

THE BEAUTY OF HONESTY

EXACTLY a hundred years ago, in 1831, Thomas Carlyle published his *Sartor Resartus* which, in his amusing manner of mock bombast, he claimed to be the first contribution of a fundamental character addressed to the British reader on the Philosophy of Clothes. It is probably quite an accident that Mr. Eric Gill's book, *Clothes*,¹ appears in this year of grace 1931: there is no evidence that he is falling in with the modern craze for celebrating obscure centenaries, or that he has any wish to revive interest in that solemn, sombre man who used to be called (how strange it sounds now!) the Sage of Chelsea. In fact, the two books bear little relation to one another, and they are separated by more important and significant things than by the big gap of a century. They agree in these particulars; each is very much the product of its age, dated 1831 and 1931 respectively; each is written by a man of genius who has an interest in stone-cutting, though many will agree that Mr. Gill's gift is pre-eminently for designing and sculpture and the cutting of letters, and less conspicuously for letters pure and simple; and each is in the nature of a satire which must have given its author great joy to write—Carlyle's inclining to be sardonic and somewhat turgid, Gill's more of a brilliant school-boy lark, scurrilous and Rabelaisian.

Mr. Eric Gill in his writings implicitly claims to be a disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas. Therefore, he should be expected to have made himself acquainted with those parts of his master's works wherein the subject-matter of his present book on Clothes is treated.

¹*Clothes*: An essay upon the nature and significance of the natural and artificial integuments worn by men and women. By Eric Gill; with ten diagrams engraved by the author. (Jonathan Cape; 10/6.)

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For instance, it is one of Mr. Gill's fundamental errors that clothing is natural to man. Carlyle is more Thomistic on this point, for, he says, man is 'by nature a *Naked Animal*; and only in certain circumstances, by purpose and device, masks himself in Clothes.' But for Mr. Gill man may be described as a Clothed Animal, and 'nakedness is not horrid, but simply unnatural.' St. Thomas's teaching is that clothing is natural to *fallen* man—a statement which Mr. Gill definitely puts aside. He says: 'Clothes are for dignity and adornment—that is the central truth of the matter. And in saying this, we do not in the least refute any doctrine of the Fall of Man—we simply transcend it; we go behind and beyond any question as to whether Adam wore a fig-leaf or breeches or an apron. Such a question is almost uninteresting; it is certainly irrelevant. We simply do not care' (p. 98). The point is that he ought to care, because the central truth of the matter is in the fact of Original Sin—the Fall of Man. 'Clothing is necessary to man in his present state of unhappiness for two reasons,' says St. Thomas.² 'First, to supply a deficiency in respect of external harm caused by, for instance, extreme heat or cold. Secondly, to hide his ignominy and to cover the shame of those members wherein the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit is most manifest. Now these two motives do not apply to the primitive state; because then man's body could not be hurt by any outward thing, nor was there in man's body anything shameful that would bring confusion on him. Hence it is written (Gen. ii, 23): *And they were both naked, to wit Adam and his wife, and unashamed.*'

The Fall has brought about a number of consequences which Mr. Gill does not seem to take into

²IIa, IIae, 164, 2, ad 8m.

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account. Christian teaching, supported by our own experience, tells us of the rebellion of body against soul, the warfare of the flesh against the spirit which original sin has caused. Not for one moment does Mr. Gill deny this fundamental Christian doctrine. God forbid! But he does seem to ignore its implications. In fact, he says: 'We simply do not care.' If man had not sinned, there would have been no death, no disease nor dirt, also with regard to the matter in hand it must be remembered that there would be no need for prudence of the 'safety first' kind; there would be no debate between the man of prudence and the man of art; there would be no disquietude or preoccupation about sex or clothing; there would be no puritans to be shocked by Mr. Gill's 'lewd little larks' and, indeed, Mr. Gill would have no inclination to indulge in them. Now, since all these consequences of original sin are so closely knitted into his thesis, we think that he should not dismiss the Fall as irrelevant—as a matter about which he simply does not care. Clothes may add dignity and adornment to man; but that is not their primary purpose: essentially and firstly they are for protection from the elements, for comfort and for decency, and this is so because of the Fall.

There are many strange things in this book; for instance, the suggestion that men and women should adopt more or less the same style of dress,³ to wit a kind of kilt, and, again, the suggestion that there is no future for the Christian religion until churches are emptied of organ, pulpit, stained-glass windows, etc., and the whole lot cast out into the graveyard. One wonders whether Mr. Gill is writing impishly with his tongue in his cheek, or merely pulling his readers' legs

³*Cf.* IIa, IIae, 169, 2, ad 3^m for St. Thomas's reasons why women should not wear men's clothes and *vice versa*.

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or noses. It is a pity if such an impression should prevent any reader from seeing the excellence and truth of so much in the book that has been written wisely and well.

We all know what Mr. Gill means when he declaims against the furniture and ornaments to be found in many modern churches; but the Christian religion, whether past, present or future, is in no way dependent on these material things. Are we to think that the first Christian Family was over-solicitous about the aesthetic surroundings when they made a beginning in Bethlehem?

There is a *decor honestatis*, which has been inadequately translated as 'the beauty of honesty,' of which St. Thomas speaks when he is dealing with this very matter of clothing, *compositio exteriorum motuum pertinet ad decorem honestatis*. An obsession of the mind with mere physical beauty, with the objects of sight and touch, may dim our perception of that transcendental beauty, the *splendor ordinis* which belongs to virtue. And supernatural virtue is the gift of Eternal Beauty, ever ancient, ever new. Even the moral virtues are something more than expedients against sin. True, they are correctives and forces against passion, they are God's redemption applied to fallen man; but they have an essential and intrinsic beauty, and they would have been man's adornment and glory had he never failed. The beauty of holiness transcends all beautifulness because it is a certain participation in that Infinite Beauty which is the Holy Ghost. Prudishness is not prudence and puritanism is not purity. The body is more than the raiment, the soul is more than the body, God is more than them all.

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