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The future of handwriting

Abstract:

Handwriting, as a means of personal expression, communication and creativity, is a fast diminishing skill and mode of expression. This dialogue between Paul Weston, a forensic expert in handwriting, and Gary Crew, a Professor of Creative Writing and established author, attempts to establish the necessity for the continued use of handwriting in all forms of human communication. 'MS found: a meditation' is a ficto-critical short story alluding to R.L. Stevenson's *Essays in the Art of Handwriting* (1905) and E.A. Poe's 'MS Found in a Bottle' (1833). The story celebrates the longevity of handwriting and the handwritten document. It predicts the loss of elements of written creative expression if recording by hand, rather than computer or other IT mechanisms, becomes obsolete.

Biographical Notes:

Paul Westwood OAM, LL.B, MCSFS, FSSoc Dip, is a former Director of the Document Examination Laboratories of the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Department of Immigration. He established Forensic Document Services Pty Ltd (FDS) in 1987 and employs four document examiners operating within laboratories located in Canberra and Sydney as well as having field equipment in Hong Kong and Singapore. He holds the degree of Bachelor of Laws and a Diploma in Document Examination from the Chartered Society of Forensic Sciences of the United Kingdom. He also completed a four year technical photography course at Sydney Technical College.

Paul has worked extensively for government departments, banking and financial institutions and law firms throughout Australia and overseas. He is a life member of the Australasian Society of Forensic Document Examiners (Inc), having been one of its founders. He is also a Member of the Chartered Society of Forensic Sciences of the United Kingdom, a member of the Australian Academy of Forensic Sciences, the Australian & New Zealand Forensic Science Society, a life member of the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners (ASQDE). In 2015 Paul was awarded the Albert S Osborn 'Award of Excellence' by the ASQDE. Paul was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1982 for services in the field of document examination whilst a member of the Australian Federal Police. He was also awarded the National Medal in 1984 in respect of police service. Paul has extensive court experience throughout Australia and overseas spanning a period in excess of forty-five years.

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Provocation

Paul Westwood

Over the past five decades working as a forensic document examiner (examining both handwritten and printed documents) I have seen digital writing challenge and overtake handwriting as the preferred means of written communication, both in business and social situations. It should be noted at the outset that handwritten documents, e.g. writing on papyrus, have a long life and the longevity of digital documents is more uncertain (Hall 2010; Hedstrom 1997/1998).

Karen Hall drives the point home:

While there are paper documents more than 2,000 years old that are still plainly legible, digital media will simply never last that long. Images and archives stored digitally face two major threats: the deterioration of the media itself and the rapidly changing technology used for retrieval. Got any floppy discs lying around? Have you tried to access them lately? (2010 p. 13)

The almost universal use of digital devices to correspond with family, friends, co-workers and colleagues as well as taking lecture notes for example, has given rise to discussion and concern amongst academics, teachers, parents, children, employers and others about the future of handwriting (Medwell and Wray 2008; O'Callaghan 2014; Sülzenbrück et al 2011).

For some years now in the United States the use of digital devices as a means of written communication has resulted in a strong trend to abandon the teaching of handwriting in favour of digital writing (Karavanidou 2017). Fortunately, this trend is being reversed in some schools. On 16 February 2017, FOX5NY reported that the New York City Department of Education reinstated a requirement that public-school children be taught cursive writing as many were arguing that cursive writing aids the development of spelling memory (see Medwell and Wray 2008).

Will handwriting survive and is there any need for it to do so? I cannot answer the first question but the answer to the second is a resounding 'Yes'. I agree with Karavanidou:

The history of writing is more symbiotic than transitory... In contemporary educational systems there is scope to make use of an innate ability, which has shaped human cognition during thousands of years and encapsulates millions of years of toolmaking

and hand-brain connectivity ... let alone relates us visually, kinetically and aesthetically with our ancestors' writings (2017 p. 158).

It must be acknowledged that typed digital communication is faster than handwritten communication, but communication involves more than speed. Handwriting is an aspect of one's identity that is in no way replicated by written digital communication and the insertion of emoticons into one's text messages (Haas and McGrath 2017).

While digitally written communication is faster and more legible than handwritten communication, it does not convey the inherent personal connection of a handwritten document. For example, the handwritten correspondence of a deceased family member or close friend evokes warm memories which cannot be conveyed by a sterile digitally composed document (assuming you can still access the digital document many years after it was created). The inherent joy of receiving a handwritten letter or hastily penned postcard from a loved one far exceeds the delight of digital script received via social media. Reflection, sincerity and individuality go into handwriting because it is a slow and contemplative process. Digital writing is fast, which is often but not always preferable being a reflection of general social trends (Hassan 2011) – valuing productivity over reflection and refinement?

If we lose the capacity to handwrite, our capacity to read handwriting will naturally be diminished. Handwriting connects us to our past; most important historical documents are handwritten and we need to be able to read and understand these documents to maintain the connection with our history (Haas and McGrath 2017).

There have been occasions when I have been professionally engaged to decipher and transcribe cursive handwritten historical documents because the lawyers/researchers involved in the matters could not read the handwritten English script. A person who cannot write in cursive script is unlikely to be able to read handwritten documents. Handwriting demands that the writer have an understanding of grammar and spelling. Texting pre-empts words and 'spell-check' does that job for the writer, overcoming the need to grasp spelling. The use of abbreviations such as 'thx' for 'thanks'; 'u' for 'you'; 'arvo' for 'afternoon'; 'probs' for 'problems' and so on is also an issue. Such abbreviations are now being used more frequently in more formal handwritten documents (Ashton et al 2017).

It is not just a matter of losing spelling proficiency. The loss of handwriting has meant that the associated need for mastery of language is less valued and the appreciation of the breadth and subtlety of the English language is also challenged. Handwriting also aids the development of fine neural motor skills. Unlike the gross finger tapping used to produce a digital message, the complex fine finger, hand and wrist movements required to write cursive script assist in the neural development and maintenance of fine motor skills. Handwriting may be more significant than we yet know in our neurological development (O'Callaghan 2014).

In some situations, handwriting is more convenient than digital communication. The efficacy of handwriting, as opposed to using a digital device, is demonstrated by two forensic scenarios.

A murder investigation

A person is seriously assaulted in their home and left for dead. During their last moments the victim uses a pen to write the attacker's name on the wall at floor level, enabling the police to identify the assailant. Had the victim been unable to handwrite, it is doubtful that their digital device would have helped; it would have been quite a struggle for the victim to activate the device, 'type' out the incriminating message and select 'send', assuming that the perpetrator had not confiscated the device.

Suicide notes

Police find what purports to be a suicide note beside a deceased person. Was it written by the deceased or by a murderer who wished to conceal the crime? A comparative forensic examination of the handwriting on the note with known writing samples of the deceased would provide the answer. The note may also reveal latent writing impressions caused by the act of writing on an overlying sheet of paper. The use of a digital device to send a suicide message would not reveal such information.

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Creative Response

'MS found: A meditation'

Gary Crew

Terry S gave me the Stevenson book over a glass of red. He said it was an expression of appreciation for my having accepted his offer to read the first draft of his unpublished opus. I was taken aback. Terry was a poet (still is, according to his web site), with ambitions to be a novelist. That was the mid 1990s. He had just returned from a teaching stint in the UK. Having won a few literary awards for my own work, in my initial flush of authorial arrogance, I had not merely read, but brutally edited Terry's MS., scrawling expressions such as 'You should not...' and 'Never use...' in the margins. This act of editorial malice had been committed before Terry went overseas. Now that he was back, I felt bad, but I had learnt. LESSON 1: 'Humility is a writer's best friend'. (Years later, following some cruel attacks on my own writing, I realised that this maxim should be reworded: 'Humility is a writer's and a reviewer's best friend'). I was going to say something to that effect when Terry said, 'Here...' and pushed his gift across the table.

I'm no expert, but one glance told me that the book was old. Presented in chunky 'A' format, the board cover dressed in unscarred matt black leatherette with no edge wear, I read the faded gold title embossed on the spine: Robert Louis Stevenson, *Essays in the Art of Writing* and lower, also fading, Chatto & Windus.

'You like?' Terry asked.

'I like.'

'First edition. 1905.'

I liked even more when I ran a finger down those marvellous untrimmed pages and opening to the centre, smelt cloves and old twine – my grandmother's sewing box.

'Terry...' I remonstrated.

He shrugged. 'I saw it and thought of you. Accept. Okay?'

'Oh, I accept,' I said. 'I so accept. Thank you.'

'Read the inscription.'

I turned to the fly leaf. Foxed. Badly. Romantic, I thought, noting that Terry had written in Indian ink with a fountain pen, (I hoped) – no tacky ball point for this treasure. I mean, I wanted the book to be inscribed in Indian ink using a fountain pen because I like Indian ink and fountain pens, especially a Conway Stewart 15 in marbled burgundy with a 14-karate nib. Romantic, as I said.

The inscription read:

G... here is the genuine article purchased in Sussex. I hope you find enough material for your after-dinner speeches and prize-winning sermons. Regards, Terry.

I thanked him again, we sculled our drinks and walked to the station. We went our separate ways. I haven't see Terry since.

Over the intervening years, I wrote much more. I also studied and found myself (interpret that as you will) teaching Creative Writing in the Academy. I did not read Stevenson's tome (no time I guess, sorry Terry), but one day, as I rifled my shelves for the source of a quote, I picked the book up.

Under the chapter heading 'A NOTE ON REALISM', Stevenson had written:

A work of art is firstly cloudily conceived in the mind; during the period of gestation it stands more clearly forward from these swaddling mists, puts on expressive lineaments, and becomes at length that most faultless, but also, alas! That incommunicable product of the human mind, a perfected design. On the approach to execution all is changed. The artist must now step down, don his working clothes, and become the artisan. He now resolutely commits his airy conception, his delicate Ariel, to the touch of matter; he must decide, almost in a breath, the scale, the style, the spirit, the particularity of execution of his whole design. (1905: 98)

'Thanks Robert Louis,' I murmured. 'And thanks again Terry S, wherever you are...' because I was suddenly aware that, in spite of what the Academy insisted upon, Stevenson had no 'Academic Research Question' in mind when he wrote *Treasure Island*. By his own admission—and he is a significant writer—he had plucked some 'delicate Ariel' of an island out of the 'swaddling mists' looming on the creative horizon of his brain; that mist which would one day clear to reveal 'the scale, the style', the very 'spirit' of the imagined landmass constituting the basis for his most successful novel.

'And that, Mr Stevenson,' I said, clapping the book shut, 'is what I would call 'Practice-Led Research''. We writers simply don't know what we're creating until the 'particularity of execution' of our narrative (indeed, the whole bloody island!) is revealed through those clouds of airy meanderings and misconception. We can only achieve this by writing through those 'swaddling mists' of our initial drafts to finally realise our 'whole design'. I was reminded of the destruction I had committed upon Terry's first draft and hoped that I hadn't scarred the budding novelist too terribly.

I bent to replace Stephenson's book among the myriad others that I'd 'just had to have' or 'must read before I die', but as I stooped, an errant sheet of pale blue note paper fluttered from between the aging pages.

I picked it up. This was not so much a note as a letter. Hand written engagingly in Indian ink (with a fountain pen?), complete with those old-fashioned hallmarks of address, salutation and signature. A thrill passed through me. Had Terry inserted the missive in the heart of the book? Had it been intended for me and was (still) awaiting my reply? I glanced at the date and the signature: Friday, 30th July 1965. Signed simply 'Joyce'. This couldn't be from Terry. Surely, he didn't write under the name of Joyce – did he? Besides, I hadn't even heard of Terry in the 1960s. But before reading on, I turned to the fly leaf as a sort of assurance. Having checked against Terry's inscription, the handwriting on the blue papered letter was certainly not his, nevertheless, I was struck by certain extraordinary expressions which had evidently passed unnoticed after all those years: 'I hope you might find enough material for your after-dinner speeches and prize-winning sermons'. Sermons? Was he having a go at me? Had he been letting me know, way back then, just what he thought of my editorial didacticism? My 'thou shalt

not' preachiness – which I still practised, I know, having caught the droll roll of my students' eyes...

But I didn't want to think about that. I mustn't think about that. I didn't have to think about that. Realistically, how could something written in a jealous pique over 30 years ago bother me now? I mean, I hadn't seen the man since.

Nevertheless (provoked by shame?), I returned to reading the blue papered letter, intent on diversion, desperate to forget.

NORMANS

LEAP CROSS,

HAILSHAM,

SUSSEX.

Friday, 30th July, 1965

Dear Roy,

Just a line in haste – we are off at 8pm tonight (at least that is the deadline we are working towards).

Bryan came over last evening & brought the post for you – he managed to snaffle it from the church board in time. He hopes to see something of you during the holiday.

Enclosed is the R. L. Stevenson book – it is a different version from your collection but if you have not already got it, you are welcome to it to complete the set. I got it from the little bookshop at Worthing. Very interesting how he came to write *Treasure Island* & *The Master of Ballantrae*.

Bryan wants us to do a concert in London. Good idea?

Wish it would stop raining. Love to Ajax & I hope you both have a good holiday. It was nice of you to have us over the other day & to play for us. I shall treasure the tape of the Liszt.

Joyce.

I thrilled again.

Here, in my hand, tucked in a book for over 50 years, lay my own MS. Found in a Bottle – and bland though its content appeared, Joyce's blue papered letter posed almost as many questions as Poe's mysterious MS. Given that there was about 30 years between Joyce acquiring the R.L.S. tome (note that she does not say 'bought'; did she 'snaffle' it, as Bryan had snaffled Roy's post?) from 'the little bookshop at Worthing' a city in West Sussex, and given that Terry's inscription said that he had 'purchased the genuine article in Sussex', might Terry and Joyce have frequented the same bookshop, 50 years apart, yet both acquiring a copy of the R.L.S. – and might that be the copy in my hand?

I shuddered again. The serendipity appealed.

But there were other (unanswered and unanswerable) questions. I mean, who was Joyce? Where was she off to ‘in haste’ on the night of 30th July 1965? Did she get there? I doubted that Poe’s MS. writer ever reached his destination—unless that destination was death—although his message turned up someplace, somewhere, somehow finding a reader sufficiently sympathetic to the writer’s woes to publish the manuscript. And why did Bryan have to ‘snaffle’ Roy’s post from the church? Was there another letter informing Roy that he was to be defrocked—heaven forbid! — although the said Roy may have been a trifle naughty considering he enjoyed the avant garde music of Lizst. And what about Ajax? Nice name for a dog, but might he have been Roy’s brother – even his partner?

The blue papered letter was amusing—and somewhat disconcerting, given its years of enclosure—yet without prior knowledge, the content remained a mystery.

Faced with the impenetrable, I sighed and turned my reflections to Poe, surely the arch exponent of mystery. Ah, Dupin... And I read somewhere—Eisenstein, was it?—that Poe also liked to ‘read what was never written’ (2002:10), seeking to discern ‘hidden meaning’ in all forms of text, including ‘entrails, the stars, or dances’, but especially the ‘hidden meaning(s)’ of cryptographs and handwriting. I knew something of Poe’s obsession with handwriting. It had been rumoured, for instance—and recorded by McGill—that MS. Found in a Bottle was originally presented in hand written and hand bound quarto form to the prize committee of the Baltimore Saturday Writer. The writing was said to be executed in ‘exquisite calligraphy’ (1997: 39). Whether truth or rumour, Poe won the prize, making MS. Found in a Bottle the first work published under his name.

Engrossed, I found *The Essential Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* in my bookshelves and, since I had no student contact that afternoon, sat at my desk to read. Initially, I turned to *MS Found in a Bottle* since that was the story which had come to my mind when I discovered Joyce’s MS. ‘found’ in the Stevenson. I read Poe’s story again. My head spinning, I fetched a coffee, and sat to think. The narrative was written in ‘grabs’—‘blocks of action’ or ‘movements’, even ‘ruminations’, if you like—making me wonder if Poe had a fully developed plot before he began, or whether he was discovering the plot as he wrote. For instance, there is a long and detailed introductory movement establishing the country he was departing from, the design of the vessel he was a passenger upon, and his unnamed narrator’s inducement for making this fateful voyage (the narration of which, he confesses, may well be none other than ‘the ravings of a crude imagination’ ([1833]2004: 69) since he declares that his intention in sailing is for the purpose of overcoming ‘a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted me as a fiend’; there follows a period of ‘entire calm’ ([1833]2004: 70)—of the sea only, or is this a metaphor for the narrator’s mental state?—followed by the ‘fury of the blast’ accompanied by ‘a wilderness of foam’ (the narrator’s fiendish ‘restlessness’?), and then, in company of ‘an old Swede’ ([1833]2004: 70) the unlikely pair survive when the captain and crew of the ship in which they had passage are swept overboard. Next is another ‘grab’ describing six days of semi-darkness, during which the Swede alerts our narrator to the terrifying presence of ‘a gigantic ship’ ([1833]2004: 73) bearing down upon them from the summit of an equally gigantic wave. As the narrator’s original ship sinks beneath him, he is ‘hurled’ (minus the Swede, who vanishes from

the story) upon the deck of this mighty vessel. Unwilling to let his presence aboard be known to the alien crew, our narrator conceals himself in the hold where he is astonished to discover that the only other person (an aged sailor, is he, or a wraith?), in that entombed space is infirm, tottering about ‘beneath a load of years’ ([1833]2004: 74) before he also vanished from the narrative. When our unnamed narrator breaks his concealment to go upon deck, he ascertains that this gigantic ship, though made of Spanish Oak is ‘worm-eaten’ and ‘porous’, if Spanish Oak could be ‘distended by unnatural means’ ([1833]2004: 75)—hence the term ‘unnatural’ is introduced which may explain why the infirm crew who hobble about the deck simply ‘will not see’. They certainly ‘seemed utterly unconscious’ ([1833]2004: 76) of the interloping presence of the narrator, leaving the reader to wonder, is the crew of this vessel none other than the dead in their passage to hell?

So many scenes, so much information, so much inducement for the reader to imaginatively close the gaps in order to ‘read what was never written’ and to seek ‘hidden meaning’ in this plethora of words. But the most significant scene is to follow.

Having sought refuge in the captain’s cabin, the narrator (still unnamed) takes up ‘the materials with which I write’ and, having begun to record all that he has experienced, declares: ‘It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavour. At the last moment, I will enclose the MS. in a bottle and cast it within the sea’ ([1833]2004: 70).

As a writer, I wonder. Is it possible that only when Poe’s narrator has taken pen in hand and committed himself to writing that Poe himself finally understands what his story is about? Is it possible that the epigraph which introduces the story—‘He who has but a moment to live has nothing to conceal’—may have been added with the wisdom of narratorial hindsight, only after the narrator (like Poe himself) had written ‘at the last moment I will enclose this MS. in a bottle and cast it within the sea’ ([1833]2004: 70)? I wonder if the expression ‘at the last moment’ might have been a Eureka moment for Poe (is he our unnamed narrator?) in the discovery of his plot structure following his initial hand written (‘Practice-Led’?) and ‘cloudy conceptions’? After all, Poe has earlier advised his reader of the premise that ‘the incredible tale I have to tell should be considered rather the raving of a crude imagination, than the positive experience of a mind to which the reveries of fancy have been a dead letter and a nullity’. Once again the reader is left to wonder, is the crew of this diabolical vessel the horde of the dead?

Yet something still irks me about my afternoon’s reading. Intending to settle my own crude imagination, I read Terry’s inscription again, then Joyce’s blue papered letter and, reaching for my trusty Conway Stewart (yes, yes, I had long since bowed to the Romantic within me and acquired one—yes, yes, it was marbled in burgundy), I begin to record my thoughts in writing. Only when I write does the source of my unease become evident: my own Eureka moment. Joyce may well treasure the ‘tape of the Liszt’ although it could never be enjoyed because it never could be played. Where would she (or anyone else?) find the device—the unavailable and outdated technology—to play a tape these days? And while I had a distant memory of saving my writing to a tape on my first computer (a trusty Commodore 64), and a more recent

memory of saving my files to disc, where was that technology now? How could I possibly retrieve what I had saved to now defunct software?

I wrote feverishly—grimly—the ink freely flowing from my eager nib.

Herein lies the irony: I could still read Joyce's handwriting, but I could never hear her music. I could still read Captain James Cook's handwriting, and Charles Darwin's, and Marie Curie's, because what they wrote has been respectfully preserved—and for all of this generation's worship of social media devices, every new device makes yesterday's technologies seem all the more 'yesterday'—and yet, for all of Terry's insinuations (I write more freely now), for all of Joyce's (unknown and undiscoverable) information, for all of Stevenson's 'cloudy conceptions' (and misconceptions), for all of Poe's verbose ravings (structured and unstructured), and despite every new (or future) computer device or programme, the ability to endure (and enlighten?) remains the immemorial legacy of the handwritten word.

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