# Lines of Desire: the phenomenology of long-hand writing in creative praxis

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# Lines of Desire: the phenomenology of long-hand writing in creative praxis

Taking a phenomenological approach, this article explores the benefits and challenges of writing long-hand, and how this has significant qualitative impacts upon the ‘early drafting’ stage of the creative process (Neale, 2018). I will consider exemplar from famous practitioners; the benefits of archival research; and the implications on my own praxis. I will argue the efficacy of this aspect of practice-based research, one that aligns with Frayling’s research *through* and *into* practice. As an experiential and kinaesthetic approach, long-hand writing can act as both a ‘mode of cultural resistance’ (Waidner, 2018) to the digitization of daily life and also complementary to other technologies (e.g. ‘smart’ devices with styluses). The pedagogical effectiveness of this approach (e.g. timed writing activities within a workshop; use of notebooks for qualia-capture in the field) is explored and evidenced with particular focus on a series of ‘Wild Writing’ workshops led between 2015-2017 in England and North America.

Keywords: hand-writing; long-hand; kinaesthetic; creative writing; notebooks.

## Introduction:

As a child growing up left-handed I became self-conscious of both the act of writing and my difference from the majority of my class-mates. Left-handedness was not beaten out of pupils (in my school at least) by that point – I occasionally hear horror stories from older adults, who as children, were forced to write with their right-hand, receiving a stinging smack with a ruler across their ‘sinister’ hand if they did otherwise – but it was still seen as odd. There are historical reasons for this (Thorpe, 2017). I quickly learned that holding the pen like my fellow class-mates, with my writing hand in a relaxed position, resulted in the smudging of the still-drying ink on the page. Therefore, I started to twist my left hand around, in an awkward claw position, to compensate. And henceforward I wrote, until I learned, through my art lessons, how to hold a pencil and a paint-brush for optimum fluidity and elegance of line. I tried this technique in my hand-writing and, finding it effective, have subsequently sustained it. And yet handwriting – the physical act of forming letters, words, sentences on the page – has fascinated me ever since. I became interested in calligraphy. The first piece of art I remember being proud of, aged 7, was an illuminated version of my initial, ‘K’. I went onto Art College and graphological elements became important in my work. I found something deeply satisfying in mark-making, in whatever medium, and this has stayed with me – enjoying sketching at the end of a day on the computer. In terms of proprioception the physical act of drawing and writing is virtually indistinguishable: they utilize a different part of the brain to, say, use of a QWERTY keyboard, although the popular bifurcation of right- and left-brain functions is inaccurate, a false dichotomy, as bihemispheric activity is far more complex than such popular distinctions suggest (Gilchrist, 2016). In evolutionary terms, the development of writing has been intrinsic to our progess, as TenHouten posits: ‘The invention of writing, as a technique of representing speech by a durable trace, was historically a dramatic leap forward for humanity.’ (2011: 588) And in terms of a child’s development, handwriting plays a key part also: ‘The learning of handwriting has the power to initiate reflection and to encourage the higher cognitive processes of analysis and abstraction’ (TenHouten, ibid). We write ourselves into being, into self-reflexive awareness.

I see this happening with my creative writing students, whatever age or ability. There is the light-bulb moment when the student discovers the satisfaction of articulating their interiority, their imaginative world, or their perception of the world, as Adams reflects, advocating the efficacy of the notebook in the creative writing workshop: ‘The very blankness of a notebook holds the potential to become a site of meaning making’ (2014, 14). They have a taste of the ‘hit’ that is my drug of choice as a writer. In this article I reflect more upon my own creative practice, with regards to the use of long-hand writing (the use of the notebook in field research, and the fictionalized journal for creating parallel narratives and differentiated voices in novel-writing; my pedagogy (via the ‘Wild Writing’ series of workshops); the benefits of archival research (in terms of accessing original hand-written material from historical sources); and the testimonies and outputs of other practitioners.

## Taking a Line for a Walk

Does the physical method by which a writer transfers thoughts to the page matter? Some swear by long-hand (Hughes, 1995); some straight to screen (Roffey, 2017); some prefer pencil or a favourite fountain pen (Pullman, 2017); others, a particular typewriter (Hanks, 2017), or dictation and the digital amanuensis of voice recognition software. Colson Whitehead tweeted his response to the debate: ‘Computer? Notebook? I engrave all my first drafts in stone tablets. Just get it down, you know? I can edit later.’ (2017)Copy link to Tweet

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  + Mute @colsonwhitehead
  + Unmute @colsonwhitehead
  + Block @colsonwhitehead
  + Unblock @colsonwhitehead
  + Report Tweet
  + Add to other Moment
  + Add to new Moment

Dorothy Parker, when asked about her process replied:

I wrote in longhand at first, but I’ve lost it. I use two fingers on the typewriter. I think it’s unkind of you to ask. I know so little about the typewriter that once I bought a new one because I couldn’t change the ribbon on the one I had. (1957, 79)

Writers are frequently asked about the minutiae of their process, as though the secret of their success can be derived from the kind of pen/computer/paper/desk/garden office/or routine they use. At the end of the day all that matters are the words.

However, I want to argue that *how* something is written affects *what* is written: that the method influences the content.

Ted Hughes, who was vehemently against composition direct to screen, advised: ‘above all don’t compose on a word processor (suppresses the right brain),’ (2011, 33). He was a strong advocate of the long-hand method when it came to poetry (1995): ‘when you sit with your pen every year of your life is right there, wired into the communication between your brain and your hand.’ In his observations of judging a children’s poetry contest in which all entries were written on Word Processors he noted how the technology affected the outcome:

What’s happening is that as the actual tools for getting words down onto the page become externalized, the writer can get down almost every thought or every extension of thought. That ought to be an advantage. But in fact, in all these cases, it just extends everything slightly too much. Every sentence is too long. Everything is taken a bit too far, too attenuated. (cited in Flaherty, 2005, 165-166)

Hughes added the proviso that the ‘ancient feelings, wanting to be expressed’ (ibid) by the kinaesthetic act of writing long-hand may be exclusive to those who had grown up used to writing by hand, as opposed to the digital natives of today’s generation who are often more used to writing directly onto a screen or device.

Yet that is perhaps a good reason for advocating long-hand in creative writing activities, as it defamiliarizes the process of composition and is closer to drawing (Hughes, 1995), to primal mark-making.

Miloš Kučera hypothesized about detrimental impact of the computer on a writer like Flaubert: ‘the slowness of this instrument and its built-in standards of completeness and correctness would probably block the creative process…’ (2010, 19-20).

Yet Flaherty herself advocated long-hand writing: ‘…*because* it slows you down, makes you think.’ (my emphasis, 2005, 166) The effort of shaping each letter, each word, and slowly filling the page makes one weigh each choice a bit more carefully. It is akin to dry-stone walling as opposed to, say, bricks and cement (which still requires skill, but is a lot faster and the results, less distinctive).

In terms of creative writing pedagogy, the efficacy of the long-hand writing activity has been advocated by many (Brande, [1934] 1981; Goldberg, 1991; Matthews, 1994; Cameron, 1995; Turner-Vesselago, 2013). Viccy Adams researched the impact of this approach on a group of 55+ year olds in Newcastle, and reflected: ‘paper and pen were essential tools and central to the creative process,’ (2014,14), although accepted that ‘this is not necessarily the case in all creative writing workshops’ (ibid). Each teacher finds what works best for them. As a lecturer coming from originally a Fine Art background I developed my own approach: Wild Writing.

## Wild Writing

My organic approach to creative writing pedagogy, adopting a form of ‘nomadic emergence’ (Whitehead, 2013), was developed on the hoof when an American friend requested some writing guidance while visiting her in Rhode Island. We visited a cove where I improvised some writing activities; and at an abandoned fairground I facilitated lifewriting which resulted in a powerful catharsis. The mobility and flexibility of pen and notebook was pivotal in this (you would not want to take a laptop onto a sandy beach; and the glare of the sun would make the screen hard to read). Back home in England, I developed a series of workshops expanding upon this approach, which I called ‘Wild Writing’ (2016). Taking place at Hawkwood College, Gloucestershire, I wanted to make the most of the beautiful grounds and walled garden – extending Klee’s famous adage ‘a drawing is simply a line going a walk’ ([1956] 1961) to taking the *page* for a walk. I encouraged students to use their senses as they explored, and record their sensory impressions in their notebook. Back inside the classroom I would encourage the students, via short writing activities improvised on the spot, to use the pen and paper in different ways: writing around the edges of the page, diagonally across, beyond the borders onto the next page, and so on. I played them different tempos and genres of music and asked them to respond in their freehand writing, mirroring the rhythm and energy of the music in their mark-making, as well as word choices. I turned the lights off and made them write in the dark. And I got them to write with their other hand, antithetically to lateral preference. In short, all the tricks in the book that I had learned while an art student on a Foundation in Art and Design, when we were ‘deprogrammed’ from our Secondary Education, and encouraged to think/draw/write outside of the box. For me, being wild (free-ranging, edgy, trail-blazing) as a writer starts with being wild with the pen, with the act of mark-making. The automatic writing advocated by Dorothea Brande’s famous ‘Morning Pages’ (now a staple of many writing workshops) is an often liberating technique to not only silence the inner critic and the linear, literal mind, but also to make practitioners fall back in love with writing again: to feel the fierce freedom of the black line on the blank page.

## The Visceral Archive

The direct impact of the handwritten can be experienced in an intense, visceral way during visits to archives, when observing or handling primary source materials. Telling details reveal illuminating insights into the writer as we witness a snapshot of their creative process – the precise moment when they are impelled to write and transfer their thoughts onto the page in the white heat of inspiration, speculation, or articulation – working out what they want to say as they ‘say’ it, almost silently on the surface of the paper. The intense vulnerability of this moment – when so many factors can mitigate against it *not* happening – first struck me when I beheld the fragile scraps of paper upon which were composed some of the seemingly immortal classics of War Poetry, in an exhibition of First World War Poetry at the Imperial War Museum (‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, 2002-3) and accompanying book (Stallworthy, 2002). There could be seen, closed hermetically in its case, the eponymous poem of the exhibition itself, penned by Wilfred Owen and covered in editorial comments by Siegfried Sassoon, a result of their famous encounter at Craiglockhart, as dramatized in haunting exactitude by Pat Barker (1991). This detail destabilized the permanence of the poem, which now seems carved in stone. Further, the accompany exhibits from the 12 featured poets – the stub of a pencil, the fragment of a draft, a few personal effects – were charged with such unbearable poignancy that they felt like saintly relics. Here, in their metonymic actuality, was contained the same charge as is condensed into the most effective of the poems that emerged from the hell of the Great War. The punch in the guts.

Developing a Derridan ‘archive fever’ ([1995]1996) I started to seek out analogous experiences. In my encounters with primary source material I have been particularly electrified by handling the Appalachian notebooks (1915-1918) of the folk song collectors Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpales (in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, London); and the MSS and notebooks of the Reverend Robert Kirk (1660-1690) in the National Library of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh special collections. Both the Sharp/Karpales and Kirk archives were an intrinsic part of my current PhD research, and this direct contact with such seminal figures in folklore and folk music studies, had a significant qualitative impact upon my project (as discussed in more detail below). I experienced a similar lightning bolt when I have beheld the original prints, paintings, and correspondence of the visionary artist and poet William Blake (Tate Britain; Westminster City Archives; Petworth NT). The minutest of details brings the historical figure, however obscure, alive. One is able to discern such exoteric details as handedness, as well as infer the esoteric (emotional or intellectual state as suggested by rhythm of the handwriting, the quality of emphasis upon particular words, telling lacuna, mistakes, and doodles). The revelatory orthographic and graphological texture culled from handwriting is an indicator of its porous ability, as a form, for capturing the nuances of process easily lost in the digital aridity of the screen.

If one then accepts the effectiveness of the experiential aspect of archival research – the details discovered and the physical effect being in close proximity to historical sources can have – then the question is: how to apply this to one’s own writing praxis?

Firstly, though, a consideration of access.

**The Virtual Archive**

Much longhand writing is now available to view digitally, and although this perhaps diminishes the viscerality of the reading experience, it allows for ease of access, reducing any financial, logistical, or physical barriers in handling archive material. Although a visit to an archive could be rewarding, inspiring experience for students, this is not always possible – and a workshop session can make good use of a digital archive in ‘real time’ for any number of participants. One good example of this is the Citizen Archivist platform of the National Archives (https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist). Even if students are not physically able to produce long-hand writing themselves, they can still benefit from browsing digitised notebooks, letters, journals, and so forth. Minute details can be enlarged on a projector screen or smart-board and discussed, even traced over on a device using a stylus (however operated). With the development and widening availability of Augmented Reality technology it may be possible to engage with palimpsests of writing/surfaces/environments in exciting ways. A digital stylus that responds to eye-movement, for instance, could rewire the act of writing in the blink of an eye.

## Writing the Fantastic

For my PhD novel project *The Knowing – a Fantasy* (a fictionalization of the diasporic translocation of song- and tale-cultures from the Scottish Lowlands to the Southern Appalachians) I needed to write a faux-journal in the voice of Robert Kirk, Minister of Aberfoyle, and the ancestor of my protagonist. To facilitate this, to help me ‘get into the zone’, I decided the most effective strategy would be to write it long-hand. And so I purchased a journal specifically for the task, and set to it. I immediately found it helped me situate myself within Kirk’s paradigm. My archival research of his notebooks revealed how important they were in the formulating of his thoughts and feelings, and in the development of *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (an embryonic version of which appears in his ‘London notebook’ of 1690 [Manwaring, 2018a]). The juvenilia and marginalia I found gave me an insight into Kirk the man, humanizing him and providing a vital ‘way in’. A great deal can be inferred by the actuality of a notebook – not least the handwriting, which can suggest much by subtle changes of rhythm and emphasis, e.g. the way Kirk, or his transcriber, emphasized ‘Our Lady’ in one handwritten version of the monograph was particularly telling (suggesting a motivation and, for my purposes, a novelistic subplot)**.** I found by carefully copying his initials and signature I felt a little closer to the man who wrote them.

Another key benefit of writing the Kirk journal was that it forms a novella within the novel, and to immerse myself in its narrative arc *away* from the novel was made a lot easier by this physical separation and containment. I wanted the voice of Kirk and his exploits in ‘Elfhame’ to be distinct from the contemporary register of the main narrative. Only when I had completed it did I then set about transcribing it into a Word document (a lengthy process that enabled some redrafting) before finally intercutting it with the existing novel manuscript.

Analogue approaches like this can help to inculcate a ‘cognitive estrangement’ (Suvin, 1979, 3-15), ideal for writers of the Fantastic.

## Creative Anachronism

The long-hand approach, although still used, is wilfully ‘archaic’ and analogue in an almost ubiquitously-digital world (where ironically we seem to think more with our thumbs than our digits). Neil Gaiman, in his writing of *Stardust* (1999)*,* his deliberate attempt at a fairy tale, decided to adopt this method:

*Stardust* was written in longhand because I wanted to inject the kind of feeling to recreate the kind of sentence structure, emotion, the whole thing that people had in, say, the 1920s. I wanted a slightly archaic voice. (Interview, 1999)

And so Gaiman bought himself a fountain pen. ‘It was that voice that I wanted to get. It was for that voice that I used the fountain pen.’ [ibid] He also emphasized his wish to avoid the invisibility of earlier drafts, (‘There IS no first or second draft’) which he found to be consequence of writing direct onto computer, where he writes, pauses, rewrites, as he goes along – a touch here, a touch there. ‘I work on a computer as if I'm working in clay… There is no discontinuity.’ [ibid] In a notebook one can trace the pathology of a draft – see all the crossings-out, the dead-ends, the feverish bursts, the interruptions and returns, the coffee stains, doodles and paratextual additions. These are a gift to any biographer, and to any novelist attempting to recreate the voice, life and milieu of the subject.

In her research into the ‘role(s) of the notebook in creating well-being during a series of creative writing workshops’ with Older Learners in the north-east of England, Viccy Adams concluded:

The changing state of the notebook can become a visual reference point for the effort put in by the writer, and the freedom to scribble afforded by handwriting compared to typing allows it to become an artefact in a way that digital word processing does not, with the delete function and the visually emotionally detached homogeneity of typeface. (2014, 14)

The tactile, analogue experience of such an interface provides a tangible feedback loop and reifies the actuality of the creative act. The poet becomes once again the ‘makar’ (Middle Scots: *maker; poet*); the writer, once more a ‘wright’ (OE:  'wryhta' or 'wyrhta': *worker/shaper of wood*). By forging our words upon the page, we leap from two dimensions into three as the perpendicular pen inscribes cursive thoughts onto wood-pulp. The physical act, which some students are unfamiliar with or even resistant too, reminds us of the graft of the craft. As Basil Bunting said: ‘Words!/ Pens are too light/Take a chisel to write.’ (1966)

**Writing Theorists of the Body**

The work of writing theorists of the body such as Holding (2015) and Peary (2018) instantiates the ontological significance of the graphological act. Holding explores connections between action and invention. Although he focuses on oral communication, there is a link with the gestural nature of handwriting, and the eloquence it can facilitate. A sustain writing practice can ‘hard wire’ a state of creative preparedness. Writing can become almost muscle memory. In her advocacy of mindfulness (a repurposing of Buddhist meditational practice, a metacognitive practice which she summarises as ‘present moment awareness’, 2018: 12) in creative writing practice and pedagogy, Peary reddresses what she perceives to be a critical lacuna: ‘the general omission of embodied and affective experiences pertaining to writing.’ (ibid) She argues that blocks and resistance to the act of composition often occur as a result of focusing upon the past or future (a crippling awareness of the ‘canon’ and one’s own ineffectualness in the face of that; anxiety and expectation about notions of ‘success’) as opposed to the present-moment – a ‘situatedness’ (2018: 1), which both grounds and frees the writer. Seeing it as ‘a professional responsibility for writing specialists to rethink current instruction’ (2018: 2) Peary’s approach is an instauration of the kinaesthesic act, akin to the Buddhist meditation walking practice, ‘jongrom’. By putting your mind into your pen, the present-moment is focalised and the primal act of mark-making becomes once more conscious and potent. Peary’s strategy intersects with Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy and Jones’ notion of proprioception (2000). It challenges us to completely rethink the very act of writing, the white-hot moment of black ink, when words irrupt into the world – a radical destabilisation of unconscious content creation which often focuses on end-goals such as assessment or publication: ‘Sustained observation of the present moment for purposes of writing leads to a game-changing mindful invention that pervades every aspect of composing.’ (2018: 3) In terms of *my* pedagogy I have found activities that explore ‘writing from the body’ (e.g. writing in the voice of a particular part of the body, limb, organ, distinguishing feature, etc.) can produce powerful, sometimes cathartic, results. By articulating our bodies, we reclaim them, and there is a defiant, self-defining energy in the writing produced, especially if performed.

## The Act of Writing Inspires

The kinaesthetic experience of writing long-hand appears to affect the quality and content of the outcome. Many these days, unused to writing long-hand for any duration, would probably argue *to the detriment.* And yet it is well-proven method for accessing creativity. Dorothea Brande advocated it ([1934] 1981)in an activity she termed ‘the Morning Pages’. This was picked up by Julia Cameron (1995) and has become enshrined in Creative Writing workshops as a tried-and-trusted technique for encouraging creative flow. By emphasizing process over ‘product’, the fledgling writer is freed of the typical performance anxiety that stifles much creativity and the learning of any new endeavour. They see the gulf between their tentative efforts and ‘the canon’ and are paralysed. And yet as any experienced writer knows, the best ideas, characters, scenes and lines start as messy jottings, as E.M. Forster observed: ‘The act of writing inspires.’ (1953, 36) Although Forster himself was not an advocate for the notebook (‘I should feel it improper’, 1953, 35), many other writers swear by them. Paul Magrs suggested ‘the white heat of actual composition’ is where the real writing takes place, in ‘Notebooks’. (2001, 9); and Nicole Ward Jouve ‘On Keeping a Diary’ described them as ‘A source of tactile and visual pleasure’ (2001, 12). Linda Anderson discusses the benefits of ‘Keeping a writer’s notebook’ at length (2006, 33-43), citing Virginia Woolf’s memorable phrase, ‘The diamonds of the dustheap’ (ibid, 37), the benefits of rapid writing. This *rhythmicity* (Kučera, 2010, 20) is a key aspect of its effectiveness at ideas-generation. More precisely, it is the ‘rapidity’ and ‘fluidity’ (ibid) which are important cognitive qualities. These facilitate the breakthrough, the eureka moment:

…suddenly, the idea appears through the mist, we have ‘counted’ the result in our mind (we do not know yet, how), and we need to write it down even in a provisory form, as quickly as possible, before it returns to the shadows. (Kučera, 2010, 26)

Many writers have attested to this emergent quality of the writing process, e.g. E.M. Forster (‘How do I know what I think until I see what I say?’), and I myself have reflected upon it elsewhere (2014; 2018a). The best place to capture this process is in the writer’s most reliable and effective resource, the notebook.

## The Notebook: a mode of being

There is something confessional about notebooks that ameliorates the internal editor (although there can also be an element of performance as well for the writer with an eye on a posthumous archival afterlife). Woolf didn’t count her notebooks ‘as writing’ (ibid); there is something subconscious about such notebook use – it is writing in a kind of twilight, a crepuscular protectiveness of one’s ideas, before they are brought out into the glare of full critical light.

Also, in adopting an analogue approach through the physicality of the notebook, one is encouraged to ‘see’ the text in a different way. It allows for non-linear leaps of association and a destabilisation of the hierarchy of the page. Diagrams, doodles, arrows, spider diagrams and so forth enable shifts of direction and thought to be visually depicted. This clustering process is rendered vividly in David Jones ‘Map of Themes in an Artist’s Mind’ (1943). Such palimpsests of consciousness and process are a form of textual heterotopia (Foucault, 1971).

On a practical level, by writing long-hand the writer is avoiding the corrosive temptations of the internet; it is distraction free (excepting the odd cold call or ‘Man from Porlock’ visitor), and future-proof – a resource with no shelf-life (or at least a longer one than less stable forms of storage). Notebooks *do* degrade, but can have remarkable longevity if preserved with care – as I experienced first-hand, handling Kirk’s 350 year-old notebooks (2018a). It is hard to imagine the ease of accessibility for future scholars of Word documents and PDFs several centuries hence.

By connecting directly through the pen with page, one is disconnected from the world – an ever-present temptation when writing on the screen unless one has either an iron will, an off-line device, or software that blocks – and able to reconnect with one’s own bedrock of truth, as the explorer and publisher Erling Kagge articulates (discussing silence): ‘It’s about getting inside what you are doing. Experiencing rather than over-thinking. Allowing each moment to be big enough,’ (2017, 51). Writing a novel long-hand is akin to walking solo to the south pole – painstakingly conquering the white space while allowing it to conquer you. This Zen-like level of attention creates the ‘zone’ that gives birth to ideas: ‘…everything focuses on the hand and its emotion, the drive and its pleasure.’ (Kučera, 2010, 27).

A counter-argument against the benefits of long-hand writing include: the slowness; the time-consuming transcribing process; the risk of illegibility; the risk of damage or loss as in Patrick Leigh Fermour’s infamous example (Cooper, 2013), and Laurie Lee’s lesser known one (Grove, 1999); and for some writers, the physical strain or impossibility of such an approach (RSI; disability). Ultimately, there is no ‘correct’ approach. Each writer must find the methodology that works for them.

I have found the long-hand method conducive to the composition of Kirk’s journal and, as an artefact, it survives outside the numerous versions of the electronic file of the complete novel – an invaluable ‘back up’ in the event of any catastrophic loss of data, and also an anchor point to remind me of what I was trying to achieve – sometimes easily lost amid the endless redrafts and edits: the baby in the bathwater.

The notebook (and alternative formats) offers the writer not only a personal ‘black box’, but a tool for developmental self-reflexive narrativizing, as Theroux observes: ‘Note-taking is not just a method for remembering. It is a way a writer tells himself, or herself, a story – and this becomes a process of life, a mode of being.’ (2018, 33)

Whether we use the output of a notebook directly in our long-form prose or not it remains the book-within-the-book, a personal archive, where one’s ideas see the first glimmerings of light before the full exposure of publication, the secret library of the self where we perform to the page, not to the reader. This seedbank of ideas, of rough sketches, ‘what ifs?’, hypothetical titles, characters and plots can be a valuable source for both the author and for posthumous creative-critical instauration (Horne, 1918).

**The Unconscious Bias of an Able-bodied Theorem**

It has to be acknowledged that any discussion of handwriting has to take into consideration legibility and disability. In the first instance, legibility is a distinct disadvantage to the longhand approach – for it can often restrict the readership to the author themselves; and even then, obscurity may occur; we may not be able to read our own handwriting or recall what it was we meant (if significant time has passed; or it was written in a fugue state). The handwriting of others can be notoriously difficult to decode, and this even before other factors such as dyslexia may impair comprehension. In terms of the physical act of writing by hand, conditions such as dysgraphia, injuries to the arm, wrist or hand, a prosthetic limb, quadriplegia, and other factors restricting motor function, will have a severe impact. However, with suitable support, training of staff and technology, even the most restrictive of conditions need create an insurmountable barrier between the writer and the act of writer, as famous dramatised cases portrayed *in My Left Foot* (1989)*, The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* (2007)and *The Theory of Everything* (2014) depict. It may require a radical rethinking of what constitutes the act of writing, but regardless of the tool, if that act is slowed down sufficiently to become a conscious act of mark-making, then it can still facilitate the same experiential ‘snag’ – a phenomenological delay that instills in the creation of words and sentences a crucial dilated quality and self-reflexive awareness.   
 Yet are we lingering on the line here, and forgetting where it leads?

**The Fetishization of the Writing Act**

We have to be wary of the fetishization of the writing act, reducing writing to the essentialist reality of handwriting – rather than what it communicates. A key critique of this fetishization is found in Derrida’s theory of the iterability of the signature (1984; 1987; 1988; 1991). Although Derrida emphasizes the importance of the graphological mark (‘The signature is a wound, and there is no other origin for the work of art…’ 1986: 184), he articulates the continual slippage between the mark (the writing), the mark-maker (the writer), and the meaning-maker (reader). Handwriting seems to suggest presence, evidence that the author has showed up at the page, has spent time there. Yet, whileas the act of writing externalizes the author’s thoughts and feelings into actuality; the author’s autograph becomes a testimony of *non-*presence. The author may haunt their own text in a similar way. Nevertheless, the territorial claim has been made, as Deleuze and Guattari note: ‘One put’s one’s signature on something just as one plants one’s flag on a piece of land’ (1987: 316). Certainly some pieces of writing seem to do this – e.g. academic staking out their territory with ‘place-holder’ articles. Yet perhaps it is more a case of self-colonization. As Siobhan Lyons observes (xxxx: 5), the act of writing can be a reification:

Just as the text is often prematurely taken to act as a keyhole into the psyche or mind of the author, the written, physical signature, the ink on the paper, has been interpreted as a method of access. Factors such as absence—death, most evidently—intensify the notion that ink and flesh are one and the same.

Thus, the physical act of writing could be seen to be a kind of tattooing of the page. So, whileas we need to be mindful, like Derrida, of ‘dispelling the aura’ (2010: 29) –Nietzche’s typewriter is just a typewriter until it is photographed – Barthes’ reminds us that ‘The text is a fetish object.’ (1975: 25). We may denounce this cultic power, but we cannot ignore it.

## Conclusion

Handwriting activities have an autographic aspect – immediately personalizing the writing, making it distinctive with the ‘tracemes’ and ‘gestemes’ (Kučera, 2010, 21) of the author’s thoughts and feelings. Even without the *paraph* flourishes of a signature freehand writing, with its river-delta furrowing (Lacan’s ‘le ravinement’) is an act of drawing, of spatial interaction. In the negative spaces between signifier and signified much is implied and implicated. Writing long-hand inculcates ‘tacit writer-knowledge’ (Neale, 2018). Further to this embodied gnosis there is, in the act of writing, a reaching out beyond the self, a wish to connect. Even if the writing is intended to be private (and deliberately illegible) the physical act externalizes what once was inchoate and, if the writing survives, the possibility of future readership: ‘Handwriting is primarily communicative, and therefore involves social relationships and other societal members.’ (TenHouten, 2011, 594) Every piece of writing has the potential of a message in a bottle, an implicit rescue note, awaiting the moment it may wash up on the shore of another’s vision. Even if the writer is long-deceased, the extant writing continues to perform its snapshot of impulse, its ‘discharge of energy’ (Kučera, 2010, 23).

Finally, it is clear that, despite the analogue approach advocated, further research is needed into the impact of emergent technologies upon notions of ‘handwriting’ in the 21st Century as the distance and difference between tool and user transforms and even threatens to disappear in a transhuman future.

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