



Figure 1 – photograph of spray-paint on a garden wall outside the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. Photograph: the author, 28th October 2023.

Misreading Mis/reading

Tia Madden

I once read that the ancient Egyptians would mutilate certain hieroglyphs to stop them from coming to life. They believed that images and words – which were, at the time, the same thing – could influence the real world, and so if a sign bore resemblance to something living, be it human, bird, or animal, it had the potential to become it.¹ Whatever they wrote, they risked writing into being; what looks like a snake may threaten to bite. Much less a shadow of reality, the sign becomes a clone.

By mutilating a hieroglyphic, and tampering with its legibility, potential threats could be neutralised. A hostile sign could be trapped and subdued, its means of escape curtailed by the amputating of limbs and omitting of heads. Without legs or eyes, the sign could not see or move beyond the wall, could not attack the deceased in their tombs and prevent them from making it to the afterlife. Illegibility was a kind of salvation. A counteractive measure. It wasn't just about what us humans could create with text; it was about what a text could do to us.

*

The thought that a written language could have power over us, or that it knows more than us, is a frightening one; particularly if it's a forgotten language we can no longer read or understand. There's a certain credence to things that are unknown, as with ancient ruins, as "ruins seem to guarantee origins... [but any] doubts... have to be alleviated by further mythmaking."² Our inability to prove what did or didn't happen before the ruin inevitably leads to further speculation. There's a higher risk involved, a greater danger. Hieroglyphs, for example, seem to accrue mystical qualities the longer

they exist in the world, the further they stray from their time and place of origin. It's almost like their illegibility to us enhances their magical potential, and the myths become more substantiated, the ancient gods more alive, as time inches forward.

Some of the most influential science fiction narratives adopt the ruin for this reason, as it allows them to create new myths with a level of historical authenticity. The less information we have, the closer we look to find it. We build ciphers, create codes, tell stories, invent myths; all in the name of reckoning with uncertainty. Matthew Reilly's *Seven Ancient Wonders* through to the 1975 *Doctor Who* episode 'Pyramids of Mars' have borrowed from what we know of ancient Egypt, imagining meticulously built death-traps and the unleashing of ancient gods – gods known not as myths, but as extra-terrestrial life forms – from eternal prisons.³ It's a natural response to the unknown, and exemplifies what Tzvetan Todorov calls 'the uncertainty paradigm,' when we hesitate in choosing between a realistic or supernatural explanation.⁴ Not only is this an effective literary device, but it also mirrors an archaeological attempt to excavate mysteries left behind and reframe them for the future. We become part of a broader, multi-millennia reaching game of telephone, where misreading is the name of the game.

It's important to remember that before they were decrypted using the Rosetta Stone, Egyptian hieroglyphics were thought impenetrable and devoid of meaning.⁵ This is, of course, a dismissive thought. The inability to unlock or retrieve information doesn't equal the absence of meaning, rather the obscuring of it. The scarcity of information expands the scope of possibility.

*

All this in mind, how might the ancient Egyptians' idea of illegibility inform our understanding of seemingly meaningless, unreadable text in our modern world? To name a modern-day equivalent, graffiti might be the closest living relative to the hieroglyphic system: it is often unsigned, appearing authorless; it is written (or scratched) onto walls of public places; and it occupies a space in between image and word, never quite subscribing to one or the other. Graffiti might as well be a new ancient language.

The term itself, *graffiti*, is tied to ancient writing methods, stemming from the Italian *graffiare*, meaning 'to scratch' or, figuratively, 'to bite'.⁶ Even dictionary definitions of the word *graffiti* struggle to reconcile if the verb action is drawing or writing: for *Cambridge*, it's 'writings or drawings made on surfaces in public places'⁷; for *Collins*, 'words or pictures that are written or drawn'⁸; *Britannica* errs towards ambiguity, but is perhaps the most valid definition, noting graffiti as 'a form of visual communication'.⁹ It seems that illegible graffiti can't possibly be devoid of meaning,

because the multitude of options to read, see, and interpret beyond temporal boundaries challenges the impulse to dismiss it as meaningless vandalism, and the overarching notion of graffiti-as-communication is, for the most part, universally accepted.

Even when graffiti does reference an alphabet – as opposed to pure abstraction – it’s often in a language we can’t understand, with distorted (mutilated?) letters, and though the spray-painted line resembles handwriting and is familiar to us, it is misleading, hollow, and unknowable. Instead of attempting to read, we’re forced to consider the aesthetic qualities of graffiti before making sense of any semantic content. We might even liken this to the experience of listening to opera, as Kenneth Goldsmith does in *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*:

“When we listen to an opera sung in a language we don’t understand, we push language’s formal properties to the front – its cadences and rhythms – choosing sound over sense. If we further choose to invert the transparency of words, we can hear them as sound or see them as shapes... emphasising its materiality disrupts normative flows of communication.”¹⁰

If we think of graffiti as an ancient language, rather than an asemic¹¹ scrawl, we can know, or presume, that it once held significance. The knowledge is there; it’s just inaccessible. Illegible. The definition of *illegible* alone, ‘not clear enough to be read,’ insinuates that a possible reading exists, even if that reading is lost, forgotten, or difficult to locate.¹² Something we can’t read is not necessarily an empty vessel, but a snow globe, its contents always veiled in some way. When we try to get a clearer image, we turn it back and forth, study it, stir it, attempt to get the snow to shift, only for the image to retreat further. The snow never quite settles. And whatever the figure is, behind a hurricane of dust, it’s just out of reach.

Legibility isn’t something that is either *there* or *not there*. Rather, think of legibility as in constant dialogue with you as a viewer. Your own knowledge of alphabets, symbols, images, will guide a mis/reading, where “you can recall old information... try to use it to define this new event; or... you can return to your own experiences and try to confront it... Reality urgently demands an answer.”¹³ But this begs the question: what happens when future civilisations return to what we left behind – both the translatable and the illegible – and have to differentiate between the two, enact this archaeological process of re-assembly, to make sense of their history, our present?

*

We talk to the future in tongues. The marks we leave behind are subject to misinterpretation by future civilisations. What is graffiti to us could be an ancient language to them. Our marks will be misread

and misconstrued, adapted to fit new beliefs, malformed into new mythologies for new futures. Graffiti that is illegible to us now, might later become a meaningful relic. The passage of time abstracts meaning. Maybe it even creates it.

Perhaps this is just human nature—the impulse to imbue language with power, meaning, agency. Once something is recognised, perceived, or misperceived as being decodable, as illegible rather than meaningless, it holds potential credibility. We will always search for Rosetta Stones. Whatever speculative answers the future creates, they will only exist because of the illegible, *can* only exist in this way, on the cusp of accessibility. If only we could find the missing pieces, we could put it back together. If we found the limbs of the Egyptians' mutilated hieroglyphics, drew them back on, stitched them back together like Victor Frankenstein did for his creature, would we be able to bring them back to life?¹⁴

What's more— what happens when future civilisations work out how to do the same? Our illegible graffiti is an amputee, a mutilated hieroglyph to them. The insinuation is that there's something broken, something that can be put back together and understood. And whilst for now we know that isn't the case, there's every chance that those new myths will take hold, and genuinely define a past that never happened. It would mean that we're only temporarily safe from whatever threat our illegible scrawlings pose once they're complete. If the future finds a way to put them back together, to see the whole picture, what will come alive in their place?

Is graffiti our way of informing the future?

Or is this how we narrate a history that never happened?

The question stands: how does a mark obtain its meaning? In this instance, it seems time is both the destabiliser and generator of meaning. Things fall apart, only to piece themselves back together, in some future, in some string of misreadings. And maybe all those readings are incorrect. Maybe, along the way, someone got it wrong. And that error becomes the true narrative, all that is left to tell the story of our time. The illegible isn't meaningless after all; it's just something broken, something ruined, waiting to be put back together again. Waiting to be brought back to life.

1. W. V. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphics*, volume 6 of *Reading the Past* (University of California Press, 1987), p. 19
2. Andreas Huyssen, 'Authentic Ruins', in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009) p. 20
3. See: Matthew Reilly, *Seven Ancient Wonders*, (Pan MacMillan, 2005) and *Doctor Who*, season 13, episode 3 (parts 1-4) 'Pyramids of Mars,' directed by Paddy Russell, written by Stephen Harris, aired from 25 October to 15 November 1975 on BBC1
4. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), quoted in *Writing by Drawing: When Language Seeks Its Other*, (Skira, 2020) pp. 51-57
5. Law Alsobrook, 'The Title of This Paper Is 𐀀𐀁𐀂𐀃𐀄: On Asemic Writing and the Absence of Meaning' in *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities*, volume 4, issue 2 (Autumn 2017), p. 7
6. *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. "Graffiare,"
7. *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "Graffiti."
8. *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. "Graffiti."
9. *Britannica Dictionary*, s.v. "Graffiti."
10. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 35
11. Asemic, according to *Cambridge Dictionary*, is to "[use] lines and symbols that look like writing, but do not have any meaning." The approach is exemplified in works by artists such as Cy Twombly, Henri Michaux, and Luigi Serafini. See: *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "Asemic."
12. *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "Illegible."
13. Erick Beltran and Bernardo Ortiz, 'Game Piece – Conference and Examples' in *The Imaginary Reader*, (Volt, 2016)
14. In the original novel, Victor Frankenstein uses an undisclosed 'elemental principal of life' to re-animate an assemblage of anatomical materials collected from slaughterhouses. Frankenstein never gives his creature a name, an effort to never truly know what he has created. This doesn't stop the creature from learning, growing, taking liberties, and creating a life of its own— much like what the ancient Egyptians thought their hieroglyphs had the power to do. See: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, (Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818)