3

Archetype as Letterform:

The "Dream" of Edward Johnston

During the many hours which I have spent in conversation with calligraphers and lettercutters over the years, I have always been struck by the way in which the practicalities of achieving the "perfect" letterform and its appropriate spacing in a given context are at the root of their preoccupation and effort. No doubt this is as it should be. What scribe or lettercutter worth his or her salt would take up this exacting craft and not be haunted and challenged by the idea of perfection?

But what one rarely comes across, if at all, is a serious consideration of *where* the notion of perfection comes from. For it has also been my experience that calligraphers and lettercutters, whilst pursuing their craft as if some notion of perfection was at least tacitly motivating them, are all too ready to deny that the perfect letterform exists.

What I would like to attempt here, then, is an exploration of the idea that the perfect letterform must be real—for if it were not, then it would not have the power to inspire the hand, the eye, and the mind of the craftsman as often as it obviously does.[1] Perhaps it would be better to say that the perfect letterform has a reality, even if it is never manifest in a material substance, such as ink or stone, or to use more Scholastic terms, that it has *being* even if it does not *exist*. But to make this distinction between being and existence presupposes that reality is much more complex and multi-layered than what our everyday consciousness reveals to us.

[1] The reference throughout to a perfect letterform is more a matter of convenience than a dogmatic assertion. This same perfection is operative in a whole collection of letters that, cumulatively, have an organic unity, each single letter being in some way modified in accommodation to the whole context of its presence.

You may be familiar with the old adage that "to work is to pray", a saying which gives some indication of the fact that the crafts were traditionally practiced as if it were possible that they possessed a spiritual dimension and that they might act as a support for contemplation. I believe the writings of Edward Johnston indicate that he exercised his vocation as if this was still a possibility. Even though Johnston's practical example has inspired innumerable scribes to take up calligraphy and lettering, no one, so far as I know, has so far examined this aspect of his work. If it is time to re-examine the legacy of Johnston (as has been suggested by some contemporary lettering practitioners), then this rather more "hidden" aspect ought to be fundamental to that re-examination.

If calligraphy is to be understood and practiced as being more than a game of shape-forming—albeit a very skilful and sophisticated game—then we might look to the example of Johnston to learn more of the depths of this ancient, universal craft. Johnston's was an example that prompted one of his pupils to claim of his inspirational teaching that it came as if out of "eternity and infinity" (L147).[2] That is a very pointed description, whose wording is carefully chosen. Speaking of the ultimate objective of his work, Johnston himself said: "Life is the thing we all want and it is the desire for life that is behind all religion and all art. . . . Our aim should be . . . to make letters live . . . that men themselves may have more life" (P88). Again, we note the carefully chosen words. This does not sound like someone advocating the practice of "art for art's sake", or even "craft for craft's sake".

If you look at your copy of *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering*—that is, if you have an earlier edition—you will find three quotations given prominence on a page facing the Author's

[2] The abbreviations used throughout are an initial followed by the page number of the following books by Johnston: F = *Formal Penmanship and Other Papers*, edited by Heather Child (London: Lund, Humphries, 1971); L = *Lessons in Formal Writing*, edited by Heather Child and Justin Howes (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1986); P = Priscilla Johnston, *Edward Johnston* (second edition, New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1976); W = *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), and reprinted many times.

Preface. (I have a copy of the 23rd edition of this book in which this page was still included. At some later date it was withdrawn.)

Now from all that we know of him we can certainly agree with Eric Gill's assessment that Johnston was "deliberate of speech and equally deliberate of thought". We know that Johnston was a deeply religious man, and it is therefore impossible to believe that he lived his life keeping his vocation as a calligrapher and his religious experience in separate compartments. So we must believe that these quotations were chosen with great deliberation by a man who claimed that the "one thing I care most about" is "to search out and live the truth" (P34). We must also remember that Johnston thought sufficiently of the following passage to write it out at least twice in 1934, one of these being for presentation to no less a master craftsman than Alfred Fairbank. Of this Johnston said, "in many ways the ms is yet my best" (L35). The last of the three quotations reads as follows: "In that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become a friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may" (Wx).

This extraordinary passage, taken from Plato's *Symposium* and given such prominence by Johnston, needs to be examined carefully. I say "extraordinary" because it is by no means representative of the habits of mind and thought that have shaped and which energize the modern world, referring as it does to the intelligible realm of archetypal Ideas. Indeed, it is precisely because Johnston placed at the head of his treatise a quotation which does not underwrite modern assumptions as to the nature of reality and the mind[3] that we must look at that quotation in some detail.

[3] For instance, we find the following "Argument" in Johnston's *A Carol and Other Rhymes* (London: Hampshire House Workshops, 1915), pp. 48-50, which gives some indication of the nature of his thought in this matter:

> We see the light of the stars, not the stars themselves: we see the light reflected from a piece of white paper, not the paper itself. In other words, we see what things are *doing* rather than what they *are*. But as light takes time to travel—however short the distance—it is more exact to say that

The passage occurs in that part of Plato's dialogue where Diotima is elaborating for Socrates her teaching that Love is "a great spirit between divine and mortal". She says that it is possible for men to gaze on Beauty's very self, unsullied, "not dogged with the pollution of mortality and all the colors and varieties of human life". Diotima insists that, only when men discern heavenly beauty itself—face to face—through what makes it visible, will they have hold of the true.

The quotation begins, "In that communion"—that is to say, in the mind's *contemplation* of beauty, and continues, "beholding beauty with the eye of the mind". When he speaks of "mind" here Plato does not, as might be assumed, mean the rational mind—that part of our common-sense consciousness that makes a reasoned judgment about things on the basis of empirical observation and logical calculation. And the "eye" referred to is not the eye of sensible apprehension—for Plato, like Heraclitus before him, held that the senses are unreliable witnesses when it comes to discerning what is unchangingly true. The "eye of the mind" is an intuitive faculty of the soul, which permits it to grasp metaphysical and spiritual realities which are not subject to change, as is every reality conditioned in whatever way by time and space. "To bring forth" means to grasp and hold with unwavering stability a truth of the mind beyond the world of the senses. It is, as

> we see what things *have been doing*. This is the way in which we "see" all material objects, whether "near" or "far", but it is impressed on us in the case of the stars, because we understand that the light of the nearest star—our Sun—takes over eight minutes to reach the Earth, and the light from the Sun's nearest neighbor nearly four years, while the flight of the light from the great majority of stars, it is said, "is to be reckoned in hundreds of years". Truly, though we see the star shine, we can hardly say that we see the stars shining (the action of our bodily sight, therefore, is an act of faith—for Faith is "the evidence of things not seen").
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> If we see, then, in the material world only what a thing is doing—or has done—but not the thing itself, how may we hope that our Love, or Faith, or Hope will ever discover its objective? Divine Love—which knows all Things—IS, and therefore does not depend on time to reach things, or on that which we call "nearness"—and in the very word confess distance.
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> In the heart of Man there is the shining of all his "stars"—those "stars" which he cannot reach, or even see with his bodily eyes—but yet he may be in touch with them—Divine Love in his heart sees the stars for him.

Plato goes on to say, to grasp "a reality" as opposed to "an image" (or representation) of beauty. Plato is pointing out that external appearances, because they are the very fabric of which transient reality is woven, have something illusory or deceptive about them. He is making the distinction between that which possesses true, permanent Being, and things which exists only in the mind as a mental abstraction. So, when he speaks of "bringing forth and nourishing" he is referring to the archetypal truths that enter into one's very being so as to become part of our very identity, rather than truths of a more ephemeral nature that are temporarily registered in the imagination as a transient image. When the contemplator is truly absorbed into these archetypal truths or Ideas, he or she becomes, as Diotima continues, "the friend of God and . . . immortal". That is to say, the contemplator assumes or takes on the identity of the archetypal or of the Divine within, to the extent he or she is able to shed the grosser demands and predilections of the empirical ego.

An early familiarity with the idea that an approach to the Divine entails the sacrifice of one's ego is reflected in the fact that at the age of twenty-five, in 1897, Johnston wrote on a parchment, "The best way to see Divine Light is to put out your own candle" (L79).

Now all this may seem a far cry from the practice of calligraphy, but that it was important to Johnston we cannot doubt. What we must hold clearly in our minds is the truth that this contemplation of, and entering into, objective beauty is the grasping of a reality that is never materially embodied. It is an intuitive, unanalyzable experience that is known directly without the intervention of mediate, mental activity—that is, without any sort of mental calculation that effectively puts a distance between, or distinguishes, the knower and the known. It may be difficult for the modern mind, with its rational and materialist training and bias, to see that such archetypal Ideas are more true and more real than the products of mental calculation on the one hand, or physical realities on the other. But Johnston's belief that this is so becomes evident from a careful reading of the relevant passages of

his writings. That he was more a Platonist[4] than a modernist also goes a long way to explain why he was increasingly at odds with the progressive, industrial world that surrounded him.

To help us get an idea of how this archetypal reality might apply to letterforms, we can turn to a passage in Johnston's *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering*. He says: "The mere taking to pieces, or analyzing, followed by 'putting together', is only a means of becoming acquainted with the mechanism of construction, and will not reproduce the original beauty of a thing" (Wxix). In other words, that part of the mind that calculates, measures, and co-ordinates what the interaction of the hand, the eye, and the mind must apply in the making of a letterform does not go deep enough in itself to touch upon the "original beauty" of the perfect letterform that is none the less sought, whether implicitly or explicitly, in the craftsman's pursuit of the "perfect" letterform. This impalpable, archetypal letter (as we might call it), which lives in the deep recesses of the "eye of the mind", is what actually underpins the perfect unity of that physical and mental action required to shape palpably beautiful letters in whatever substance. When a manifestly beautiful letter is fully realized by the craftsman, then the archetype is, as it were, sounded so that what results is a letterform whose beauty reduces the observer to silence, unable to describe or quantify that in which its perfection consists. And, conversely, I would suggest that whenever we look at a letter that appears insufficient in some way, even though all its elements are "correctly" present, then in that experience of impoverishment we are intuitively sensing the absence of any reverberation of the archetypal "original beauty" which Johnston refers to.

Here, in parenthesis, it is interesting to note that in a Report on Art Schools that W. R. Lethaby prepared in 1898, a few months before meeting Johnston, he wrote: "Lettering of all kinds is almost without exception *bad*. Such students as endeavor to apply lettering harmoniously to their designs seem to endeavor to

[4] It might be noted that Robert Speaight, in his biography of Eric Gill, records Johnston reading Plato aloud to Gill in his workshop when they were close neighbors in Hammersmith.

invent new and contorted forms out of their heads. Of all things the form of letters has been shaped by tradition and in most cases the effort to be original is an effort to be *bad*" (P12).

Lethaby is surely noting here that such *bad* letterforms arise from the use only of that superficial part of the rational mind (if that!) that takes to pieces, analyzes, and puts together the basic elements of letters on the basis of personal preference. And when he says that the forms of letters have been shaped by tradition—with the implication that such forms are "good" and "beautiful"—it would surely be bad logic to interpret Lethaby as meaning that such forms are arrived at simply on the basis of habits of past precedent. An ugly or bad letterform does not acquire beauty or legitimacy in the process of being copied and repeated, for however long. Beauty is of another order than the mere passage of time.

Johnston himself, early in his career, defined "Beauty" as "obedience made manifest to the Laws of Truth" (P134)—we note the use of capitals on the words Beauty, Laws, and Truth. He did not significantly change his mind in later life, even though he went on to investigate those laws exactingly, testing them again and again against rigorous thought and assiduous practice. He never lost sight either of the earthly/heavenly axis along which, traditionally, the practice of any craft proceeds. Speaking of the old scribes at their work, he remarked that even more than their skill and the *speed* with which they wrote—as if writing an ordinary letter—and even though they were "engaged on serious work" and were not concerned with "art" as we think of it, "they had in their hearts a kind of dream of divine beauty that they were seeking . . . [and] . . . note how much that dream was fulfilled" (P153). Let us look a little closer at this "dream".

All that we know of Johnston presents us with a picture of an entirely practical man. There was nothing "abstract" or "airy-fairy" about him, nothing "arty". Indeed, we might doubt whether there was anything about him that was superficial. "Preoccupied", certainly, as the notice he made for his study door proclaimed, aimed at repelling unwelcome visitors. His daughter Priscilla said of him that "for all his lassitude he was extremely forceful, indeed dominant. It was not an active forcefulness of vitality but a kind of latent forcefulness of character" (P125).

But his was no utilitarian practicality. Johnston's vision of his craft begins at the beginning. By this I mean literally the beginning of all things—his testing of his ideas took him that far. Noel Rooke reports of him that "he related his subject to everything in heaven and earth" because he saw it as essentially part of a whole. Even when it came to describing a single element of letter formation—that of contrast—he took the comprehensive view: "Contrast is at the very root of formal penmanship. So is harmony. That is why our work, when well done, is so sparkling. It has that unique possession, the best of both sides; the idea of Heaven and Earth is there, harmony and contrast" (L176).

And Priscilla Johnston relates that her father once spoke to her of his taking a class, "of how he was able to give (the students) the feeling that it really was worth doing and a little of his vision, also, the spirit of it, over and above the technical side. He quoted *Man shall not live by bread alone* and spoke of the excitement of the vision" (P263). Can we not sense in this passage Johnston's desire to communicate the idea that the perfection of work which is the aim of the true craftsman must involve more that the mastery of practical skills, if indeed the craftsman is to become "a friend of God" as the quotation from Plato puts it?

Since man is created in the Divine Image (as Johnston believed), it follows that in the exercise of his vocation, the craftsman, by analogy, shares in the actions of the making of the world by its Creator. Johnston thought of the process of creation as involving three stages: "embodying , animating, and inspiring". The three stages must be understood and actualized in the context of man's origin and place in the fabric of the Creation. "In a book for craftsmen", Johnston wrote, "the primary order is Genesis 2:7: 'And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul'" (L47). Also in connection with man's being created in the Divine Image, Johnston asks us to consider Genesis 2:19, where it is related how God formed every beast and bird and how Adam named every living creature. That is to say, the word by which each thing is named establishes the unique and permanent reality of that thing. In the naming, by Adam, of each thing inheres the archetypal essence or Idea of that thing as it exists in the mind of God: as it exists in the Word, that is, the *logos*—the

eternal reason of things. The scribe, giving a manifest form to true and beautiful words, recapitulates the Adamic action of giving each thing God's signature. Thus, named things and meanings co-inhere. And in this co-inherence is the very ligature that binds man to Truth itself. Johnston, true to his life-long insistence that the scribe pay attention to the meanings of the words he writes, is reported as having worn out his dictionary.

How Johnston saw Adam's giving of God's signature to each thing as an analogy of the scribe's action is clearly seen in the following passage: "All his [the craftsman's] works express Idea [note the Platonic capital, denoting a pre-existing, immaterial potentiality] . . . by substance brought to [material] life—like Adam made of Earth. Each of his [man's] works—like every son of Adam—bears a human touch and is seen to be unique. All things are unique, but the craftsman's works show this—each one [each manuscript of ours] is an autograph" (F141).

As each man bears the signature of God in his deiformity, so each work from the hand of the scribe bears the signature of its creator. Thus it is, infallibly and authentically, a thing brought materially to life from a pre-existing idea in the mind. This analogical wisdom is surely what resonates in Johnston's assertion that the proper task of the scribe is "to make letters live . . . that men themselves may have more life" (P88).

In a letter quoted by Priscilla Johnston, Johnston himself spoke of the *final creative act* as one in which God saw that the Creation was Good—"in fact, a thing is not completely created until it has been appreciated . . . I believe it" (P256). Here Johnston is at his most profound, for he is drawing upon the idea that the final justification for the Creation of the world, by God, is in the realization of the necessity that it is completed by being *known*. It is the responsibility of the craftsman's share in the Divine Creation to see that his work is good, that it is true, for it is the Truth, "both immanent and transcendent" (P308) that prevails. And of Truth, Johnston wrote: "its other names are goodness and beauty, the way and the Life, the Light (of the world), the Word, and many more." Which brings us to the question of beauty.

We can only understand Johnston's view of beauty correctly if we keep it in the context in which he himself placed it: Beauty is approached and found indirectly in the search for Truth, through

the discipline of a proper utility of human needs. Priscilla Johnston reports her father as holding that "Beauty is an ultimate Grace which will be conferred upon the craftsman's work if it be well done. If Truth . . . has been served, the result will be Beauty" (L48). Can anyone look at the best of Johnston's works and not see that it is beautiful?

However that may be, it perhaps takes a more trained eye to see that the beauty of his forms arises out of their construction. It remained axiomatic for Johnston that "unless the design arises out of the actual construction of a thing it is reduced to the level of extraneous ornamentation. Design is inherent rather than applied . . ." (P285).

In connection with this principle we might incidentally note that Johnston's reluctance to have his work reproduced was precisely because of the resulting inauthenticity. As he pointed out, "nothing is reproduced, something different is produced" (P285).

As with design, so with the "original Beauty" of a thing. It is not something applied to the surface but comes out of workmanship honestly and straightforwardly undertaken. What, then, does such workmanship entail?

Like Gill, Johnston anchors his answer to all questions that have to do with the validity of the craftsman's activity by going back to the nature of the agent doing the work. What is man? Man is a creature, a body—"the flesh is a *sine qua non* for the spirit of man" (P308)—who looks to God for the answers to the primary questions: What, How, and Why. Why should one, why ought one, why must one, make a thing? And by a "thing" Johnston meant both "*what we make* and *what we do*" (F141). Moreover "things are His [God's] will" (P308). By virtue of asking these questions, man is searching for Truth as well as tacitly proposing that an answer can be found. Other names for Truth are Goodness and Beauty. And Truth "is that against which we sin" (P308). (This thought—that the workman can sin in his actions—may go some way to account for Johnston's lassitude.)

In making a thing, the scribe "works in substances . . . with special tools and special methods. He also thinks in substances and in things, and in methods. . . , which direct the tools and form the thing out of the substance". The "prime purpose of writing is to be read". "His direct objective is to write well", so that the work

produced is useful. In his primary duty to the author "the words are of the first importance", and with this in mind the scribe aims at a presentation that is beautiful. Such beauty for formal penmanship is achieved by "Sharpness, Unity, and Freedom". In this, his *direct* purpose, "the scribe keeps the idea of usefulness constantly before him". "Usefulness in this context, consists in legibility, fitness for purpose, and perfect presentation. The scribe follows after usefulness since, in the final analysis, the ultimate objective of usefulness is beauty" (F141-42).

So, given that the scribe has mastered all the necessary practical skills, this alone will not suffice to achieve the "original beauty" that must be sought by indirect means. "Original beauty" comes intuitively through concentration upon, and contemplation of, the archetypal Ideas that letterforms embody. The fact that Johnston wrote little on the subject of beauty is itself an indication of the fact that, by its very nature, it is a subject all but unteachable in any direct sense. The pursuit of beauty in isolation from its necessary alignment with truth and legitimate human needs has always been recognized by the wisest minds as being liable to lead men astray, into folly and self-indulgence. Nevertheless, something of what is involved in achieving the original beauty of living letters can be glimpsed in words which Johnston addressed to an audience in Dresden in 1912. The passage occurs in a context touched upon earlier, regarding the scribe's aim to "make letters *live*". The relevant words are: "I think I can claim that, poor as they are, the letters on the blackboard are alive: that is not due to myself—I am only a superior kind of motor or engine—it is due to the pen [chalk!] (which brings life to letters)" (P187). It is "not due to myself": this attributing of his achievement in giving life to letters to a higher agency gives a hint, surely, of what is meant in the passage from Plato's *Symposium* by "nourishing true virtue to become a friend of God"?

To come back to Johnston's "dream" and to end with a question. Priscilla Johnston, in her memoir of her father, quotes him as saying: "I see no successor who will put his life and heart into the work I love. There are plenty of *good* scribes to whom it is an occupation and a profession but apparently not *a preoccupation and a dream*" (P251, our emphasis). His daughter was inclined to dismiss this remark, but given its pointed wording can we be

so sure? Does not another interpretation offer itself? To anyone with a deep religious conviction, such as Johnston possessed, the scribe's vocation must be more than an entertaining and diversionary activity. The whole man must be engaged. Could it be that Johnston found no one willing to attempt, through the craft of the pen, that degree of contemplation, beyond the empirical ego, that engages those "realities"—and not their semblances—that enable the craftsman to "bring forth and nourish true virtue"—that interpenetration of being and knowing that is a gazing upon the heavenly beauty face to face, in so far as "mortal man may"?