It “stands for me”; it acts and orders (Hertz 103). Theorized as “the principle of all effective activity, the source of everything that is good and . . . the idea of sacred power” (100), the right hand creates a product: a fine hand, a gold leaf calligraphy, in other words, a surface of signifiers.

Corresponding to the legacy Metaphysical leaves by adorning the solar city, the sacred texts and images of the right hand exist on the
surface, as the surface. Such cultic or religious writing, asserts Philippe Sollers, “rises from the plane of inscription . . . it is merely detached on the surface, it proceeds to weave itself there, delegated from depths which are not deep toward the surface” (41, qtd. in Barthes, Empire 57). Translating the walls of the ancient capital onto the surfaces of the modern metropolis, it is the right hand that weaves the surface of the city centre: “No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface: . . . there is a texture . . . then the strains, the hatchings, the tracery of strokes, the diagrams, the words” (Barthes, “Works on Paper” 162). The surfaces of the modern city—the walls of churches, offices, banks, department stores—always bear a message, producing a knowledge, an accumulation of information. The specious aura of these surfaces is a “sun which never sets,” a system of signifiers, which “covers the entire surface . . . and bathes endlessly in its own glory” (Debord 13). Graffiti is a flash of darkness, a gesture that ruptures the surface, shaking the walls of the city.

Graffiti is the literature of the other hand. Since the domain of the profane is radically indeterminate (Caillois 54), Robert Hertz affirms that the signifiers of the unright “disappear constantly in the face of new words” (99) as they become irredeemably contaminated—unrecyclable—by the “sinister” quality of the signified: the left. Occult and illegitimate, inspiring terror and repulsion, spreading a corruptive influence, the place of the left hand is “dedicated to demons, the devil,” because “a black and wicked angel holds it in dominion” (105). The “dark and ill-famed” domain of the left hand is far from the sanctuary, on the periphery, margins, edges; it stands for not-me, others; as its people, writes Hertz, are “like those pariahs” on whom all impurity is burdened (105). The left hand perjures, defiles, and scribbles the dreaded words amid the scorpions, basilisk, and dragons: HIC SUNT LEONES. Graffiti relocates the blackness of these profane lives and prose in the domain of the sun, mobilizing the constituents of the periphery in an invasion of the radiating city centre.

Gaucherie, the writing of leftness, extols Barthes, is rarely a matter of lightness; generally, to be gauche is to press too hard (“Works on Paper” 165). An etymological line is erratically drawn from the Greek graphein—to scratch, to write—to the Italian diminutive formation grafito—a scratch or scribble—to graffiare, graffiti: to scratch, to incise, to tear the surface. It is precisely the ontology of the “wall, the background, the surface (the desktop)” that structures the writing of graffiti; the full existence of the background, as an object which has already lived (167)—a set of recycled signifiers—forms the determinate space that is inscribed, cut by graffiti. “Writing,” writes Jacques Derrida, designate[s] not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible . . . we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general” (9), for the lacerated surface of graffiti is made possible, is given rise by the auratic signifiers of the right hand.

Indeterminate and inexhaustible, the language of graffiti is gestural—signs that refuse to
participate in any graphic code. “Ultimately of importance are not the letters themselves as signifying units,” Carrie Noland argues, but their ability to “emphasize the transgressive, subversive nature of inscription as an act involving the deferral of totalities, the ceaseless re-articulation of differentiated marks in the space” (309). Yet, Noland remains unwilling to walk to the end of the argument in theorizing graffiti as merely evolving into “complex palimpsests” (311). For, the authorial writing of the right hand weaves a diachronic palimpsest; the left hand inscribes graffiti as the irredeemable contamination, corruption, and poison of the privileged signifier. While the legitimated palimpsest functions in a recycling process of writing, erasure, and re-writing, graffiti tears through the graphic code, wounding the phenomenal space—Sollers’s woven plane of writing—penetrating the surface, infecting it with the contagion of indeterminacy. In the seam, the place of trauma, the illegible wound, mingles all the power of the profanely marginal, that is, the defiling dark matter of the periphery.

The authorial palimpsest is the veil of the Temple, the auratic surface of signifiers, torn by graffiti. Graffiti inscribes the precise moment, the place where authority takes its penultimate breath. Every graffito is an echo of the absolute blasphemy: “Eloi Eloi lama sabachthani?” Here in the mouth of the Most High, here on the walls of the Holy of Holies, is the essential profanity. Graffiti is a confusing of the centre and periphery, sacredness and sacrilege, so radical that it exacts the supreme provocation: dark jouissance. Here one trembles as the entire system gives a death rattle: la petite mort.

“We should go forth on the shortest walk,” writes Henry David Thoreau, “prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms” (24). Striding on these tight-rope lines of text, without a net, traversing and transcribing a map flanked by lions et al., here, a walker ought to expect no less. Lèse-dieu, lèse-majesté, lèse-autorité “is ranged alongside of sacrilegious acts that attack the universal order and that provoke a break, a disturbance or an hiatus in the functioning of the society” (Caillois 96). The arc of a walk, ancient or modern, always bends towards the edge of the text, the world as text: “O, gentlemen, the time of life is short! . . . An if we live, we live to tread on kings” (Shakespeare, Henry IV 5:2). From the prehistoric to Pompeii to Paris, the trace of the ancient tool that rendered man’s first paintings is evident both in the Roman stucco pick and the can of spray paint, marker, and pen. The diachronic markings of these instruments become a substratum, a language of the peripheral that radically influences its bipolar opposite. Graffiti re-introduces the confounding babel back into the centre (the Holy Land, the solar city, the metropolis . . . ). In anticipating the language(s) to come, it takes a lion’s leap into the darkness of the future.
In the Old Testament, the Hebrew verb for “create” is applied only to divine, never human, constructs. As the Godly articulation, “Let there be light” is (un) framed in the context of a conceptually empty and formless universe, the decree of the spoken sensory sound-image signifier simultaneously births both the previously non-existent concept of light and, consequently, the reference to “light” in worldly illumination: “there was light” (Genesis 1:2-3). As the auditory signifier has its command only in the “dimension of time” (de Saussure 855), the structure of the spoken sign marks the establishment of a chain-like set of temporal coordinates in which the signifier “light” precedes and generates the signified and referential elements of “light.” The insight must be taken to the end: as there are no temporal references before God’s initial proclamation, only spatial references to “the heavens,” “earth,” and “the deep,” the pronunciation of the auditory sign “light” establishes the dimension of time for the entirety of the universe, instantiated in the “evening and . . . morning—the first day” (Genesis 1:1-5).

See Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

Carrie Noland develops another instantiation of the topos: “The millefeuille of planes created by the receding bowers of foliage as well as the palimpsest of depictions inscribed on the walls of Lascaux can serve as models for approaching the type of space produced by contemporary graffiti in urban environments” (305).
Works Cited


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