

ERIC GILL: A RETROSPECT

DESMOND CHUTE

IV—THE DRIVING OUT OF THE MONEY-CHANGERS

ERIC had an engagingly boyish, at times almost infantile, sense of humour. He delighted in a stock of comic stories which he retailed with inexhaustible relish both for their formal neatness and for their garnered wisdom. Among these was a dialogue between three men in a railway-carriage:—

First man: 'What lights are those?'

Second man: 'They're the lights of Hanwell.'

First man: 'How strange they look!'

Third man: 'Not half so strange as the lights of the train look from Hanwell!'

Perhaps this unassuming little allegory may enlighten the chequered history of the *Money-changers* from its thwarted beginnings in 1916 to its recent and painful aftermath in 1949.

A representation of the turning-out of the money-changers has been chosen for a war memorial, for it commemorates the most just of all wars—the war of Justice against Cupidity—a war raged by Christ Himself.²¹

The sculptor had long dreamed of a great monument which should embody this struggle and at the same time be his crowning achievement. The original design—for a bronze group in the round—done in 1916 for a competition as a monument for L.C.C. employees, was rejected. It may be seen reproduced in *Eric Gill* published by Ernest Benn in 1927; it is also extant in a wood engraving.²² The upsurging rhythm of this bronze group is finer than the more geometrical movement of the relief ultimately carved in stone at Leeds. By the end of the year it had attracted the notice of Sir Michael Sadler, then Vice Chancellor of Leeds University and a 'prodigal collector'²³ of modern works of art, who (wrote E.G. a year later) 'conceived the idea, being taken with the design and its subject,²⁴ of putting it at Leeds in the

21 Eric Gill: *Welfare Handbook No. 10 / War Memorial* / printed and published at S. Dominic's Press, / Ditchling, Sussex, A.D. MCMXXIII. 22 Reproduced on p.23.

23 Michael Sadleir. / *Michael Ernest Sadler.* / (Sir Michael Sadler, K.C.S.I.). / 1861-1943. / A Memoir by his son / Constable, London / first published 1949, p. 222.

24 Note and its subject: important in view of subsequent developments.

University somewhere The present proposal is to do it as a colossal high relief carving in stone. This is my own proposal and I'm very glad Sadler approves. . . . because it will keep me clear of the bronze-founders, whom I know not, and allow me and my faithful assistants to put the work through entirely on our own. What a job to do, if it comes off!²⁵ With his 'calling-up' for August 1st, 1918 'many other jobs including that Leeds affair must be left.' In 1919 'the Leeds monument, which Professor Sadler wants me to do, is still a possibility, but the work is not in hand yet. That would be a *magnum opus*! . . . Christ turning the money-changers out—such a subject carved upon such a scale would satisfy all my ambitions—both as man and artist.'²⁶ By May 1923 the stones were at last in place at Leeds, ready for him to finish. However, in spite of such high hopes and of a certain satisfaction with the carving—'really good in parts'—to the maker, looking back on it a year later, the finished work seemed a failure—'lacking much beauty as a whole.'²⁷

Meanwhile the unveiling of the colossal plinth, revealing as it did Christ robed in a priest's alb driving out five usurers (and the wife of one of them) in modern dress, was the signal for a deafening outcry and even for attempts at defacement.

The Memorial had, with the utmost generosity, been commissioned and carried through, and then stubbornly defended against virulent hostility by Sir Michael Sadler, now Chancellor of the University. 'It was therefore a startling experience', writes his son and biographer, 'to find among M.E.S.'s private papers the brief note printed below

November 18th, 1940

Eric Gill is dead. A fine draughtsman, a vain poseur, a tiresome writer. I had trouble with him at Leeds about the War Memorial which he carved for me. He departed egregiously (without telling me until it was too late) from the earlier design I had chosen. And he broke his word by publishing at the worst moment of acute controversy, and sending down to Leeds, a contentious political interpretation of the Memorial's significance. He behaved like a vain, wilful child. The Memorial is a fine piece of work, but not nearly so good as it might have been. The mood is too obviously underlined.'²⁸

25 E.G: Letters. No 66.

26 E.G: op. cit. No 86.

27 E.G: op. cit. No 119.

28 Michael Sadleir: op. cit. p. 238.

The strain of such self-imposed forbearance over a period of sixteen years suffices to explain the bitterness of tone.

E.G. vain? Well, Fr Vincent used to remark that a humble man cannot be proud but he can hardly escape being vain. And yet. . . .

A poseur? A psychiatrist friend whom I invited to meet him summed him up at once by saying that certain obvious singularities lay so close to the surface as merely to throw into greater relief the massive sanity of the whole personality—quite apart from the fact that some of these (e.g. the *kind* of clothes he wore) sprang from his being saner than his contemporaries, while others (e.g. the *way* he put, or forgot to put, them on) were but examples of that *distractio sapientium* which is so intent night and day on momentous things that trifles are overlooked—a truly Michaelangeloesque disregard of the minor needs of life. What an intense dynamism his was! Yet how easy-running! And how infinitely far removed from all affectation!

A tiresome writer? No doubt St Paul seemed a bore to those who did not accept his premisses.

But what no one who knew Eric intimately could ever believe of him, any more than of Sir Michael, is indulgence in deliberate bad faith. Nothing in his letters suggests that he was conscious of having purposely altered the design or taken the initiative in the newspaper controversy. Quite the contrary. On February 10th, 1923 he wrote to Fr John O'Connor: 'As to its acceptance by the University. . . . Sadler. . . . says thanks for photos. . . . "I share your hope that the Council may deal with the matter as *we wish*"—my underlining of the significant word—significant as implying that *he* makes no adverse criticism of the work as shown on the photo.'²⁹

In May of the same year he stayed with Fr O'Connor at Bradford while finishing the carving *in situ*. Writing to him immediately afterwards he says: 'This afternoon a reporter chap has been over—sent by the *Sunday Express*—to ask what means the Leeds War Memorial! He says there is discussion in the Leeds papers. What, already? I saw nothing of it. . . .'³⁰ And to me a few days later he wrote: 'After [a visit] I had to set to and write letters to various newspaper editors re the Leeds sculpture. There is a bit of a furor in Leeds and the London papers are taking it

²⁹ E.G.: op. cit. No 112.

³⁰ E.G.: op. cit. No 115.

up too.’³¹ It is true that he adds ‘We are hoping to have a little sport over it. They can’t make out why Christ and the money-changers should be a subject for a war memorial.’ Surely this is no more than an outburst of that ‘gay frolicsomeness’ which, side by side with ‘solid sincerity’, Donald Attwater³² noted as a Victorian trait in Eric, but which to others has seemed to bring him closer to St Thomas More.

However, Sir Michael Sadler was probably not referring to newspaper correspondence at all but to a pamphlet entitled *War Memorial* written by E.G. and printed at S. Dominic’s Press, Ditchling, in the same year, as the tenth of a series of *Welfare Handbooks*.³³ Moving from the Gospel record, this leaflet opens with the fine statement, quoted above, of the idea of the *Driving out of the Money-changers* as a subject for a War Memorial. It then unfolds the treatment of the subject. ‘The figures are clothed in modern clothes because the point of the sculptor is ethical rather than historical. . . . The sculptor is not an archaeologist, still less is he a fancy-dress maker. . . . His job when he has a given subject to represent is to make. . . . a stone version of what he sees around him, and the stonier it is the better, for stone is his material. . . . As a Work of Art, the memorial is primarily an “illustration” (i.e. rather than an essay in aesthetics)’. Here we meet (for the first time?) certain characteristically Gillian apophthegms, such as ‘Look after Goodness and Truth, and Beauty will take care of itself’, which is thus glozed: ‘for Beauty is the mutual love of the good and the true, and it proceeds from Goodness and Truth as the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son.’ In a note, we also meet the delightfully pregnant *boutade*: ‘the artist does the work, the critic has the inspiration.’

What follows, a description of the Leeds monument, is hardly up to the same level: here indeed ‘the mood is too obviously underlined’; we are conscious of a shade of irritation, a tinge of sarcasm, almost of flippancy—tuneless echoes of insensitive questioning. For it was while he was working at the *Money-changers* that the indiscretion of journalists began to make work on Ditchling Common impossible. I distinctly remember one occasion on which, exasperated beyond bearing, he answered Yes

31 E.G: op. cit. No 113.

32 in *Eric Gill: Workman*, p. 9. [see note 5].

33 see note 21.

to any question however futile. (The rather curious statement that Our Lord 'wears thick boots because he is "a Priest for ever"' is vaguely connected in my memory with some such encounter.) On another occasion he refused to answer at all, with the even more disastrous result that the baffled reporter fell back upon his powers of invention. I am convinced that some meddling of this sort, possibly working on the *War Memorial* leaflet, rather than any intemperate action on E.G.'s part, set the spark to the conflagration in the press and among the public.

Others have testified in these pages to Eric's remarkable patience with those who could not understand.³⁴ With those who would not, he had less. Hence he says here: 'The critics may or may not find beauty in it—but they might as well try, and fail, as fail by not trying.' Such impatience is surely excusable in the circumstances; at any rate it is far removed from anything contentiously political.

There is another possible source of misunderstanding which must be taken into account.

Gill was of course acquainted with the prevalent fashion of appreciating the Fine Arts exclusively by the standards of 'pure form'. Not only did he know it but he viewed it with disapproval, and often tilted at it. Yet in practice he did not always notice how far his individual interlocutor might be from his own so different point of view: We have seen him insisting that 'the point of [this] sculpture is ethical'. Such was his constant approach to art. His mode of (aesthetic) perception was purely formal, but he did not stop there: he did not, because he was sensible of formal values, therefore he closed his eyes to those which are epideictic or rhetorical.³⁵ His ultimate valuation of art was always fundamentally intellectual and ethical, even in the case of works of art whose content was not such as he could wholly accept or endorse. For instance, he had a considerable knowledge of, and a great love for, Oriental Art. Here his whole-hearted admiration of formal qualities did not preclude the play of moral values; nor did these prevent him on the one hand from enjoying those to the full nor, on the other, from being aware of intelligible content. He neither hesitated to admire a *Buddha*, let us say, for what it was and for

34 cf. *Blackfriars* February 1941 Eric Gill Memorial Number.

35 'Art... is a rhetorical activity': Ananda Coomaraswamy quoted by E.G. in *Last Essays* / Jonathan Cape / first published 1942 / p. 9.

'Rhetoric... thought of... as *effective communication*.' Coomaraswamy, *ibid.* p. 18, note.

what it meant;³⁶ nor, since he could not wholly accept this, did he wholly reject it. To him a well-made idol (I use the word loosely) was a valid hymn to Being—and as such, analogically, an oblique homage to the One True God. Thus he could, in the realm of art, appreciate a *Siva Nataraja* to the height of its formal beauty without emptying it of its significance. Equally conscious as he was of the rival claims of Art and of Prudence, he neither confused aesthetic (formal) with ethical (moral) value, nor prescind from the one or from the other. Such a habit of thought made it hard for him at times to remember that others could and did so prescind. Consequently he was liable to presuppose that whoever accepted a work of art as *form*, accepted it also as *word*. Thus he ran the risk, while working out the logical implications of his ideas, of carrying these further than others might deem warrantable and so of outdistancing apparent sympathisers, all the time fondly imagining them to be still abreast of him.

This was most probably the case in the evolution, through a troubled period, of the *Driving out of the Money-changers*. What on Ditchling Common was in fact a plain statement of a stable ethical position might appear, amid the wartime turmoil of industrial and academic Leeds, an ephemeral and inopportune political gesture.

~ One thing is certain—that Eric Gill was as incapable as was Sir Michael Sadler of any deceitful or dishonourable action. Patron and sculptor, both in their own way, were men of integrity and of noble intent, and both of them unselfishly devoted to the cause of the arts. Peace to their souls!

36 'What is a work of art? A word made flesh... A word, that which emanates from mind. Made flesh; a thing, a thing seen, a thing known, the immeasurable translated into terms of the measurable. From the highest to the lowest that is the substance of works of art. And it is a rhetorical activity.' E.G. op. cit. pp. 19-20.