

**In His Own Hand:**

**Interpretation and the Effacing of the Scribe**

**David W. Jardine, University of Calgary**

**Tanya Graham, Calgary Board of Education**

**Patricia Clifford & Sharon Friesen, Galileo Educational Network**

**In His Own Hand:****Interpretation and the Effacing of the Scribe****I**

*As an early childhood educator, the heart of my philosophy is the belief that young children are highly capable and intellectual learners who have a right to a school experience which is respectful of their curiosities, worthy of their time, and mindful of their place within the larger human context. It is this belief that drives me in my daily work. It is this belief which causes me to question over and over whether or not I am creating an environment and a program which sings in concert with my beliefs. I am thankful for this continuous drive that I feel to build a larger story with the children. Without it, I believe that I would allow myself to sink into a routine of habit and superficiality and in turn lose the very essence of my being as a teacher.*

*As I have attempted to bring the children into deep and meaningful conversations, I have recently felt the needs of one particular little boy weighing on my heart. For two and a half years I have had this little boy sitting in my room while we have explored descriptive writing, symbolism, rich literature, art and poetry. Rarely has he engaged in conversation or even demonstrated interest in what we talk about. His eyes wander around the room; he appears to be interested in and distracted by everything except what we are taking up. During this entire time, I have struggled with questions from both myself and colleagues: “How does **this** work for Darren?” “Does Darren have an opportunity to join in **this** conversation?” “Why don’t I just*

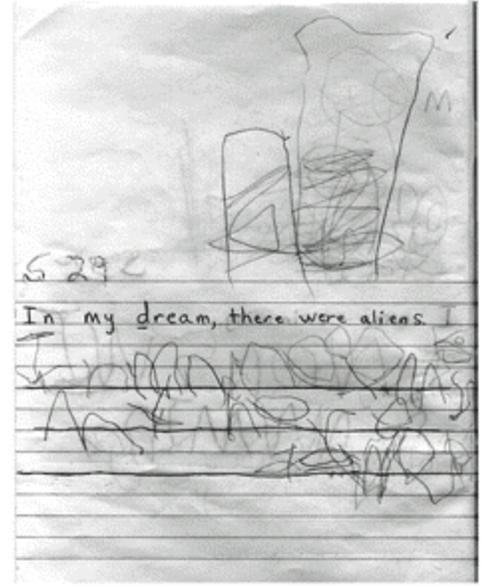
bring it down a couple of notches so that it will make sense to him?” “Where should I start with Darren?”

*The final question, was perhaps the one that kept me up most nights when I first met this little boy. After all, where **could** I start? He didn't know his alphabet, he couldn't write, making marks on paper was a challenge, and he was barely talking. A part of me kept asking, “Where should I start in order to fix him?” Nothing that I knew could fix him—none of the new or old methods. He was not progressing in the area of reading or writing. There were no books to which I could turn; really there were few specialists who could offer anything that Darren would respond to without wrapping him up in labels and languages that made everything **his** problem. This was a whole new landscape and it was up to me to find the way to navigate.*

*If I truly believe that all children deserve a program which is respectful of their curiosities, worthy of their time, and mindful of their place within the larger human context then I had to believe that this was true for Darren as well. I began to realize that I had to start with “Darren the person” rather than “Darren the problem,” the non-reader or non-writer. My goal had to transform from “fixing Darren” to “respecting his place and his learning within the larger story.” I had to start with him in **his** landscape not mine. I had to let what he showed me of himself to be true, to be telling and real, not just a failure of my own expectations. I had to look beyond his scrawls and his inability to demonstrate his knowing in the familiar ways that other children demonstrate theirs. Instead of fearing the uncertainty of this landscape through which Darren travels and fencing him in with a steady diet of “fixer activities,” I had to trust that my starting point with Darren could and should be no different then that of other children.*

*I would, as I have always done with other children, bring to his landscape what I have learned about the world myself: rich, and meaningful literature, powerful questions, and beautiful art. I knew that he would appear not to listen, not to be moved as the other children appeared to be moved. I was even prepared for the withdrawal that he would show. However, I held the unrelenting belief that perhaps I was planting a seed—one that just might (or—can we admit it?) just might not grow and blossom.*

*Darren's reading and writing, of course, would remain a concern and a goal. This sample from his journal, written in his own hand, attests to this fact:*



*However initially disturbing such journal entries might first appear, how could I possibly suggest that I know from evidence like this the full extent of Darren's participation in our class and our conversations? I has been amazing how easily and forcefully such journal work can set nods and knowing glances. But I know that this journal entry and others like it are not enough.*

*Perhaps my own images of what participation should look like were stifling my ability to see Darren's involvement, his knowing, his experiences. I was looking for those well-known signs of involvement: the raising of a hand, the nod of a head, the sharing of a personal story.*

*When the class was asked to create their own poetry in their writing books, Darren created the following poem through a scribe:*

***The hot sun is like the Mojave Desert.***

***The sun is a beautiful colour of gold.***

*The mountain peaks are covered*

*With a small double wizard of snow.*

*I walked across the bridge*

*And smelled the trees.*

*The mountain has purple shadows on it.*

*The wind is blowing just a little bit.*

*A fat mountain is right in front of me, it's huge.*

*Both these traces of Darren's work—the hand written journal entry and the scribed poem--came into terrible focus when I recently attended a morning workshop on children's writing, and all of the talk was pointedly in favour of "starting where the child is at." The suggestion was made, over and over again, that we always "gear down" what we do as teachers "to the child's level."*

*So later that afternoon, a group of student-teachers ended up in my classroom, and I showed them the two pieces of work and asked "What does it mean to start from where Darren is at?" Some of the initial reactions were so familiar. Even though all the students agree that the poem was wonderful and that the journal entries were "a concern," the main question that arose again and again was over the scribed work:*

*"Yes, but did he actually **write** this or did someone write it for him?"*

## II

When we recently scanned web-sites using the term "scribe" as our search item, we ended up with several hundred references to the practice of "scribing" in a wide variety of language arts programs,

classrooms and textbooks—mainly dealing with how it is done and why it is done and describing, sometimes in great detail, precisely how such a practice worked in a particular school setting.

However, none of these “hits” dealt especially with *what it is*, to scribe for another. All of them treated this notion *as if* “what it is” is somehow either obvious or is simply what we intend it to be. As is frequently the case in the emergence of seemingly “new” educational practices, scribing is treated *as if* it appeared just now, out of nowhere, with no relations or attachments or consequences or shared and contested ancestries and images other than the ones we might generously intend in practising language arts well in our schools.

As we’ve come to expect, education is most often interested in *how to do it* and *whether it works*.

This absence of the question “What does it *mean*, to scribe for another?” is both not unexpected and, for us, full of interpretive portend. As James Hillman and Michael Ventura suggested in their lovely, disturbing book *We’ve had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world’s getting worse* (1992), North American culture in general (and, we add, educational theory and practice in particular) is almost exclusively interested in *practising* ideas (such as “scribing” for children in schools) but has little or no interest in *entertaining such ideas*—holding them, so to speak, “between,” and stopping our rush to practice for a moment to consider this inheritance we’ve been handed, out from under the auspices of producing, out from the rush of “doing.”

Interpretation requires stopping and letting all the ancestries, voices and relations that are hidden in this simple, obvious “practice” of scribing come forward and have their say.

“Scribe,” interpretively understood, is thus not simply the name of something done in schools. It

is not just a “good idea” according to either implicit or explicit criteria, and therefore either recommendable or not recommendable for practice in the classroom. It is also the first word of an allegory (Gadamer 1989, 70-81), a long and convoluted and sometimes contradictory tale full of a **“multifariousness of. . . voices” (Gadamer 1989, p. 295). It is only if we risk reading our way through this tough, ambiguous allegory that we might** come to understand how its images are silently working themselves out “beyond our wanting and doing” (Gadamer 1989, xxviii) in the lives of teachers and children and schools. It is this unintended “beyond” that is the territory of interpretation:

Every word [like the word “scribe”] breaks forth as if from a centre and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word [like the word “scribe”] causes the whole of the language[s] to which it belongs to resonate. Thus [“scribe”]. . . carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning.. (Gadamer 1989, p. 458)

The term “scribe,” to be interpretively entertained, must be allowed to summon up the world(s) to which it belongs. “Understanding begins when *something* addresses *us*” (Gadamer 1989, 299): to interpret means to attempt to respond to this summons, this address, to find out what *it* –this world of implication- is asking of us, to find out how it–this world of implication–defines *us* beyond how we may define *it*. To interpret means to find out that, even in our innocent use of the term “scribe” in schools, we are summoning up worlds of implication without necessarily intending to. And, as a *living* allegory, our readings of how our taken-for-granted practices might belong to this allegory *add themselves to what the allegory then means*. By interpreting, we “further” (Gadamer 1989, xxiv).

To entertain interpretation, therefore, is to entertain the possibility that the agency of inquiry—its motive, its movement, its demand—lies outside of the command of the knowing subject and the methods it might wield. Things *show themselves*: “Look, here we are” (Hillman 1982, 77). Interpretation requires learning to “entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest.” (Gadamer 1989, 378). And, through such entrusting, our own tales of scribing add themselves to this bloodline. Our tales become its begats.



### III

#### The Scribe, by Heronymous Bosch

From the *Alberta Learning Document on Testing and Achievement: Guidelines for Scribing*

##### Use of Scribes

If a scribe is approved to assist a student during a test, the following procedures apply. A scribe may assist in recording the student's answers. A scribe may not improve a student's response by rewording or otherwise changing the student's answer. The student's response must be recorded with no change of any kind.

Scribes may not:

- provide suggestions or interpretations of any kind
- correct grammar
- make any changes to the student's response unless directed to do so by the student

A scribe may not read a test to a student. Audiotape versions of the test or readers may be provided for this purpose, if previously approved by the superintendent.

The school jurisdiction is responsible for the appointment of a scribe and for any expenses incurred.

Parents or other immediate family members may not serve as scribes or readers for their child.

The scribe must adhere to the *Achievement Test Rules*, as described in the Policies section.

A test administered by a scribe shall be given in a separate writing area so that other students are not disturbed.

The scribe must sign his/her name at the end of the student's work.

The principal will record in the appropriate section of the test booklet or answer sheet that a scribe assisted the particular student.

**Note:** Scribed papers are not marked for conventions, or in the case of functional writing, for content management. Students' scores are pro-rated.

From Blake Morrison's (2000). *The justification of Johann Gutenberg:*

[In] the scriptorium, we also sometimes sang hymns, among them an Ode to All Our

Labours, whose rhymes I grew to hate:

Unless we scribes this book enhance

By writing in God's hand,

The words will lack his governance

And never breathe or stand.

With what solemnity we sang of this. But I had seen the obscenities written in margins by scribes, blistered and chilblained, whose endurance had run out. For what is noble in copying? The act is mechanical. If a monkey could be trained to copy the Bible, would its version be less holy than a monk's? I do not think so.

Our masters in the scriptorium urged us to be neat and self-effacing. But in all my time there I never saw two hands the same. Because they could not put their names or be given credit, the scribes like to parade themselves in other ways –with flourishes, blots, curlicues, misspellings and other marks of distinction. As a reader, I resent such intrusion. I like the relations with an author to feel private; I think he does too. I hold him in my hands, and he takes me into his confidence, and neither of us wants a third to

come between. Print is better that way, because self-effacing. It makes the script undistinctive. It takes all 'character' out of the characters. It is oblivious, as no man's hand can ever be. What I learned in the scriptorium is that the scribe is a meddler. And I began to think how to stop his meddling. (Morrison 2000, 44-5)

#### IV

It was more than profit that drew me to vellum. I loved its springiness to the touch. Its velvet nap. The whiff of animal still hanging about it, as though when reading or writing you were living inside the beast. I loved the blood-veins running there, under the ink. I loved the brown-white, brown-white run of the pages in a vellum book, since however long soaked in lime-water, and whatever sharpness of blade is used to scrape it, and no matter what creature it has come from (calf, goat, pig, sheep, deer—with smaller books, even squirrel), hairside will always be darker than fleshside. I loved all this as a boy with a goosequill in a scriptorium. (Morrison 2000, 210)

If I were able, I would write it myself. But my hands being shaky and my eyes half-blind, I have hired a scribe to do it for me. Anton sits with me, transcribing my impressions as fast as they lept out of my mouth. He has been told to set down each word I speak, even those just now spoken of him. For though to see his own name may discompose him, these words do not compose themselves. And though humility may be a virtue, to be effaced, as I know myself, is a painful wound. I will not play that game, Anton. Without you, this manuscript cannot exist. Without you, there is no hope of making it a book. Let your presence be admitted here—you are Anton, not Anon.

Be careful, then, you do not skip or nod. Nor must you leave words out or write them twice over, as scribes are wont to do. My invention sought to correct such error—in metal, books should read as God intended. But for drafting this testament I put my trust in your ear and hand. Be sure, then, you copy me in good faith. (Morrison 2000, 4-5).

As these passages from Blake Morrison’s compelling novel *The justification of Johann Gutenberg* attest, writing, even carefully scribing the words of someone else is not as much a technical, anonymous act that the above-cited *Alberta Learning* document might have us believe. In fact, that government document makes scribing sound precisely like what was so feared about Johann Gutenberg’s new invention:

“The Bible! You plan to make the Bible as well?”

“I have considered it.”

“The Bible, to have authority, must be written by monks, not by some heretic machine.”

“With my press, it will look as though a monk has written it.”

“But it will be counterfeit, the work of an engine. And God does not inhabit an engine.” (Morrison 2000, 160)

It is especially interesting, in the images that the Ministry provides on-line, that *family members* especially not be scribes for their kin. Ideally, once familial ties have been severed, the hand of the scribe becomes “undistinctive” (Morrison 2000, 44). It must “take all character out of the characters” (45). And, in perfect parallel, as the scribe loses all familial relation to the student—all distinctiveness and

character--the one scribed for becomes “abandoned to their own devices” (Arendt 1969, 233), cut off from all their relations. Both scribe and student becomes anonymous in the face of a presumed realm of “meaning” that is to be anonymously handed on with no inhabited hand involved. Reading and writing thus no longer occur “as though you are living inside the beast” (Morrison 2000, 210) of our Earthly blood relations.

(We might playfully say then that “living inside the beast” is living with our kin, in their full difference and diversity “inside” the living, often contradictory, ambiguous and “multifarious” [Gadamer 1989, 295] human enterprise of writing, of reading, of meaning, of expression, of understanding. Handwriting, for Darren, is not just a problem that he has. It is also a place that he has in this enterprise, a place *here, with us.*)

However, Blake Morrison’s Gutenberg is convinced that scribing by hand—perhaps even under the auspices of the Alberta Ministry of Education-- is unable to attain such undistinctiveness and lack of character, and this novel illuminates the great conflict inherent in this inability. It may be that Gutenberg’s printing press effaces the obscene, bestial interferences of the scribes hand. However, as the character of Gutenberg finds as the novel proceeds, scribing by hand is an act that requires faithfulness and trust and a certain embodied discipline and attention. It is an act that cannot be effaced, cannot become anonymous.

In the cloistered Scriptorium, the monk’s hand works in the *Imagio Dei*—the monk’s hand is inhabited by God. And, even in the more mundane cloisters of classrooms or examination rooms, where it is our children who are at stake in our practices, the scribe’s hand clearly maintains a trace of the bodylabours and the love involved, and the sense of natural affection, kind-ness, where hands

become inhabited by long ancestries, relatednesses and bloodwork. Could we have ever been delivered “a small double wizard of snow” without some love and attention and alertness and readiness and trustworthiness in the hand of the scribe? Don’t these scribed words “flesh out more than the hands than the ones that made them” (Wallace 1987, page)—more than the hands of the scribe and more than the interiors of the one scribed for?

Let’s get brutal about this: given Darren’s admittedly troublesome handwriting, would a teacher who, from such evidence, believed that he wasn’t very able, be able to hear this poem at all, as something worthy of attention, as something worthy of scribing? Is *this* part of the startle-response hidden in student-teachers’ queries (“Yes, but did he actually *write* this or did someone write it for him?”)? That not only did we not expect this from Darren, given what we’ve seen of his handwriting, but that we realize, to our horror, that, given his handwriting, *we might not have listened to his stories if we had been his teachers?* This is not *at all* about the practice of scribing itself, but about our own humiliation in the face of what we may have too quickly presumed was our task as teachers with children in our care.

As the illustration of Heronymous Bosch attests, scribes like those pretended to in the Alberta Learning Document cited above are equally objects of potential ridicule as they attempt to cleave relentlessly to the letter, to the literal, all bloodhoundedly droopy-eared and penpointedly-mouthed, skating squinty-eyed from place to place so as not to miss a thing. An image not unlike Friedrich Nietzsche’s “inverse cripples,” where we become (crippled by) what we most desire (see Smith 1999): ears so long and so ready for listening that they trip up and encumber and distort, a bill so crooked for writing that speaking is impossible, attention so skating, so necessarily surface-fleeting (don’t think,

don't stop, don't entertain, don't interpret, don't teach, don't learn, don't read, don't be suggestive, don't correct, don't breathe) that our kinships are gone, and we become like Gutenberg's machine, soulless, uninhabited, unhospitable, full of wariness and paranoia instead of attention and love, bereft of flesh and relations, all in the name of fairness and objectivity. To be "fair" in this techno-mechanical sense, we must scribe what "the child him- or herself" dictates and nothing more. Being true to these children is being detached, mechanical. We must simply write down what the child says verbatim—where "verbatim" has itself shed all its ancestries of the Verbum and Word debates that once raged through Scholasticism (see, for example, Lonergan 1997).

As we become scribes for the Ministry of Education, the children for whom we scribe must become *dictators*: autonomous individuals who have some sort of hidden life independently of the living, intergenerational body of work that surrounds and holds us all in the living practice of reading and writing and the difficult ways of the hand. Perhaps it is therefore a good idea that the Ministry of Education does not allow family members to scribe for each other. At least with those students who are not familiar and familial, who don't expect trustworthiness from us and love, we can feign and fake such independence. As the student becomes a dictator, something, too, becomes of us. We fail to listen with love. We fail to enter into conversation. We examine, as if our child were an object and as if reading and writing did not draw us together inside the body of the beast.

#### IV



#### PAGE DIMENSIONS

182 x 129mm (7 1/4 x 5 3/16 ins)

#### TEXT DIMENSIONS

95 x 60mm (3 13/16 x 2 7/16 ins)

#### *BOOK OF HOURS LEAF*

second quarter of the 15th c., France, Paris(?) [Rare Books, MS lat. frag. 8]

The beginning of the Psalm is marked with a two-line enlarged initial painted deep blue on a gold leaf background. White stripes lighten the colored pigment. Each verse begins with a large gold leaf initial placed on painted deep blue and deep rose backgrounds, decorated with simple patterns in thin, white lines. To

**regularize the appearance of the textblock, deep rose and deep blue line fillers are inserted where the text stops short of the right edge of the text block. The decorated rectangular blocks are lightened with white and gold leaf dots.**  
**([http://www2.art.utah.edu/Paging\\_Through](http://www2.art.utah.edu/Paging_Through))**

I learned the torture of working: cramped wrists, swollen elbows, aching back, thumb and fingertips scalded by constant pressure on the quill. But I was taught new disciplines: how to rule a page to perfection; how to pare a quill and slit a nib' how to illuminate in different colours until a text look to be spiked with gems. The ink was made from oak apples—gall nuts—crushed and soaked in rain water, then stirred with a fig stick in green vitriol till it turned gummy and black. The quills came from geese, the left wing-pinion curving best to sit in a right hand. It was here, too, that I learned the ways of vellum—how calf-skin rubs smoother than goat, how ink sticks better to the flesh side, and so on. (Morrison 2000, 42-3)

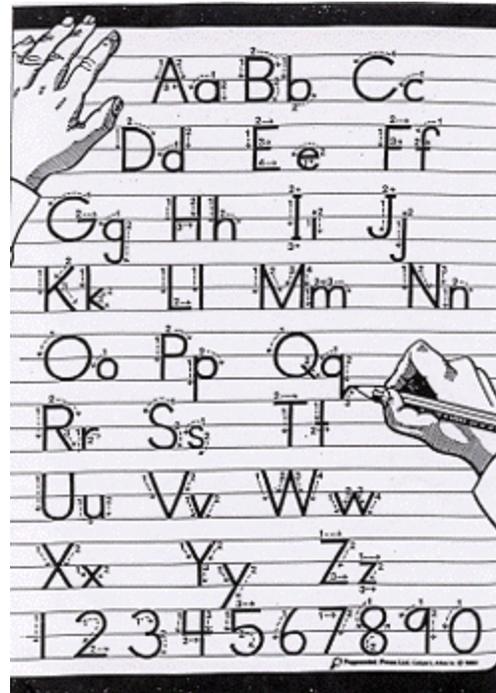
Not incidentally, most of the *remaining* readily available web-site “hits” around the idea of “scribing” are deeply religious in character, involving, most often, candle-lights and calf-skins and inks and the handiworks of rabbis, *Schules*, monks and monasteries, the character and necessities of proper ascendants and descendents in the curlicues of illuminated manuscripts, the cloisters of Scripture and the Scriptorium and the bloody handwork knowledges of the absorptivity of certain blood-veined vellums.

We can all imagine children in rows, “cramped wrists, swollen elbows, aching back, thumb and fingertips scalded by constant pressure” doing rows and rows of lower and upper case Rs (lower and

upper, of course, the descendants of Gutenbergian arrangements of upper and lower cases full of print-type letters), with ascendants and descendants still at issue.



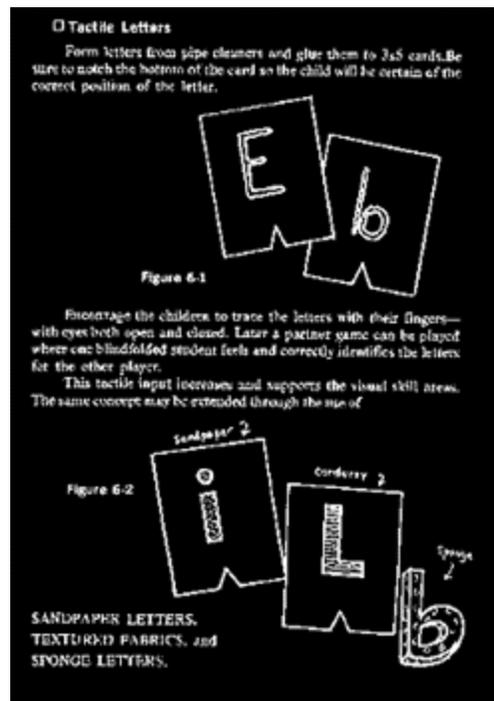
Circa 1450



Circa 1980

These both remind us of the burning body-labours that make the training of the hand in writing such an urgent phenomenon. This is a deep body-memory that we all have, having been schooled with rows of Os and Bs and As. We were not just learning to write. This was not the only schooling occurring. The training of the hand dovetails with the training of the wilful beast of the rough child-body. The training of the hand is an allegory of the coming to command and coming to properly control the body's sinfulness and fallenness.

Incidentally, those in Early Childhood Education can easily imagine classrooms full of young children with their fingers in the air tracing out air-letters as a form of artful practice. And we can also remember those store-bought or home-made sandpaper letters and numbers that young children could play with, running their hands over the rough surfaces to help ingrain the body movements and ways of the hand necessary to writing.



(From Piechowak & Cook, 1976, 98)

A student-teacher recently asked whether such “sandpaper letters, textured fabrics and sponge letters” are a good idea for kids:

I quite approve of the practice of stimulating children to learn to play by giving them ivory letters to play with, the sight, the handling, and the naming of which is a pleasure.

As soon as the child has begun to know the shapes of the various letters, have these cut,

as accurately as possible, upon a board so that the stylus may be guided along the grooves. By increasing the frequency and speed with which the child follows these fixed outlines, we shall give steadiness to his fingers.

**Quintilian, circa 85 C.E.**, from his first volume of

*The Art of Oratory* (cited in Illich 1993, 9).

This is obviously an odd and impractical response. It is part of the annoying character of interpretation. It is intended, following Hillman and Ventura, to make it possible to entertain this idea, not just practice it.

It can easily seem that interpretive work is simply a joke meant to interrupt and complicate and sometimes humiliate the ordinariness and straightforwardness of that student-teacher's question: "are these a good idea for kids?" Why do this, then? Because it re-places the idea of the sensuous tracing of letters back into the body of a long-lived beast, back into all its relations, back into all the multifarious voices that make it a living, breathing question for us, here, in the confines of school, in the presence of *this* child and what s/he asks of us. Thus re-placed, such tracing of letters becomes full of character and distinctiveness. As with scribing itself as a living inheritance, letter-tracing now arrives "trailing [all the] dark and chaotic attachments" (Hillman 1979, 123) that make it what it is, not as a dead-object, but as a living inheritance. It also makes our task one that is more complex than simply training the hands of children: we are also always handing on an inheritance the child's participation in which is essential to its life. Who would have imagined that Quintilian was an ancestor who not only might have something to teach us, but might have, beyond our knowing, *already handed down to us a teaching in the very ordinariness of these sandpaper letters in Early Childhood Education*. Who would have thought, as well, that hidden in the

very ordinariness of those one-page letter-formation black-line-masters hide old ghosts that haunt us “beyond our wanting and doing” (Gadamer 1989, xxviii), ghosts that just might have something to say to us about what we understand to be so obvious.

But again, why do this? Why not just “use” these things if the kids like them and they help and be done with it? We suggest that treating these matters interpretively makes the act of teaching more sensuous, more pleasurable, more generous, more serious and more full of a sense of kinship with the children we teach and with those who have come before us in this great, difficult task. Recall, above, where we suggested that, in an interpretive treatment of these matters, handwriting, for Darren, is not just a problem that he has. It is also a place that he has in this long-standing enterprise, a place *here, with us*. He is no longer simply the object of our attention (an attention always aimed at “control, prediction and manipulation” [Habermas 1973]). He is now *one of us* and, often more disturbingly for some of our student-teachers, we, too, are some of us. We, too, are *in* the enterprise of reading and writing and meaning and expression and understanding, along *with* the children we teach. *Of course* we are all not doing identical work in that enterprise. Of course we don’t all have equal skills, desires, fears, masteries, previous experiences, practice and so on. Nevertheless, treating these matters interpretively means making it possible to engage with our children as fellow-travellers, not only as objects to be controlled predicted and manipulated.

## V

*Brother Erhard loved my hands especially, which he thought, being dexterous, were ‘gifts from God’. When we were set some Biblical text to copy, I would take*

*infinite care over the spacing, the angles, the depths of the ascenders and descenders. And at the end, mine would be the paper brandished in class.*

*'Here, boys, look at the beauty of the script,' Brother Erhard would say.*

*'Regard the elegance of the strokes. It is more like a woven tapestry than parchment. This is a hand guided by God.'* (Morrison 2000, 5).

Clearly Darren's hand, at six-years-old, is not yet so guided, and it is equally clear that part of our mandate as teachers is to help Darren develop his dexterity. However.

Consider this **Statue of the Scribe Heti** found in **Giza, Western Cemetery, Old Kingdom, Egypt, 6th Dynasty, c. 2250 B.C.** (<http://mfah.org/splendor/docs/highlts/9.html>):

And consider, too, that the had a profound place in the culture, where the lines on the and take care of it.

Then consider, from *of reading* (1996, 178-9):

The inventor of the may have realized the pieces of clay over



scribe in this Old Kingdom maintaining of memory and tablets hold memory in place

Alberto Manguel's *A history*

first written tablets

advantage of these

the holding of memory.

Tablets did not require the presence of the memory-holder to retrieve information.

Suddenly something intangible. . . could be acquired without the physical presence of the

message giver; magically, it could be imagined, noted, passed on across space and beyond time. Since the earliest vestiges of prehistoric civilization, human society had tried to overcome the obstacles of geography, the finality of death, the erosion of oblivion. With a single act—the incision of a figure on a clay tablet—that first anonymous writer suddenly succeeded in all these seemingly impossible feats.

Is this part of the fear behind the question “*Yes, but did he actually **write** this or did someone write it for him?*”? this magic, that the message can be acquired without the physical presence of the message giver, and in such a way that the message giver is oddly erased from view? Where exactly is Darren in this transcribed poem? And can we, knowing of the love and care of his teacher, ever surely say that this poem is strictly somehow *his*? Or is there some mild accusation here, that maybe the teacher *did* “write” it and not just “scribe” it? If it is the product of Darren being encouraged to tell what he knows is it not, then, as the product of encouragement, not “[him] actually” but also somehow another “someone?”

Writing is meant to *disappear*. But this erasure is too horrible to imagine. If writing is meant to disappear, so are writers:

The writer was a maker of messages, the creator of signs, but these signs and messages required a magus who would decipher them, recognize their meaning, give them voice.

Writing required a reader.

The primordial relationship between writer and reader presents a wonderful paradox: in creating the role of the reader, the writer also decrees the writer’s death, since in order for a text to be finished the writer must withdraw, cease to exist. While the writer remains present, the

text remains incomplete. This uneasy relationship between reader and writer. . . is a fruitful but anachronistic [one] between a primeval creator who gives birth at the moment of death, and a post-mortem creator, or rather generations of post-mortem creators who enable the creation itself to speak, and without whom all writing is dead. From its very start, reading is writing's apotheosis. (Manguel 1996, 178-9)

*It was said I hated scribes and my invention would dig their grave. This last, as Anton knows, is a wicked lie. They are our nameless ghosts, condemned to a a purgatory of oblivion, while those whose words they copy enjoy immortal fame.*  
(Morrison 2000, 205)

So again, what is the urge to see traces of the hand that wrote? Is it centrally a refusal to allow the possibility that the writing might stand without its creator, in spite of its creator, as something subject to being read? This is the helplessness of the written word worried over by Plato in the Phaedrus:

**You are father of written letters. But the fact is that this invention of yours [writing] will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it. They will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written, calling things to mind no longer from within themselves by their own powers, but under the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves. So it's not a recipe for memory, but for reminding that you have discovered. (Plato, Phaedrus, 275)**

and worrying still to Hans-Georg Gadamer in his *Truth and Method*. Writing, Gadamer notes, is as Hegel suggested: an attempt to “make memory last,” (1989, 391) but the memory that lasts is

embodied, not in the body that has written in its own hand, but in the text that has shed the body of the writer in favour of the body of the work itself, in favour of *what is said* and *what such writing says to those who read it*. The writer, even the scribe, is thus meant to be *effaced*. This is again a hint of the heat behind the question “Yes, but did he actually *write* this or did someone write it for him?” If the writer’s troubled handwriting is effaced in scribing, what is left is a poem that, precisely because of the *absence* of the writer, is *meant for us*.

Rather than us being in a position to judge Darren’s handwriting, it is we who become subject to question with the scribed poem: what, in heaven’s name, are we to do with this poem/ are some of the images in it as good as they seem to be? where *is* Darren “at,” as they say in the workshops? what is the compulsion to “gear down?” And then what of our own humiliation at suspecting that this sort of imaginal presence should not be possible in such a student? As the writer becomes effaced in scribing, we ourselves come forward as the one’s who are now *addressed*.

## VI

Darren, this lovely child who signalled in some of the student-teachers visiting him an ill-at-ease, not-enough-experience sense of “trouble--Darren is not effaced by the transcribed poem, even though his handwriting difficulties might temporarily be occluded. Neither is his scribe, his teacher, effaced. What is effaced here are the security and presumed (or, with student-teachers, “hoped-for-in-the-future-when-I-have-learned-enough”) certainty of our own next pedagogical gestures.

We are cast out of the familiar role of readiness to help, to rescue, to fix, to repair. Those

Mojave images don't exactly need to be *fixed*. They aren't a *problem*. However, these images do require that we come to face a certain humiliation: why did we ever imagine that such a thing was *not* possible? Why are we so very surprised?

What becomes effaced then, is a certain "gap": between the first face of Darren as a presence in the classroom (drifting attention, slightly clumsy, always asking unexpected questions, troublesome handwriting at the beginning of the year, and so on) and the undeniable presence of the imaginal worlds he inhabits and articulates, if given the opportunity. The "portal" in this case is a scribe full of readiness, relatedness, trustworthiness, love and expectation. In Morrison's novel, Johann Gutenberg was not possessed of an untrained hand but of old and failing hands. Once so able to write in ways inhabited by God, he is now unable himself to write at all, and he entrusts himself to a young boy-scribe: not to Anon, not to just anyone and no-one (the Alberta Ministries version of "the scribe"), but to Anton, someone whose hands he trusted.

So the great lesson here is that when our attention falls to Darren's handwritten work, we witness not only the child's troubles, but also our own panics and our own desires to intervene and fix. As the scrawls and mis-formed letters become our object, we ourselves become something appropriate to such witness: purveyors of a lack of skill and technique. We become, as professionals, fully able to act, to help, to remedy, to repair, to intervene, with all the energies requisite of setting things right. And even if we fail in this, and can't understand what to do, in place already are vast regimes of assessment tools, specialists and, if tragically necessary, the grand admission of well-researched failure in the face of this child's problems. In our concerns for his handwritten work, we already know what the future of this work can possibly be because we have, in a great technical-rational project, laid out in advance of this

particular child's efforts, the architecture of a possible future: developmental stages in the sequential achievement of the ability to write and scribe for oneself.

The only thing up for grabs, here, is not what the future will hold but simply whether, how or when Darren will achieve the future we have already planned for him (a planning to which, of course and of necessity, *he is not party*—a whole other sense in which the child is effaced by school itself and the particular sorts of technical attentions it brings to bear). With this piece of writing, therefore, there is no future, since it is already here, already oddly “out of our hands” (this *is* the sequence, no matter how we might intervene on Darren's behalf), already laid out and fated. Darren's own progression into what we already know in advance is thus an accident. It is not an accident in the sense that we have no hand in his training. It is an accident in the sense that Darren's particular progress can make no difference to what we already understand the essential character of writing-development to be.

This is what David G. Smith (2000), following David Loy (1999), calls “frozen futurism,” a future in which there in fact is no future.

With the transcribed poem, the situation is more fulsome and ambiguous. It seems to invite. It seems still somehow undecided what will come of it:

Here I am tempted to say that my own experience of writing leads me to think that one does not always write with a desire to be understood—that there is a paradoxical desire not to be understood. It's not simple, but there is a certain “I hope that not everyone understands everything about this text”, because if such a transparency of intelligibility were ensured it would destroy the text, it would show that the text has no future [*avenir*], that it does not overflow the present, that it is consumed immediately. Thus

there is the desire, which may appear a bit perverse, to write things that not everyone will be able to appropriate through immediate understanding. There is a demand in my writing for this excess. . . a sort of opening, play, indetermination be left, signifying hospitality for what is to come [*avenir*]. As the Bible puts it—the place left vacant for who is to come [*pour qui va venir*]. Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 30-1)

For Darren’s poem, we are not prepared and there is a future, but now that future appears *as* a future, unfrozen: “an open horizon of as-yet-undecided possibilities.” (Gadamer 1989, 289).

What does this mean? It doesn’t only mean that we weren’t expecting this quality of work from this child. It also means something more fearsome. What, pray tell, are we properly to do? The transcribed poem breaks apart our decided, frozen, distanced gaze, draws us in to its orbit, halts our helpful resolve and our measured relationships to “children and their needs.” It is *our* need that comes forward.

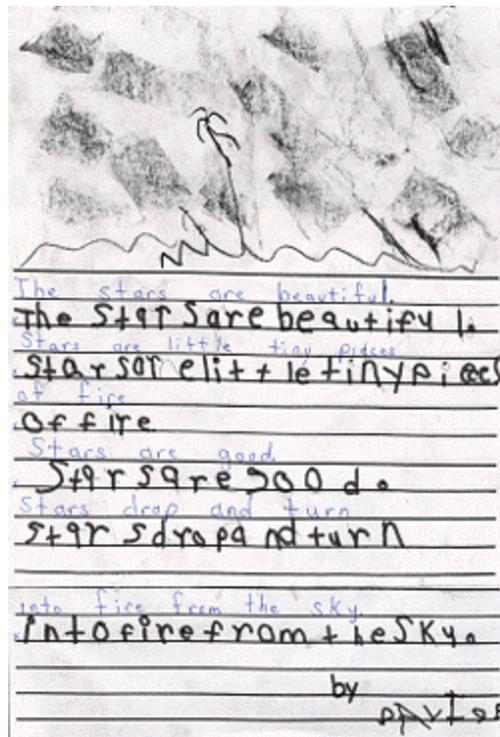
With Darren’s poem, we have a terrible futurity to face, of what might come of his compelling imaginal ability (especially since we know something of what he has in store in schooling).

This does not mean that we are somehow in favour of simply ignoring Darren’s handwriting. That would be pedagogically irresponsible. The issue of starting “where Darren is at,” however, is not whether one piece of his work—the scribed poem or the journal entry--is more reflective of his “actual” ability. Not only can either one be granted this status by the school’s knowing gaze. We could also just as easily say that these pieces have nothing to do with one another: one is a matter of physical dexterity and .manual practice, and the other is an issue of imagination, creativity and composition.

The purpose of all this interpretive focus on “the scribe” is not

to demean the terrible troubles we face  
in the face of Darren's pencil scrawls.  
They are, undeniably, troublesome.  
However, now these scrawls *and our  
troubles with them* can appear in a  
vast and generous topography of work,  
a place full of possibility, futurity,  
arrival, hospitality, spots left empty,  
alluring us to go on. Now there is a  
place where our troubles with his  
handwriting might work themselves *out*  
and might cease to be simply something  
to work *on*. Now they can appear  
back *in relation* to stories told and  
transcribed, back *in relation* to  
communication and its nature, limits and  
difficulties, back *in relation* to the  
mixed messages of the ear that hears  
and the hand that writes and the eye of  
reading.

## Endbit



**The stars are beautiful**

**Stars are little pieces of fire**

**Stars are good**

**Stars drop and turn into fire from the sky.**

As can be seen from the handwritten piece above, Darren's handwriting is coming along.

And, thus far at least, the future of his imaginal abilities is still open, and stars, as little pieces of fire, can

still charm and draw us in. As can be seen, too, from this piece of his work and the one pictured near the beginning of our paper, the scribe's hand still appears, now bypassing our abilities to decode his handwriting itself, and moving, instead, to what he means to say, asking him to read it to us and placing, in a loving and legible hand, a scribing of his work that will help us not lose what he has imagined to write in his own hand. "Making memory last" (Gadamer 1989, 391) in such a way that there is a future.

So interpretive work can itself be seen as a way of attempting to remember the strange topographies that underwrite the most ordinary of events. Little wonder that interpretation takes an interest in the scribe. We've only scratched a few surfaces here. The good news is that in a couple of days, we get to meet Darren again for another year of his life in this tough old enterprise of writing.

Incidentally, check the scribe's handwriting in Darren's earlier poem about aliens, and Darren's own handwriting in the later piece about stars and fire. It seems that Darren just might be imitating the distinctiveness and character of the hand of a scribe he trusts. *I was thinking that perhaps the true beauty in my scribing for Darren lies in the fact that together we are creating a piece of work which otherwise would have had no past or future--it would have been lost to time within Darren's mind--put aside to make room for more "important" school stuff. Without the technical (my recording of it) there could exist no reader, and yet had the focus been the technical Darren would not have been freed enough to express his imagination thus there would be no need for a scribe. Perhaps the beauty of scribe-creator-reader relationship is that they are in essence inseparable in a sense symbiotic. Together, the scribe and creator (in this case teacher and student) are weaving words that will speak to a future of readers --words that perhaps would never have been heard were it not for a historically based act of the hand--scribing. I get goose bumps when I think of the analogy*

*of the Bible. Would we ever have known God were it not for the work of scribes? Would we ever have known Darren without the hand of a scribe? I would argue that Darren spoke to us through my hand--my hand was the tool that Darren moved and through his work we were all moved.*

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