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Book Review

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Shop Right

October 28, 2009

Matthew Crawford. *Shop Class as Soulcraft.* Penguin Press. May 2009.

Near the beginning of *A Fan's Notes*, Frederick Exley reflects upon why, with his life at loose ends around him, he feels organized only as a fan of the New York Giants: "Why did football bring me so to life? I can't say precisely. Part of it was my feeling that football was an island of directness in a world of circumspection. In football a man was asked to do a difficult and brutal job, and he either did it or got out. There was nothing rhetorical or vague about it.... It smacked of something old, something traditional, something unclouded by legerdemain and subterfuge."

What succor Exley found in football—age, tradition, directness, honest brutality, and the men who embody these virtues—Matthew Crawford finds in what he calls "the trades." Crawford's book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, describes the emotional and cerebral satisfactions of skilled manual labor; it is an attempt to restore dignity to, and propose renewed pedagogical emphasis on, such work in the softer, more circumspect era of the "knowledge economy." Crawford has worked as an electrician intermittently throughout his life, and now owns a motorcycle-repair shop. His reflections on the pleasures and demands of manual labor are thoughtful and, frequently, inspiring. But where the Exley of *A Fan's Notes* was an alcoholic washup, Crawford has a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Chicago, was a postdoctoral fellow on Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, and is currently a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. His book is not only an encomium to manual work but a

"cultural polemic" in the tradition of Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism*, Philip Rieff's *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, and Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. Crawford's suggestion is that our growing preference for the legerdemain of knowledge work over what he is tempted to call "real" work might help us understand what is amiss in the culture.

Raised on a commune in California, Crawford began working as an electrician and mechanic in his teenage years; after college, he found unsatisfactory but well-paid office work abstracting academic articles in Silicon Valley, and eventually returned to the academy. After completing his doctorate, Crawford took a position at a Washington, DC, think tank. He soon grew bored and dispirited by the papery mediocrity of the place, however, and left to open his own motorcycle-repair shop in Richmond. "In this book," he writes, "I would like to speak up for an ideal that is timeless but finds little accommodation today: manual competence, and the stance it entails toward the built, material world." But his first task is to describe the sort of work he finds useless and enervating.

On Crawford's account, the story of work in the 20th century is one of how individual expertise, gained with years of apprenticeship, gave way to "process engineering knowledge," or algorithmic distillation of hard-earned familiarity into repetitive, idiot-proof errands. "Scattered craft knowledge is concentrated in the hands of the employer, then doled out again to workers in the form of minute instructions needed to perform some *part* of what is now a work *process*." This process ensured that the cognitive aspects of manual labor, its embodied methods of problem-solving, were drained off. Crawford's story of the degradation of work, and the stultifying effects of assembly-line production on the working class, seems right as far as it goes, though it doesn't appear to add anything to the standard critique of Taylorism found in the work of scholars such as T. Jackson Lears (to whom Crawford acknowledges his debt). He goes on to suggest that, over the last few decades, we have begun to see a similar sort of shift in white-collar work, at the hands of process-oriented management consultants, which has created "a rising sea of clerkdom."

Against this general call to efficiency, Crawford arrays a kind of Emersonian "spiritedness." The spirited tradesman gathers energy from his membership in an historic community of like-minded individuals, oriented toward a shared, concrete goal. The "spirited man"—in Crawford's example, a motorcycle repairman—is a "*master of [his] own stuff*." He will recover for himself, and perhaps in himself, the lost purposive coherence of a premodern world. "Spiritedness is an assertion of one's own dignity, and to fix one's car is not merely to use up time, it is to have a different experience of time, of one's car, and of oneself."

This stance is a composite of what Crawford has occasional reason to call "stoic" virtues. The stoic works in steady obedience to the authority of the trade; his aims are clear; his technique carves an asymptotic approach toward perfect form. Crawford writes of "iterated self-criticism, in light of some ideal that is never quite attained, whereby the craftsman advances in his art. You give it your best, you learn from your mistakes, and the next time get a little closer to the image you started with in your head." People who have taken their bikes to be fixed by Crawford may find this dedication to "mistakes" alarming, but Crawford does not mean that he will mess up your bike. Rather that his repairs are slow and careful. The stoic craftsman learns, by grappling with the intractability of the real world, an awareness of limits and an attendant sense of humility. His community keeps him honest; he knows he will be held to account for his contribution to common pursuits, his convergence upon common goals.

This kind of virtue isn't just the province of the mechanic, or at least it didn't use to be. Early machines, Crawford points out, also required the same sort of attentiveness to the recalcitrant world. In one passage, Crawford details the bruising process of starting an old motorcycle, which involved setting the throttle and the choke manually before landing on the kick-starter ten or twelve times until the engine started. But in finally wresting from the bike what one wanted from it—that it move forward—one achieved a new sense of self in relation to the world. "One was drawn out of oneself and into a struggle, by turns hateful and loving, with another thing that, like a mule, was emphatically *not* simply an extension of one's will. Rather, one had to conform one's will and judgment to such external facts of physics that still presented themselves as such. Old bikes don't flatter you, they educate you." Individuals thus educated gain a sense of their own mastery within the world's limits, and develop an agreeable antagonism with their environment. His stoic is a figure who feels enviably at home.

Clearly we no longer have to tame mulish motorcycles. Crawford is no foolish nostalgist, and he freely admits that his own bike has all the usual innovations of automation. But he still thinks something important has disappeared in the transition, and this is where his defense of the tradesman's stoicism becomes a critical project.

Some new Mercedes cars, he remarks, no longer come with dipsticks, so the driver can no longer check the level of his or her oil. This has made him, on Crawford's view, less self-reliant:

> The burden of paying attention to his oil level he has outsourced to another, and the price he pays for this disburdenment is that he is entangled in a more minute, all-embracing, one might almost say maternal relationship with … what? Not with the service technician at the dealership, at least not directly, as there are layers of bureaucracy that intervene. Between driver and service professional lie corporate entities to which we attribute personhood only in the legal sense, as an abstraction: the dealership that employs the technician; Daimler AG, Stuttgart, Germany, who hold the service plan and warranty on their balance sheet; and finally Mercedes shareholders, unknown to one another, who collectively dissipate the financial risk of your engine running low on oil. There are now layers of collectivized, absentee interest in your motor's oil level, and no single person is responsible for it. If we understand this under the rubric of 'globalization,' we see that the tentacles of that wondrous animal reach down into things that were once unambiguously our own: the amount of oil in a man's crankcase.

The light on the dashboard that reads, with maddening vagueness, "Service Needed," infantilizes. The kind of electronic interface that a dipstickless Mercedes has "is meant to be 'intuitive,' meaning that it introduces as little psychic friction as possible between the user's intention and its realization…. If all goes well, the user's dependence (on programmers who have tried to anticipate his every need when constructing the interface) remains well beneath his threshold of notice, and there is nothing to disturb his self-containment." The man in the dipstickless Mercedes has fewer opportunities to own up to the limits of his power, and is given free rein in

indulging his fantasies of control. This is an argument about narcissism, and owes much to Christopher Lasch. The narcissist, living in a world of his own projection, is both grandiose (insofar as he imagines himself unbounded) and impotent (as, with no real basis for activity in the world, he can never comfortably settle the issue of his ability).

As is the case with many cultural jeremiads, it is never fully clear in this book whether Crawford intends this sort of argument to be taken literally or metaphorically. Is the dipstickless car a *symbol* of our estrangement from the world and our emasculation, or is it actually a *cause* of that estrangement and deterioration? There are moments when he really does seem to believe the latter. He writes, for example, that "the doctor and the mechanic have daily intercourse with the world as something independent, and a vivid awareness of the differences between self and nonself. Fixing things may be a cure for narcissism."

Crawford is too intelligent and too scrupulous, however, to maintain this idea—that people without brute-object contact are more likely to become narcissists—for very long, and he finds himself stuck in a position he knows to be untenable. He backtracks. He writes, a bit later on, that the "basic character of human agency … arises only within concrete limits that are not of our making. These limits need not be physical; the important thing is rather that they are external to the self." He goes on to quote a passage from Iris Murdoch about the difficulty of learning Russian, and glosses it by saying that "in any hard discipline, whether it be gardening, structural engineering, or Russian, one submits to things that have their own intractable ways." He has gone from making the strong claim that our distance from the workbench diminishes us to the much weaker platitude that hard work builds character.

This particular problem might have been avoided, had Crawford cast his distinctions along pragmatic lines rather than those of naive realism. He has divided up work into areas that are "genuinely useful" and areas that are, presumably, not; there are worlds of work that require "focussed engagement with material things," which have "objective standards," and worlds, on his account, that presumably swing free of reality. Crawford would have been better off suggesting that the salient aspect common to the work of the mechanic and the student of Russian is not that objective standards obtain, but that both represent activities whose goals

and standards are more or less uncontroversial. For there is no metric with which we might evaluate the "genuineness" of use, or of internal standards; they hang from the purposes of the particular needful community.

On this account, the relevant distinction is between spheres of work and culture where one's purposes—to make this motorcycle go fast, to order a sandwich in Russian—are clear, well-established, and generally agreed upon, and spheres of work where one's purposes—write a new poem, give someone a sense for what it feels like to be alive, invent a new variety of person—are, on the whole, not. There are already half-gestures toward this sort of argument in the book, where Crawford retreats from the naive realist position (that noble work involves something called "direct contact" with the world) and instead talks about our relationships with the world as necessarily triangular—they are a matter of three-fold relationships between us, objects with which we causally interact, and the sorts of conversations we have with our colleagues about what we might want from these objects, and how we ought to go about those tasks.

One of the things Crawford's book does well is show how and why the stoic character emerges from, and is best suited to, arenas characterized by such consensus goals and standards. "The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chatting *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on." He ultimately goes so far as to say that the tradesman is "free not only of deadening abstraction but also of the insidious hopes and rising insecurities that seem to be endemic in our current economic life. Freedom from hope and fear is the Stoic ideal."

But these are not the conditions under which everyone achieves a sense of satisfaction; not everyone looks to become "quiet and easy." There are people, in fact, who would describe such ostensive certitude—the ability to indicate success via pointing—as matters of mimicry and obedience. Or as something boring.

If the stoic is best suited to work where the goals are well agreed-upon, an ideal type we might call the "romantic" thrives on the other end of the spectrum, where our goals and standards are up for grabs. The romantic may not have the luxury of consensus or a hard tether to perfection's maypole, but she feels free to pursue

ends that might not yet have been fully consecrated by her community. She might feel a corresponding anxiety, but she believes that such fear is the proper cost of her hope, and she has perhaps decided that an allowance of hope is more important than freedom from fear. Crawford writes off the romantic ideal as the "hippie theory" that holds that "creativity is what happens when people are liberated from the constraints of convention," and mocks the breathlessness of the sociologist Richard Florida, the *Rise of the Creative Class* guy, as a proponent not of true self-reliance but of "the aesthetics of individuality." But a cheap romanticism is simply more easily proliferated than its stoic counterpart; that is no argument with democracy, or with office culture. Taking Richard Florida as representative of the romantic ideal is like taking Simone Weil as representative of the stoic.

If taken simply as a description and defense of the stoic ideal, and its affinity for and roots in particular sorts of work, Crawford's book is an achievement, and has moments of true homiletic force. As cultural and political criticism it is not only incoherent but irresponsible.

In an attempt to preempt an obvious criticism of his book, Crawford writes, toward the beginning, that "it so happens that most of the characters who appear in this book are men." And we do hear quite a bit about men. We already have heard about the man who is "easy and quiet." Crawford explains that in the "physical circumstances of the jobs performed by carpenters, plumbers, and auto mechanics … one feels like a man, not a cog in a machine." There are times when this feels harmless, as when Crawford claims "pride before my wife" when he is treated well at a restaurant whose owner's bike he has fixed, or even, perhaps, when he writes that before a man kick-started his old motorcycle he had to "make sure there are no attractive women present to witness your display." But when he writes, for example, that "Volkswagens in particular, as the People's Car, tend to get passed around like cheap whores," or that his joke about youthful beautiful bodies at an academic conference drew "incredulous howls of outrage from some of the more senior harpies," it becomes clear that it did not, in fact "so happen" that this is a book about men; it is not incidental but constitutive.

When he writes about contemporary management science as a series of "manipulative" exercises in self-esteem, he makes it clear that what's wrong with modern work is not its abstractions and its lack of communal responsibility but its *femininity*. The modern workplace, as described here by one sociologist of management, "sounds to me like being part of a clique of girls, where one can commit a serious misstep without knowing it; where one's place in the hierarchy is made difficult to know because of the forms and manners of sisterhood." Sisterhood means not knowing where you stand. It means accepting the blandishments of self-esteem without having something material, something "genuinely useful," to show for it. It means not being able to point to that bright light bulb, or go fast on that motorcycle. He contrasts this with "the real freedom of speech on a job site, which reverberates outward and sustains a wider liberality. You can tell dirty jokes." That is, there aren't any of the forms, or representatives, of sisterhood present.

The problem with sisterhood, or with the modern office place, is that *there* aren't enough *things* around. Things are hard and there and you can't just do what you want with them; they discourage narcissism by being mute and stubborn. But things, *pace* Crawford, have no monopoly on not-self: there are beings called *other people*. And a careful, attentive interaction with another person—in an office or in the sorority or in a talk-therapy session—is just as likely to draw us out of ourselves as a motorcycle. (Harold Bloom's 'strong poet,' for example, has had a lot of truck with the imaginations of other people, and presumably hasn't had much use for things.) There is something to be said for the ability to fix one's own car. But that competence gives you a *specific* handhold in the world, not a *necessary* one. There are a lot of good-citizen non-narcissists who live in cities and frankly couldn't care less about fixing a motorcycle. A serious conversation over time with an admired friend—or a recalcitrant one—can, and ought to, do the same thing for one's relationship to the not-self. The difference is that people are messy and sometimes they don't shut up. Also, you can tinker with them as much as you want, but you're unlikely to make them go faster. The awesome thing about things is that they don't have desires. A motorcycle may be complicated but it's essentially schematic; go ahead and tinker away. Crawford's stoic is a dipstick fetishist.

In a bike shop, the preoccupation with a hot consensus of hard *things* is fine. But there are very real sociopolitical dangers in the idea that we might use the tradesman's guild as the model for the wider collective. At the center of the stoic ideal, as Crawford has pointed out so thoroughly, is a quest for purity. Its norms are articulated, its hierarchy apparent, and its aims aglow. At a racing shop a young man begins as a customer, over time is perhaps lucky enough to be invited to hang out in the back and use the shop's tools, and ultimately might be made a full member of the fold. In this case, "this activity is directed toward something that appears as good within the horizon of a certain way of life: *speed*. To place oneself in the service of this master is to enter into a community and, as I learned outside the Buggy House, to open oneself to being schooled by one's elders. This is solidarity." This is true, and cannily said. But what remains unsaid is that such solidarity always comes at the cost of exclusivity. This sort of solidarity is based on the community's idea of purity, and purity, like the idea of the sacred with which it is closely allied, is a contrastive concept; it conjures up the impure. Those outside the ring of belonging, in this case, are romantics, and naturally women. Where a stoic strives for purity of heart, a romantic seeks novelty and self-enlargement. She takes no pleasure in the kind of submission and single-mindedness necessary to belong to a stoic community.

All of the things that afford the guild such a strong sense of solidarity, and its members such a neat sense of tested potency—the clarity of common goals, the pleasures of widespread agreement, the deference to traditional standards and hierarchies—are exactly the same things that make it unsuitable as a political model. This is clearest not in the portions of this book about sisterhoods or dirty jokes, but in his discussion of the broad deracination of work:

> In the nineteenth century, there was a prohibition in the United States on banks opening branches in communities other than the ones in which they originally operated. People had to trust the bank if they were to deposit their money in it, and bankers had to assess the character of borrowers before writing loans; it was genuinely believed that 'the bankers' interests and the interests of the larger community are one and the same,' as a historical sociologist of banking writes. We might imagine a banker sits down with a young couple and begins to form a judgment of their credit-worthiness, that is, their character. This character is knowable because there is a community. Maybe the banker asks around at the grocery and the hardware store, and notes subtle cues in the tone of voice or body language of their proprietors as he mentions the names of the applicants, and inquired after their record of credit. Satisfied, he vouchsafes their credit-worthiness to his colleague bankers, who live in the same community, and a mortgage is secured.

He goes on to consider a mortgage broker in 2005, who has incentives to sell risky mortgages because he knows they will be securitized and resold, and that he won't be held responsible. This was, obviously, disastrous, but not necessarily for the reasons Crawford maintains; it was a regulatory problem, not a cultural one. What should be obvious in the above example is precisely why an intimate community such as a speed-racing shop, whose solidarity he has described with such vividness, is inappropriate here: in its sense of consensus, in its tight warp, it is prone to exactly the kinds of xenophobia that liberalism hopes to render immaterial.

For right-communitarians like Crawford, liberalism means paternalism, or, more accurately, maternalism: it is the "nanny state." "It seems to be our liberal instincts," he writes, "that push us in this direction of centralizing authority; we distrust authority in the hands of individuals. With its reverence for neutral process, liberalism is, by design, a politics of irresponsibility." The mistake Crawford makes is in confusing the real genius of liberalism, its equitable *im*personalization, for *de*personalization. Liberalism dispenses with the questions of purity, and thus of exclusivity, that give a guild its assurance and generosity of meaning. The ideal of the small-town nineteenth-century banker is excellent if, say, race doesn't exist.

There is much to admire in stoicism, but it is finally a private ideal. As an inspirational description of what it feels like to be a member of a *voluntarist* community grounded in stoic ideals, Crawford's book ought to resonate with a great many alienated workers, of both the blue- and white-collar varieties. Perhaps some school principals will heed his useful and original arguments in favor of reinstating shop classes, or will encourage their students to learn a trade. (He is probably right that, from a pedagogical point of view, a stoic education ought to come before a romantic one.) He himself finally drops the high dudgeon of his cultural criticism by the end of his book, adopting instead the gentle, exhortative tone that characterizes *Shop Class as Soulcraft* at its finest. He concludes by saying his stoicism is "resolutely this-worldly. It insists on the permanent, local viability of what is best in human beings. In practice, this means seeking out the cracks where individual agency and the love of knowledge can be realized today, in one's own life." +

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