The Writing on the Flyleaf

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2018)

Bob After Max Beckmann, Charles Winecoff

Of all expert evidence in a criminal trial, it used to be said, that of handwriting experts was the most useless or the least reliable. I am not sure there has been any scientific study to prove this as a general proposition, and certainly handwriting experts did not exactly cover themselves in glory in the Dreyfus case, as well as in others that I could name. On the other hand, the graphologist in the case of John Donald Merrett, a young psychopath who shot his mother dead and forged her cheques back in 1926, got it exactly

right. Merrett lived to kill another day—his wife and mother-in-law, as it happened, more than a quarter of a century later, having lived in the meantime as a smuggler and swindler. He was an all-round bad egg.

Be that as it may, we are all amateur graphologists just as we are all amateur physiognomists. There may be no art to find the mind's construction in the face, in the sense of *infallible* art, but I doubt that there is anyone who does not judge a man, at least initially, by his face. No doubt there have been brutish faces that have concealed a tender heart, and certainly there have been angelic faces that have concealed diabolic souls: but other than appearances, what, often, have we to go on? It is better to be mistaken some of the time than mistaken all the time.

Graphologists are probably a dying breed, in so far as so few of us any longer put pen to paper; and I believe that there are now some school systems that do not teach children cursive writing on the grounds that they, the children, will never need or employ it. To teach them such writing would be like teaching them how to seal letters with sealing wax, dry ink with sand or sharpen goose quills.

But handwriting isn't quite dead yet, and so long as it still exists, people (at least, people like me) will scan it for clues as to the character of the writer. Sometimes, indeed, we—I—build an entire fantasy character on a single signature.

The other day I bought a slim volume, published in 1947, to help me with an article that I was writing. Inscribed in blue

ink on the front flyleaf was the signature of a previous owner, Richard J. Herbert, and the year, 1950.

I went to the internet to find any likely person of that name, almost certainly now dead. It is surprising how often such a search yields results, and the signatory turns out to have been a person of some eminence, even if now forgotten. This, however, was not the case with Richard J. Herbert, and though his was by no means an exotic or unusual name, I found no one who fitted the bill. My imagination was free to take flight.

The signature was neat and precise, elegant without affectation or excessive flourish. It was small but easily legible, quite without that miniaturisation characteristic of the writing of many lunatics of the period. The signature flowed beautifully, as if it had been completed in a single liquid movement. It was underlined, the line broken by the downstroke of the J. of the middle name. There was no emphasis to the underlining, no extra pressure of the pen, and it was of exactly the length of the underlined words, from which I concluded that it was not the underlining one might expect from an egocentric or self-important man. Indeed, the size of the signature itself would have suggested this, for while it drew the eye to it on the otherwise blank page, it did not overwhelm or dominate it.

The signature was disposed at an angle of thirty degrees to the horizontal, slightly unusual, perhaps, but graceful and not intended (or calculated) to shock anyone who saw it, as perhaps another fifteen degrees inclination to the horizontal might have done. The year, in the most beautiful figuring, was inscribed just the underlining of the start of the surname.

My first reaction on seeing this inscription was a feeling of shame and inadequacy. However hard I tried, however much I practised, I would never now be able to equal this writing in point of elegance or refinement. Though the hand was that of a mature person—I cannot imagine him younger than his mid-twenties, at the youngest, which is why I suppose him most likely to have died, and I think he was probably older, in his thirties—it could hardly be that of someone who had not been well-taught as a young child.

My writing is far from the worst imaginable, but it is certainly not distinguished and in fact strikes me as curiously characterless, with an inclination to sudden change for no obvious reason, as if I could not make up my mind how to write and was still seeking a final style. At its best it is serviceable, but no more than serviceable; it can look neat from a distance but close-up it looks a little messy. And yet, if I remember my schooling correctly, I spent many hours on handwriting practice, even tracing copperplate lettering in the vain hope that I might make it my own.

How, then, did Richard J. Herbert come by his beautiful hand? Did he have better teachers than I? Was his hand-to-eye co-ordination intrinsically, that is to say, genetically, better than mine? There is no way of knowing, and if there were such a way, it would hardly be worth the effort necessary to pursue the matter to a conclusion.

My speculation as to Richard J. Herbert’s character was as follows: that he was a fastidious but not effete aesthete, a man of intelligence who would have been pained by the

unnecessary and even militant ugliness of the age. He would have preferred antique furniture to modern, his politics would not necessarily have been conservative, but his attachment to the things of the past would have been intense. He would have been well-educated in the formal sense, but not so over-educated as to preclude further mental development. He was not, therefore, self-satisfied or a man with a closed mind.

All this I might have guessed from the writing alone, but the book itself was a work of the psychology of aesthetics, I will not say above my head, but somewhat obscure so that by the time I had finished reading it I would have had difficulty in explaining to a third party what it was all about, even without an intervening period of forgetfulness. I like my prose plain or, if coloured, at least comprehensible. I imagine Richard J. Herbert reading it with attention—everything he read, he read with attention—but also with mounting exasperation. His signature, after all, was that of a man with a taste for clean forms.

I now come to my sociological and historical reflections occasioned by Richard J. Herbert's signature. Of course, these may be fantasy too; at the least they are undisciplined by any firm knowledge.

As a purchaser of second-hand books of many years' experience, I can say that the signatures to be found within books deteriorated sharply (from the aesthetic point of view) in the late 1960s or early 1970s, when the last people born before the Second World War came to maturity. The effect on handwriting of that war was not immediate, but as the teachers of the old methods retired, so did the handwriting change. It became more slapdash, as if anything would now do (the theory

behind the changes in the teaching of spelling and grammar). Individuality within a disciplined framework became individualism without individuality.

Of course, other explanations are possible. Richard J. Herbert's signature is clearly that of someone belonging to an elite, possibly to a very small elite. The book in which it is to be found was not such as to appeal to the million: on the contrary, if it appealed to anyone, it was only to a very rarefied part of the population. It was almost an experimental work, an unstable mix of memoir and reflection on the aesthetics of a famous artist a good deal more modern then than he is now (his death was less distant from the book's publication than was the book's publication from the present moment); and it was not altogether easy to understand how the memoir and the aesthetics were connected intellectually. If truth be told, I prefer a good murder story (I am with the million in this): it is usually better-written and tells you more about human nature—assuming knowledge of human nature, is, apart from entertainment, one of the main goals or purposes of reading.

I don't imagine Richard J. Herbert to have been a snob, that is to say an aesthete whose love of beauty was instrumental in separating him from, and elevating him above (in his own estimation) the great mass of mankind. Rather, I imagine his aestheticism to have been entirely natural, or at least second-natural, to him. Probably—I am talking of statistical chances—he had been born into and grown up in surroundings in which objects of beauty were taken for granted, as part of the natural order of things; I should be surprised to discover that he was, like D. H. Lawrence, say, the son of a miner. But just as no one born to the ugliness of modern industrial society can become a self-conscious aesthete, so not everyone

born into beautiful surroundings learns consciously to appreciate them, at least not until deprived of them. I imagine Richard J. Herbert needed no such deprivation to love beauty, that his aestheticism was intrinsic to his nature, and that he was an aesthete to his finger-tips – which I imagine to have been at the end of long and fine, rather than sausage-like, fingers, more antennae than spanners or screw-drivers.

As to his taste, I would imagine it to have been more for the classical than the romantic, for formal perfection rather than for the self-expression of deep and stormy, if transient and changeable, emotion. He would have preferred a certain detachment in art, and also in literature, no doubt in life itself; he would have distrusted excesses of feeling, at least when they made their outward appearance in art forms. He would have liked eighteenth century English furniture then, preferring its elegant simplicity to the somewhat vulgar, gilded over-elaboration of Louis XV; the same would go for silverware. He would have preferred the hard lines of the Netherlandish to the insinuating softness of those of the Italian renaissance; the Mannerists he would have abominated, in so far as abomination was within his emotional repertoire. He was cool-tempered rather than hot.

I imagine him in grey tweed suits, so finely tailored that one did not notice their tailoring, of impeccable unobtrusive taste. Loudness in clothes would have pained him, though of course he would have been far too well-mannered to let his pain show to those who were loudly-dressed. He would always have remembered that not everyone had had his advantages. Even in private, between friends, his disapproval would have been expressed in measured terms, coded rather than explicit (his friends, of course, shared the code, otherwise they would not have been friends). He would never have ventured out in

unpolished shoes, but not so polished that they shone like a military guard-of-honour's boots. Probably he would always have had someone to polish them for him.

Richard J. Herbert was not a deeply imaginative man, at least not in the sense that he could imagine everything, or anything, very different from how it was, or that the things that he valued might one day cease to be. In any case, he would have regarded political militancy in their defence as vulgar, and vulgarity was what he would have avoided at all cost, as the worst of evils. He would have preferred retreat into an entirely private, or oneiric, world to that.

Richard J. Herbert, in my imagination, was a cultivated stockbroker rather than, say, an art-dealer. Not being an artist himself, and knowing himself to have no creative talent, he knew that beauty on any scale could only be sustained by money. It remains only for someone now to inform me that Richard J. Herbert was a drunken boorish bookmaker who beat his wife and frequented prostitutes. But then, of course, graphology is not an exact science, even when practised by me.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *The Proper Procedure* from New English Review Press.

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