

## THE SCULPTURE OF ANTHONY FOSTER

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**H**AVING rashly consented to the Editor's request for an article on my brother I find myself doubly embarrassed; by having to write about my brother and about art. But the latter embarrassment is the worse. Being assured of his entire unconcern, I do not really mind discussing my brother in public. Indeed the situation has its advantages; it compels one, at least, to try to be objective. But to play at art-criticism is a game I do not relish.

Let me begin with the fact, plain to me, that my brother's is a quiet talent. Decidedly not precocious as a boy, he had turned twenty before a bent for carving showed strongly in him. It came then with remarkable spontaneity; not chosen to suit a theory, still less a pose; hardly encouraged by others; not even, it seemed, the result of any specially urgent desire for self-expression. He never appeared tormented or oppressed by any abundance of feeling and imagery striving for an outlet. He was recollected rather than expansive. And so, though its range has widened, his art essentially remains; content with relatively few images. Yet he is drawing attention now, not only because (and this is his own chief conscious concern) his figures evince good craftsmanship, but also because of a quality in them, let me risk calling it a certain sober sweetness, which I shall try, I will not say to define, but to suggest, summarily, in these few remarks.

My brother learned his craft from Eric Gill, during seven years in the workshops at Pigotts or on tour with that master. He is quite the reverse of an autodidact, not only in fact but mentally. It must be emphasised that he does not, cannot, fling himself at anything. It is not inertia; he is most warmly alive; and has in fact lived an extremely hard life. But he has a deep vein of diffidence, inseparable in him from sincerity. He absolutely cannot pretend; and to jump is to guess, and to guess is pretentious. He starts from just where he is: with an urge to carve, almost as natural as breathing, and an implicit assurance that he can produce nothing of value until he has deeply and thoroughly received. It is like the spirit of the novice in religion; and such indeed Anthony was for

nearly a year. It was on leaving Woodchester, on finding that after all he had to follow his bent and carve, that he turned to Eric Gill; and so began a new novitiate; or perhaps continued the former one in a new way.

From Gill he got his skill, and up to a point his style too. It is of course impossible to determine this 'point' exactly. But the question of this particular pupil's originality is settled by some in his disfavour. He is, they say, not 'original'. The charge is worth considering.

In the first place the conception (taught by Gill) of carving as a craft to be learned, like any other, disposes one to take an 'objective' view of the sculptor's function, and so to discount somewhat the element of individual fancy or genius; especially if this craft is regarded not only as a private livelihood, but also, and in a sense chiefly, as the provision of objects for the public eye and the public mind. And lettering and statuary are rather public things. Stone outlasts the individual. The very elements of his craft dispose the sculptor to face outwards to the public. No wonder, then, if he conceives that he exists in order to make good serviceable images. The urge to make images is presupposed, along with some fancy, wit and feeling; but not that you know how to make them. This, the technique, must be learned from a master; who if he is, like Gill, at once a clear thinker and a beautiful workman, will inevitably propose a *norm*. The norm in this case sprang from attention to the nature of sculpture, with a stress on its public function, on its power to convey, with exceptional stability and visibility, universal ideas. Granted that one can form a fairly accurate idea of the nature of sculpture, including at least the above-mentioned notes, some minimum norm imposes itself. But it does so in fact through the style of the master; hence we are forced to try to discriminate between what is truly normative and general and what is individual and therefore inimitable. The question arises with regard to any pupil of Gill.

Of course, in any particular work, precisely as particular, the individual and the normative are inseparable, are the undivided effect of one man's touch; the particular mark of the chisel resists abstraction, like the individual himself. Still, in thought one may effect a separation. What then is normative in the style of Gill? I suggest these: linear beauty, respect for the native character of materials, and a certain rationality in the treatment of subjects—

human figures, sacred and secular, animals, etc., and of course letters. Enough, here to point to these three factors, which in other contexts would call for closer definition; and it is surely arguable that they are in truth contained in the ideal norm of sculpture as a *public art, are universally appropriate thereto, are to be regarded as normal*. This is not to say, however, that, because Gill's art usually displays these qualities in some degree, it must be taken as the universal *model*.

Gill's individuality, through which the norm was displayed, was marked by an extraordinary energy and a peculiar delight in the shape of things, especially of the body. The energy was notably intellectual, and his sculptured figures constantly suggest a preoccupation with ideas by their economy of detail, their emotional reserve and something in the taut exultant poise they so often possess. But the great volume of his work is witness that Gill's energy ran into the hard day-labour of the workshop. And in this my brother is like his master. But it cannot be said that he has the same mental force. His figures have not the power of Gill's. They are economical, reserved, serene; but behind these qualities is a less masterful intellect and a less passionate sensibility.

It is indeed not easy to get the particular quality of my brother's work into focus, to see it as truly *other* than his master's. An element of mere submission to the latter's manner—including confusedly the 'normative' and the 'individual'—need not be excluded; it is in any case being outgrown, I think. It is more important to note that, so far as the pupil's work has what I have called economy and reserve, it holds to that norm for the public arts of sculpture and lettering which Gill may be said to have exemplified in thought and deed. The line, exact and delicate, sensitive and severe—the most evident merit, I suppose, of Gill's carving—has certainly passed into the pupil's imagination and (what is more) governs his hand. So also the regard for the native quality of materials. The rationality reappears in my brother's clear and sober figures. The peculiar force of Gill, that power which seems to owe little or nothing to mere size (can one say the same of Michelangelo?), though it could, one feels, inform ever larger masses of stone, this indeed has remained with the master, the mark of a fecundity unrivalled since. It is observable that my brother tends to work on a smaller scale and is notably happy in the medium of wood. But with this diminution in scale and force

comes a fresh positive quality, delicate but authentic.

I hope it is not irrelevant or embarrassing to introduce a point of morals here. St Thomas connects gentleness, *mansuetudo*, with the cardinal virtue of temperance, as connoting a mitigation or moderation of passion, in this case the passion of anger. Thus it renders a man self-possessed, *compos sui*; the special effect of which is to open the mind to receive truth by removing the impulse to contradict, which so often arises *ex commotione irae* (II-II, 157, 4). This seems to me relevant. I am disposed to connect my brother's docility in discipleship, which I have been stressing, with a certain gentleness or, better, with the fine grain of sweetness that gives so much of his work its particular flavour. It is a very sober sweetness, a grain only; you must watch for it. It appears, as is natural, most in his figures' faces, in the carving of which my brother's chisel seems to go to work, as a rule, a little more softly (if that is the word) than did Gill's; with a less hard strict severity; but with more 'expression' in the result. His faces have more expression, as a rule, than Gill's. They are a trifle more individualised; they show a trace more sentiment. Yet, if the expressions *tend* towards individuality, the type of sentiment suggested does not itself vary much.

This sentiment might be called a sweet gravity. You may sense it in a dozen figures picked at random of Christ and our Lady, in the little wooden crib figures, in the splendid Sacred Heart reproduced here, in the delicately moulded oaken crucifix that hangs in our refectory at Cambridge. For this art is homely, for all its delicate reserve; the artist has much of the peasant in him.

The type of sentiment, I say, does not vary much; variety belongs to the single specimens, as in all things made by hand. The 'type' has imposed itself, apparently, with the subject-matter of the bulk of my brother's work, since he set up on his own, which is the 'sacred'—a field in which 'sweetness' (the word is convenient) might seem to grow rather easily. As an inventive artist he might indeed benefit from a widening of the field, from being compelled to deal with a greater diversity of forms and images. Circumstances have, so far, limited his choice. To make a living he has had to plough and replough his own particular patch. He is best known as a worker in Christian themes. He has five children. And anyhow the great crucifix on the outer wall of Guildford Cathedral witnesses to a certain width of scope span-

ning the difference between it and the little box-wood cribs.

The demand for variety is often only a desire to have things cheap; it is often vulgar. Art may indeed be boisterous, rampant, nervous or weird, and still be very good art in its way; but in the clamour there is danger that we overlook work that speaks clearly, quietly and steadily of holiness. Perhaps we have to train ourselves to see a beauty so unspectacular and so bare. But the effort is rewarding—and merited. There has been attempted amongst us, during the past thirty years, and in the face of most discouraging odds, the revival of an art at once Christian and rational. We Catholics cannot afford to ignore it; nor can England. And where else if not among Christians, can reason walk with beauty and poverty with freedom? It is, I think, as one who has done something to bring this ideal into his daily work that my brother would like to be remembered.

#### NOTICE

The April issue of *BLACKFRIARS* will contain an article on David Jones by Harman Grisewood.