

Hands humanise
us. In handwriting
the opposable thumb
of the species meets
the inky thumbprint
of the individual. Here
our works become our
selves.

Underwriting the psychometric pretension of graphology is a modicum of science. We have before us a contemporary hand. We know it because the sample disposes itself in imitation of the shapes of word-processing, and analysis of the ink shows trace triarylmethane: blue fountain-pen issue to an 80% degree of certainty. But “grouping” and “abeyance” in the ink’s response to pressure suggest also that this hand has been formed with exposure to clotting inks. We suspect India for preference, but the writer would relish Iron Gall, not least for its name: in him, as in his hand, the aesthete and Caesar keep company.

Gullible they would be, however, who thought, that the idiosyncrasy of this hand’s retrograde “d”-ascender had anything of the backward-glance about it. What looks a trailed college scarf in a high wind is, in fact, a whip. We refer the reader to De Klerk’s 1973 paper, “Haak-en-steek: On reading the retracted thorn in Kells uncials.”

Here, then, is a bastard Italic, body-ligatured, with elements looking back to Insular Uncial, and extravagant “governed” flourishes. A worn and well-used hand, the outward banner of a job well done.

An example at random: this hand is one that would relish a short but letter-varied name like “Godfrey”, or, perhaps better, “Hugh” (the envy of calligraphers everywhere) for the way in which it can become, in proper hands, almost an ideogram, splendid with opportunities for ligature and flourish, looped ascenders and descenders dancing in the “h” and “g”, and a Narcissus’ Pool of mirrored garland and arcade in the wells and vaults of “u” and “h”. This hand would make one knot of those four letters, beautiful and cunning, and strong, and be well pleased.

Most good hands hope to plant a doctrine of signatures upon a world bereft of magic. This hand is lifted to cast spells. Its character of imprimatur suggests a ceremonial function and a public signature (one can hardly ignore the superficial correspondences between these flourishes and the Coca-Cola pennant). Clergyman, soldier, naval attaché? Rotarian? Freemason?

Order, system, regularity imply an institutional occupation. The harmony of this hand is a cipher of belonging; regulated and formal, it has been taught and learnt, is governed and governing. May we infer from these a strong super-ego, yet loyalty, the labours of Stakhanov?

On the other hand (which is to say the same hand), it is in the elaborations that the real self is found. Regard the predilection for “wetness” of ink; regard the way the ink spools and shudders in the wake of the nib, as the steel (steel, not brass or avian keratin) engineers not a canal but a river; regard the “roll-cast” lemniscate of the trout-line in the flourished high and low loops; regard the waning and waxing weights of the line, deliberate, such as you see in a stopped propeller or the basket knotting of the “leopard’s muscle” motif in Djibouti – any of these betray a strong, if bridled, personal flair.

Recklessness, indeed, has been within the grasp of this hand. The looped “tumble-turn” of ligatured trizonals surely signifies a childhood relish of trampoline parties, and an adult nimble and deft, capable of high-wire acts, acrobatics, landing on his feet. We would not be surprised to learn that this is the hand of a pilot or stunt double. The writing speaks of the circus, its forms of spectacular control: there is the poise of the unicyclist, the juggler’s eye for a faster pattern, a streak of clown, or a clownish urge to streak. A boy scout, surely, but of the sort more keen on the badges and the neckerchief than on the obstacle courses. A lover, then, of formal gardens, knots, speeches, young people, party games, the occult (the Tarot, but he wouldn’t read a Ouija board, because of its implication that the spirit world is slovenly in handwriting). On holiday he might risk wearing espadrilles, but secretly yearn for an Hawaiian shirt and cocktails involving pineapples, rum and paper umbrellas (which he would collect). Indeed, a marked compulsion to hoard. Conchology, handkerchiefs, military insignia might attract him with their constrained brilliancies, so also bird-watching. But this author would look down on stamp-collecting, decidedly, as lacking “twinkle” and flourish; we expect he reserves a special derision for philatelists.

Envision then the author of this hand: sporting a moustache, we feel sure, a “Niven” or a “George V”, he has foibles of apparel, a buttonhole, perhaps, or risqué socks. We come down to the three medieval institutions. Powerful ductus, diacritical hook in the terminal letter “t” – these argue for a military background. And the church finds ground in the hand, too – clerical, graven in stone, with syndromes expressive of metaphysical flights or theological knots. But of the last of the medieval institutions we can be quite clear: we are convinced that this hand belongs to no-one in the Gadarene sties of today’s universities. It is too Platonic, too scholarly, too independent, too clear-headed, too calm, too selfless, too original, and too wise.