

REVIEW

*The Calligraphic Line:
Thoughts on the Art of Writing*

By Hans-Joachim Burgert, trans. Brody Neuen-
schwander (Burgert Handpresse, 2002, US\$35)

The Stroke: A Theory of Writing

By Geritt Noordzij (Hyphen, 2005, £15)

Reviewed by Owen Williams

THE 20TH CENTURY proved productive for letter theory. As design movements came and went, letter theories developed to provide artists, craftsmen and designers with sound working methods. These theories frequently focused on the question of legibility. At the heart of these theories was often a discontent with contemporary standards.

Two recent books that have contributed to this dialogue are *The Calligraphic Line: Thoughts on the Art of Writing*, by the German calligrapher Hans-Joachim Burgert, translated by American calligrapher Brody Neuenchwander, now in its second edition; and *The Stroke: A Theory of Writing*, by the Dutch type designer and educator Geritt Noordzij. Both writers are polemicists and make interesting contributions.

I first came across *The Calligraphic Line* while a student in London. A friend—she was a former model who had abandoned the catwalk for the pleasures of the scriptorium—had a pirated version. I read small sections of it over her shoulder late one night on the Piccadilly line.

What impressed me at the time were the visual connections Burgert made between lettering and other disciplines. For example, he compared the formal qualities of buildings and script. On one page he had a caption, “A texture composed of rectangles emphasized by rhythmic variation of their density,” then placed an image of an early Greek cursive against a Japanese temple. This was an unusual juxtaposition but the visual logic was obvious. Used to examining the structures of letters in detail, and often in isolation, I found this more generalized but structured way of looking a revelation.

In *The Calligraphic Line* Burgert argues that typography serves the needs of legibility more effectively than handwritten letters. He suggests that variation is the essential element of handmade letters, thus the task of calligraphy lies not in the clear transmission of a text but in the opportunities it provides for formal experimentation. This is not a new idea in contemporary lettering; it dates back at least a

hundred years. What is new is the way Burgert articulates the deep structures of calligraphic composition through a formal analysis of different writing traditions.

The motivation behind this analysis lies in Burgert’s belief that, unlike other traditions, the West has never developed a true cursive. He proposes that Western scripts are based on simple modular forms usually arranged in grid-like structures. Thus the restraint of the Western tradition contrasts with Burgert’s taste for irregularity, contrast, tension, tonal variation and an organic quality of line.

Burgert’s analysis is detailed and complex (he starts with Paleolithic man), profusely illustrated, and annotated. His translator, Brody Neuenchwander, has rendered the text into plain English but retained Burgert’s near dogmatism. This is saved by lashings of sardonic humour. An appendix contains his short essay “*If One Only Knew What Calligraphy Is*,” which offers a concise introduction to Burgert’s compositional methods.

In the past 20 years Burgert’s ideas have gained a wide circulation among British calligraphers, enriching a deepening tradition. His ideas are just beginning to have a wider influence in North America. Fifteen years ago I wanted to buy a copy of *The Calligraphic Line*, but I didn’t have the £52 for the first edition. I asked my friend to lend me hers to make a photocopy, but she knew my history with “borrowed” books and refused. Fifteen years on, I now have a copy of my own. This second edition has a green cover, with a black plastic binding, and is still photocopied. I find that this modest presentation supports the urgent tone of the text.

In contrast, *The Stroke: A Theory of Writing*, by Geritt Noordzij, is handsomely produced with an enviable typographic restraint. Noordzij’s ideas have gained a wide circulation amongst type designers. He is a member of ATypI, the international association of type designers, and has taught lettering for many years at the Royal Academy at The Hague, one of Holland’s forcing grounds for type designers. He assumes a concern for legibility and a familiarity with the history of letterform. Readers of *Amphora* may be familiar with his book *Letterletter*, published by Hartley & Marks and introduced by Robert Bringhurst.

In *The Stroke: A Theory of Writing*, Noordzij attempts “a genuine theory of all writing, done with any kind of generating tool.” He starts with black and white space. Asserting white space as the principle element in perceiving the form of

letters, Noordzij identifies two kinds of mark-making: continuous, in which strokes of the pen remain on the page, and interrupted, in which the pen is lifted from the page. Both marks are subdivided by three forms of contrast. The first two, translation and rotation, are written with the broad-edged pen; the third, expansion, with a pointed flexible pen. In translation the angle of the pen is held constant; in rotation the angle of the pen changes; and in expansion contrast is created through the application of pressure. None of these distinctions are new in themselves, but this conceptual matrix goes some way in bridging a gap that has existed between two very different schools of penmanship.

Noordzij then skips the complicated topic of letter anatomy, proposing instead that the word image is the primary visual unit in writing. This oversight is unfortunate, for other recent letter theorists have found simple and effective ways to introduce this subject without being overtly prescriptive. He has much to say about the word image, advocating it as the proper starting point when learning to read and going so far as to suggest that western civilization begins in Ireland in the seventh century with its invention. The text concludes with an interesting explanation of how his theory of writing can be applied to the creation of sans serif letterforms.

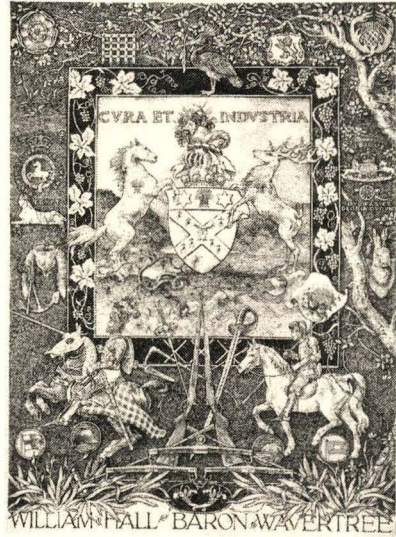
One has the sense that this book will remain within the limited circle of its intended audience. Noordzij assumes too much. He leaves out too much. I find his approach mechanical and limiting rather than expansive. It is as if he is trying to freeze a beautiful living thing. My copy will remain on the shelf in mint condition. Let's hope it becomes a collector's item.

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*Moderation is a fatal thing.
 Nothing succeeds like excess.—Oscar Wilde*



THIS IS THE bookplate of Colonel William Hall Walker, 1st Baron Wavertree (1856–1933), a British businessman, art collector and figure of prominence in the world of Thoroughbred racehorse breeding. In 1900, he established what would soon become a highly successful stud farm, and in 1916 he presented his entire bloodstock to the British government with a view to improving cavalry horses. This gift would become the basis for the National Stud of the United Kingdom. In 1919, Colonel Walker was created 1st Baron Wavertree.

Colonel Walker's bookplate is an exceptional example of the lack of moderation sometimes exhibited by British nobility. A bookplate that is grandiose if not grotesque, it is the attempt of one man to capture all the elements of his existence on a piece of paper measuring 11 by 16 centimetres. Dense with imagery, this bookplate consists of a central framed coat of arms, surrounded by an overcrowding of symbols and figures, including but not limited to a rose, a portcullis, a bird, a small argent escutcheon charged with a lion rampant, a thistle, military insignia, mounted hunting spoils, horse racing emblems and knights on horseback.

The bookplate is part of the Thomas Murray Collection at Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia.

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