

QUESTIONED DOCUMENTS: THE HUMAN TRACE AS A BODY FLOW

ABSTRACT

Although handwriting has long been recognized as something entirely individual, it has not yet been the subject of true scientific and objective examination. This article tries to promote an interest in the scientific observation of handwriting. A methodical and complete description of each written document would allow researchers to solve identification problems, investigate group characteristics and bring forth new information in a number of different fields.





Could we find in handwriting something like DNA? That may seem a farfetched idea, but we know how individual handwriting is. Would it be possible to examine it scientifically as a body flow? We already study handwriting, or graphic production, with the help of neurology, computer science, other sciences, and literary or artistic studies. Writing considered as a means of communication, as a product of culture, as a form of art, is now highly investigated without being separated from the concept of language. Writing, then, is assumed as a conscious, intellectual, rational activity, the study of its disorders helping to define what is “normal” writing.

But is it always rational, intellectual, conscious? Let us try to forget what we know about handwriting; let us drop our cultural experience and imagine that we are looking at a writing person, without knowing what he or she is doing. What do we see? A leaning head, a moving hand, and something, of which we do not know the nature, seemingly flowing out of the individual’s fingers and becoming a separate object.

Let us start with the little child trailing a wooden stick in the dust behind him and wondering about the magic trace it has produced. Let us start with the pictures upon cave walls: whatever the support, whatever the implement, man has found a way of producing something which apparently flows out of him, which comes directly from inside his body and stays after him as an individual token of his presence.

Let us consider handwriting, not primarily as a means of communication but first as an expression, as an exteriorization of the individual self happily discovering his ability to mark his passage with something as personal as his own blood.

Language, of course, has made writing more effective, allowing it to communicate complex thoughts and feelings but, at the same time, reducing it to a means, an instrument, a tool.

And yet, why do lovers in all times write their names and their love upon trees and monuments? Why are most anonymous letters written by hand (while typewriters, newspapers, scissors are easily available)? Why are our urban walls covered with graffiti?

Examiners of “questioned documents” (documents whose authenticity is suspect and under investigation) have seen many a criminal case in which, having stolen or killed, the guilty one had also written, although it was not necessary nor useful, involved a serious risk and finally allowed him to be identified. Why such incautiousness?

These examples show that inscriptions are not only nor primarily a means of communication, but an internal necessity to expel intense feelings, conscious or unconscious: love and hate, greed for power, desire to destroy. Graffiti, when they have a meaning, are created as an attempt to get attention from a world which does not listen, which is felt as deaf and blind. And when there are no words, is it not the aim, conscious or unconscious, of the authors to occupy the available space, all the available space? In fact, “writing,” whether or not it uses a language made of words and signs, is the result of a deeply rooted need. And if we consider it as flowing out of the individual, as growing out of a need to expel something, as a means to mark a territory, then we can consider it as a body flow.

Body flows have been studied extensively in the last decades. We have learned about the vast information they give, which allows positive identification in many cases. So does handwriting. And handwriting has a definite quality: it is durable. It is still possible to examine inscriptions which were made centuries ago. Whether people have been dead for a long or a short time, we can study the written documents they have left, which represent a yet untapped source of information, and (like body flows) not only for identification purposes. The information is there. We have to find out what we can do to extract it from the material we have.

While other scientists are studying the process of handwriting production, we have to tackle the problem from the other end: the examination of the finished product. And if we consider it as important, as individual as a body flow, then we have to give it a full scientific treatment—that is, accurate observation. Like the primitive man who knows how to “read” in the woods the



traces of animals or humans, we have to develop a power to observe precisely what we see.

A scientific observation should be done without a narrow purpose. The only way to observe accurately is to examine without any preconceived idea or special aim. Such an observation of handwriting is, in fact, what examiners of “questioned” documents do in their work which concerns identification, and identification only. We have to examine and to compare without any consideration for the text, the psychological aspects or the circumstances. This is the only way to solve accurately these police or justice problems. For instance, if we have to study anonymous letters and writing samples of several suspects, we must not consider their different personalities. The author of the letters is not necessarily the least sympathetic of the writers. In the same way, forgery detection can be done only if we know how to look at and examine a document—if we are aware of the possibilities and limits of willful transformation and are able to find out through disguised or imitated handwriting the natural characteristics of the real writer.

This is not graphology as it presently exists. I am very definite about that. Graphology experienced a valuable start. Many remarkable works were written, especially during the first half of the century, before World War II. Crepieux-Jamin, Pulver, Saudek, Klages, Hegar, Jacoby, among many others, have brought forth new and valuable notions.¹ Unfortunately, graphology has suffered since then the worst kind of vulgarization. As it developed a commercial appeal to the general public, books began to be published that gave subjective or false interpretations. Anybody now can buy such books in the unscientific hope of knowing everything about their neighbor without the embarrassment of questioning. Different training programs, mostly through commercial organizations, have multiplied the number of “graphologists,” and the professional associations which should have exerted control over the qualifications have not always succeeded. The result is that the competent professionals are outnumbered by quacks or imprudent consultants,

and graphology does not any longer enjoy the consideration rightly gained by its first promoters.

From its very beginning, graphology defined a proper pattern of handwriting observation, considering writing not only as a shape but as the result of a movement. The methodology rests on a few basic principles:

- to examine without reading,
- to look at the entire document, never forgetting the global view,
- to study the general characteristics, that is to say, layout, size, slant, baseline, connections, pressure, velocity, spacing—the shapes of letters coming at the very last, rather as an illustration.

It should not be necessary to adopt a peculiar terminology for graphology: our aim is to keep the language of handwriting observation as simple as possible, to be understood by any unprejudiced person and not only by specialists. Handwriting observation should be taken into consideration as a still-untapped source of information by scientists in many fields: medical research, sociology, history and paleography would be enriched by a methodical and objective examination of written documents.

What has been learned in the past decades about visual perception shows that one sees only what one expects to see. So it is a mistake, in my view, to teach graphology by teaching both observation and interpretation at the same time. Those are two entirely different things. When we have learned to give a special significance to any graphic feature, we unconsciously choose to see (or not to see) according to what pleases us most or suits our preconceived ideas. This is the source of many graphological errors.

We have to separate observation and interpretation. Interpretation itself can always be discussed. It is not a scientific process (at least, not yet), and opinions may differ. But an observation precisely stated can always be verified (or contradicted) by comparison with the original. We might train good professional graphologists if the aspirants were obliged to study handwriting observa-



tion for two years before starting to learn the possible significance(s) of what has been observed.

To look is not to see. To be able to observe a written document properly, we must have a minimum of scientific, cultural and artistic education:

Scientific: We should have basic information about

- visual perception, optical illusions (which should develop the ability to appreciate proportions correctly,²
- neurophysiology of handwriting production (respective roles of brain, eye, hand), and the possible changes in handwriting induced by a change of instrument, the use of the untrained hand (foot, mouth) and the effects of age and illness,
- research in computer science about handwriting recognition.

Cultural: We should know about the teaching of writing and its practice, especially in the time and place corresponding to the document we have to study. Handwriting changes. In each country, each generation has its own handwriting. It means the interpretation cannot be universal unless it is, at the same time, general and flexible. The individual has to be considered in a social and cultural environment. We cannot, for instance, grant to a graphic feature in a modern handwriting exactly the same meaning it had at the beginning of the century, when social conditions were different.³ It is not necessary to be able to read the text of the document. In fact, it is very good training to examine documents written in a language one does not understand (even in a different alphabet): it allows pure observation and prevents the student from being influenced by the information contained in the text.

Artistic: Seeing paintings in museums and exhibitions and learning to appreciate art as a critic is a valuable asset in handwriting observation.⁴

Naturally, each step should be completed by practical exercises added to the theoretical learning, so that we can understand our own process of visual perception and enlarge it as much as possible to enable us to observe as precisely and accurately as

we can. Only then is it possible to reach a complete and correct observation of the written product. And once we have done this, any untrained person can verify what we have described because once it has been shown, it becomes apparent for everybody.

The examination of questioned documents to ascertain the writer's identity should be done in this way. Only a complete description of each handwriting can be the basis of a correct comparison. The full description of any written document can be compared to a genetic sequence: you cannot properly compare two sequences if one element is missing.⁵

Technically, a complete observation cannot be made without special training. But there is another reason which prevents us from seeing everything there is to see. It is difficult to look at handwriting with an open mind: first, because we are used to reading words and phrases expressing a message which is immediately intelligible; and second, because it contains an emotional element. Of course we feel a special pang when we recognize the handwriting of loved ones, but even when we see a written document for the first time, we almost immediately have an impression which is purely sentimental: sympathy or antipathy, which makes us feel this handwriting is beautiful—or is not.

This is probably why so many people are self-conscious about their own handwriting—which would seem to contradict what we said at the beginning of this article, but does not really. Being afraid is the result of experience, while the need to write belongs to some primitive instinct. Even the person who says he or she has a “bad” handwriting writes instinctively when lying on a beach, with a finger on the sand, erasing it afterwards and writing again.

That self-consciousness deserves our attention. On many occasions, it is due to the misunderstanding of teachers and family. Society makes people think that a “beautiful” handwriting is very regular and stable. But that is not exactly true. The mechanical, stereotyped handwriting in some mental illnesses is evidence of the condition. Although it is not very easy to explain the difference between elegance, conventionalism and vulgarity,⁶ it is



possible to show that the small (or larger) irregularities in handwriting are mostly due to the fact that you are a living person: breathing, acting, sensitive to circumstances and emotions. Whatever the reasons, one should never apply a judgment upon handwriting: like a body flow, handwriting has to be accepted as part of the individual.

Handwriting, indeed, is not just a fixed image but something which has a life of its own: it comes from an individual who is not only living, but acting. Often enough, one hears people say, "My writing changes; it is quite variable." But our handwriting, like ourselves, does not change fundamentally; it reflects, more or less, like our face, our physical and mental state. Happy or sad, energetic or tired, our mind concentrated or just dreaming, we are also vulnerable to the effects of time. Here again, a correct observation of different samples allows one to distinguish the permanent features from the temporary ones.

To treat handwriting as a body flow, deserving a truly scientific observation, we have to forget what we know about letters and words, to get rid of our feelings, to prepare our mind and our eyes to see just what there is to see and everything there is to see, from every possible angle: to describe, to show, to verify and to capture objectively the breath of life, present in every script. This is not easy. It is one thing to look at a sitting duck, and another to look at it flying. But it is rewarding: when we can explain and communicate, when we can show—then it is possible to share our experience and allows others to go further on. A scientific examination of handwriting considered as a human trace, as a body flow, opens a vast field of research: collecting handwriting, collecting observations, and confronting them with what we know about the writers, allow us to define group characteristics, make accurate comparisons and discover new information about the individual and about the group or any group.

Some of us can already recognize some national characteristics: there is, overall, a difference in the general aspect of American and European handwritings and, among the Europeans, a

certain variety according to different countries. We can recognize, too, the differences between generations: a page written by our parents or our children is different from what we write. Professional features are also identifiable: we can distinguish technical, administrative or commercial qualities among candidates' letters. In the same way, experienced examiners of questioned documents have noticed that anonymous letters have some graphic peculiarities in common.⁷

If we do not organize this on a scientific basis, this kind of experience is not transmittable. But we could make it completely objective, that is, available to any scientist, if we were to give handwriting the treatment which a body flow really deserves. It is essential that we keep a scientific mind. Our observations must be exact, complete and verifiable.

And let us remain modest. We are not bringing answers, but more questions. If we are able to show some constant features in a group, we do not know what the meaning might be. At most, we propose hypotheses which have to be checked and rechecked. Why, in some ancient Hebrew manuscripts, are some words written slightly larger than others? Here the paleographer may answer. Why do we so often see long, isolated commas in anonymous letters? There we may offer a possible interpretation which can be discussed by the psychiatrist. Do the differences in national handwritings correspond to national features of character? Does the roundness of Sinhalese writing, which has no angles at all, give one among other elements which might explain misunderstandings with Tamils? Can we establish a link between certain personal handwritings and art productions by those who have no art training and may be suffering from a mental condition?⁸

This list is endless. It opens large avenues of investigation and reflection, and it allows us to believe that although cultures are different, the human truth is one. Observing a graphic product as a body flow, we touch, under the cultural strata, the deep universal reality of the human being. Looking at the flow and analyzing its movement, we can learn about the living person



who existed centuries ago in other parts of the world; get a better understanding of cultural differences and their relative importance; give new tools to medical, sociological and many other researchers; find out what changes or impairs the normal and happy production of the human hand, and study the ways which may help the current of life express itself with freedom and grace.

ENDNOTES

¹ See the first chapter of H.J. Jacoby. 1948. *Analysis of Handwriting*, 2nd. ed. London: George Allen and Unwin.

² See R.L. Gregory. 1970. *The Intelligent Eye*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd.; Oliver Sacks. 1985. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.; and Glyn W. Humphreys and M. Jane Riddoch. 1987. *To See But Not to See: A Case Study of Visual Agnosia*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

³ As an example, we may consider the baseline. The interpretation suggested by Michon and Crepieux-Jamin is that a stable baseline means rectitude; a very sinuous one, dishonesty. At the beginning of the century, religious and moral principles represented precise landmarks. Nowadays, when we do not have so many landmarks, my opinion is that a very stable baseline in modern handwriting would indicate prejudice: acting without questioning oneself.

⁴ It seems necessary to read E.H. Gombrich. 1960. *Art and Illusion*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press and *The Sense of Order*. 1979. Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd.; Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny. *Taste and Antique*. New Haven: Yale University Press; and Francis Haskell. 1976. *Rediscoveries in Art*. Oxford: Phaidon Press.

⁵ This is why, unfortunately, different people give different opinions on the same case, and this is the source of errors. However, the comparison of a questioned document with the genuine one needs a second step, which is even more complex. Once we have done a correct description of each document, we find differences and similarities. But these differences and similarities do not have the same value, so the comparison should be completed by an accurate analysis of the results.

⁶ The study of calligraphy is very interesting from this point of view: we sometimes see calligraphers' works which are technically clever and yet fail to be harmonious. See Dr. Rosemary Sassoon and G. SE Briem. 1984. *Teach Yourself Handwriting*. Sevenoaks, Kent: Hodder & Stoughton.

An interesting attempt at analyzing typescript has been made in the first chapter of Jan Tschichold. 1985. *Treasury of Alphabets and Lettering*. Hertfordshire: Omega Books, Ltd.

⁷ The study of a number of suicide notes has shown a particular pattern. See M. J. Sedeyn. 1982.

"Farewell Letters." *Hexagon Roche* 10, no. 2. The examination of ancient manuscripts allows us to think that we can differentiate the work of a scribe from that of the original writer. See M. J. Sedeyn. 1990. "Acte Mecanique ou Presence Vivante?" in *Bibliologia* 10 "L'écriture, Le Cerveau, L'oeil et La Main, edited by Colette Sirat, Jean Irogoin and Emmanuel Pouille. Place of publication?: Brepols. It should be possible to recognize, without reading, the likely content of a text, whatever the time and place it has been written.

⁸ The collections of the Musée de l'Art Brut, in Lausanne, Switzerland, deserve special study in this context.



B I O G R A P H I E S

Susan Walker is a lecturer in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, England and a typographer with a particular interest in information design. Her research and publications in recent years have concentrated on ways of describing formality and informality in written language, and on house style conventions across a range of technologies. One of her interests is typographic education at school: both how letter shapes are taught and how children organize information on the page.

Michael Twyman is professor of Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading, England, where he has been teaching for thirty years. His major research interests are in the history of graphic communication and the structure and conventions of graphic language. He has published articles on a wide range of topics, and his books include *Lithography 1800-1850*, *Printing 1770-1970* and, most recently, *Early Lithographed Books*. He has a special interest in the place of typography in education at all levels and has been chairman of the British Working Party on Typographic Teaching and the Education Committee of ATypl (Association Typographique Internationale).

Department of Typography &
Graphic Communication,
University of Reading

Visible Language Volume XXIV Two

Michael Twyman and Susan Walker, pp. 176-193

© *Visible Language* 1991

Rhode Island School of Design

Providence, RI 02903