CHAPTER LVII

THE GRAFFITI

The graffiti form the largest division of the Pompeian inscriptions, comprising about three thousand examples, or one half of the entire number; the name is Italian, being derived from a verb meaning 'to scratch.' Writing upon walls was a prevalent habit in antiquity, as shown by the remains of graffiti at Rome and other places besides Pompeii, a habit which may be accounted for in part by the use of the sharp-pointed stylus with wax tablets; the temptation to use such an instrument upon the polished stucco was much greater than in the case of pens and lead pencils upon the less carefully finished wall surfaces of our time. Pillars or sections of wall are covered with scratches of all kinds,—names, catchwords of favorite lines from the poets, amatory couplets, and rough sketches, such as a ship, or the profile of a face. The skit, occasionally found on walls to-day,

'Fools' names, like their faces,
Are always seen in public places,'

has its counterpart in the couplet preserved as a graffito both at Pompeii and at Rome: *Admiror, pares, te non coecidisse ruinis, Qui tot scriptorum taedia sustineas,*

'Truly 'tis wonderful, Wall, that you have not fallen in ruins,
Forced without murmur to bear the taint of so many hands.'

Of a similar vein is a Greek line scratched upon a wall on the Palatine hill in Rome: 'Many persons have here written many things; I alone refrained from writing.'

Taken as a whole, the graffiti are less fertile for our knowledge of Pompeian life than might have been expected. The people with whom we should most eagerly desire to come into direct contact, the cultivated men and women of the ancient city, were
not accustomed to scratch their names upon stucco or to confide their reflections and experiences to the surface of a wall. Some of the graffiti, to judge from the height at which we find them above the floor, were undoubtedly made by the hands of boys and girls; for the rest, we may assume that the writers were as little representative of the best elements of society as are the tourists who scratch or carve their names upon ancient monuments to-day. Nevertheless, we gain from these scribblings a lively idea of individual tastes, passions, and experiences.

A few graffiti have reference to events, as the siege of Sulla, in 89 B.C. (p. 240). The most interesting historical examples are those which relate to the conflict between the Pompeians and the Nucerians, in the year 59 A.D. (p. 220). An ardent Pompeian wrote: *Nuceris infelicia,* — 'Down with the Nucerians!' From a scribbling by a partisan of the other side it appears that the inhabitants of Puteoli sympathized with the Nucerians, while those of Pithecusae — the island of Ischia — favored the Pompeians: *Puteolanis feliciter, omnibus Nucerinis felicis, et m[c] Pompeianus [et] Pithecusani,* — 'Hurray for the Puteolanians, good luck to all Nucerians; a hook for the Pompeians and Pithecusans.' The hook referred to in this connection was that used by executioners and the attendants of the Amphitheatre in dragging off the dead. Another Pompeian wrote: *Campani, victoria una cum Nucerinis peritis,* — 'Campanians, you were conquered by the same victory with the Nucerians.' The Campani were not the inhabitants of Campania, but of the suburb called Pagus Campanus.

Two inscriptions, attesting the presence of members of the Praetorian Guard in Pompeii, have been previously mentioned (pp. 387, 401). Another praetorian left his name in a house of the eighth Region (VIII. iii. 21): *Sex. Decimius Rufus milis col[ortis] V pr[aeatoriam] J Martialis,* — 'Sextus Decimius Rufus, a soldier of the fifth praetorian cohort, of the century led by Martialis.' To the same division of the army probably belonged a centurion of the first rank, Q. Spurinnaus Priscus, whose name was found in a house of the first Region (I. iii. 3). The first, fifth, and ninth praetorian cohorts, mentioned in the graffiti, may have come to Pompeii with different emperors, or on different occasions with the same emperor; it is unlikely that the three were united to form a single escort.

Graffiti are sometimes useful for the identification of buildings; so in the case of the Basilica and of several inns. The dated examples throw some light on the age of the stucco on which they are found. They are for the most part late, and afford little help in determining the time of commencement of the various decorative styles; but in several cases they indicate a later limit clearly. In this way we learn that the decoration of the Basilica, in the first style, was finished before October 3, 78 B.C. — how long before we cannot tell; and that in 37 B.C. the plastering of the Small Theatre was already on the walls, decorated in the second style. The gladiatorial graffito in the house of the Centenary (p. 226) proves that the decoration of the room in which it is found — a late example of the second style — was finished before November, A.D. 15. A dated inscription of the reign of Nero is given in the chapter on the house of the Silver Wedding (p. 305).

Several hundred graffiti present merely the name of the scribbler, sometimes with the addition *hic fuit,* — 'was here,' or simply *hic;* as, *Paris hic fuit, Sabinus hic.*

A large number contain a greeting, perhaps in some cases intended for the eye of the person mentioned, as *Aemilius Fortunatus fratris salutem,* — 'Aemilius greets his brother Fortunatus.' In this as in other examples it is interesting to note that one brother is designated by the gens name, the other by the cognomen. Sometimes the greeting is the reverse of cordial, as in this example: *Samius Cornelio, suspendere,* — 'Samius to Cornelius: go hang yourself.' Hardly less naive is the message to a friend who has died: *Pyrrhus Chio conlgeae sali[tem]: moleste fero, quod audivi te mortuon; ita[ne] vale,* — 'Pyrrhus to his chum Chius: I'm sorry to hear that you are dead; and so, Good-by.'

The most prominent theme of the graffiti is love, which is constantly reappearing, in prose scribblings and in snatches of verse. The verse form is usually the elegiac distich. Some of the lines are taken from the poets; others were made up for the occasion, and not a few verses were finished in prose,
as if the would-be versifier found original composition more difficult than he had anticipated.

Several distichs extol the power of love, as the following, which, taken from some unknown poet, is found in several places: *Quisquis amat, valeat, percat qui nescit amare; Bis tanto percat quisquis amare vetat;* —

‘Good health be with you, lovers all;
Who knows not how to love, be cursed;
But oh may double ruin fall
On him who sets out love to worst.’

A similar thought finds expression in a single line, perhaps also a quotation: *Nemo est bellus nisi qui amavit mulierem,* — ‘He who has never been in love can be no gentleman.’

Not all the Pompeians, however, viewed the matter so seriously. To the first line of the couplet just quoted a scribbler of a cynical turn in one instance joined a parody, to the effect that those who are in love may well avoid the use of hot baths, on the principle that ‘the burnt child dreads the fire,’ — *Nam nemo flammis ustis amare potest.*

The uselessness of interference with the course of love is also made prominent. In this distich, apparently from some poet, the scribbler seems to have made a slight change to meet a specific case, substituting *obirugat* for *custodit* or some similar word: *Alliget hic auras, si quis obirugat amantes, Et vetat assiduas currere fontis aquas,* —

‘Whoever has a mind
To hinder lovers’ way,
Let him go zephyrs blind
Or running waters stay.’

Ancient lovers nevertheless had their fears, and the following couplet, which is no doubt borrowed from a poet, appears also, in a slightly different form, on a wall in Rome: *Si quis forte meam cupiet violare puellam, Illum in desertis montibus urat Amor,* —

‘If any man shall seek
My girl from me to turn,
On far-off mountains bleak
May Love the scoundrel burn.’

Of extant elegiac poets Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus are quoted or paraphrased. Among the quotations is the familiar couplet of Propertius: *Nunc est ira recens, nunc est discedere tempus; Si dolor aferit, credo, redibit amor,* —

‘Now is it time to depart,
Now anger freshly burns;
When one ceases to feel the smart,
Believe me, love returns.’

If it was written by a lover after a quarrel, reconciliation was not far off. Another discouraged suitor perhaps consoled himself by writing on the wall of the Basilica this distich from Ovid’s “Art of Love,” the form of which differs slightly from that given in the manuscripts: *Quid pot est durum saxo aut quid mollius unda? Durum tamen molli saxa cavantium aqua,* —

‘What is so hard as rock, or what can be softer than water?
Hard rocks nevertheless by water are worn away.’

Amatory inscriptions often have the form of a message or greeting to a loved one, as in this example: *Victoria, vale, et ubique es, suavit et sternites,* — ‘Health to you, Victoria, and wherever you are may you sneeze sweetly,’ that is, may good luck follow you. Often the greeting is more ardent, as that to Cestilia: *Cestilia, regina Pompeianorum, anima dulcis, vale,* — ‘Cestilia, queen of the Pompeians, sweet soul, greeting to you.’

Sometimes the lover avoided writing the lady’s name: *Pupa quae bella es, tibi me misit qui tuis est; vale,* — ‘Maiden who are so beautiful, he who is yours sent me to you; good-by.’

Now and then we find an inscription of this class that leaves an unfavorable impression. The following is repeated several times on the outside of a house in the first Region: *Serenae sodales sal[utem],* — ‘Greeting to Serena, from her companions!’

Spurned lovers also confided their woes to graffiti, sometimes adding an appeal to the obdurate one, as in this wretched couplet, which can scarcely have been taken from a poet; the play upon words in the last clause was apparently intentional: *Si quid amor valeat nostei, sei te hominem visis, Commiseresce mihi, da veniam ut veniam,* —
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If you a man would be,—
If you know what love can do,—
Have pity, and suffer me
With welcome to come to you.'

It was probably a lover in straits who scratched on the wall a line of the Aeneid (IX. 404) as a prayer to Venus: Tu, dea, tu praesens nostro succurre labori,—

'Thou, goddess, with thy present help
Our sore distress relieve.'

Another unsuccessful suitor found the lines of a single poet inadequate to express his feelings, and joined together a couplet from Ovid (Am. I. viii. 77-78) and one from Propertius (IV. v. 47-48) in order to voice his complaint against a miserly mistress who barred her door upon all except wealthy lovers. But the climax is reached in four lines of irregular verse in which the rejected lover proposes to vent his anger on the goddess of love herself: 'All lovers, come! I purpose to break the ribs of Venus and to smash the small of her back with clubs; if she can bore a hole in my tender breast, why can I not break her head with a cudgel?' From the psychological point of view the complete identification of the goddess with a statue representing her is noteworthy.

Occasionally a pair of lovers left on a wall a record of a meeting; thus, Romula hic cum Staphylo moratur,—'Romula tarried here with Staphylus.' Staphylus, however, was apparently a flirt; in the house of Caecilius Jucundus a similar meeting with another maiden is recorded on a column of the peristyle: Staphylius hic cum Queta. But Staphylus does not seem to have gained the confidence of the fair sex to the extent that another Pompeian gallant did, of whom we find it written: Restitutus multas decipit saepe puellas,—'Restitutus has many times deceived many girls.'

The names of husband and wife are sometimes joined together, as in a room of a house in the ninth Region: L. Clodius Varna, Pelagia coniuncta; there is a similar example in a house ruined by the earthquake of the year 63, [Balbus et Fortunata, duo coinges.

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We find a pleasing instance of marital affection in a graffito in which a lonely wife sends a greeting to an absent husband and other relatives: Hirtia Psacas C. Hostilio Conopi coniugi suo manudictori et clementi monitori et Diodo [a] e sorori et Fortunato fratré et Celeri suis salutem semper ubique plurimam, et Primigeniae sua salutem,—'Hirtia Psacas at all times and in all places sends heartiest greeting to Gaius Hostilius Conops, her husband and guide and gentle adviser, and to her sister Diodota, her brother Fortunatus and her Celer; and she sends a greeting to her Primigenia, too.' The names of both husband and wife are Greek, psacas signifying 'dewdrop,' and conops 'gnat.'

Many happenings are chronicled on the walls; and there are memoranda of every description. The programmes of gladiatorial combats have already been mentioned (p. 223). One man records the result of a trip to Nuceria, where he won at the gaming table—without cheating, he takes pains to add—a sum amounting to $130: Vici Nuceriae in alia (for alea) X DCCCLVS, fide bona,—'At Nuceria, I won 855.5 denarii by gaming, fair play.'

Another Pompeian counted the steps as he walked up and down the colonnade at the side of his garden (in the house VII. ii. 41) for exercise; he recorded 640 paces for ten turns back and forth.

In the peristyle of a house in the first Region the advent of young pigs, or of puppies, is noted: XV K[alendar] Nov[embres] Puteolana peperit masc[alos] IIII, fem[eas] II,—'On October 17 Puteolana had a litter consisting of 3 males and 2 females.'

The inscriptions relating to business transactions are reserved for another chapter. We may notice here, however, that memoranda of accounts were sometimes scratched on walls, usually containing only the figures indicating measure or price, as in the shops on the south side of the Macellum. The following is from a bakery in the first Region (I. iii. 27): Oleum, [l[ibra], a[sseibus] IV; palea a. V; faeuna a. XVI; diaria a. V; furtura a. VI; viria I a. III; oleum a. VI,—'Oil, a pound, 4 asses; straw, 5 asses; hay, 16 asses; a day's wages, 5 asses; bran, 6 asses; one wreath for the neck, 3 asses; oil, 6 asses.'
The value of the as varied; in the Early Empire it was nearly equivalent to 1½ pence, or 3 cents.

Children scratched upon walls the alphabet that they were learning. The frequent quotations from Virgil, generally incomplete, are likewise an echo of lessons at school, where this author was carefully studied; we find very often the beginnings of lines at the opening of a book, as Arma virumque cano, or Conticuere omnes. The first word of the poem of Lucretius, Aeneidum, also occurs several times.

Occasionally gnomic quotations are found, in most cases, perhaps, from writers of comedy. Among them is the well-known maxim, Minimum malum fit contumendo maximum,—‘The smallest evil, if neglected, will reach the greatest proportions.’ A proverb more concrete in its form of statement is the following: Moram si quaeres, sparge milium et collige,—‘If you want to waste your time, scatter millet and pick it up again.’