

God's Graffiti: On the Social Aesthetics of Divine Writing

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Abstract

This article proposes that the methodology of social semiotics can be used to study how traditional narrative schemes are adopted and shaped into new versions in order to give voice to particularly critical moments in the life of a community. The focus here is on how Jewish and Christian civilisations have posited the relation between the invisibility of abusive and arrogant power and the manifestation of social judgment and condemnation under the form of mysterious messages that, unbeknownst to those in power, are disclosed to them by a just interpreter whose revelations also determine the ruler's fall. The textual point of departure for this is *Daniel 5*, the passage of the Bible in which graffiti mysteriously traced on a wall announces to Belshazzar the end of his kingdom during a sacrilegious feast. By examining Talmudic and later Jewish interpretations, Christian exegeses, medieval and early-modern Christian iconography, and modern and contemporary intertextual transpositions of this biblical episode, this article condenses the essential elements of the relation between religious aesthetics and power. Each new retelling of this story serves the symbolical and aesthetic needs of a specific community, and yet all versions share a common narrative kernel in which the arbitrary use of power is condemned through the re-imagination of a transcendent message deciphered by an immaculate hero.¹

Introduction: Patterns and Twists of Social Aesthetics

When the adjective 'social' qualifies the term 'aesthetics', it points to a new way of reshaping a cultural and intellectual tradition. Whereas 'aesthetics' refers to the philosophical study of either sensation or beauty as the foremost response to art, 'social' deflects this trend of thought from the humanities to

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the social studies. There is a social dimension in every sensation, even the most introverted one, and every conception or inaction of beauty is surrounded by a social context. There is, however, more in social aesthetics: the idea that patterns of feelings, artistic creation, and beauty reception do not stem from individual genius only, but from a deposit of forms that are continuously reshaped generation after generation. This does not rule out creativity, but bridles it into a sort of combinatorial craft, exerted on a predetermined range of materials. Schools of thought in various disciplines disagree about the nature of these materials. Nevertheless, be they archetypes, tropes, or figures, the principle of their functioning is the same: human groups and generations do not invent stories but rather re-mould previous narrative schemes that have been deposited in traditional texts whose semantic power is often underlined by an attribution of sacredness.

The article that follows seeks to unravel one of these schemes, taking as a point of departure an extremely influential passage of the Bible, *Daniel 5*. Stripped of all its figurative details, the narrative skeleton of this story talks about a human scenario that is as old as humanity: political power that is arrogantly unjust sooner or later is condemned and dismantled in a ruinous way. As the story shows, though, the hero that triggers this redress for injustice is nothing but a mediator or, better, an interpreter: someone who is able to hear a mysterious voice, read a secret message, and pronounce the tyrant's death sentence. Pursuing the traces of this scheme through the centuries and the civilisations, one finds out that, underneath small differences, cultures have come up with new versions of an old story, in which those in power become blind and deaf to the voice of protest mysteriously raising towards them.

In *Daniel*, the guilty unawareness of the unjust ruler materialises as a hand that mysteriously writes on a wall. But all the secret messages that, unbeknownst to the powerful—the global bankers, the media tycoons, the oil kings of this world—simmer day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute on the mysterious wall of the internet, or on the walls of our suburbs, schools, universities: do they not manifest, after all, the same social aesthetics, the same way of establishing the relation between the invisibility of power, clad in its castles or exclusive resorts, and the disruptive force of a “*j'accuse*” that, incomprehensible to its evil addressees, nonetheless sets off their perdition, once is interpreted to them by the just, the hero, the reader of signs?

If social aesthetics is the systematic study of the social conditions that affect the creation of feelings, including the perception of beauty and artistic value, then an urgent task of this discipline is to study how, especially in periods of crises, frustration, and despair, protesters do not simply invent a new language but rather turn with pragmatism to the force of previous narrations,

resurrecting old heroes so as to accomplish new deeds. And whose is the wall where myriads of hands are currently writing their divine graffiti?

The Biblical Text

This article focuses on *Daniel 5*, the passage of the Bible that tells the story of the end of Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon.² Although the passage is well known, it is perhaps useful to refresh the reader's memory. Given the concise, almost lapidary style of the passage, summarising it would be inappropriate. Hence, it is quoted below in its entirety, according to the *King James Version*:

King Belshaz'zar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshaz'zar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden and silver vessels which had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Immediately the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand; and the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king cried aloud to bring in the enchanters, the Chalde'ans, and the astrologers. The king said to the wise men of Babylon, 'Whoever

² Writings on the book of Daniel are extensive; specifically on Belshazzar. See, for example, Raymond Philip Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar: A Study of the Closing Events of the Neo-Babylonian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1929); Gerhard F. Hasel, "First and Third Years of Belshazzar: *Dan 7:1; 8:1*," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 15:2 (1977): 153-168; Alan R. Millard, "Daniel 1-6 and History," *Evangelical Quarterly* 49:2 (1977): 67-73; Alan R. Millard, "Daniel and Belshazzar in History," *Biblical Archeology Review* 11:3 (1985): 72-78; William H. Shea, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel: An Update," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20:2 (1982): 133-149; William H. Shea, "Bel(te)sazzar meets Belshazzar," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26:1 (1988): 67-81; Lester L. Grabbe, "The Belshazzar of Daniel and the Belshazzar of History," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26:1 (1988), 59-66; Al Wolters, "Belshazzar's Feast and the Cult of the Moon God Sîn," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 199-206; Daniel R. Watson, "The Writing on the Wall: a Study of the Belshazzar Narrative" (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, 2004).

reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.' Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshaz'zar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed; and his lords were perplexed. The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall; and the queen said, 'O king, live for ever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. There is in your kingdom a man in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chalde'ans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshaz'zar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.' Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king said to Daniel, 'You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. I have heard of you that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation; but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple, and have a chain of gold about your neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. Then Daniel answered before the king, 'Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; nevertheless I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty; and because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him; whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive; whom he would he raised up, and whom he would he put down. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him; he was driven from among men, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild asses; he was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of men, and sets over it whom he will. And you his son, Belshaz'zar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven; and the vessels of his house

have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. 'Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.' Then Belshaz'zar commanded, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put about his neck, and proclamation was made concerning him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. That very night Belshaz'zar the Chalde'an king was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

Even before any in-depth analysis, it is already evident that this passage offers one of the most suggestive tales on many of the themes the present article is going to deal with: a king who abuses his power until he becomes sacrilegious; graffiti that a mysterious hand traces on the wall of the palace whilst the apex of profanation is reached; the king and his acolytes' incapacity to decipher the content of the graffiti; the necessity of summoning Daniel, untouched by the arrogance of power, in order to decode the message,³ the way in which the graffiti, once interpreted by the righteous one, reveals to the powerful one, blinded with haughtiness, his fault to the eyes of God, and predicts his imminent end; and finally, the inexorable accomplishment of divine punishment.

This passage has been the object of several interpretations, which for the purposes of the present article can be categorised into four trends: 1) Jewish exegesis, which includes commentaries by both Talmudic and later authors; 2) Christian exegesis; 3) non-verbal exegesis as it is expressed through the transposition of this tale in other media, starting from its Christian iconography; 4) both verbal and non-verbal exegesis as it is manifested in intertextual references to this passage.

Jewish Exegesis

³ See Edward J. Young, *The Prophecies of Daniel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1949).

The most systematic Talmudic commentary on *Daniel 5* is in the Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin, treatise of Sanhedrin, second chapter, folio 22a of the Soncino edition, where the language and the original alphabets of the Torah are debated. Simplifying the matter to the extreme, the main question of this Talmudic passage is the following: since not even the Jewish courtiers of Belshazzar were able to decipher the divine graffiti, how is it possible that Daniel was? The answers quoted by the Talmud take two opposite directions. According to Rav Jose, the Torah was originally given to the Jews in Assyrian alphabet [*'ktav ashurit'*], but after they sinned, it was mutated into the Samaritan one [*'ro'az'*], and then when they repented, the Assyrian script was reintroduced. This exegesis, which interprets the story of Belshazzar's feast as evidence of the mutation of the Hebrew alphabet at the time of Ezra, essentially presents Daniel as a philologist: it is through his knowledge of the original divine script that he is able to decipher the graffiti addressed to Belshazzar.

On the contrary, according to Rav Simeon ben Eliezer, who refers to the authoritative opinion of Rav Eliezer ben Parta, who, in turn, relies on that of Rav Eleazar of Modin, the script of the Torah has never changed. Daniel's capacity to decipher God's graffiti is not due to his being a philologist of a lost alphabet, but to his being a semiotician of a secret code: gematria. According to the historian of Jewish mathematics Solomon Gandz, who summarises and develops a long tradition of scholarship on this matter, the term 'gematria' has nothing to do with geometry, as the etymology wrongly proposed by some scholars would suggest, but derives, instead, from the Greek γραμματεία, and would essentially designate "cryptography, the science, art or game of forming secret letters, the art of secret codes, the numerical interpretation of letters, the permutation of letters."⁴ Gandz lists the most common gematric techniques: the permutation of letters according to their position in the alphabetic order, or also with regard to their numerical value; the change of direction of writing from right-left to the left-right, or from the horizontal to the vertical line, *et cetera*.⁵

⁴ Solomon Gandz, "Hebrew Numerals," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 4 (1932-1933): 53-112.

⁵ Literature on gematria is vast (but not always of academic standard). See, for example, John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1968); Jonathan P. Siegel, "Grammar or 'Gematria'?" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (New Series) 59:2 (1968): 161-62; Karl Menninger, *Number Words and Number Symbols: A Cultural History of Numbers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969); Gershom Scholem, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Gematria," (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House; New York: Macmillan Company, 1971-1972); Shmuel Sambursky, "On the Origin and Significance of the Term Gematria," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 29 (1978): 35-38; Gutman G. Locks, *The Spice of Torah* –

According to Gandz, the earliest written evidence of the existence of the gematria would be precisely the passage of the treatise of Sanhedrin in which Rav Simeon ben Eliezer interprets the story of Belshazzar's feast. In this Talmudic interpreter's opinion, the divine graffiti would have been composed of a series of fifteen letters of the Hebrew alphabet, divided into four words, the first three of three letters each, the last one of six, so that the message would have appeared to Belshazzar as follows: 'yod – tet – tet / yod – tet – tet / alef – dalet – caf / pe – vav – ghimel – het – mem – tet':

יטט יטט אדך פוגחמט

This sequence of letters does not correspond to any meaning in Hebrew, and it is for this reason that not even the Jews in Belshazzar's court were able to interpret God's graffiti. Daniel, however, according to the Talmudic exegesis of Rav Simeon ben Eliezer, permuted the letters following the techniques of gematria and, in particular, adopting the principle of the so-called *at-bash*, a simple mono-alphabetic substitution cipher in which the first letter of the alphabet is replaced by the last one, the second one with the second-last one, and so on, 'inverting' the alphabetic order of letters. Thanks to this stratagem, the abovementioned sequence of letters was replaced by the following one: 'mem – nun – alef / mem – nun – alef / tet – qof – lamed / vav – pe – resh – samekh – yod – nun':

מנא מנא טקל ופרסיך

And here is, finally, the content of the message according to the interpretation that Rav Simeon ben Eliezer attributes to Daniel: '*mene*': God has numbered your kingdom and has led it to an end; '*tekel*' you have been weighed and found faulty; '*peres*': your kingdom is divided and given to the Persians and to the Medes. In the same Talmudic passage, then, other sages reconstruct the sequence of letters of the original divine graffiti through different permutation techniques. According to Rav Samuel, the letters were written vertically instead of horizontally; according to Rav Johanan, the directionality right-left had been replaced by the left-right one; according to Rav Ashi, finally, a permutation had occurred in which the second letter of each word had been written as first.

Gematria (New York: Judaica Press, 1985); Jonathan D. Rawn, *Discovering Gematria: Foundational Exegesis and Primary Dictionary* (Hixson, TN: Gematria Publishing, 2008).

Nevertheless, none of these Talmudic interpretations has entirely satisfied the modern and contemporary Jewish exegesis, which essentially revolves around two points: 1) why is the word 'mene' repeated twice, a subtlety that is not translated either by the Septuagint or the Vulgate, and it is therefore neglected by biblical commentaries that rely on these two translations? 2) Why does the Talmud read the last sequence as 'peres', overlooking the termination of the plural?

"*Mene mene tekel upharsin*: An Historical Study of the Fifth Chapter of Daniel," a PhD thesis defended by John Dyneley Prince at the Johns Hopkins University in 1893, underlines that the modern and contemporary Jewish exegesis, unlike the Talmudic one, does not attribute to Daniel only an extraordinary syntactic astuteness but also an admirable semantic subtlety. Daniel manages to interpret the divine graffiti not because he merely reconstructs the intelligibility of its expressive plane through suitable gematric permutations, but because he also explores the content plane of the graffiti thanks to the polysemy of the words that manifest it. 'Mene', therefore, refers to both 'counting' and 'ending'; 'tekel' to both 'weighing' and 'being at fault'; 'peres' to both 'dividing' and 'Persia'.

Many more interpretations of the 'mene mene tekel upharsin' have been proposed in the last century,⁶ among which it is worth mentioning the one put forward by the French Orientalist Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau in an article published in 1886 after the discovery in 1878, in the British Museum, of a Babylonian weight bearing the Aramaic inscription 'pe – resh – sin'.⁷ Clermont-Ganneau linked such inscription with the Hebrew 'pe – resh – samekh', which designates half a mina, and read 'tekel' as 'shekel' and 'mene' as 'mina'. The mysterious divine graffiti would therefore contain a metaphor based on the Biblical units of weight, according to the following equivalence,

⁶ Literature on this subject is vast. See Antonine de Guglielmo, "Daniel 5.25 - An Example of a Double Literal Sense," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 11 (1949): 202-206; C. Steyl, "Mene Mene Teqel ufarsin: 'n Samevatting van die studies oor hierdie probleemteks'," *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 18 (1977): 199-205; Danna Nolan Fewell, *A Story of Stories in Daniel 1-6* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988); David Instone Brewer, "Mene Mene Teqel Uparsin: Daniel 5: 25 in Cuneiform," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42:2 (1991): 310-316.

⁷ Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau, "Mane Thecel Phares et le festin de Balthasar," *Journal Asiatique* 8:1 (1886): 36-52; Heinrich Gottlieb Kraeling, "The Handwriting on the Wall," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63:1 (1944), 11-18; Frank Zimmermann, "The Writing on the Wall: Dan. 5.25 f.," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (New Series) 3 (1965): 201-207.

ascertained by scholars: 1 talent = 60 minas = 3.600 shekels.⁸ The ciphered message would therefore allude to Nebuchadnezzar as a mina, to his son Belshazzar as a shekel—that is, a very small part of a mina—and to the Babylonian kingdom as a mina destined to be broken into two pieces and divided between Medes and Persians. Clermont-Ganneau’s solution is fascinating because it adds to the semantic levels stemming from the polysemy of Hebrew—and already identified by the Talmudic exegeses—a further semantic level singled out thanks to historical and archaeological erudition. The divine graffiti, to conclude, would mean not only that God has numbered the kingdom of Belshazzar and has led it to an end; and that his kingdom is split and given to the Persians and to the Medes. It would mean, in a more hidden and subtle way, not only that God is progressively annihilating the Babylonian kingdom, belittling it till halving it, but also that, in the end, power is a matter of measure, and those who do not know how to exert it are destined to lose it.

Christian Exegesis

Christian exegesis has also brought about numerous interpretations of the episode of Belshazzar, but with a radically different style. The medieval commentators on *Daniel*, for instance, being unable to explore the labyrinth of the Hebrew semantics, give rise to mostly eschatological exegeses in which the divine graffiti is no longer decoded as utterance—with reference to its semio-linguistic structure—but as enunciation with reference to the divine intervention in the Christological plot of history. Thus, Rupert of Deutz, a Benedictine theologian and biblical exegete who lived between the eleventh and the twelfth century,⁹ entitles the ninth chapter of the first book of his commentaries on the prophet Daniel “De eversione Babylonis quae facta est a

⁸ Benedict Zuckermann, *Über Talmudische Gewichte und Münzen* (Breslau: Schletter’sche Buchhdlg, 1862).

⁹ On Rupert von Deutz see Mariano Magrassi, *Teologia e storia nel pensiero di Ruperto di Deutz* (Rome: Apud Pontificiam Universitatem Urbanianam de Propaganda Fide, 1959); Maria Lodovica Arduini, *Rupert von Deutz (1076-1129) und der “status Christianitatis” seiner Zeit: symbolisch-prophetische Deutung der Geschichte* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1987); Maria Lodovica Arduini, *Ruperto di Deutz e la controversia tra cristiani ed ebrei nel secolo XII* (Roma: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1979); John H. Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Heinz Finger, Harald Horst, and Rainer Klotz, eds, *Rupert von Deutz, ein Denker zwischen den Zeiten?* (Cologne: Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, 2009).

Medis et Persis, quomodo per illam significetur futura in die iudicii destructio totius civitatis diaboli.”¹⁰ Here is the most significant passage:

*Igitur cum Balthasar rex grande convivium fecisset, et unusquisque secundum suam biberet aetatem, cum biberet ipse, et optimates ejus, uxores et concubinae ejus, cum biberent vinum et laudaverunt deos suos, aureos et argenteos, aereos, ferreos, ligneosque, et lapideos, in eadem hora apparuerunt digiti, quasi manus hominis scribentis contra candelabrum in superficie parietis, scribentis, inquam, peccatum, iudiciumque et iram secundum peccata superbiae Babylonis, quia secundum haec erit, qua die Filius hominis revelabitur, et Babylon civitas diaboli, civitas confusionis, sanguine sanctorum ebria meretrix, eadem ejus revelatione indicabitur.*¹¹

Whereas for most Jewish exegesis, the divine graffiti—deciphered according to its immanent semio-linguistic structure—accuses Belshazzar of having lost the measure of his own power and as a consequence of having being measured as faulty, for most Christian exegesis, this same graffiti does not mean as much as utterance as in its quality of enunciation,¹² that is, as

¹⁰ “On the subversion of Babylon by the Medes and the Persians, on how by which it is signified the future destruction of the entire city of the devil on judgment day.”

¹¹ PL 167, col. 1510. The passage translates as: “Then as king Belshazzar threw a big party where everybody drank depending on their age, as he was drinking together with the members of his court, his wives and his concubines, as they drank wine, and praised their gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone, in that moment some fingers appeared, a sort of human hand writing down, near the candleholder on the wall, the sins, judgment and condemnation of the arrogant Babylon, because in this way they will be revealed the day of the Son of man, and through his revelation Babylon will be shown as the city of the devil, of chaos, as a whore drunk of the blood of the saints”.

¹² The bibliography on the linguistics and the semiotics of enunciation is copious. On the genesis of the concept of enunciation, see Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale, I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). For a survey of Benveniste’s theory of enunciation, see Aya Ono, *La Notion d’énonciation chez Émile Benveniste* (Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2007); for an effective synthesis of this tradition of studies, see Giovanni Manetti, *La teoria dell’enunciazione: L’origine del concetto e alcuni più recenti sviluppi* (Siena: Protagon, 1998) and Giovanni Manetti, *L’enunciazione: Dalla svolta comunicativa ai nuovi media* (Milan: Mondadori Università, 2008). For an interesting phenomenological approach on the semiotics of enunciation, see Jean-Claude Coquet, *Phusis et logos: Une*

prefiguration of the transcendent intervention of Christ as judge and defeater of evil.

Medieval Christian Iconography

Inspired by this exegesis, the first examples of Christian iconography depicting Belshazzar's feast start to appear. One example being a capital of the vestibule of the Benedictine abbey of Vézelay (FIG. 1):¹³ here the divine graffiti disappears, because what matters is emphasising the hand that has traced it; a hand that, emerging from a cloud, points the index at Belshazzar, standing out against the arch that dominates him.



FIG. 1 – Capital of the vestibule of the Benedictine basilica of Vézelay: Belshazzar's feast. Photographer unknown.

Two elements, at least, corroborate the hypothesis that this iconography is inspired by Rupert of Deutz's eschatological commentary on *Daniel*. Firstly, the next capital

represents the fall of Babylon as prefiguration of the Last Judgement.¹⁴ Secondly, there is at least one other iconography of Belshazzar's feast,

phénoménologie du langage (Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2007).

¹³ For an introduction to the Basilica of the Vézelay Abbey (Basilique Sainte-Marie-Madeleine), see Francis Salet, *La Madeleine de Vézelay. Étude iconographique par Jean Adhémar* (Melun: Librairie d'Argences, 1948); Viviane Huys-Clavel, *La Madeleine de Vézelay: cohérence du décor sculpté de la nef* (Chambéry: Editions Comp'act, 1996); and Kirk Ambrose, *The Nave Sculpture of Vézelay: the Art of Monastic Viewing* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2006).

¹⁴ Specifically on the iconography of the capitals of the Vézelay Abbey, see Peter Diemer, "Stil und Ikonographie der Kapitelle von Ste. Madeleine" (PhD diss., University of Heidelberg, 1975); Robert Pirault, *L'École du Moulin: Essai sur le message d'un chapiteau de Vézelay* (Paris: Editions franciscaines, 1986); and Viviane Huys-Clavel, *Image et discours au XIII^e siècle: les chapiteaux de la basilique Saint Marie-Madeleine à Vézelay* (Paris: Harmattan, 2009).

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preceding the commentary of Rubert of Deutz, an iconography in which the biblical episode is depicted in a much closer way to the Jewish exegesis. Folio 255v of manuscript 644 of the Pierpoint Morgan Library of New York contains a whole-page illumination representing Belshazzar's feast (FIG. 2):



FIG. 2 – “Belshazzar’s Feast,” folio 255v of manuscript 644 of the Pierpoint Morgan Library of New York.

This illumination, taken from a commentary on *Daniel* by Jerome and executed by Magius—an illuminator of Mozarab style who worked in Tábara, Spain,

from 926 to 968¹⁵—represents a haloed Daniel who, as the caption reads, (*'DANIEL CONTRASCRIPURAM RESPICIENS'*)¹⁶ stares and points at a hand that emerges from behind a candelabrum (*'CANDELABRUM'*). This hand inscribes with a quill on three quoins of the Mozarab arch the words *'MANE TEHCEL FARES'*; next to it, one reads the caption *'ARTICULUS MURI SCRIBENTIS'*¹⁷ as well as the deciphered message: *'MANE NUMERABIT DEUS REGNUM TUUM ET COMPLEBIT ILLUD'*; *'THECEL ADPENSUS ES IN STATERA ET INUENTUS ES MINUS HABENS'*; and *'FARES DIUISUM EST REGNUM TUUM ET DATUM EST MEDIS ET PERSIS'*.¹⁸ Below, a crowned Belshazzar and other men—two of whom are haloed, perhaps so as to indicate their Jewish identity—are lying down on a sigma couch, stretching their hands toward a prepared table whilst a servant comes with two bottles. A caption towers over them and reads: *'BALTASSAR INCONUIBIUM CUM OBTINATIBUS SUIS MILLE'*.¹⁹

In this iconography, which is at least one century older than Rupert of Deutz's exegesis, the hand that mysteriously emerges from behind the candelabrum is not one that condemns by pointing the finger, as in the capital of Vézelay, but one that, oddly holding a quill, condemns by writing, or rather, by inscribing a graffiti black on white on an arch of the palace. Thus, although the presence of a single *'Mane'* suggests that the illuminator is inspired by the Vulgate rather than by the original Hebrew, this iconography is still far from the eschatological interpretation of this biblical episode that will flourish in its palace in the subsequent centuries, emphasising the divine writer to the detriment of the divine writing.

Another element emerges in this iconography, an element that, after a long medieval apnoea, will surface again after the Christian rediscovery of the Hebrew text of the Bible in the seventeenth century: the inscription of God's graffiti coincides with a re-appropriation of the palace, which is all the more significant if one takes into account that the mysterious message is provoked by Belshazzar profaning the vessels of the temple of Jerusalem. Thus, exactly in the moment when the Babylonian king turns the sacred vessels into profane

¹⁵ See Jonathan J.G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and their Methods of Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); on MS 644, see Harold R. Willoughby, "III. The Cycle of Text Illustrations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 52:2/3 (1933): 89-107; and Catherine Brown, "Manuscript Thinking: Stories by Hand," *Postmedieval: a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2 (2011): 350–368.

¹⁶ "Daniel looks at the wall."

¹⁷ "Writing the words on the wall."

¹⁸ See the English translation of the Biblical passage.

¹⁹ "Belshazzar throwing a party with thousands of his court members."

cups, the divine graffiti says: "Stop! Now this profane palace becomes my sacred temple."

In the late-medieval iconography of Belshazzar's feast, this element is less evident because it is diluted in the typological moralisation of the biblical episode. For instance, in folio 62 of the English *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*—manuscript 766 of the Pierpoint Morgan Library of New York—produced between 1375 and 1399, the representation, on the right, of Daniel deciphering the divine graffiti for a Belshazzar who is already on his knees is paralleled, on the left, by a depiction of the well-known parable of the ten virgins (*Matthew* 25:1-3), immensely popular in the late medieval Christian iconography (FIG. 3).²⁰

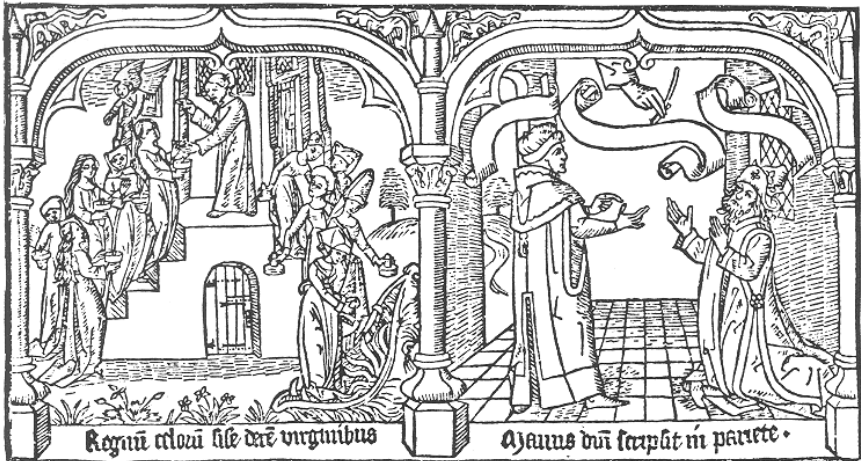


FIG. 3 – "Belshazzar's Feast," folio 62 of manuscript 766 of the Pierpoint Morgan Library of New York.

There are various common elements, on several semantic levels, that link the two images together and through them the 'Old' and the 'New' Testament. Two of these are most relevant: first, the correct usage of receptacles as opposed to the incorrect one (just as the five foolish virgins did not know how to use their lamps, letting them die out, neither did Belshazzar know how to use the vessels of the temple of Jerusalem appropriately, filling them with wine); and second, unappealable condemnation: just as the five

²⁰ See Adrian Wilson and Joyce Lancaster Wilson, *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis, 1324-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

foolish virgins were excluded from the wedding, so were Belshazzar and his acolytes condemned on the judgment day.

An aspect of this iconography of Belshazzar's feast is particularly striking: like in the abovementioned Mozarab manuscript, a hand with a quill appears here too; however, as in the capital of Vézelay, such quill does not trace any graffiti on the walls of the Babylonian palace. Indeed, the typological and moralising intent of the image is such that the wall has been replaced by three cartouches, and the task of writing on them '*mene tekel upharsin*' is left to the reader/viewer of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. Thus, this image—didactically—invites those who observe and complete it to take the role of the divine judge in condemning Belshazzar through the writing of the three words, the role of Daniel in typologically deciphering its message through the visual reference to the parable of the ten virgins, but also the role of Belshazzar in making amends for one's own faults. The Christian exegesis of Belshazzar's feast as a discourse of soul searching and repentance seems to substitute the Jewish interpretation of the same episode as a discourse, instead, of judgment and punishment. Simultaneously, as it has been already pointed out, a reading of the divine graffiti according to a semiotics of enunciation replaces a reading of it according to a semiotics of utterance.

Early Modern Christian Iconography

At the dawn of modernity, with Christian exegesis and Christian iconography rediscovering the Hebrew philology of the biblical text, the two interpretative lines indicated above tend to converge once more. Early evidence of this is in the oil painting executed soon after 1548 by Tintoretto—probably with the help of Lambert Sustris—on a Venetian chest, currently in the *Gemäldegalerie* of Wien together with five more panels, all decorated with Old Testament subjects. As it is evident in the detail (FIG. 4), the painting is able to introduce in the scene a discharge of tension that agitates and discompose Belshazzar's court, culminating in the contrite gesture of the Babylonian king.



FIG. 4 – Tintoretto, *Belshazzar's Feast* (c.1568), oil on pinewood. Wien: Gemäldegalerie, reproduced with permission.

As though emulating the iconography of famous symposia of the New Testament²¹ (for example, the dinner at Cana and the Last Supper) yet reversing their semantics, the image shows its faithfulness to the biblical text by disseminating cupbearers within the image—paralysed at the appearance of the graffiti—all around the feast. Above all, however, is the depiction of the hand that inscribes on a wall of the palace the fatidic message. The fact that ‘mene’ is repeated twice is perhaps a sign that the sources of Tintoretto are not simply the Vulgate or the Septuagint, but a biblical text revised according to Venetian Jewish erudition. Such return of the Christian imaginary of God’s graffiti to its Hebrew textual source is completed one century later—again, in an environment where Christian art and Hebrew philology develop side by side—in that which is probably the most famous and suggestive image of the entire iconography of Belshazzar’s feast: the oil on canvas painted by Rembrandt in approximately 1635, currently at the National Gallery of London (FIG. 5).

²¹ See Silvia Malaguzzi, *Food and Feasting in Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006).



FIG. 5 – Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast* (c.1635), oil on canvas. London: National Gallery, reproduced with permission.

Many are the elements of this painting that, worthy of admiration, would deserve an in-depth analysis as well: the orientalisising magnificence of the king's garments and the Flemish luxury of his acolytes' clothes,²² the astonishment in faces and gazes; the oxymoronic character of gestures, such as those of a king still divided between a right hand diving onto the table and a left hand that reacts to the scare; the extraordinary efficacy of a freeze-frame in which the vessels of the temple of Jerusalem, the one carried by the red-clothed maidservant and the one at the right of Belshazzar, pour their sacrilegious content in the same instant as the prodigy takes place.

It is the divine graffiti, however, that shall be examined in detail here. It shows a return to the Hebrew script of the message, but it also features an element that both Christian exegesis and iconography, ignoring the original

²² See Emilie E.S. Gordenker, "The Rhetoric of Dress in Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Portraiture," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 57 (1999): 87-104.

biblical text, had neglected, thus interpreting the episode of Belshazzar's feast from an exclusively typological and moralising perspective. The neglected element is the following one: Belshazzar is not dismayed only because he is facing the enunciation of God's graffiti, but also because he is facing its utterance. He is dismayed because he is convinced that this graffiti has a meaning—since it is presented to him through familiar signs—but he cannot decipher it. It is in his semiotic ignorance that Belshazzar's incapacity of keeping and managing power manifests itself: he is blind to God's judgment. Symmetrically, Daniel's role in the episode has a meaning only if he is considered as the narrative counterpart of Belshazzar: the former, unlike the latter, knows how to read the divine writing, interprets the judgment that it expresses, and therefore deserves power, which indeed will be bestowed upon him at the end of the episode.

The subtlety of Rembrandt's painting consists in granting philological depth to the exegesis in, and through, the image. The divine graffiti, indeed, is not depicted in its decrypted form, that is, after the intervention of Daniel, but in its encrypted form – before the interpretation. Rembrandt paints the angst of the powerful one who suddenly becomes conscious of his blindness.²³ The *'mene mene tekel upharsin'* is, indeed, represented according to the gematric code of Rav Samuel, that is, by replacing the horizontal direction with the vertical one.

Could it be deduced that perhaps Rembrandt knew the gematria and the Talmud? He happened to be the neighbour and friend, in the Breestraat of Amsterdam, of Menasseh Ben Israel—a Portuguese rabbi—who was immensely learned and was the founder of the first Hebrew publishing house in Amsterdam.²⁴ Philosophers may remember him for having been Spinoza's teacher. Rembrandt even etched a portrait of him. In 1639, Menasseh Ben Israel published a book entitled *Tseror Hahayim, De Termino Vitae*. On page 160 there is a passage that comments the biblical episode of Belshazzar's feast and reproduces the divine graffiti, reconstructing it according to the gematric

²³ See Mirjam Alexander-Knotter, "An Ingenious Device: Rembrandt's use of Hebrew Inscriptions," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 33:2 (1999): 131-159.

²⁴ See Michael H. Zell, "Protestant Imagery and Jewish Apologetics: Rembrandt's Encounter with Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994); and Michael H. Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Scholarship on Menasseh Ben Israel is abundant; see Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel, Rabbi, Printer, and Diplomat* (New York: Arno Press, 1975) and Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulán, and Richard H. Popkin, eds, *Menasseh Ben Israel and his World* (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

code of Rav Samuel (FIG. 6). The divine graffiti painted by Rembrandt is exactly the same, evidence of how the Christian painter had learned from the philology of his Jewish friend.²⁵

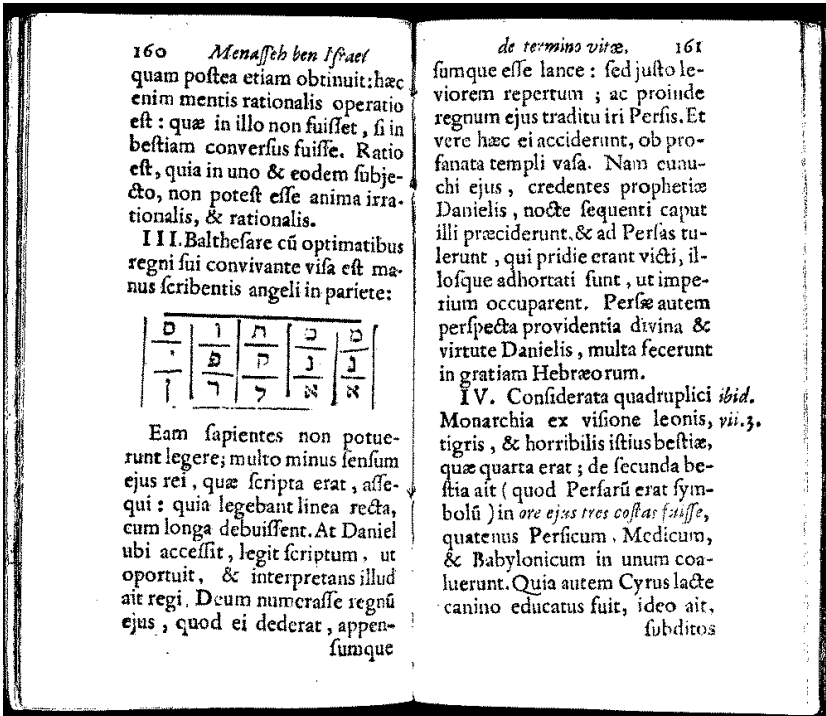


FIG. 6 – Menasseh Ben Israel, *Tseror Hahayim, De Terminis Vitæ* (Amsterdam: Typis & Sumptibus Authoris, 1639).

Intertextual Operations

In the following centuries, the iconography of Belshazzar's feast became the visual subtext of a copious series of intertextual operations representing the abuse of power, its blindness, and its condemnation by a mysterious and frightening divine graffiti. For instance, (FIG. 7) shows an etching and aquatint

²⁵ See Robert J. Littman, "An Error in the Menetekel Inscription in Rembrandt's Belshazzar's Feast in the National Gallery in London," *Oud Holland* 107:3 (1993): 296-297.

hand-painted by the British caricaturist James Gillray²⁶ and dated August 24, 1803; its title is *The Hand-Writing upon the Wall*.



FIG. 7 – James Gillray, 1803. *The Hand-Writing Upon the Wall* (1803), hand-painted etching and aquatint.

This image represents Napoleon who—surrounded by an obese Joséphine, French officers with monkeyish features, soldiers with blood-covered sabres, and several women showing their breasts—sits at a table set

²⁶ See Draper Hill, *Mr. Gillray, The Caricaturist* (London: Phaidon Press, 1965); Thomas Wright and Robert H. Evans, eds, *Historical & Descriptive Account of the Caricatures of James Gillray: Comprising a Political and Humorous History of the Latter Part of the Reign of George the Third* (New York: B. Blom, 1968); Mary Anne Goley, *The Satirical Etchings of James Gillray from the Collection of John Morton* (Washington, D.C.: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 1996); Christiane Banerji and Diana Donald, eds, *Gillray Observed: The Earliest Account of his Caricatures in London and Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Richard T. Godfrey, *James Gillray: the Art of Caricature* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001); Christina Oberstebink, *Karikatur und Poetik: James Gillray 1756-1815* (Berlin: Reimer, 2005).

with special dishes: ‘Bank of England’, ‘St James’, ‘Tower of London’, and ‘Roast Beef of Old England’. Napoleon throws out his arms, frightened, and the cups of wine are overturned whilst God’s right hand writes on the wall ‘mene mene tekel upharsin’ and his left hand weighs the British crown, finding it heavier than the Jacobin hat.

Less than a century later, on October 29, 1884, senator James B. Blaine,²⁷ candidate of the Republican Party at the Presidential Elections of that year, took part in a sumptuous banquet in his honour at Delmonico’s – the renowned New York restaurant. The day after, the pro-Democrat newspaper *The New York World* published, on the first page, a cartoon entitled *The Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine and the Money Kings* (FIG. 8).

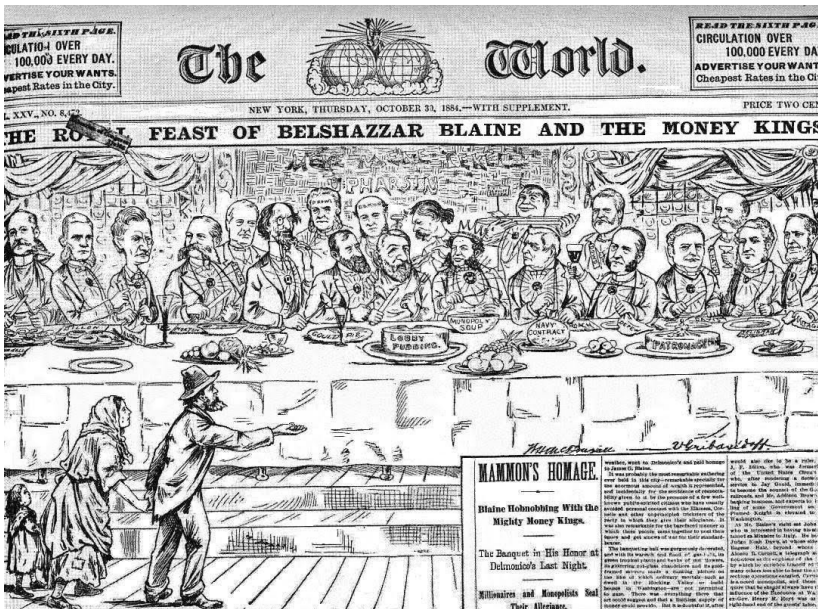


FIG. 8 – *The New York World*, *The Royal Feast of Belshazzar Blaine and the Money Kings* (1884).

²⁷ See David S. Muzzey, *James G. Blaine* (New York: Dodd, 1934); Edward P. Crapol, *James G. Blaine: Architect of Empire* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000); Harlen Makemson, “One Misdeed Evokes Another: How Political Cartoonists Used ‘Scandal Intertextuality’ Against Presidential Candidate James G. Blaine,” *Media History Monographs* 7:2 (2004-2005): 1–21; Neil Rolde, *Continental Liar from the State of Maine: James G. Blaine* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 2006).

In this cartoon, Blaine is represented sitting at the centre of the table, a napkin around his collar and a knife and a fork in his hands. Surrounded by the richest New York tycoons of the time, he is about to eat dishes such as 'lobby pudding', 'navy contract', 'monopoly soup', *et cetera*. In front of the guests, a miserable American family is begging. Behind the guests, a mysterious hand writes on the wall of the restaurant: '*mene mene tekel upharsin*'. This cartoon was the last drop of the Democrats' very aggressive media campaign, meant to depict Blaine as a candidate attentive exclusively to the interests of the most affluent. Blaine lost the elections to Grover Cleveland, exactly by a fistful of ballots in the State of New York.

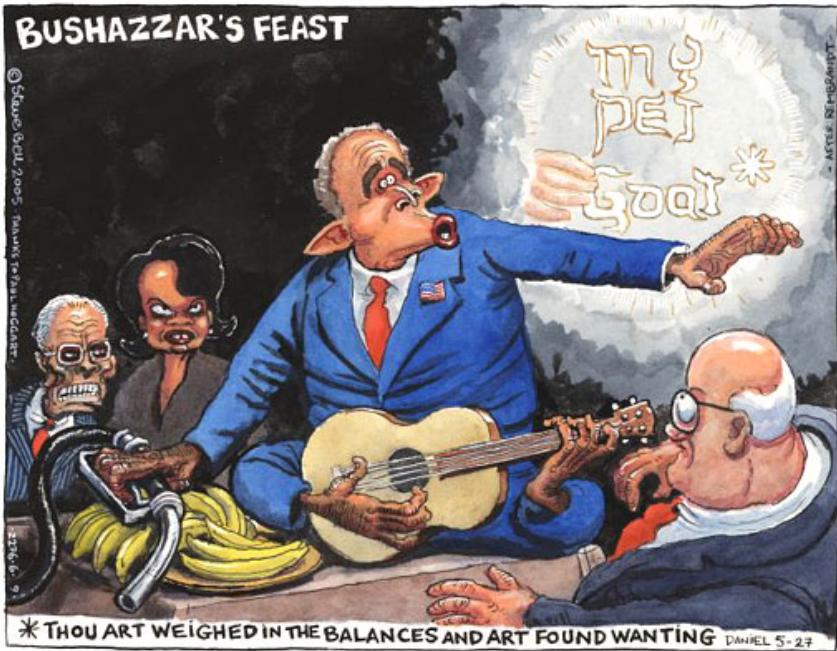


FIG. 9: Steve Bell, *Bushazzar's Feast* (2005).

On September 6, 2005, George Bush returned to Louisiana in order to reinvigorate the efforts of his administration to relieve the victims of Hurricane Katrina and boost his presidential image. The same day, the progressive British

newspaper *The Guardian* published an image created by his most famous cartoonist, Steve Bell,²⁸ entitled *Bushazzar's Feast* (FIG. 9).

There is no doubt that the artist had attentively observed *The Feast of Belshazzar* by Rembrandt in the National Gallery of London, given that the cartoon imitates its scenic construction almost faithfully. Surrounded by a ghostly Donald Rumsfeld, a grim Condoleeza Rice, and a bulky and astonished Dick Cheney, a monkeyish George Bush—strumming a little guitar with his back paws—stretches his right hand toward a gas nozzle lying on a bunch of bananas, and his left hand, frightened, toward the divine graffiti. Here pseudo-Hebrew letters remind one of the ‘*mene mene tekel upharsin*’, but actually compose the message ‘my pet goat’. It may be opportune to recall that *My Pet Goat* is a story for children contained in a spelling book entitled *Reading Mastery II: Storybook 1*, written by Sigfried Engelmann and Elaine C. Bruner. This story became famous in 2001 when President George Bush, paying visit to a primary school in Florida on September 11, 2001, continued reading it to a class for seven minutes after having been informed of the terrorist attacks. An asterisk then discloses its mystery, referring to the King James Version of *Daniel 5:27*, and replacing the biblical exegete by the British cartoonist.

Conclusions

The textual series composed and analysed thus far could be enriched much more. For the sake of concision, only some of the Hebrew exegeses, Christian interpretations, iconographic transpositions, and intertextual quotations that compose the abundant textual universe of Belshazzar's feast have been mentioned. There was no space to dwell, for instance, on the many literary

²⁸ See Colin Seymour-Ure, “Le dessin satirique dans la presse britannique contemporaine,” *Mots* 48 (1996): 55-73; Steve Plumb, “Politicians as Superheroes: The Subversion of Political Authority Using a Pop Cultural Icon in the Cartoons of Steve Bell,” *Media, Culture & Society* 26 (2004): 432-439; William Kidd, “Borrowing Delacroix: Transnational Iconography in Contemporary Caricature and Advertising,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 13:2 (2005): 193-207; Walt Werner, “On Political Cartoons and Social Studies Textbooks: Visual Analogies, Intertextuality, and Cultural Memory,” *Canadian Social Studies* 38:2 (2004): 1-10; Klaus Doods, “Enframing Bosnia: the Geopolitical Iconography of Steve Bell,” in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, ed. Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 130-150; Klaus Dodds, “Steve Bell's Eye: Cartoons, Geopolitics and the Visualization of the ‘War on Terror’,” *Security Dialogue* 38:2 (2007): 157-177; Klaus Dodds, “Popular Geopolitics and Cartoons: Representing Power Relations, Repetition and Resistance,” *Critical African Studies* 2:4 (2010), doi: 10.1080/20407211.2010.10530760.

creations from Jonathan Swift to John Cheever, from Robert Louis Stevenson to Emily Dickinson, adopt this biblical episode as subtext. And there was no way either to discuss the musical transpositions of Belshazzar's feast, which are also numerous, from the famous oratory by Händel²⁹ to Johnny Cash's ballad.

It is important to emphasise, however, that this textual series, when suitably investigated, reveals some of the essential traits of the expressive form of graffiti, especially in their quality of esoteric political communication. The first trait is the anonymity of the instance of enunciation – an anonymity that, by bestowing on the graffiti an aura of mystery, pushes its addressee to dismayingly search for its source. It is found either in the *vox dei*, as regards religious cultural contexts, or in the *vox populi*, as regards the secular one. In both cases, the message addressed to the powerful is prodigiously inscribed on the wall, without this writing being imputable to an embodied agent.³⁰ It is this indeterminacy of the agent that acts to disable—with fear—those who would arbitrarily wield power.

The second trait is the effect of the anonymous inscription on the structure that receives it, and on its symbolical connotations. In condemning power, the graffiti performs a symbolical expropriation. It is also this invasion of the spaces of power that so disturbs the powerful. The third feature is the cryptic character of the graffiti, a character that is not tantamount to incomprehensibility, but to the capacity of letting meaning be glimpsed at without being fully grasped. The ruler knows that the graffiti is addressed to him in a threatening tone, but he cannot understand what it says. It is, above all, this sudden awareness of one's own blindness that makes this power impotent.

Finally, the fourth and last trait is the necessity of an interpreter. The anonymity of the graffiti, its invasiveness, and its cryptic character would have no effect without a Daniel who, placing himself outside of power and refusing his rewards, foresees his imminent end, thus accelerating it. The exegetic, iconographic, and intertextual tradition of Belshazzar's feast does not end here. Depending on one's tastes and distastes, everyone will be able to update the character of the overbearing king, that of his courtiers, that of the Babylonian

²⁹ See Leneida Marie Crawford, "The Performance of Contrasting Roles in Selected Works of G.F. Handel: Otho in Agrippina, Dejanira in Hercules, Daniel in Belshazzar" (D.Mus.A diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 1996).

³⁰ Massimo Leone, "Agency, Communication, and Revelation," in *Attanti, attori, agenti: Il senso dell'azione e l'azione del senso; dalle teorie ai territori / Actants, Actors, Agents: the Meaning of Action and the Action of Meaning; from Theories to Territories, Lexia* (New Series) 3-4 (2010): 77-94.

palace, that of the profaned vessels, that of the exegete with pure heart, and, above all, the content of the mysterious divine graffiti.