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W. R. Lethaby on Art and Labor

Priscilla Johnston said of her father Edward Johnston that “only one man influenced him profoundly and for life, William Richard Lethaby”. She relates how, within hours of arriving in London on the night train from Edinburgh on 4 April 1898, her father was taken by Harry Cowlshaw to Gray’s Inn Square and introduced to Lethaby. Reflecting on the significance of this meeting with the founder of the then fledgling Central School of Arts and Crafts, Johnston thought of it as “the miracle of my life”. Many years later, with an eye to what this meeting had done to shape his life, Johnston concluded, “I think it nothing less than a Divine Providence”.

Some forty years after meeting him, Eric Gill said of Lethaby, “who shall measure the greatness of this man—one of the few men of the nineteenth century whose minds were enlightened directly by the Holy Spirit”.

It was Lethaby who, on seeing some of Johnston’s “parchments” (his early attempts at calligraphy), sent the younger man off to the British Museum in search of good letterform models in early manuscripts, and promptly put Johnston in charge of a class in calligraphy which he was planning to start at the Central School. It was Lethaby who commissioned Johnston’s *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering*. Moreover, it was Lethaby who suggested to Gill—who was in Johnston’s first class—that he take up stonemasonry and who bequeathed to him, as to many others, the notion of “art-nonsense”.

These few facts alone, if one thinks of the legacy of Johnston and Gill, ought to prompt us to ask what sort of ideas motivated this exceptional man. I will make no attempt to give a comprehensive portrait of Lethaby the man and of the full range of his interests, but will concentrate mainly on the core of his ideas to do with art, labor, the crafts, and the impact that these have on society at large.

God and Work: Aspects of Art and Tradition

William Richard Lethaby was born in Barnstaple, Devon, in 1857. As a young man he trained as an architect, moving to London in 1879 where, at the age of twenty-two, he began work as Chief Clerk to Norman Shaw. During the next decade Lethaby gained a position in the thriving Arts and Crafts milieu that had been established on the basis of the precepts and practice of Ruskin and Morris.

In a short essay on Ruskin which he wrote in 1919 Lethaby listed, off the top of his head, what lessons he had absorbed from Ruskin. These included: Art is not a luxury; "Industry without art is brutality; life without industry is guilt" (these words of Ruskin's were later to become something of a mantra for Gill and Ananda Coomaraswamy); science ought to be wisdom and service; "There is no wealth but life"; economics should be a doctrine of wise production and beneficent distribution; education to be a tempering of the human spirit; the artist's proper office is to teach and inspire; nature is our garden home not a resource to exploit; property must observe propriety and quality of life as the end of all rational activity. These lessons gave Lethaby's views their moral and socialist bias.

Lethaby was one of many who responded to the seminal challenge of Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" that signaled the moral poverty of the division of labor. He was, both historically and intellectually, an intermediate figure who marked the transition from the pioneers of the Arts and Crafts movement, to the later generation, who turned their back on the "antiquarianism" of the pioneers in order to come to rational terms with the needs of a society based on industrial production. This was nothing more than to follow what Lethaby called the "scientific method".

It was an important observation of Lethaby's when he noted, in his essay "Design and Industry" (1915), that "it has been extremely unfortunate that the Arts and Crafts movement in England coincided in time with the violent fashion for antiques of every kind". This had led, he saw, to an obsession with design as a matter predominantly of style. This was simply "unreasonable", and indeed untenable in an age having to cope with the increasing mechanization of production.

He was surely right when he claimed that "style" was nothing more than "a museum name for a past phase of art"; and he was

certainly reasonable in saying that “rightly understood, ‘design’ is not an agony of contortion but an effort to arrive at what will be obviously fit and true”. From this argument he concluded “that there is as little reason for an architect [artist/craftsman, one might add] to pretend to work in a style than there is for a chemist”. It might be said that the idea which presided over all Lethaby’s endeavors was his hope to combine two realities, “the reality of natural necessity and common experience with the reality of the philosophers, which is the ideal, and to reconcile again Science with Art”. It is what Lethaby understood by the “ideal” that kept him apart from modernism, even though he was later claimed by the modernists as one of their pioneers.

In the early years of his professional life Lethaby was in the habit of holidaying in Northern France, where, as Priscilla Johnston records in her memoir of him, “he studied and drew . . . with devotion and the insight for which he was noted, divining things that had escaped all other observers. He mentally put himself in the position, and almost inside the minds of the old masons. He knew why they did what they did except for the fraction which no one could know.” This training, coupled with his exceptional insight, fed the central concern of his writings on art and labor. These are perhaps the most important parts of his legacy, and alone make him a significant figure in that long line of thinkers and practitioners, from William Blake to the present day, whose dissenting voice has challenged the intellectual, imaginative, and practical premises of industrial society.

Following Ruskin, Lethaby’s central insight was to see that art and manual work are at the heart of life: “As work is the first necessity of existence, the very center of gravity of our moral system, so a proper recognition of work is a necessary basis of all right religion, art, and civilization. Society becomes diseased in direct ratio to its neglect and contempt of labor.” He went so far as to propose, in his essay “The Foundation of Labor” (1917), a sort of National Service of manual work, with the intention that it should teach reverence for labor as the basis of art, “for art is the labor which is fully worthy of reverence”. If all those who intended to live by “brain-work” were to give themselves to such a service, if this was the basis of their actual experience, then “perhaps we might hope to control the machines before they

tear civilization to bits". What lay behind this prescriptive challenge was Lethaby's belief that the arts had become too separated from life and suffered from isolation and professionalism. Art had become too specialized—"no great art is only one man deep". Fine art had become free at the expense of what he called "work-art", for in the making of necessary things there can be no freedom from labor, utility, and service. Such a pretended freedom is in reality an isolating of life from the body. Art is not limited to the manifestation of aesthetic essence. As Lethaby claimed in "The Foundation of Labor":

Historically, the word Art has meant work, production, making, doing, and it was not conceived that the spirit, the expression, the meaning of the several kinds of work could be separated from a residuum which without it becomes brute labor. Art is the *substance* as well as the *expression*; it is the *service* as well as the *delight*; and the two aspects cannot be torn apart except to the ruin of both.

In "Art and Workmanship" (1913) he came nearest to a definitive formulation of his ideas on the nature of art. Dismissing the "sham technical twaddle" (Morris' words) of much art criticism, he stood by his beliefs.

There is nothing occult about the thought that all things may be made well or made ill. It may be a well-made statue or a well-made chair, or a well-made book. Art is not a special sauce applied to ordinary cooking; it is the cooking itself if it is good. Most simply and generally art may be thought of as the *well-doing of what needs doing*. If the thing is not worth doing it can hardly be a work of art, however well it may be done. A thing worth doing which is ill done is hardly a thing at all.

Needless to say, Lethaby saw that any revaluation of the nature and place of art and workmanship in life must necessarily raise the question of the nature and function of Beauty. In this he was no different from Ruskin and Morris before him, or from Johnston, Gill, and Coomaraswamy after him. Lethaby almost shies away from any head-on discussion of beauty, partly because he was all too aware of what might happen—*had* happened—whenever

artists, craftsmen, and architects make the pursuit of beauty their direct and overriding goal. As he wrote in “What Shall We Call Beautiful?” (1918): “As with the man who inquired whether he had yet attained wisdom, so with anxiety about enjoying beauty, the answer must ever be, ‘It might have been, if you had not thought about it’. Beauty has to come by the way.”

As we shall see, what underpins this last remark and all of Lethaby’s observations and strictures on the subject of beauty is the ancient truth that beauty as such is not directly accessible to man apart from the truth of its presence in *things*. The workman’s sole concern is with the good making of things, such that beauty cannot be isolated as a pursuable good in isolation from the authenticity of the process of its material embodiment.

It is better that men let beauty take care of itself—another axiom which Gill inherited from Lethaby—in the context of its being “the necessary function of fitness”. It is the “smile of health” as he said elsewhere, rather than a shade of rouge. Just as he called for an understanding of art as the principle of perfect workmanship *in* the artist, and not something applied to aesthetic feelings and enjoyment, so Lethaby called for a recognition of beauty as an idea arising incidentally out of the pursuit of those qualities that ought to be exercised in the making of true art: service, fitness of purpose, skill, economy, concentration, intensity, order, unity, as well as realization and identity with the values of past excellence. Just as there is danger in isolating art from utility, so is there in any activity intended to embody beauty when it is divorced from service, production, and creation. The following, from “What Shall We Call Beautiful?” has as much finality as any statement he pronounced on the subject: “Beauty in Art is the evidence of high humanity in work. Appreciation of Beauty should be one with our judgment of essential quality; there should be an instant recognition of what is noble and what is base. The sense of Beauty is the work-conscience.” Thus for him it was merely to state the obvious to say “every work of art shows that it was made by a human being for a human being. Art is the humanity put into workmanship, the rest is slavery”. This is more or less the starting point for Gill who, in calling beauty the “splendor of Being”, shifts the emphasis away from the affective and towards the cognitive: “In things of beauty the mind comes into its own.” Indeed, in the

context of his Scholastic way of thinking Gill ends by identifying beauty with holiness; “Beauty is holiness made visible.”

In what has been presented of Lethaby’s ideas so far, we have hardly gone beyond anything that Morris advocated. Both thought that machines could relieve men from drudgery, but Lethaby was prepared to go further and to allow that the artist/craftsman might provide good models for machine production.¹

Lethaby’s ambivalence towards the role and value of machines in human society was forced upon him by a situation he confronted in his essay “Art and Workmanship”: “We cannot go back” as “we cannot stay where we are”. In “The Foundation of Labor” he aired something of his dilemma, that though the machine had “come to stay” none the less it was a “wrecking force in the world” that had “swiftly changed the character of our population”. He was even prepared to predict that the world will “in fact, be shattered by it”. He therefore called for its control, on the basis that “mass production” implies “production for the mass”. In the face of *laissez-faire* production by the owners of machinery, society in turn has “as much right to control any form of machinery as we

¹ Johnston was no less sensitive to the dilemma of the situation, but was only partially in favor of the craftsman collaborating with mass production. To prepare punches “for printer’s type or any similar form of work intended for limited reproduction . . . I am in favor of it, but *designing* things for others to make (such as my designing of some type faces) is apt to be a dangerous game”, he wrote to Noel Rooke in 1933. He thought “*mass production as commonly understood . . . an evil, mitigated perhaps if it is in the nature of a transition method essential as a forerunner to a better state of civilization.*”

The degree of ambiguity in both Lethaby’s and Johnston’s (as well as others’) views on the seemingly intractable problem of the proper relationship between the craftsman who creates one-off works on the one hand, yet on the other might be called upon to provide designs for subsequent mass production by machines, is indicative of a problem that possibly cannot be resolved in such detail as finally to remove any question of operating double standards. There are matters in life that will always escape precise formulation. Johnston’s statement here is a case in point. He appears of be saying that, in designing a punch the craftsman has a *direct* intellectual and aesthetic responsibility over a matrix from which duplicate types must be struck. It is not possible to print from the punch itself. However, to design a punch which is subsequently, in some way, manufactured by machine as a duplicate punch *and nothing more* would be a matter of “*designing* things for others to make”.

have to protect ourselves from firearms". "Machinery must be controlled."

There can be little doubt that Lethaby's "fear" of the machine (and Johnston's and Gill's for that matter) rests upon an unpalatable truth that Morris had acknowledged in "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil" (1885):

It is waste of time to try to express in words due contempt of the production of the much-praised cheapness of our epoch. It must be enough to say that this cheapness is necessary to the system of exploiting on which modern manufacture rests. In other words, our society includes a great mass of slaves, who must be fed, clothed, housed, and amused as slaves, and that their daily necessity compels them to make the slave-wares whose use is the perpetuation of their slavery.

There can be no less doubt that Lethaby had arrived at *the* intractable problem of the modern world: is the machine to be the master or servant of man? The very nature of Lethaby's polemic against a world he saw was destroying the very basis of civilized community makes some assessment of that polemic inevitable.

Lethaby saw everything through the eye of an architect possessing an uncommon empathy with and insight into the many related crafts of the building trades. It was his concern that the study and practice of architecture should be freed from the pursuit of "style", which led him to the necessarily interconnected question of what constitutes the proper nature of art and workmanship. It meant asking, what art is *in principle* before it becomes an idea put into practice, before it is applied; even before it becomes, as he believed it to be, the most noble response to human requirements—that which satisfies man's spiritual needs.

To satisfy this latter function Lethaby saw that art must in some sense embody an intelligible symbolism. In his little book *Architecture*, first published in 1911, he spoke of this embodiment in buildings as inspiring "awe" and "wonder": not as an applied element, but as arising out of the fitness of the work. "In becoming fit", he said, "every work attains some form and enshrines some mystery". He also saw that this enshrined mystery ultimately depends upon a "heavenly prototype"—that is, the

expression of an idea of archetypal reality. It most emphatically was not to enshrine some antiquarian style.

It must be said that Lethaby was always reticent about what he thought the supreme mysteries comprised, and how man might actively, spiritually, engage with them. He only ever tacitly acknowledged the divine as being the ultimate principle according to which all human making and doing must be measured, and never went so far as to say that the divine is the fundamental reality on which all human experience rests. His book *Architecture, Nature, and Magic*² was a pioneering attempt to co-ordinate the universal symbolism by which, throughout the ages, men have sought to link themselves to the presiding realities beyond the passing world. Yet he was, as René Guénon noted in a review, unable to bring out the true significance of his material. Even the word “Magic”, changed from “Myth” in the first edition, seems an equivocation. We search in vain for any statement in the whole of Lethaby’s writings that gives us any idea of the interconnectedness of man and God. In his essay “Towns to Live In” (1918), he spoke of the arts as constructing “a ladder of salvation”, but we are given no substantial idea as to the nature of the reality to which such a ladder might lead. Reading him we remain uncertain as to the extent of Lethaby’s understanding of the ramifications of seeing man as essentially a spiritual being. In the “ideal” that Lethaby so frequently looked to, God is curiously hidden from sight as a participating cause in the fulfillment of man’s work, being veiled by such notional realities as “rational construction”, “necessities of material”, “systems of craftsmanship”, even a “scheme of related measurements”.

His equivocation in this respect obliged him to concentrate, for the most part, on the external aspects of how the arts might serve to fulfill man’s spiritual needs. Historically, this is understandable. The whole point of the Arts and Crafts movement out of which he grew was that unlike, say, the constructors of the

² Lethaby described the first edition of this work—published in 1892 as *Architecture, Mysticism, and Magic*—as the most ignorant book ever published. He later revised it as a series of articles in *The Builder* in 1928. This revised version was finally published in book form in 1956.

great cathedrals, who built to the limit of the science of their day (a science which, it must be acknowledged, possessed a qualitative dimension), Ruskin and Morris anxiously sought to arrest the decline of the crafts in the face of a science conceived and applied purely quantitatively, which was already well on the way to eliminating the human altogether from any productive process. This same movement called, in Lethaby's generation, for a rearguard action wholly against the grain of the times. Lethaby saw that a stylistic antiquarianism—the "treadmill of style mongering", as he called it—was no answer. Accepting that the modern maker possesses no effective symbolic language with which to construct a "ladder of salvation", Lethaby proposed what amounts to a species of practical humanism. Such questions as fitness of form, reasonableness, service, practical necessity, economic viability (provided that the economics were not allowed wholly to determine the nature and purpose of supply and demand), and a qualified use of design for such subsequent machine manufacture as he espoused, move him in the direction of modern functionalism. From Lethaby's standpoint, however, modernism throws out the baby with the bath water in rejecting, more or less, any question of beauty other than of a utilitarian function. His rejection of the aesthetic notion of art, coupled with his qualified acceptance of the machine, places Lethaby awkwardly vis-à-vis modernism. With modernism, machine manufacture becomes the norm for nearly all production and it is the crafts that are relegated to the limbo of antiquarianism. Lethaby and modernism both lack a proper philosophy of man, with the difference that Lethaby needs such a philosophy before he can hope to establish a hierarchy of human needs based on something more substantial (salvational, one might say) than human appetites. Merely to cater for "wants" is not necessarily to satisfy needs. Utilitarian modernism, on the other hand, needs a philosophy of man if it is ever to do more than cater for market expediency. The alienating utility of our abundant mass-produced goods, which people have had no hand in making but are persuaded through advertising to consume, does nothing to satisfy man's spiritual needs. Saleability is no criterion for a standard of human fulfillment.

All this is a long way from finding the spiritual satisfaction in art and labor that was available to the men who built the

cathedrals which Lethaby so admired and so carefully studied. There was a culture in which it was still possible to relate human workmanship to a cosmic and redemptive paradigm, as Coomaraswamy, in the decades before and after Lethaby's death in 1931, demonstrated with a thoroughness of scholarly detail not available to Lethaby.

In defining art as everything that is rightly done or made, Lethaby certainly drew on the traditional doctrine whereby art is the principle of perfected work. But his lack of a proper doctrine of man left him in a position where he could never effectively show what agency or set of principles were appealed to in order to establish what is "right". It is man who knows what is right, and man who is guided by the values and meanings embodied in what is right. This cannot be done by a simple appeal to his creaturehood. That is to enthrone self-will. Having learned much from the older man, Gill went beyond Lethaby's position in recognizing that the human is, finally, only definable in terms of the Divine: "Strange fact! Man cannot live on the human plane; he must be either above it or below it", he wrote, following the Scholastic dictum, "*Homo non proprie humanus sed superhumanus est*". In the sphere of making and doing, paradoxically, man does not reach to the superhuman by the supposed virtues of self-willed achievement, but falls into the subhuman. Man is either created in the image of God, and that fact will determine the nature and extent of his needs; or he is a congeries of appetites, ever reluctant to accept a curb on their natural exertion.

From Lethaby's position this was an horizon too far. He saw that human needs must be satisfied in and through the art of noble workmanship. But his reticence towards "the Kingdom of God" (that which, as the Bible reminds us, must be sought first) meant that for his philosophy needs are, in effect, based on little more than the interweaving currents of social events and man's natural inclination to make things in the economic context of those events. This is the road to consumerism which, when straightened and broadened, gives us what we have now: a meaningless superfluity (at least in the "developed world") that in its unrestrained abundance threatens to engulf us—precisely the eliminating of the human at the heart of life that Lethaby saw and hoped to arrest.

Lethaby ends the chapter “The Temple of Heaven” in his *Architecture, Nature, and Magic* with a nostalgic passage that looks back to the monuments of earliest cultures, while coupling an appeal to the mere humanity of “sense” with a note of defeat at the prospect immediately before him. But the chapter’s final question mark denotes an impotence which we continue to share:

Our western architectural methods of designing whim-works in the sham styles can hardly compete with such symbolical art; common sense is the only way open to us. Those ancient works were imitations of paradise, ours are exercises in commercial “grandeur” and advertising vulgarity. Design must have some motivating *idea* in it: what idea can we modern people think except structure for reasonable service?³

In his essay on Lethaby, the critic Peter Fuller concluded that he failed to supply a “solution” to the problem “of how men and women’s aesthetic and spiritual needs can be met in a modern, secular, technological society”. We must immediately note that this accusation harbors two unwarranted assumptions: that such needs *can* be met in a modern, secular, technological society, and, if a “solution” were to be offered, that it would inevitably be adopted and adapted to perform its remedial function. History knows otherwise when it comes to such assumptions.

Moreover, and more importantly, this accusation seems to demand, impossibly, that an effect be delivered of its cause. The modern, secular, technological society *is* precisely the outcome of man’s aesthetic and spiritual needs being suppressed and ignored.

³ A decade or so after Lethaby’s death the work of several scholars began to demonstrate the direct interaction of the Divine in man’s attempt to build according to a heavenly paradigm. See for instance Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Treasures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (New York: Pantheon, 1962), Titus Burckhardt, *Chartres and the Birth of the Cathedral* (original German edition 1962, English translation, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books/Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1995), Louis Charpentier, *The Mysteries of Chartres Cathedral* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), as well as, later, Rene Querido, *The Golden Age of Chartres* (Edinburgh: Floris, 1987), and the studies in sacred geometry of Keith Critchlow, John James, Robert Lawlor, and others.

There can be no “solution” on the level of application that is the legitimate sphere of making and doing. *What* is to be “solved” is beyond the jurisdiction of the maker as such. The maker’s wisdom is a type of knowledge about skill applied to some productive end. The wisdom about what can be a solution to satisfying man’s spiritual needs belongs to a type of knowledge that includes a vision of the final end of human life. Such a vision is not in the sphere of making and doing. Action comes into its own on the basis of a prior knowledge. Speaking from the standpoint of the maker, Morris warned in “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil”:

To attempt to answer such questions thoroughly or authoritatively would be attempting the impossibility of constructing a scheme of a new society out of the materials of the old, before we knew which of those materials would disappear and which endure through the evolution which is leading us to the great change.

Lethaby’s position was no different from that of Ruskin and Morris before him, and Gill, Coomaraswamy, Massingham, and many others after him. His vision of noble workmanship was defeated by the economics of the machine. The momentum of capitalist investment, in the pursuit of wealth, must ever seek to reduce the cost of production in the pursuit of a cash surplus. Thus by degrees the handiwork of the skilled worker is undermined by the use of machines. Such is the remorseless pressure of this process that it becomes, in due course, a sort of cannibalism, first of all destroying the machine minder through automation, then, in a further step, destroying the machine by an economy based on the virtual reality of computerized information. At this stage the question of human needs hardly arises, having been displaced by the internal demands of the productive system itself. This “system”, possessing no vision of an end other than its own perpetuation, must eventually bring about its own destruction. Can we claim we have seen no intimation of this?

An economics of noble workmanship, such as Lethaby envisaged, allows quantity to yield to quality as part of a culture that acknowledges that the end of the productive process is above and beyond the process itself. The most precious commodity of the

craftsman is time free from economic constraint. Capitalist economics demands that quality yield to quantity. Time must yield to a surplus of money. What takes time in the exercise of skill must be converted to a technique that produces more and faster. This technique will begin by approximating to human skill and end by replacing skill altogether in order to produce goods that no human skill could produce. There could never be such a thing as a “handcrafted” mobile telephone. What began as a way of duplicating human skill on a greater scale ends as a means to produce goods regardless of any human intervention. By now the “market” demands that it should be so. Gill used to say that machines are not designed to produce things but the thing called profit!

As a necessary part of this process any call for the control of machines, however desirable in human terms, is bound to seem illogical since it amounts to the destruction of the system for generating the wealth needed to perpetuate the consumption that underpins the social fabric. When Lethaby, in “The Arts and the Function of the Guilds” (1896), called for the Trades Unions to become supervisors of the quality of commodities, he assumed that “Society generally”, as he put it, would “soon pay back the debt in sympathy”. It is just conceivable that this might have been possible at the end of the nineteenth century. It is a vain hope in our time. Lethaby’s call for quality rests on the assumption that the consumer is sufficiently cultivated to recognize and use skill after its own kind. But there is no such thing as an understanding by “society generally”. Each and every man and woman understands according to individual ability. The consumer of manufactured goods is himself a patron of skill to the extent his purchasing power, and the way in which he exercises it, determines what and how things get made—and at what price. If, as patron, he has long since been dispossessed of any intellectually responsible involvement in the making and using of the commodities of life, then he will have no standard by which to recognize the qualitative from the shoddy. In such a situation he is unlikely to envisage any imperative of debt towards his fellows—consumers and producers—in a situation where the commodities available to him show little or no sign of having been made with an eye to stimulating any sense of the nobility of his human calling.

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This is the self-crippling position we are in today, inundated as we are with the consequences of having perfected, beyond the dreams of previous generations, techniques for producing overabundant, meaningless superfluities. Ruskin's claim that "industry without art is brutality" needs revision. In a society where labor hardly any longer exists (having been exported to Third World countries) industry without art has become a mind-numbing palliative of time-serving hardly made bearable by the constant distractions of the "leisure industry", all in the name of an economic growth devoid of moral direction, whose social injustice and material unsustainability is self-evident. There are no "solutions" without responsibilities and those must take root in the conscience of each and every one of us.

Which brings us to the question of greed.

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Features in

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