ERIC GILL: A RETROSPECT

DESMOND CHUTE

I—HOPKINS' CRANK (1913-1924)

'I WONDER how many people have spent five minutes today thinking about the Incarnation.' The speaker was Father Vincent McNabb. It was during the first world war and the Rosary had just been said in the Gills' living-room kitchen on Ditchling Common. In default of a chapel, Compline was sung nightly in this long low candle-lit room. At one end two candles burned beside a crucifix on the mantel-shelf, at the other a stone niche flush with the whitewashed wall enshrined a small figure of Our Lady suckling the Divine Child; lights and shadows flickered around their feet from a wick floating in a bowl hollowed out of the same stone. Between these two focal points of light, members of the families and of the workshops, guests and friends, stood on either side of the refectory table so as to form two choirs. Eric acted as cantor or maybe one of the girls; more often Betty whose voice was as plumb in the middle of the note, as English-sweet as her father's.

Later on, Compline came to be chanted in one of the new workshops and finally in the Guild Chapel. But neither the shadowy resonance of the lofty shop nor the quietude of the white chapel ever recaptured quite the same spontaneity of intimate absorption in the Church's twilight prayer as transfigured nightly that cottage kitchen.

Hopkins' Crank was at that time a neat square toy of a house on the western fringe of the Common, an untouched Georgian squatter's cottage, preceded by a porch and diminutive fenced garden. Here amid sweet william, honesty and marigolds there grew two rose-bushes of the kind which, on stems furry with prickles, bears amid many deep-grooved leaves large flat single blooms, white or magenta. These stand out in my recollection as the only flower I ever saw Eric pluck. '*There's* a rose for you!' His taste was satisfied, his mind moved by its 'heraldic quality' (always a favourite word of his and never more so than at this time).

The trim sash-windows, the 'stone-colour' paint led naturally up to the wooden latches, the scrubbed refectory table, the Dutch brass chandelier, the pewter mugs and dishes, the wooden platters and, somewhat less naturally, to the Omega Workshop plates. Occasional drawbacks were not unknown, as when once during grace the logs collapsed in the open fire-place and the whole family's mid-day meal went up in an odour of burnt-sacrifice. But these were inherent in a generation which had been only just in time to recapture (for how long?) the simpler traditions of country life.

Having arrived at dusk, I was not prepared for the morning view out of my bedroom facing south: pigeons circling around a dove-cote in the midst of a yard lined with workshops; on the right the stone-masons', on the left, next to a large wain in a shed, a big black shop where Eric stone-carved, whence there jutted out at right angles a lower red-roofed shop in which he drew and engraved. An opening between this and a similar shed marked JOSEPH CRIBB led the eye through a meadow to the top of Bull's Brow and thence across the hidden Weald to the Downs and open sky. Quince, apple and medlar bloomed in the orchard behind the house. Grey in the shadow of the workshops, sudden as a monolith on Easter Island, stood Gill's first colossal carved figure—MULIER.

'Those are pleasant days when young men and men in the prime of life argue and debate about the divine mysteries and concoct schemes for the building of new societies, and they were pleasant days for us.'[1] Apostolic days too. Eric went about with a penny Catechism in his pocket ready for the first enquirer; and we used to leave in trains and such places pamphlets printed by Hilary Pepler, more especially *Does the Catholic Church protect Work People?* a mosaic of texts from the *Rerum Novarum*, which the C.S.G. had declined to publish without a commentary and which Fr Vincent, the compiler, had refused to water down.

We had frequent visitors from the Fabian and L.C.C. world Gill and Pepler had recently left, and from the still fresh Catholic world they had entered. Prominent among these were the Friars Preachers. Fr Austin Barker it was, blithest of Dominicans and always a devoted friend of the Gills and of the Guild, who inspired me to go to Ditchling. There I first saw Fr Vincent and

1 Eric Gill: *Autobiography* (Cape: ninth impression, 1944), p. 206.

there I remember him best. To see Fr Vincent between the wide Common and the Sussex sky, crossing the meadows in his habit against the low ribbon of blue Downs, entering workshop and cottage, Breviary and New Testament under his arm, scattering everywhere seeds of truth and justice, was to understand what was said of St Dominic—that he spoke only to God or of him.

We were dependent upon visiting priests for Holy Mass, the nearest church being nearly three miles away across the Common. Our first chapel was a converted stable beside the printing shop at Hallett's. In the summer, clergy came from the Sacred Heart parish in Glasgow, as intent on working out the implications of *Rerum Novarum* in the slums as we were in the country. One of these, Dr Flood, afterwards remained in particularly close contact with the Gill family, often acting as chaplain at Capel-y-ffin and at Pigotts. Our fellow Tertiary too, John Canon Gray was wont to come from Edinburgh about the feast of the Assumption.

There were memorable afternoons as when Abbot Butler, (of the *Lausiac History*) *en clergyman* with a black boater, strode puffing into the houses and without further preamble banged his fist among the tea-cups to drive home a point debated in a previous argument. And there were hectic week-ends. I remember one in which we sat round the table all night while A. J. Penty expounded what in one of the more hilarious productions of the Press (and one of the few of that period which owed nothing directly to E.G.), Pepler was later to call 'pentyousness',[2] Mary Gill dozing the while. Gently recalled by her husband, she was heard to murmur: 'I was just waiting until you came round again'. On another Saturday all-night session, Fr Francis Burdett, then still of the Society and all bandaged from, I think, a street accident, broke in with scorn: 'As though God were *ethical*!' Nor did discussion cease when visitors and reporters had turned life at Ditchling into one long week-end. For it was at Capel, after the flight to the Black Mountains, that the last candle guttered out revealing to Denis Tegetmeier and myself a new day breaking and the vanity of bedward thoughts.

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2 'and pentyousness fulfil the years'. *Libellus Lapidum*: verses and engravings.... by H.P. and D.J..... (St Dominic's Press, Ditchling, MCMXXIV), p. 17.

II—Integral Anarchist or Integral Christian?

'To make a cell of good living in the chaos of our world'. Every step in Eric Gill's life was governed by that aim. He gave up architecture and took up the modest craft of lettering because it seemed more compatible with a good way of life; he left London and helped to found an ideal community at Ditchling, and when the life at Ditchling was spoilt by unwelcome publicity, he went into the wilds of Wales. When life in Wales became too difficult, he came to Buckinghamshire and found what he wanted—a quadrangle of decent English brick buildings—'the only decent way to live—and there he stayed until he died.'[3]

With the exception of the epithet *ideal*, it would be impossible to sum up Gill's life or the Gill ethos more justly or more movingly than in these grave smooth periods. Therefore it is sad to find so sympathetic a critic as Mr Herbert Read almost wilfully misunderstanding Gill's conception of work and accusing him of continual equivocation in the use of the very word. Alas, who then shall be saved? For few thinkers were at greater pains than Gill to define their terms. In this context he repeatedly distinguished between making and doing, between anonymity and irresponsibility, between art (= skill in making) and mass-production.

Is it not obvious that every man has his own way of doing things and of making things? Just as no two handwritings are the same, so no two men dig, thatch, weave, lay bricks in the same way, nor any two women beat an egg to the same effect. Every individual leaves his or her mark on the thing made, no matter how simple, how humble, not because they want to project their personality onto it, but because they cannot help doing so. Thus there is necessarily and inevitably established a *qualitative* difference between things made by a person and things made by a machine. Gill admired machines, he approved of many of their simpler and more typical products; but he refused to waive the distinction between one of these and 'the product of the fully human workman'. This distinction, often explicit, is always implied in his use of the word *work*. 'I still desire the human world of human work.'[4]

'Gill spoke and wrote deliberately "on the level of human

3 Herbert Read: *A Coat of Many Colours* (Routledge, 1947), p. 7.
4 Eric Gill: *Sacred and Secular* (Dent, 1940), p. 198.

speech and thought".'[5] Now language is not so rich nor thought so poor as to afford each word a single meaning. It is essential but sufficient, as Fr Vincent never failed to point out, that disputants should define the meaning of terms in the context under discussion. This requires concerted goodwill. Writing to Mr Read in 1934, E.G. confesses to being 'disturbed by the adverse parts of (his) criticism, and I'm all the more disturbed because it seems to me there's a sort of perversity in what you say'.[6]

He would have been more disturbed had he been able to read the chapter on himself in that fascinating collection of essays *A Coat of many Colours*, wherein Mr Read repeats in 1945 several points that E.G. had ably countered in a remarkable letter written—characteristically enough, in a train—eleven years before[7] and further elucidated in another quoted by H.R. as having been written 'a few days before he died'.[8]

Mr Read himself equivocates in the use of words, sometimes to splendid effect. Defending E.G. from the charge of eccentricity, he proclaims him 'a rationalist'. The hit is palpable, true, for Gill's way of life was indeed 'determined by a rational aim' and his philosophy, like that of St Thomas, based upon reason;—witty, too, inasmuch as in neither of these is the meaning of the word *rationalist* likely to leap to the average reader's mind.

Again, Mr Read envies the 'integrity' with which E.G. managed to live like an anarchist. When Eric wrote that he agreed about 'the ultimate truth of anarchism',[9] he spoke within the framework of an 'integral religion' recognised by his correspondent as 'embracing the whole of life'. 'It is a primary doctrine of Christianity that men are unique persons. It is as persons that they are unique whereas as individuals they may not be.'[10] This Mr Read accepts as a 'distinction fundamental to anarchism'. But Eric's was an anarchism controlled by the magnet of God's love, moving freely in an ordered cosmos according to the law of *Love God and do what thou wilt*. If E.G. was, as H.R. saw him, an integral anarchist, he was an anarchist integrated in the Mystical Body of Christ.

5 Donald Attwater: *Eric Gill: Workman* (James Clarke), p. 59.
6 *Letters of Eric Gill*, edited by Walter Shewring (Cape, 1947), No. 210.
7 *ibid.*
8 Herbert Read: *op. cit.*, p. 5.
9 H.R. *ibid.*
10 E.G. quoted by H.R., *ibid.*

To Gill not only were all persons 'uniques' but all human works were 'uniques' too.[11] Man's making is an extension of his personality. It is here that Eric and his critic part company. E.G. maintains that all men are essentially, at least potential, makers, whereas H.R. holds that 'a certain faculty which the Germans call *Gestaltungsfaehigkeit*—the ability to think in plastic images—is not a normal faculty, but the possession of those abnormal people called artists'.[12] I venture to think that here Mr Read trips up over the application of his own principle of '*qualitative* differentiation'.[13] Supposing we were to say that the normal inmates of an asylum are lunatics, this would be a somewhat loose expression of a statistical fact; it would be no guarantee of their personal 'normalcy'. Likewise the statistical frequency or the reverse of what E.G. prefers to call 'imaginative making' is irrelevant to the nature of the normal Adam. 'My view is that art is making (... ability to make, ... ability to *imagine* the thing to be made).... I don't think it *is* abnormal to possess the rudiments of this 'imaginative making' in spite of the tendency of industrialism to deprive the factory hand and the clerk of any opportunity of exercising that power.'[14]

On the other hand, it is misleading to say that Gill 'renounced the whole basis of our civilisation.... because his philosophy saw no function for the artist in the machine age'.[15] He merely noted this fact as symptomatic of both the age and its artists. For art in the nineteenth-twentieth century sense of the word, he has precious little use. 'As to the so-called fine arts—the lap-dog arts—their eclipse would be all to the good.'[16] Not that he was indifferent to contemporary development—witness his respect for Maillol, Dobson, Moore; his interest in the Spencers' painting, Cocteau's drawing, Bartok's quartets; his life-long friendship and admiration for David Jones; only he recognised the 'fine-artist's' position as being perforce parasitic. Yet he saw the parasite as victim too, and though in friendly debate he might have exclaimed 'To hell with the fellow', as he had written 'To hell with

11 *Letters*. No. 159 to Romney Green.
12 H.R. *op. cit.* p. 9 (note).
13 Herbert Read: *The Philosophy of Anarchism* (Freedom Press; seventh impression, 1947), p. 10.
14 E.G. *Letters*. No. 211.
15 H.R. *Coat of Many Colours*, p. 9 (note).
16 E.G. *Sacred and Secular*, p. 196.

culture', he loved his fellow-man, especially as maker, far too well to abandon him without protest to the fate of a van Gogh or a Modigliani, a Hugo Wolf or a Henry Jonas. Yet the fact remains that it was not for the man in the studio that his withers were wrung, but for the man in the workshop. If he did reject our civilisation, it was because it had no place for the free man. 'I hoped I had made it clear that my complaint against machine industry was that it destroyed [not 'the personal "quality in modern art" but] the personal quality in the modern workman'.[17]

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III—The Craftsman

The Armistice found the carver and engraver in full early maturity. Technique, no longer an adventure and not yet a lure, was sheer delight. It was years now since he had discovered first 'a reasonable basis for lettering' and then 'a reasonable workshop life'. At the end of the war, his first apprentices came back and were joined by others, among these Denis Tegetmeier and David Jones. Gill's first major carving had revealed an image-maker such as England had not seen since the Black Death. His small Madonnas in bronze and plaster of this period are unconscious works of 'the Golden Middle Age'. The impetus which produced the twelfth Westminster Station was yet to spend itself in kindred works—the same motive engraved and printed in gold on purple-black paper, or carved in black Sussex marble and gilded, the superb aureoled head of our Lord built into the printing shop at Hallett's before leading on to other but no less sacred roods, a King at Bisham cross-roads; a Man of Sorrows offered (alas in vain) as a gift to Westminster Cathedral. A like freedom from idiosyncrasy marks the wood-engravings of this period—Christ in Judgment, the 'Gallows' Madonna, *Gloriam vidi* and, finest of all in its heavenly heraldry, *Agnus redemit oves.*

E.G. had now been a Catholic for over five years. Many of his pupils, and indeed most of his *entourage*, followed him into the Church. Workshops, temporary or permanent, were springing up on neighbouring ground—on Spoil Bank whence a fifteen-foot figure of the Crucified dominated the approach to the

17 E.G. *Letters.* No. 210.

Common, and in a field near by, grouped around a chapel where the Little Office was sung by the Tertiary members of the Guild of SS. Joseph and Dominic. The Press, now 'St Dominic's' and housed within the Guild precincts, was turning out its most beautiful printing.

The sculptor's next big job, the Leeds War Memorial, had an eventful history which shall be told another time. Eric hoped that it would prove his *magnum opus*; yet somehow it missed, though narrowly. Was it too large and not large enough, thus falling short of the true structure of its proportions? Incidentally, however, we owe to it one of his finest sacred works, a stone model of the wrathful Christ, a conception which, here far outsoaring size, owes much to a theme of Fr Vincent's—Jesus as the last of the Prophets.

While he was carving the five big stones of this memorial the mounting indiscretion of journalists became a menace to work on Ditchling Common. The following year witnessed the flight to Wales. There he did not carve much, but the first carving he made—'a black marble torso of Our Lord (a "Deposition")'—turned out to be the only one with which he ever professed himself wholly satisfied.

To anyone who has learnt a craft in a workshop, the elaborate *expertise* whose aim is to spot the Master's hand and isolate his work from that of the school is simply laughable. The touches of the master hand are as fleeting as they are frequent, whereas the imprint of his mind is everywhere and often not least in what he has least touched.

At times someone would happen to single out an inscription of which Eric would say: 'I'm glad you like that: Albert (or Laurie or Denis) cut it.' He no more sought to conceal the fact than it would have occurred to him to show or sell the stone under the assistant's name. In the workshop anonymity stands for distinction and not privation. There was no shortage of outstanding masons in the Middle Ages; that is why they ceased to stand out. Besides, anonymity is more than mere namelessness: it is not just an historical accident, but a peculiar positive quality. 'If every single medieval carving were signed and not a single modern one, it would still be true that medieval art is "anonymous" and modern art isn't.'[18]

18 E.G. *ibid.*

But how comes the disciple thus to outstrip his master? Whereas the master's mind, his potency of imaginative making, is always *in fieri* (self-criticism of present, preparing the way for future, work), the apprentice, knowing neither *arrière-pensées* nor *pentimenti*, is free to realise the job in hand. Untrammelled, he carries this to the utmost perfection of which it is susceptible.

This is the only valid sense in which one can speak of 'stylistic formulae'. The suggestion made by a reviewer in these pages that 'Eric Gill.... brought about a situation fraught with as many artificialities as that from which he tried to rescue religious art in England'[19] betrays a woeful misunderstanding of what he wrought and taught: 'What a man!'.... wrote one who knew him at close quarters.... 'If I remain a fool, it will not be for want of an example of wisdom.'[20] For Gill inculcated a way of life and a mode of work, both consonant with human nature; he accepted all such idioms as are their natural fruit. The immemorial system of workshop and apprenticeship which he practised is a plant propagated by root division, not by seed. Is it the gardener's fault if children will lean over the fence and pick flowers doomed to wither?

On the other hand Anthony Foster's carvings spring naturally from his way of working and are both akin to and different from his master's. An ivory by Philip Hagreen differs subtly from one by Eric Gill, while of Denis Tegetmeier, surely the most accomplished letterer we have, it may be said that his work bears the same relation to Gill's as the music of Johann Christian to that of J. S. Bach.

'His own solution', far from being 'one of escapism', was conspicuously the opposite. There are turning points in history in which flight to the wilderness is the most practical of politics. No doubt 'the idiom' of the Thebaid was 'out of touch with the urgencies of fourth-century civilisation', yet it rehumanised Europe because it meant facing facts and escaping to, not from, reality; whereas 'escapism', if it means anything at all, means flight away from reality on refusal to face facts.

The same writer's complaint that E.G.'s art 'fails to achieve an equivalent grandeur to that expressed by the fifteenth-century Flemish masters' works' displays a disarming lack of historical

19 M. Shirley: *An æsthetic vacuum* in Blackfriars, February 1950.
20 P.H. to D.C. From Capel-y-ffin, September 16th, 1924.

perspective. What valid comparison can be drawn between the sunset glow of a centuries old tradition of technical prowess—grown paramount since devotion replaced awe and curiosity ousted wonder—and the uncertain dawn of a new culture? We are nearer contemporaries with Bonanno de Pisa and Wiligelmus than with van Eyck.

David Jones is almost certainly 'right in saying that Gill was the first artist in this country after a lapse of some generations, to work directly on the stone'.[21] He was essentially a forerunner leading us back to the beginning.

His initial experiments were in the profane, but he very soon turned to the sacred and there forged his first firm idiom. Later he was to pass from one category to the other without effort, as only a deeply religious craftsman can. Thus wrought the medieval artisans; thus the monk of Reading, di Lasso, Byrd, Bach, Haydn; thus Tintoretto and Rubens and, in our own day, Maurice Denis (he too a Tertiary).

There have been craftsmen who with prayer and fasting strove to blazon the otherness of God, e.g. the great Greek and Russian makers of ikons. Others have preferred to show forth his homeliness: such for the most part is the incarnational art of the West. And such in substance, however heraldic in form, is Eric Gill's. To him every making was a word made flesh.

Posterity will probably value more highly his sacred inspiration and judge him by such works as the Westminster '*Consummatum est*', the 'Creation of Adam' in the Palace of the League of Nations at Geneva, and the group known to the many as 'Prospero and Ariel,' but by him conceived as God the Father and the Son:

'In the beginning was the Word'.

Note: Fr Desmond Chute's study of Eric Gill will be continued in future issues of BLACKFRIARS.

21 *Eric Gill as Sculptor* in Blackfriars, February 1941.