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Francesco ASCOLI, *La penna in mano: Per una storia della cultura manoscritta in età moderna*, presentazione di Giorgio Montecchi. Florence: Leo S. Olschki editore, 2020. vii-228 p., ill. (ISBN 978-88-222-6700-9).

This book is a manifesto for the study of the history of scribal culture. It demonstrates the survival and many functions of manuscript in the so-called age of print. As Giorgio Montecchi writes in his preface, it follows in direct descent from Giovanni Tritemio, who in 1494 wrote *De laude scriptorum pulcherrimus tractatus*, urging monks not to abandon copying by hand because it led them into an intimate spiritual relationship with Scripture and with the religious community. Tritemio's cause was already lost, but handwriting has never ceased to be of central importance in the history of textual communication. Its survival, as Ascoli argues, is repeatedly obscured by the conventional periodisation of histories of the book, which present in succession the manuscript phase, then the age of print and thirdly the digital age. This has had the unfortunate effect of setting up manuscript culture in opposition to print, instead of analysing the mutual interchanges between them, and the specific functions which each medium fulfilled.

Ascoli's demonstration proceeds through five chapters of very unequal length, discussing learning to write, communicating by correspondence, collective or shared writing, collecting (mainly autographs) and monitoring writing. Several important themes are stressed. Ascoli writes interestingly on writing materials, from the goose quill pen to the fountain pen, and on the apparatus which once accompanied the act of writing – knife, ink, inkwell, sand or ground shell for drying, blotting paper, sealing wax, the portable writing desk. Writers enjoyed intimate relationships with these essential objects, and they sometimes acquired high symbolic or ceremonial significance. When statesmen convened in 1856 to ratify the Treaty of Paris which concluded the Crimean War, signatories were provided with an eagle's feather quill to mark the extraordinary importance of the occasion. Ascoli's discussion needs to be extended into the twentieth century; it does not fully embrace the age of the typewriter or the impact of Lázló Biró's ball-point pen, which need to be incorporated into the material and cultural history of writing.

The pedagogy of writing is another prominent theme, and Ascoli laments the devaluation of handwriting as a school subject, bringing neuroscience to his aid to argue that handwriting exercises parts of the brain which other methods cannot reach. He notes the way that handwriting could become part of a nationalising agenda, citing Belgian attempts after 1831 to promote a distinctly Belgian script which would differ from French handwriting. In the nineteenth century, however, English cursive was the matrix; it was slanted with characteristic ascenders and descenders, well adapted to the use of a small nib. The pen hardly had to leave the surface of the paper and the writer rarely had to move the position of his or her hand. Fascism would see such inclined writing as decadent and instead demand the use of a more upright, and allegedly virile, script.

Ascoli devotes considerable space to autograph collectors, and here I question the balance of his exposition: he devotes relatively few pages to correspondence, a far more widespread and enduring manuscript form, and to epistolary literacy, the everyday skill of folding paper, using envelopes, sealing them, addressing them correctly and posting them. He discusses graphology at length – meaning the nineteenth-century concept that handwriting could reveal an individual's personality, but without mentioning Bertillon's catastrophic contribution to the conviction of Alfred Dreyfus on the basis of his handwriting.

Ascoli covers a wide range of manuscript usage, for musical scores, handwritten newspapers, personal prayer books, the *album amicorum*, wills and the last words of those condemned to death, but he omits much more, including commonplace books and *livres de raison*. Overall, he over-emphasises calligraphic issues at the expense of studying the social uses of correspondence and other manuscript forms. And he is heavily reliant on literary examples to support his arguments.

Ascoli's purpose is polemical and he is right about a lot of things. Print has indeed dominated our agenda as historians of the book. The impact of Gutenberg is consistently exaggerated and it has unnecessarily overshadowed the importance of handwriting in everyday life. He is right that historians too often exploit documents for data-mining, interpreting them solely as vehicles for text, without analysing the physical characteristics which may influence its uses and content.

The state of the history of written culture as a sub-discipline is one of his major concerns. It brings together various disciplines – archaeology, anthropology, cultural history, socio-historical linguistics, literary studies – but, he argues, it has no centre and no coherence. Historians of written culture thus lack a common language, common reference points and an overall theoretical framework. They operate, according to Ascoli, in an 'epistemological

gap' (200). This seems over-pessimistic. Others may see the methodological pluralism of the field as something to be valued. But Ascoli is right to stress the lack of an institutional basis for the history of scribal culture in the modern period. Historians of scribal culture do not have a journal of their own, and university departments and research centres specialising in this field are few and far between. As a result, those engaged in this territory often struggle to make their voices heard. To this extent, Ascoli's manifesto is welcome.

Ascoli concludes by offering a research agenda for the future: among its recommendations, we can endorse the history of postal services, which should not be abandoned to philatelists but seen as vital nation-building enterprises determining the exchange of correspondence; the history of shorthand and typing which is already gathering momentum; and the history of writing instruments themselves, already advanced by some recent studies of ink and paper. We need, finally, an anthropology and a cultural history of writing, which see it as much more than lines traced on a surface, and ultimately as an expression of the individual self.

This book is beautifully produced by Olschki, with 19 high-quality colour reproductions.

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