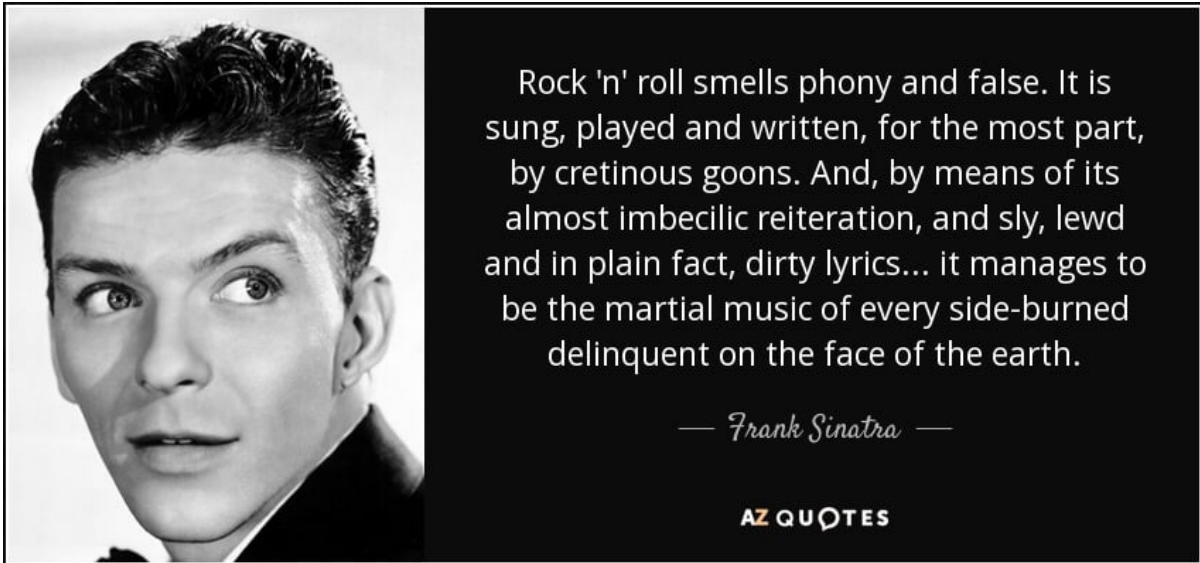


Omnipresent Rock

by Theodore Dalrymple



At Nîmes station, you pay 80 centimes to go to the lavatory (it recently went up from 70 centimes). What do you get for your money?

The facilities have recently been refurbished. There is now an automated entrance machine, into which you pay your fee: though the supervising lady is still there, who seems mildly disapproving of the basic human necessities that provide her with a living. You can now vote, by pressing a red, amber or green button, on whether the facilities satisfied you as to their cleanliness today. There is a notice that says that your opinion is very important to whoever owns or operates the lavatories. Perhaps the supervisor is paid by results.

Certainly the facilities were very clean when I used them the other day. The redecoration was not altogether to my taste, but it is not for their beauty that one visits lavatories.

What really upset me, however, was the public-address system through which rock music was relayed while one relieved oneself. Is modern man really so lacking in what my teachers used to call inner resources that he must be entertained while

he urinates?

I have an aversion to rock music at the best of times. It seeps into the public space in the western world as martial music and political propaganda seeps into the North Korean public space (and all space in North Korea is public). Its enveloping sound irritated me greatly in the lavatory at Nîmes station. Having paid my 80 centimes, I felt I had a right to urinate in silence, but even worse was the effect upon my heroic efforts to relieve myself.

These days, alas, I have to concentrate on the task in hand. Any distraction prolongs it, and rock music is just such a distraction, being both a noise and a source of aesthetic discomfort.

However, bad as it was, it was not half as bad as the recorded message in the lavatories on Virgin Trains once you have locked the door. For several years now, this facetious message asks passengers not to flush their nappies, dreams or goldfish down the pan. Not funny the first time, being a condescending insult to the taste and intelligence of the public, it drives you mad the hundredth time you hear it. Would it constitute a mitigating circumstance if I vandalised the lavatories in Virgin Trains? It certainly ought to be.