

Book reviews

THE CRAFTSMAN RICHARD SENNETT

2009, Penguin, PB, 336 pages,
£9.99, 9780141022093



If there is one guiding thought behind Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman*, a long digressive series of reflections on his life's work as a social critic, it is the maxim 'making is thinking'. This brings him directly into conflict with his old teacher, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who erected a division between the world of animal needs ('unreflecting work for beasts of burden') and the higher world of *Homo Faber*, of those who reflect on art and work, and even draw moral conclusions from it. That division started with Plato who belittled cooking as a 'knack,' something done without the full exercise of reason. As a pragmatist, Sennett believes this is a serious philosophical error with important ethical and political consequences. It isn't only that it demeans those who do manual labour, it suggests that thinking comes after making: it is a justification for the kind of politics which gives status to expert elites and technocrats (ours), and in which the word 'benchmark' is nothing more than an empty signifier.

Some of the best pages of his book are devoted to that great Victorian thinker John Ruskin who spent much of his life defending the old idea of the economy as a husbanding of resources against the new idea of maximum output for minimum effort. His prose has 'an almost hypnotic tactile power, making the reader feel the damp moss on an old stone or see the dust in sunlit streets'.

Thinkers from William Morris to Karl Marx broadly sympathised with Ruskin's argument, and defended craftsmanship as a middle ground between autonomy and authority. A certain archaic nobility still attached to an activity that went back to the ancient Greeks, who thought that manual skill or *techné* was the only sphere in which human beings could attain anything resembling perfection. But with the industrial slaughter of the First World War, when the machine seemed finally to have triumphed, the word 'craft' lost its stuffing and became a derisory term — 'a pastime for eccentrics and the slightly loopy'. The industrialisation of the new Soviet Union in the 1920s was only the most blatant example of the new worship of the machine.

Sennett does not believe craftsmanship has disappeared. It has found other communities of workers 'who embody some of the elements first celebrated in the (Homeric) Hymn to Hephaestus'. In line with his conviction that the work of the hand informs the work of the mind (a topic brilliantly explored, as he acknowledges, in Raymond Tallis's recent philosophical work),¹ he arrives at what is basically a reinterpretation of the Enlightenment: the *Encyclopedia, or Dictionary of Arts and Crafts* in 35 volumes, edited by Denis Diderot, son of a master cutler from Langres (the Encyclopedia has been made available by the ARTFL project of the University of Chicago in the original French at <http://portail.atilf.fr/encyclopedie>), which essentially sought to show its readers how to do things. The great work was not primarily one of ideas but of craftsmen at work in the material world; maintaining beehives, preparing hemp, grinding wheat, repairing shoes, or making paper: 'these were all activities which contributed to the proper functioning of society'.

Craftsmanship is focused not on getting by but on getting it right. It is quality-driven, an ethically absorbed child's play extended into adult life. It is humble, in contrast to many of the projects of modernity: careful attention to details and skills is actually reactionary insofar as it slows the march to progress. And craftsmanship has, as the

non-craftsmen like to say, added value: 'Learning to work well enables people to govern themselves and so become good citizens'. This kind of Enlightenment is the fire being stolen from heaven in slow motion.

Sennett may not be a Marxist, but he certainly believes that the labour process shapes consciousness. (It apparently takes about 10 000 hours of instruction to become accomplished at any given activity; which is roughly equivalent to the 3 years it takes young doctors to acquire specialist skills.) That being so, he has a problem with what might be called 'explicitation': how do you convert the experience of being absorbed by a craft into a polity? The very nature of the activity works against its abstraction, as Michael Oakeshott, who is surprisingly absent from the book, pointed out in his famous essay *Rationalism in Politics*² which makes a distinction between technical and practical knowledge. Forms of craftsmanship, like medicine, which have humans as their plastic material, involve both, and the irony is that practical knowledge is largely tacit: it cannot be grasped, other than through doing. Oakeshott cites an episode in the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi: a wheelwright explains to an indignant duke why reading instructions from manuals is worthless:

'The right pace [for making a wheel], neither slow nor fast, cannot get into the hand unless it comes from the heart. It is a thing that cannot be put into rules; there is an art in it that I cannot explain to my son. That is why it is impossible for me to let him take over my work, and here I am at seventy still making wheels.'

Sennett, in turn, mentions the comparable situation of Antonio Stradivari, whose two sons, though both competent craftsmen in their own right, never managed to equal the quality of his violin production. Expertise at that level requires affinity. It is surely noteworthy in this respect that in the high age of the medieval guilds, the professional relationship between master and apprentice took precedence over the natural relationship between father and son.

Sennett's companionable work offers hundreds of similar examples and insights to detain the reader (I was fascinated by his distinction between all-purpose and fit-for-purpose tools), without convincingly explaining why the present-day workplace, 'in which objects are rapidly being transformed by digitalisation into signs and technology itself is widely regarded as creating wealth and change', is quite so hostile to craft. Sennett (who is no romantic) puts in a good word for Linux system developers as public craftsmen, but I remain sceptical: how do you draw the line between form and function in artefacts that are ever more living, buzzing bundles of semiotics (mobile phones)? How can we talk eloquently of work done for its own sake, when for the average technocrat working on 'flexitime', what exists as a practice hardly exists as knowledge at all? What remains of craftsmanship when we are taught that 'having a career' is what life is about? The ultimate teasing question being asked by Sennett is: how reasonable is it to be rational? More bespoke insights can be expected in the next two volumes of what is a projected trilogy.

Iain Bamforth

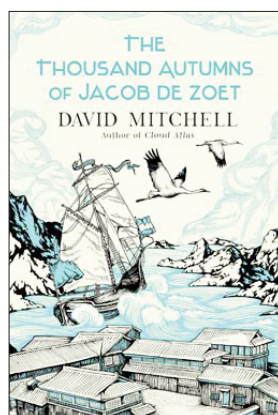
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1. Tallis R. *The hand: a philosophical inquiry into human being*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
2. Oakeshott M. *Rationalism in politics & other essays*. London: Methuen, 1962.

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THE THOUSAND AUTUMNS OF JACOB DE ZOET DAVID MITCHELL

2010, Sceptre, Hodder and Stoughton, HB, 480 pages, £18.99, 9780340921562



Fans of David Mitchell will not be disappointed by his wonderful fifth novel. They may be disappointed that he has eschewed any pyrotechnics with his chapter lay out and there are no running themes from his previous books (including *Cloud Atlas*) in this tour de force. However, this is his most accomplished novel. This is a novelisation of a true encounter of a British war ship in the only port with communication with the West in 18th century Japan. We follow the exploits of a young Dutch trader, Jacob de Zoet, hoping to make his fortune and impress his high class love's father back in Holland.

Mitchell wears his extensive knowledge of 18th century Japan lightly, but uses the ban on any Christian books wonderfully and with great literary tension early in Jacob's arrival in Nagasaki. From there on in the reader is whisked along with all the intrigues on both sides of the bamboo curtain which separates the infidel Christians from the rest of the Japanese, who are equally desperate to have a piece of the trading action with the corrupt Dutch East India Trading company.

With beautiful language, and intense storytelling, Mitchell draws us into this hidden world and takes us to places we could never conceive with the

consummate ease of a great writer. He straddles the gap between literary novels and popular novels and I will be very surprised if he does not win the Booker this year. Add it to your summer reading list and just wallow in its sumptuousness.

Chris Johnstone

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