

Reviews

Edited by Peter Faulkner

Simon Dentith, *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, 245pp., £48.00. ISBN 978-0-521-86265-3.

In this cogent and clearly written book Simon Dentith gives a convincing account of the part played by epic in nineteenth-century literature and culture, which he shows to have been larger than we might casually assume. The Introduction declares that the book's field will be that of 'epic primitivism' (p.10), an understanding of epic as the expression of a much earlier stage of culture than that of the nineteenth century, and a form whose 'archaic' qualities bring out by contrast the assumptions of modernity. Later in the book Dentith gives an account of the arguments of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, which greatly increased my respect for that philosopher. Hegel writes, 'All the truly primitive epics give us the vision of a national spirit ... in short a picture of a whole way of thinking and a whole stage of civilization.' (qu.p.106) This stage of civilization is one in which humanity is not 'cut adrift from a living connection with nature', unlike the worlds of 'Our modern machines and factories'. (qu. p.108) It is interesting that Hegel, unlike some other German scholars, shows no enthusiasm for the rediscovered *Nibelungenlied*, which he sees as dealing with 'a past history, swept away with a broom'. (p.109) Hegel's admiration for the *Iliad* is based on the contrasting view that its story is that of the triumph of European over Asiatic values, and is therefore of world-historical significance. The idea of social alienation, which was to mean so much to Marx and to Morris, emerges in this context. Epic in the nineteenth century can serve as a critique of contemporary civilization, as well as an acknowledgement of it, according to the ideological position of the particular writer. Concern with national identity brings epic close on occasion to elements in the ballad tradition.

Beginning necessarily with a thoughtful discussion of Homer and his reputation, Dentith goes on to consider in some detail works by Scott, particularly *The Lady of the Lake* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Tennyson, Arnold – primarily for his views on the translation of Homer – Barrett Browning, Morris and Kipling. Barrett Browning was the most explicit in her attack on anything but modern subject-matter in *Aurora Leigh* (1856). She declares it the poets' task to

represent the age,
 Their age, not Charlemagne's, – this live, throbbing age,
 That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
 And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
 Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
 Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles.

The story she tells is accordingly set in her own time, although Dentith views the poem overall as 'generically hybrid', but showing the poet's capacity, 'intermittently though emphatically, to forge an epic idiom that is adequate to the contemporary world'. (p.97)

The chapter of most interest to students of Morris is the fourth, 'The Matter of Britain and the Search for a National Epic'. Here Dentith briefly contrasts the conservative attitude of Tennyson in his 'Guinivere' with Morris's radicalism in 'The Defence of Guenevere'. He then goes on to consider the two mythologies with the highest claims to providing material for a British national epic, the Celtic one centred on King Arthur, and the Nordic one centred on Siegfried or Sigurd. (For some reason, King Alfred had ceased to be a serious contender). Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* are well known to be based on the Celtic material, and so have the problem for English nationalism of celebrating a king who fought against the English; Arthur is also described as doing so, as Dentith points out, in a context that owes more to medieval romance than to the epic tradition. Moreover, Tennyson was evidently unhappy with the militaristic element in the epic, and wanted to direct his poem towards a Christian ethos. This is brought out clearly in the contrast Dentith draws between a narrative passage quoted from 'The Coming of Arthur' and what he terms 'another bloody extract' taken from Book I of Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*. In fact, Tennyson is far less 'bloody' than Morris, partly because his conventional pentameter lacks the rough energy of Morris's hexameter, and partly because his intention in the poem is quite different from Morris's. As Dentith convincingly puts it: 'Morris is seeking to provide a nineteenth-century equivalent of the poetry of the heroic ages, while Tennyson is seeking to provide a highly moralised story or set of stories which can prove exemplary to the present day.' (p.74) Dentith is appreciative of the energy of Morris's poem, and brings out, in discussing a later passage, Morris's remarkable success in conveying within the poem the characteristics of the society in which the story is taking place. He shows that 'Morris's hatred of modern civilisation led him to propose the values of epic barbarism as a counterweight to the paltriness and ugliness of the contemporary world', but his conclusion is that 'the poem is undoubtedly a virtuoso exercise in an astonishing idiom, but it is both wonderful and a poetic dead-end'. (p.83) I think that most admirers of Morris would reluctantly agree with this conclusion. As we know, Morris was disappointed with the

reception of *Sigurd* by the reading public, and wrote no poem of similar ambition again, using prose for his later long narratives. However, it would be interesting to know what Dentith might make of *The Pilgrims of Hope* in this context, since in this poem Morris dramatises an important recent historical event, the Paris Commune, and relates it to the imagined future of humanity.

In the later parts of the book, Dentith address the question of the form the epic spirit took in the increasingly imperialistic British world of the later Victorian period. In this context he discusses both the novels of adventure by writers such as Stevenson, Rider Haggard and Henty, and the ballad-based poetry which made its way into patriotic anthologies such as Frederick Langbridge's *Ballads of the Brave: Poems of Chivalry, Enterprise, Courage and Constancy* (1890) and W.E. Henley's *Lyra Heroica: A Book of Verse for Boys* (1891). This included a lengthy extract from the fourth book of *Sigurd the Volsung* entitled 'The Slaying of the Niblungs' – although it actually consists of the preceding section, 'Of the Battle in Atli's Hall'. A note tells us that the extract was included by permission of the author, but one wonders how the Socialist Morris would have reacted had he looked into the company he was keeping in the anthology. In relation to these poetic anthologies, Dentith cheers himself by noting 'boys' resistance to many forms of official indoctrination', as suggested strikingly by Kipling in *Stalky & Co.* (p.147). But he cannot avoid going on to consider Kipling as 'Bard of Empire' (Ch.8), in an account which brings out well what was the disturbing modernity of Kipling's approach, embodied in his demotic language, which puts his work at the opposite extreme from *Sigurd*. As far as the adventure novels are concerned, Dentith notes how it came about that ideas of the archaic epic society came to be reanimated in accounts of societies that imperialism had discovered on the edges of the modern, expanding, world. Thus in *King Solomon's Mines* in 1885, Haggard's narrator Quatermain records a victory-chant by the Zulu Ignosi which is translated into quasi-Homeric poetry, with all the conventional components of epic language. Similarly, though in a more complex mode, in the account of Conrad in this context we are shown a writer in whose early novels 'the martial virtues ... appear as characteristics of native rather than imperial peoples'. (p.192)

Dentith's final chapter is entitled 'Coda: Some Homeric Futures'. This includes a thoughtful examination of T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and introduces a book that I was previously unaware of, *Emperor Shaka the Great* by Mazisi Kunene, published in South Africa in 1979. Dentith describes it as 'an epic told without irony ... constructed out of the oral traditions of a subject people as part of its struggle to build a nation' (p.205), and compares its ambition to that of Morris in *Sigurd*. It would be interesting to know whether the poem has played, or is playing, the part aimed at by its author in developing a democratic ethos in the new South Africa. Morris makes a final appearance in a discussion of his influence on the 'now hugely developed genre of fantasy epic', leading through

Tolkien to Robert H. Jordan's 'Eye of the World' cycle and David Eddings's 'The Malloreon'. In passing, Dentith remarks that the late romances were 'much less self-consciously serious in Morris's own estimation than his earlier epic' (p.209), but this raises an interesting question about the value of an author's seriousness. For me – perhaps under the influence of the late Norman Talbot's critical defence of the romances – there is a sense that the freedom of the new genre which Morris was developing in his last decade allowed him to express his ideas with less constriction than in more obviously serious works like *Sigurd*.

The dust-jacket of this well-produced but expensive book shows the powerful naked figure of Achilles in Henry Fuseli's *The Obsequies of Patroclus*. This is a highly appropriate image for the theme of epic primitivism in the context of the question asked by Karl Marx in 1857, in this excellent book's opening quotation: 'Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine?'

Peter Faulkner

Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, 343 pp. £35. ISBN 978-0-300-13549-7.

Elizabeth Prettejohn's sumptuously produced book on Aestheticism has an important, and threefold, historical mission. It aims to put painting back at the very centre of Aestheticist debates; it shifts attention away from the late Victorian period to the 1860s when, in its view, doctrines and practices of *l'art pour l'art* begin to take shape in English culture; and it aims to stress the Continental, and above all German, affiliations of such work. Since it is as magnificently documented as it is richly illustrated, it succeeds handsomely in these three objectives; and yet its essential energies are elsewhere, in a project more philosophical than historical. For, as the book itself stresses, you can always tell two stories about modern art: one is Hegelian, emphasising the powerful narrative progression of the various modernist movements, as they boldly break beyond each other in their iconoclastic quest to 'make it new'; the other is more Kantian, and stresses individual works rather than collective movements, seeing each one of those works as an intolerable wrestle with certain enduring problems of art and aesthetics at large. Historically rich though this book's analyses are, it is the other, more philosophical perspective which in the end predominates; and Prettejohn therefore offers her study as 'an experiment in art-historical method', breaking both with the progressivist narratives of what she wittily at one point terms

'manly Modernism' and with the dominant 'social history of art' approach of the contemporary academy.

Her first exhibit is John Millais's haunting painting of *Autumn Leaves* (1855–56), in which the painter breaks away from his earlier Pre-Raphaelite literalism and aspires, in his wife Effie's phrase, to produce 'a picture full of beauty and without subject'. Aestheticism, as Prettejohn construes it, thus becomes an ever-renewed, ever-defeated effort to resolve the conundrum posed by Effie Millais's phrase. If you do not want your painting (or poem or novel, for that matter) to be merely the secondary reflection of some pre-existing subject-matter, whether that be Ruskinian Nature, or a transcendental realm of higher reality, or a literary or historical narrative, or contemporary bourgeois morality or even a radical political cause, if you want it instead to be an entity in its own right and for its own sake, then how do you proceed? Aestheticism in Prettejohn's account does not have a clear historical beginning (though it has a definite end, with the trials of Oscar Wilde of 1895), but it has a precise enough philosophical starting point. It may not possess a public identity (like Pre-Raphaelitism or Impressionism), or a shared style or subject-matter, but is rather given its unity by 'exploring a shared artistic problem ... the problem of what art might be, if it is not for the sake of anything else'. The great slogan – 'art for art's sake' – is, on this showing, an empty tautology, the name of a problem not of a solution; it does not predetermine the outcome of the philosophico-artistic exploration, which, in Prettejohn's view, is only available in unique individual cases, in the concrete works which she analyses with such care and flair in this book, not as some general theoretical position.

So she takes a raft of well-known Victorian artists – Solomon, Moore, Leighton, Whistler, Rossetti, Burne-Jones – sandwiches them between chapters on the critical writings of Swinburne and Pater, and then, in a series of scintillating readings of particular paintings, persuades us that these artists are a good deal more philosophically interesting, and often philosophically knowledgeable, than we had assumed; and that they thus, as a group or movement, deserve a more prominent part in the Hegelian historicist narratives of the emergence of modern art. We all know that Walter Pater had carefully read his Hegel, but Frederick Leighton, for example, displayed familiarity with many aspects of Hegel's thought too, and is not just the academical classicist one had lazily taken him to be.

It must be said, however, that Aestheticism's supposedly unique individual cases show some pretty recurrent commonalities, as Prettejohn herself well knows, to a degree which may fundamentally vitiate its underlying philosophical project. Female figures, female bodies, female faces, appear to a quite obsessive degree, so that the Aestheticist realm does indeed end up as 'mysteriously self-contained worlds inhabited by female figures', albeit occasionally varied by the androgynes of Simeon Solomon's more syncretistic ambition, or the hermaphrodites of Swinburne. You can then argue, as Prettejohn spiritedly does, that such images are

radical in their particular historical moment or, more philosophically, that ‘the aesthetic dissolves the gendered distinction between manly activity and female passiveness, for the subject judging beauty is both active and passive at once’. But I do not think such necessary caveats are going to save the author, or her painters, from the weight and wrath of contemporary feminism, and justly so!

Yet it is perhaps the human body in general, and not just its femaleness, in such paintings, which is the ultimate problem here. Immanuel Kant himself was convinced that figurative representation of any kind would always entail extraneous judgements (moral, social, sexual) which would contaminate the pure autonomy of the aesthetic judgement of the beautiful. So perhaps the most radical and consequent of Prettejohn’s *Aestheticists* is Albert Moore, whose use of geometrical grids in his compositions is implicitly beginning to move him away from figuration altogether towards the pure geometricist and subjectless abstractionism of Mondrian and Kandinsky (‘there may even be an historical connection’, Prettejohn adds, provocatively).

This finest study persuades us that Victorian Aestheticism is not just the investment in art of a faith which once found its underpinnings in traditional religion, or merely a reflection in the realm of art of late-Victorian commodity-culture (though it is surely both these things, from an historicist viewpoint). Its full glory, rather, lies in its stubborn, tormented will to resolve a philosophical impossibility, to paint Effie Millais’s ‘picture full of beauty and without subject’; for, as Elizabeth Prettejohn finely puts it, paying due tribute to the artistic heroism of her subjects, ‘it may remain logically impossible to make the “freely beautiful” work, but the act of trying to do so acquires a special significance as an exploration of that very problem’.

Tony Pinkney

Glen Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*. Oxford: Berg, 2007, 224 pp, 16 colour and 43 b&w illustrations, £15.99 pbk. ISBN 7981845206475.

Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft Function and Aesthetic Expression*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, 352 pp, 44 b&w illustrations, £27.50 hbk. ISBN 9780807831359.

Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane, 2008, 336 pp, £25.00 hbk. ISBN 9780713998733

Soon after being appointed to my first academic job, I naively agreed to take over a module on the history and theory of contemporary craft. The difficulty of my position did not really become apparent until I attempted to strengthen a very thin reading list: I found the lack of scholarly books on the subject quite astonishing, in fact if it had not been for the recent publication of Tanya Harrod’s

excellent book *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, I doubt whether I could have run the lecture programme at all. It was therefore with some satisfaction that I undertook a review of three recent books, all centrally concerned with the meanings and significance of contemporary craft.

There are people who would be discouraged by the starting point of Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* for, as the title states, this book treats craft more as conceptual framework rather than a material practice. Sculpture, architecture, ceramics, textiles, jewellery and furniture all feature, but many of the works discussed would normally be considered as 'fine art' rather than 'craft'. The book is structured around five themes: 'supplemental', 'material', 'skilled', 'pastoral', and 'amateur'. Whilst the last four are categories which might be expected to crop up in a book on craft, 'supplemental' is a term explicitly linked to the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, a character not frequently encountered in this context. I would urge potential readers who do not like the sound of this to read on, as the chapter is very lucid in its use of theory: a minimum of post-structural evasion and a reassuring impression that the theory is here an analytical tool rather than an end in itself. Thus Derrida's idea of 'supplement', something which is a necessary part of an entity, but considered external to it, is equated to craft's relationship to modern art. This strategy is pursued through a discussion of Constantin Brancusi, iconic modernist sculptor and pioneer of direct carving, whose career drew upon strategies which can be equated to the 'supplemental': the way he exhibited sculptures both as works in their own right and pedestals for other sculptures is seen as playing on the relationship between the sculpture itself and that which is supplemental to it.

The argument moves on to a discussion of the fascinating work of Dutch designer Gijs Bakker, a moving force in the avant garde 'Droog' group. In his 'Real' series, Bakker acquired some flashy pieces of costume jewellery and then commissioned a jeweller to imitate the cheap paste with real stones. The two pieces were then combined into the same object and in this Adamson sees 'a brilliant exercise in the supplemental' in that each of the jewels relies on the other while simultaneously exposing and questioning the other's authenticity.

Binary oppositions form the logic for most of the chapters and from 'autonomy' versus 'supplemental' in the first chapter Adamson moves on to 'material' *v.* 'optical', initially through Anthony Caro's sculpture, and then on to postwar American ceramics. Rather than select makers who sing the praises of their chosen material, Adamson seems attracted to those with a more ambivalent response to their discipline: 'If [Robert] Morris was a sculptor who did not want to make a modern sculpture, then the story of postwar ceramics is primarily that of potters who did not want to make pottery.' (p. 42)

This is a book which is both broad and narrow – broad in its eclectic theoretical approach (classical Marxism, Adorno and Derrida are all invoked), the wide

range of disciplines and practitioners discussed (from canonical Modernists to niche studio craft practitioners) and its geographical range (though unsurprisingly Britain, America and Japan are the key areas of interest). The narrowness comes from the book's preoccupation with the avant garde – a deliberate focus which leads to the surprising admission in the conclusion that 'traditional craft' does not demand critical analysis. In fact Adamson is quite assertive about what is not good for craft: 'If people who care about craft above all else are to shake off the air of crabby conservatism that hangs about that word, they must not hold the notions of studio, action, and object as sacred'. (p. 168) As this quotation implies, this is not the book to read if you are hoping to have your enthusiasm for studio craft reaffirmed. Adamson is not reassuring about its recent role or status, in fact, in what could be interpreted as an attempt to reassure his readers, he states in his conclusion that two of his 'most prized possessions' are a chair and a pot made by studio craftsmen. This book is, however, full of thoughtful and pertinent analysis and achieves an impressive theoretical take on the role of studio craft within the history of modern art.

Howard Risatti's *A Theory of Craft* sets out to produce a rigorous definition of what a craft object is and how it should be interpreted. Many of his propositions will be surprising for both the contemporary maker and the historian. He believes craft objects to be the fundamental things which aid humans in their survival within nature, objects which fall into three categories: containers, supports and covers. This narrow definition forces him to reject categories of objects which most would consider craft, such as jewellery, tapestry and stained glass. He contends that craft objects can only be meaningfully united if they possess at their core 'practical physical function', though it later transpires that 'function can be abstract and metaphorical without the object necessarily losing its identity'. Because of their functional status, craft objects are awarded a privileged ontological status: 'craft objects are "real objects" in the sense that they exist in the world as tangible things apart from our perceptions and apart from language' whilst the opposite is true of fine art objects: 'as physical objects their existence is socially contingent on a language of signs, so much so that, in a sense, they have little meaningful existence independent of them'. (p. 86) This fundamental status of craft objects gives them a universal appeal: 'embedded within the craft objects we use every day resides the memory of our evolutionary moment, a memory that transcends ethnic and racial, economic and class, cultural and national boundaries'. (p. 59)

I must admit I was not convinced. In seeking to privilege craft, Risatti becomes rather simplistic about the disciplines which he sees as a challenge to craft, notably fine art and design. He seems to think, for example, that designers just formulate abstract ideas and produce drawings or CAD designs, whilst *making* of some sort is fundamental to the practice of most of the designers whom I have worked

with, and we need look no further than Morris for an example of a designer who got his hands dirty. I simply do not believe that the boundaries between craft, design and fine art are distinct enough to make the kind of assertions necessary for Risatti to maintain his argument.

Despite purporting to be a new approach to the subject, several of Risatti's ideas are distinctly nineteenth-century in flavour, but never acknowledged as such. One of positive features he attributes to craft objects is the fact that the maker works 'in concert with the material' whilst machines 'force material into forms that have little to do with a material's organic properties' (p. 194) thus evoking an argument familiar to Pugin, Ruskin and Morris. Another section urges the reader to look beyond the surface of an object when interpreting it: 'We must take into consideration how the object was made and how making, as a conscious process, is a bearer of meaning, whether the object is machine-made or hand-made'. (p. 190) At this point many people familiar with Ruskin will be thinking of the frequently quoted passage from *The Nature of Gothic*, when the reader is urged to look around the room and see the highly finished machine-made products within as signs of slavery. Neither Ruskin nor Pugin is mentioned and Morris receives one oblique footnote.

Perhaps a book which deals with contemporary craft should be excused for not wanting to be diverted on to a discussion of Victorian designers, a distraction largely avoided, as Gottfried Semper is the only nineteenth-century design theorist discussed in any detail. A fault which is far more difficult to understand is the book's lack of attention to more recent discussions of craft. Although many of the examples discussed relate to American makers or objects in American collections, this book sets out to discuss craft in a global context and with this in mind it is strange to notice Risatti's avoidance of British craft writers. I began this review by bemoaning the lack of scholarship on craft, but several key books have pushed the subject forward. Tanya Harrod's history of twentieth-century British craft is not mentioned or cited. The work of Peter Dormer and Paul Greenhalgh is omitted completely. The collection edited by the latter entitled *The Persistence of Craft* (published in 2002) proposed a far more fluid definition of craft and shows sophisticated awareness of the relationship between craft and design. The absence of any reference to Peter Dormer is indeed strange. A chapter entitled 'Technical Knowledge and Technical Manual Skill' deals with the interesting relationship between materials and craft skills, just the area examined so well in Dormer's exposition of the work of Michael Polanyi in *The Art of the Maker*. Risatti's discussion is largely plausible, but for anyone who has read Dormer's work, it is unlikely to seem original. Risatti does discuss David Pye's influential book *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (first published 1968) although he seems to find Pye's approach to the subject hard to accept. Risatti's own argument is forced into all kinds of untenable positions because of its premise: any attempt to rigidly

define such a fluid category as craft is surely doomed to failure. The idea that craft objects somehow transcend historical and cultural difference is very hard to swallow: surely the complexity of the debates surrounding craft are the best evidence that both the ideas and the objects which fall into this category are deeply influenced by the specifics of historical and cultural context?

Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* is an ambitious book which is less concerned with creative practitioners than with proposing the idea of the craftsman as concept which, if valued, can potentially improve many people's working lives, and it is in this sense that the book is exciting: a real attempt to put the politics of work back on the agenda. Sennett's craftsman can be a cook, a nurse, or a Linux programmer, as well as a goldsmith or a glass blower, and whilst this might be frustrating for a reader hoping to learn about creative practice, it is also intriguing to broaden out the idea of craft in this way. This approach is in some ways reminiscent of Morris's conviction that the right kind of work was central to a fulfilling human existence.

Sennett argues that recent patterns within institutional structures and economies have prevented workers from achieving the satisfaction of the craftsman. The British NHS is an example referred to at some length and illustrates Sennett's approach well: he proposes that the skills of an effective nurse rely on a type of knowledge which can only be gained in oblique ways: '... nursing craft negotiates a liminal zone between problem solving and problem finding; listening to old men's chatter, the nurse can glean clues about their ailments that might escape a diagnostic checklist'. (pp. 48–9) This type of practice must be learned through experience – it cannot be communicated through textbooks or accounted for in 'Fordist' economic models.

Sennett uses a wide range of historical material in order to create his argument: the workshop of the medieval goldsmith, the working methods of the musical instrument maker Antonio Stradivari, Christopher Wren's plans for rebuilding London, Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*, Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Brunel's engineering, and two houses constructed in Vienna during the early twentieth century, by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the architect Adolf Loos. The more recent examples include Frank Gehry's use of a new alloy needed for the Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, and the story of how a glass blower, Erin O'Connor, learned to blow a new type of goblet. Such breadth is impressive, although in areas where I possess specialist knowledge, I was not always happy with Sennett's analysis. A case in point is his account of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (annoyingly styled the 'Great Exposition'). Here he implies that the 'Crystal Palace' was made possible by the development of rolled glass during the 1840s, when in fact it was not glazed with rolled glass. Unlikely as it may seem, every pane of glass was made by artisans using the 'blown cylinder' method: individuals blew long bottle-shaped cylinders of glass which were then split open in order to

form sheets. The size of these individually blown panes of glass became the basic unit from which the design of the building was formed: craft skills were fundamental to the building's creation. The analysis of Ruskin which follows is far more sophisticated, but I still feel that Sennett adopts a rather superficial attitude to the 1850s in order to promote the 'Enlightened' attitude of Diderot, an enthusiasm which later becomes explicit his statement 'We want to recover something of the spirit of the Enlightenment on terms appropriate to our time'. (p.269)

The question which constantly emerges when reading *The Craftsman* is how Sennett is going to relate his analysis to social change. At times the reader is offered a tantalising glimpse. A chapter entitled 'The Hand' provides a fascinating account of the relationship between the human 'grip', nuanced 'touch' and how these physiological issues combine with mental processes in 'prehension' – the technical name for 'movements in which the body anticipates and acts in advance of sense data'. (p. 154) The chapter then ranges through the Suzuki method for teaching violin to the story of a classically trained pianist adapting his technique to jazz piano through to the technical skill of the 'Chinese cleaver chef', who is notable for using a large tool with minimum force. Such force is then related to self-control, which is finally merged into a discussion which compares brute force and minimum force within diplomatic and military strategy. Sennett suggests that self-control might be seen as consisting of two dimensions: 'one a social surface beneath which there lies personal distress, the other a reality at ease with itself both physically and mentally, a reality that serves the craftsman's development of skill. This second dimension carries its own social implication'. (p. 171) Here the reader is given a hint about how the approach conducive to craftsmanship can be related to the social and the political, but a hint is all that is offered. Other passages suggest ways in which craftsmanship could be related to institutional reform: 'The drive to do good work can give people a sense of vocation; poorly made institutions will ignore their denizens' desire that life add up, while well-crafted organizations will profit from it'. (p. 267) Just what a 'well-crafted organization' might be is not explored in detail, but as this is only the first of a three-volume project, perhaps we will find out in the next.

The fact that this book is reticent about social change should not disguise its value. Sennett mounts a subtle critique of contemporary attitudes to work: repetition does not mean meaningless drudgery, ambiguity should be embraced rather than eliminated, and obstacles (as other craft writers have suggested) can often act as stimuli to creative solutions. In fact, as Sennett notes, he avoids the word 'creative': much of the book breaks down this often mystifying idea into a more tangible series of processes – another marked strength of this volume.

Some readers will find Sennett's style annoying: the book at times becomes almost anecdotal in its eclectic range of sources. Personally I feel he is most engaging when discussing examples which draw upon his own experience as a

proficient cook and cello player, as in a wonderful passage which discusses different approaches to cookery writing. In the Prologue, Sennett describes himself as 'a philosophically minded writer asking questions about such matters as wood-working, military drills or solar panels' (p. 9), and to be fair to him, this is how the book come across; it is much more about ideas than material culture. Given the book's subject matter, it should contain fewer typographic errors, but despite its imperfections this work is easily good enough to make me to anticipate the next volume with considerable interest.

Jim Cheshire