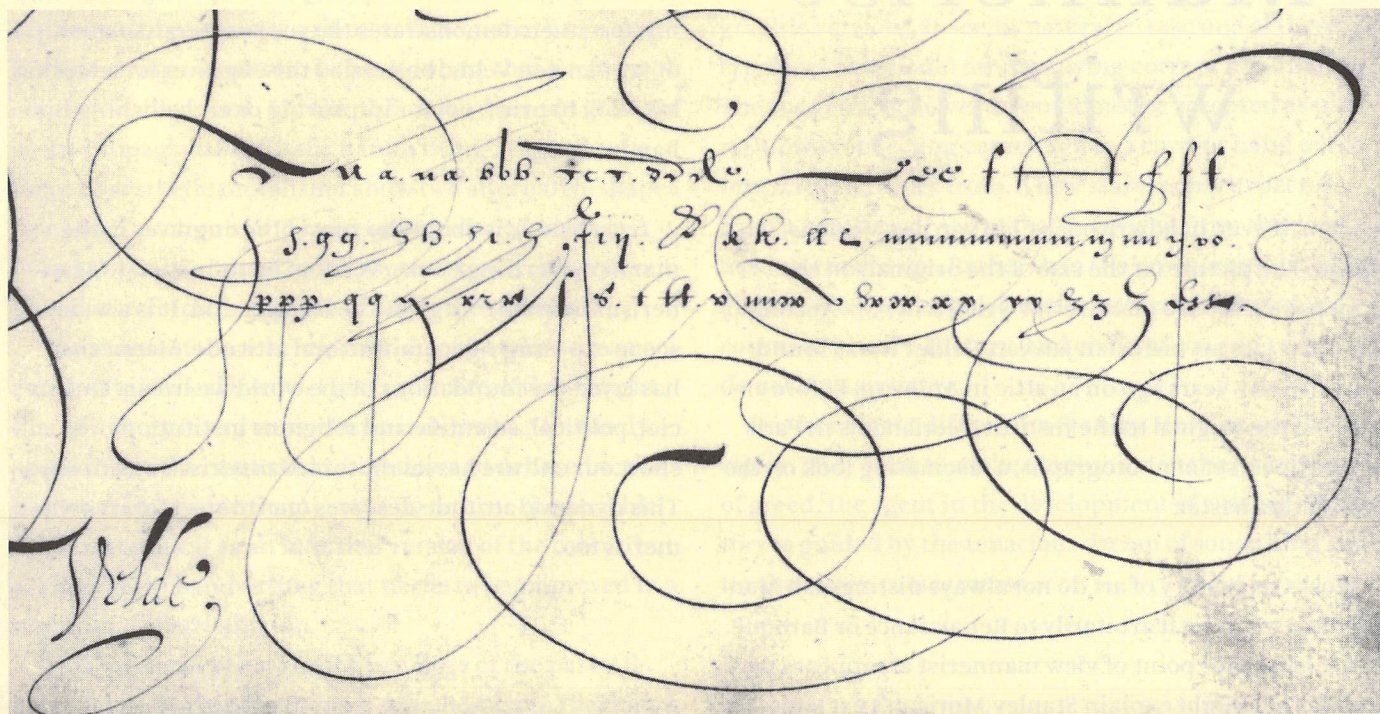


Mannerist writing

Letterletter 14

1996



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Mannerist writing

Seldom, if ever, handwriting by Jan van den Velde is shown. The picture (at the size of the original) on the front page is from a manuscript written in 1597. According to the late art historian Jan van Gelder it was found about twenty years ago on an attic in Antwerp. Before entrusting the original to the Institut Néerlandais in Paris he gave me a set of photographs, a fascinating look on the desk of the master.

Works on history of art do not always distinguish Mannerism, assigning it arbitrarily to Renaissance or Baroque. To a renaissance point of view mannerist art appears perverted. This might explain Stanley Morison's exclama-

tions of disgust with regard to the purest examples of mannerist writing, notably when they happen to be of German origin. Nicolette Gray takes a romantic point of view by assuming that the mannerist writers depended on their engravers for the quality of the plates. However, my specimen demonstrates the supreme craftsmanship of Jan van den Velde; he needed the engraver for adapting his work to print, not for improving or embellishing his handwriting.

Letterletter 15 is about the part of the engraver in the mannerist writing books. With an introduction to Mannerism *Letterletter 14* gives the background. It is a wide scene exposing a general cultural attitude. Mannerism has layed the foundations of the world we live in. Our social, political, scientific and religious institutions, in short our culture has its roots in Mannerist inventions. This dynamic attitude deserves our interest for its own merits too.

THE GREAT PATTERNS OF CIVILI- SATION

There are three patterns in cultural attitude.

Classic is the attitude in harmony with place and time in a harmonious universe. In verse: *I cannot but rejoice that things are as they are.* (T. S. Eliott, *Ashwednesday*).

Mannerist is the attitude that creates its own little cosmos amidst the chaos joining the chorus in *Porgy and Bess: It ain't necessarily so.*

Romantic is the attitude dreaming of better times and better places than here and now: *The happy highways where I went and cannot come again.* (A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire lad*).

Cultural history transposes cultural attitudes to periods or styles. This is convenient but paralysing. Simplified history is inclined to present a cultural attitude without continuity as an attribute of a period; time is classic, mannerist or romantic at best. Such historical writing is largely an extravaganza of romantic attitude. It fails in appreciating other attitudes.

Instead of lines of verse I could take stages of life as symbols of the basic attitudes. In its acceptance of life childhood is classic, the rebellion of adolescence is mannerist and the nostalgia of old age is romantic. Reality

loosens the links between these impressive symbols; everybody knows adults who will never come of age and others who have never been a child. Historical labels stick tight neither. In a classic period a classic attitude dominates mannerist and romantic inclinations. The underlying attitudes are germs of change and as such more important for understanding history than the dominant attitude of a period. Without them we get a fragmented history of sudden changes without roots in the past.

The examples of dissident attitudes are sitting on our book-shelves. The general pattern of Antiquity is classic, but in the *Politeia* Plato dreams the romantic dream of times better than his own. With their mannerist battle-cry *metanoëite* (convert) the Gospels attack the classic framework from the other side.

For some four thousand years the world stayed in a stable position. This classic world collapsed at the end of the fifteenth century. Within decades all its conceptions, cosmological (Kopernik, or Copernicus if you prefer pseudo-latin), geographical (Columbus, or Colon if you prefer Portugese), metaphysical (Luther) and political (the Turks) converged into the greatest catastrophe in history.

4 In the entry from 17 May 1521 in his diary, the 'Luther la-

ment', Albrecht Dürer gives an impression of the *Apocalypse* as he experienced the chaos of his time. Many more descriptions of the universal consternation are preserved in calligraphic labyrinths (for the occasion I mean their texts). They speak unanimously of a lost universe.

The elite, in any time the model builders of a new world, now got a chance. When everybody feels safe the elite is pushed aside or encapsulated in established administrative structures like universities. Now they were needed, they could indulge in their craft of universe making, Mannerism. A small garland of mannerist genius: Thomas More, Michel Angelo, William the Silent, Claude Goudimel, William Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, John Dowland, Johann Kepler, Desiderius Erasmus, Hans Holbein, John Calvin, Ignatius de Loyola, Johann Neudorffer, Martin Schöngauer, Claudio Monteverdi, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Memlinc, Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Breughel, Hans Burgkmaier, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. No other period of the Christian civilisation is as studded with genius as the sixteenth century.

If not explaining Mannerism, the list gives a feeling for it. We can interrogate any genius of the list for his personal contribution to the general awareness of the catas-

trophe and of the need to substitute for the old universe a homemade Utopia.

Genius does not care for his feelings or how to reveal them to the world and if he would like at all to save his own soul, he would only do so by saving the world he is condemned to live in. The Mannerist 'has the whole world in his hands'. His greatness does not need a pedestal, it always descends from its generic heights.

This is a central issue in the gospels: they may be read as mannerist literature in the service of mannerist propaganda for a mannerist conception, for a new world. The repeated question who will be the greatest in the coming Kingdom is an intentional opportunity for repeating the mannerist answer: the little one (Greek *mikron*, Latin *paulus*) is the great one, a mannerist labyrinth in the mirror of one sentence.

In crisis the genius has his finest hour. He got a long hour in the sixteenth century since the crisis was unequalled.

Genius

When asked how I could attract so much promising talent to my programme at the Academy in The Hague, I answered: 'I do not attract talent, I make talent because I am a teacher.' In a reckless moment I might even say that I could make genius too, but that is not as easy. A genius is not a graduate. To become a genius the student should gain absolute independence. A genius acknowledges no classics. He never quotes others. He is his own classic. If genius refers to classic sources, a closer look reveals a mannerist twist. In his emblem William the Silent puts Ovid's metamorphosis of Halcyon upside down. Not waves and wind are calmed by the cynical mercy of gods, it is the small bird keeping its balance amidst chaos: *Saevis tranquillus in undis*. Genius does not even touch the trend. It devises its own place and its own time, making a new universe. The genius is the hero of Mannerism.

Meanwhile genius dwells in normal man, as vulnerable, shy and feeble as anybody else; and, at that, not always good company.

Copperplate

The mannerist print maker is an engraver, an artist of the cut edge. All important mannerist prints are engravings and all important engravings are mannerist. Not all important romantic prints are etchings, because lithography provided another technique of romantic print making, but all important etchings are romantic. The important exemptions are six etchings on iron by Dürer and *Eine gute Ordnung* by Neudorffer. Important because they belie the historian's assumption that the mannerists did not know etching. They tried and rejected the blurred bitten line. The story of copperplate engraving goes along with the story of mannerist writing but the assumed influence of engraving on writing has no factual support.

Changing 'times'

European history of the first half of the seventeenth century is the history of Holland and its surroundings. The nature of the Republic is the reason to look for Dutch examples. Every country had to endure the universal catastrophe in its own way and no country suffered more than

The essential part (with the modest signature of the calligrapher) at actual size of a representative page from Jan van den Velde, Spiegel der Schrijfkunst, 1605. The vigorous stroke of Simon Frysius, the engraver, contributes greatly to the splendour of the plate. However, the design of the plate with all its details comes from the writing master.

The text has little to say:

De sonderlinghe liefde die UL tot de hoochloffelijke Vederkonste/ draghende zijt, heeft mij veroorsaecht U.L onder mijne beste vrienden mede/ ghedachtich te wesen, ende U.L met dese weynighe regelen gheschrifts/ te vereeren. Vriendelijck versoeckende deselve soo aenghenamel. te/ ontfanghen. Als ick wete dat uwe gheneghentheyt tot alle goede konsten alle/ andere konstbeminders my bekend, daerinne te boven gaet; onder de/ welcke ick U.L estimerende een Paragon te wesen geensins en twij/ fele off u.l en zal dese myne toe eygheninghe goetionstelyck aenveerden/ ende my altyts houden voor uwen onveranderlycken goeden Vriendt./ JAN VAN DEN VELDE

onderling geliefde die tot de hoogh lof selvke Adeldikous de
dragende gyt heb t my bevooracht en .l. onder myne beste vriendin mer
jedenst tich te wesen. En .l. met dese weninge reguley jfderst to
te wesen. Vriendelyk verkenne de selve son nengenaamel de
ontfangen. Alle ick wete dat uwe gfeundtcheyt tot alle goet konst en alle
ander konst t beuinden my bekent. Mer jme te wesen gaten: onder de
welcke ick .l. t. Dinnendun dey Caragoy te wesen. jensine en heb
keet of t w. l. en halde t myne toe ingefeninge goet joudteyke geuwerdey.
En my altyts honden. Voe uwe onoverkandelyke joudtey Vriende.

poor Germany, but the Republic was an original mannerist creation itself. A mannerist song, now the national anthem of The Netherlands, recording proudly three terrible defeats, mused the Republic into victory. Because nowhere else the mannerist attitude has been as apparent, nowhere else the decline of Mannerism can be seen as distinctly as in the Netherlands.

1648 the Treaty of Münster confirmed conditions that got shape a few decades and many thousands of victims earlier. For the Eighty Years War 1600 was the turning point. A republican raid to break the siege of Ostende ended in a victory that had nearly become a disaster (the battle of Nieuwpoort). This was an occasion to relinquish the mannerist conception of the independent Netherlands. The rebellion of an elite changed into the war of a new Dutch empire against the Spanish remnants of the Holy Roman empire. For the first time since the Roman republic a free republic had attained great power, but again at the price of freedom. The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands remained a stronghold of tolerance and individual freedom, but liberty had become a mere epithet that a powerful establishment could cherish and indulge in. It was no longer the prominent issue the pre-

vious generation lived and died for.

It became dangerous again in the old-fashioned way to belong to the elite. Remember Johan van Oldenbarneveld, Johan de Wit, Hugo de Groot, Baruch d'Espinoza, René Descartes, outcasts even in the tolerant Dutch Republic, banned, exiled or killed. The printmakers turned to etching and the abstract art of writing lost its prominent position to romantic painting. Genius and mannerism got the romantic meanings recorded in our common dictionaries and fixed in common minds. The print market expresses the romantic appreciation of mannerist art in figures; an indifferent Rembrandt etching might cost 100 times the price of a Dürer engraving or even 1000 times the price of an engraving by Hendrik Goltzius who in his time was considered to be the greatest printmaker of the world.

Appreciating Mannerism

Each attitude has its preferences. In romantic or mannerist perspective the cultural reform of Pharaoh Echnaton has the fascinating flavour of innovation. In classic perspective the same experiments were rather destructive.

Much of what was written on mannerist writing reveals a romantic mind. Stanley Morison scorns the ‘overloaded’ design of a written labyrinth. It does not come to him that a labyrinth cannot be straight. When writing about mannerist writing examples Nicolette Gray likes to add: ‘no doubt under the influence of the burin’ (*Lettering as drawing*). However, by excluding such doubt from the onset we would exclude understanding too.

To appreciate mannerist art we must forget romantic propaganda for individual expression of personal feelings. The mannerist artist is preoccupied with tools, techniques and science. He builds a shelter for all instead of erecting a scaffold for his private interests. Together with beautiful things a new branch of geometry arose from the workshops of painters and engravers. Geometry was not an interesting hobby, but the standard of art. A design or a universe could claim beauty if its proportions could be expressed in geometrical terms as Albrecht Dürer teaches in his *Books of proportion*, 1528: *It would be to his [the master’s] avail, if he would understand in his heart what would be the right proportion and no other, so that he could indicate it in the work. [...] For untruth is in our knowledge and darkness is so deep in us, that our groping fails. What,*

however, proves its case by geometry and shows its fundamental truth, is to be believed by everybody.

Examples of mannerist symbols are plenty in politics, sciences and other arts but nowhere more direct than in calligraphy because in handwriting the plan is already its realisation; its execution does not depend on patrons, their money and whims. The calligraphic example is a mannerist invention itself. With the rather straightforward writing manual by Gerard Mercator for an exception all writing books are stuffed with symmetric and labyrinthine arrangements.

In the calligraphic masterpieces the standards of the Renaissance are not corrupted, but rejected. Scholars have tried to show that the sixteenth century writing books served the propaganda of renaissance handwriting. Even if we neglect the German inventors of the genre, we can see that this theory cannot be upheld. Just skim through the Italian books to find complicated patterns, rebuses, enigmatic monograms and other secret writing, more often founded on gothic writing than on its renaissance counterpart; and what looks like a renaissance hand has in fact little to do with it, as Cresci rightly ob-

served. When Cresci returns to the sources Mannerism is over; his interest is not mannerist or classic anymore but already classicist (romantic).

The mannerist penstroke

Handwriting is a civilisation's graph. Hidden in the shape of letters is the character of the penstroke. The clue for understanding the stroke was revealed in *Letterletter 1*. I italicise the key words of my classic text:

A stroke is a shape that is produced by a *continuous front* of points.

In any position the *frontline* intersects the outline of the stroke in a pair of points, the *counterpoint* of the stroke. The subsequent positions of the frontline may be parallel (in *translation*) or not (in *rotation*) and its length may be constant or not (in *expansion*). In mathematical terms the front is a *vector*.



translation – the classic stroke



rotation – the mannerist stroke



expansion – the romantic (or classicist) stroke

This is almost all you need to describe any writing, hieratic hieroglyphs included. You can learn it in only one year. Then you can start to write history:

In *classic* writing the stroke scribing vector has a constant length and a constant direction (translation).

In *romantic* writing the length of the vector changes, but the direction of the vector is constant (expansion).

In *mannerist* writing both parameters are variable (rotation).

To make this even more simple I provide a specimen of each type of stroke.

The Dutch mannerists held their featherlight pen steep, so that the shaft rolls easily between the fingers. If we are not aware of this trick, we might ascribe the changing thickness of the stroke to a pointed flexible pen. The mannerist pen was flexible, but not pointed. To be sure about this I paraphrased the Dutch hand of Van den Velde in the teachers hymn from Jesaja 52 with a broad steel nib. Before exposing an opinion on writing in public I try it in writing. My analysis of the bastarda in *Letterletter 13* depends entirely on similar exercises.

Nicolette Gray has suggested that embellishment was

Dominus dedit mihi
linguam eruditam ut
sciam sustentare eum
qui lassus est verbo
erigit manum manum
erigit mihi aurum
ut audiam quasi
magistrum Isaias 50: 4

more important to the mannerist calligrapher than legibility. I agree. Calligraphy appears as a pretext for abstract art; it is the mannerist dream rather than the often trivial texts that justifies the splendid penwork. However, the aesthetic ideal never became a mannerist pretext for illegible writing. Everything Van den Velde has written is legible. If you cannot read it nothing is wrong with the master. It is just you who has not yet learnt his splendid Dutch hand.

The course of writing

Science is supposed to seek the truth on the slippery path of trial and error. The faithful scientist nourishes the illusion that this journey will bring him a little nearer to the truth. I prefer a different and yet as moving story of science. My upside-down story science begins with profound dissatisfaction about truth, not truth as it is preached and has to be believed, but undeniable absolute truth as it surrounds us in self-evident truisms. Truism is always trivial but often it comes clad in dignity and prestige. An impressive example is the famous expression coined by Herbert Spencer (not the designer, of course) about *the survival of the fittest*. The prestige of the saying depends entirely on the magnificent last word. When put bluntly (and more precisely, for that) it shrinks to plain

nonsense: *the survival of the survivor*. Absolute truth is absolute nonsense, the profound knowledge by which I know 'that things are as they are.' A great poet might transform such truth into verse, an inventor would exchange the truth for something more risky, as far away from truths as possible and yet tenable; he devises a theory.

ECONOMICS

On many occasions Stanley Morison advertised economic thrift as the changing agent in the development of writing. In a trivial sense Morison is right. Any purpose is economic, seeking to obtain the highest profit at the lowest costs.

In Morison's economics the profit is money. This is not true, not even absolutely. Money is only a provisional purpose. You do not have to specify your needs if you want to impress your friends with a second house and a third partner. Just say: I need money. Were I rich, I would teach writing, design books and typefaces and edit *Letterletter*.

My 1955 edition of the *Britannica* contains the article *Design* by W. R. Lethaby with the remarkable sentence: 'The end of design is utility, fitness and delight.'

Lethaby's design is the end of all economic ends because he was a designer. In my history 'writing' substitutes Lethaby's 'design'.

In typography commercial economics wants to see compactness increase and margins shrink. Manipulation of facts can produce such a development indeed, just like the contrary. To get precisely the opposite of Morison's newspaper-economics you only have to arrange pages by Gutenberg, Jenson, Garamont, Baskerville and Bodoni in a chronologic order. I can reverse any straight continuum. To make my own continuum of history invulnerable for this dirty trick I avoid straight symmetry; I make it oscillate between the opposite agents of speed and articulation.

SPEED & ARTICULATION

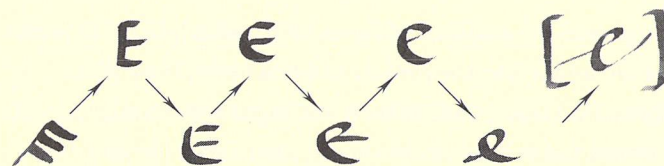
The *speed* of writing depends on
the writer; his skill and condition,
the script; its construction,
tools and material; surface tension of ink, capilarity of pen
 and paper, friction of pen on paper,
articulation of writing.

Given script and utensils the *cultured* writer can only

write more or less formally by adapting speed. Without speed he would get nothing and without articulation he would not get writing.

In an articulate hand the writer eventually meets the limit of his speed. From thereon any increase of speed impairs the articulation of the script.

The writer can return from an informal version to the canonic model as long as he remembers the joints between letters as inarticulate penlifts. The observer, however, will likely distinguish a different hand with joint letters as a speciality and more readily so when horizontal segments are suppressed in ballistic upstrokes, which always happens in running hands. The scribble can be formalised to a new joint script as in the Japanese hira kana, or more ostentatiously, in Arabic writing. On their way to a formal Western joint hand the mannerist writing masters were stopped by the fashion of italic and the spread of typographic writing that became the standard of formal writing; a joint script neither matches the fundamental idea of typography (writing with prefabricated characters) nor the technical limitations of casting type. Western civilisation left formalising joint writing to pedagogy where it was distorted into the illusion of single stroke words.



U P S & D O W N S

The hypothetical diagram reduces the history of writing to the interaction of speed and articulation. It has a formal and an informal level. The course of history, as indicated by arrows, proceeds in ups and downs. You have always known this, but now you can see it too.

The history of *e* begins in the remote past of Semitic writing. The first up assumes that the inventor of the capital took the sloped stem for an untidy upright stem; the first up corrects the supposed error. A swift stroke rounds the hook of the capital which is readily misunderstood as an irregular curve in the first down. The second up 'improves' the curve in the uncial. At high speed a joint unifies the second and the third stroke of the uncial. If not the joint but the second stroke is taken for an addition it can be 'repaired' in the minuscule. The final

down comes from misunderstanding the second stroke of the minuscule as the beginning of a loop. Its introduction in common education has abraded current handwriting. The *e* occupies nearly 20% of all writing. Its frequency drags handwriting into a continuous loop. The scribble of unconscious writers is little more than a unarticulate string of uniform loops. It is here that a reform of education must start. My simplification does not go as far as the propaganda for 'italic handwriting'. To keep a distance to aesthetic moralism I show two alternative shapes from the Dutch running hand as reproduced on page 1. Do what you like, alone write *e* in two strokes, always, not because I tell you, but because this is the minimal *e*.

The stages of the schema should not be taken for an account of historical events. I just try to break the straight line of history into a story of ups and downs. Obviously speed draws the canonical script down to debased scribble. It is remarkable that there is no return. The scribble is not recognised as an informal version of the canon, but as the state of handwriting that needs to be improved in a new canon of articulation.

This misconception is not a privilege of the past. All current handwriting is derived somehow from the Italian



cursive we have at hand in a vast range of formal typographic versions. It seems natural to take one of these typefaces as a model for improving corrupt handwriting. The suggestion, however, would not be accepted as natural. Common feeling cannot relate a current hand to the text script it comes from. A new start is only expected from a new formal script that is derived from the previous informal stage. Rather than the great examples of a glorious past the rubbish under our hands directs the course of history. History (and civilisation) ends when we do not care anymore.

It is here that I differ from Stanley Morison and his disciples. They want to make economics, in the narrow sense of greed, the agent in the development of writing. My history is guided by the tenacious dream of something better that often comes worse.

For Page 16

With the passing of time it turns out that Letterletter is one of the very few often produced documents that has been made consistently available to A Typ I members. This is an interesting irony because it was never conceived as anything but a highly ephemeral and informal publication, and a vehicle expressing a point of view. Also relevant is that A Typ I did not put specific management effort behind Letterletter to ensure its consistent availability.

Today we are proud to introduce two new issues of Letterletter, numbers 14 and 15, both of which are a lot more substantial than earlier issues. They form part of the keepsake box given out in The Hague during the 1996 conference.

Letterletter is changing as is A Typ I. It will continue to be part of the fabric of A Typ I as long as it is relevant to members.

Letterletter was the brainchild of Gerrit Noordzij in 1984, and it was he who persisted with it and made it what

it is today. Letterletter has been and continues to be an important esthetic contribution to the type loving community and for this A Typ I offers collective thanks and admiration.

Mark Batty,

A Typ I, *President*

New York, September 1996