

by Adrian Cunningham

Writing of Eric Gill some years ago Graham Greene remarked that 'catholicism in England instead of producing revolutionaries, produces only eccentrics, and that Gill was a disturbing intruder among the eccentrics . . . That overpowering tradition of eccentricity simply absorbed him until even his most outrageous anti-clerical utterances caused only a knowing smile on the face of the faithful.' And we have seen quite a lot of those silly weary smiles yet again in the reception of Mr Speaight's biography of Gill<sup>1</sup>. Rarely can such a beautifully produced and expensive book have received such accolades for the biographer's skill and such a confident dismissal of the subject. One sees the book being read with a nostalgic regret for the sunny days of such delightful chesterbelloc buffoonery with all the home-grunnit food, tunics and sandals, and placed on the shelf with a sad shrug, 'Poor Gill'.

I do not want to be misunderstood, Gill was certainly eccentric in many respects, his views on monarchy and the indecency of husband and wife kneeling together in church, for example, and Mr Speaight has valuably stressed Gill's victorian formation which plays an important part in all this. He has also filled in many of the gaps in the *Autobiography*, particularly the incidents leading up to the removal from Ditchling, his documentation is wide and admirably integrated. Gill's biography is perhaps an unenviable and delicate task, but I think the reception of the book and the confirmation of Gill's place among the wayward cranks of English catholicism owes something to the biographer's interpretation of his subject, or rather the interpretation he fails to make.

There is a false show of an evaluation in the preface:

His importance was in the exact sense of the word prophetic. Whether you regarded him as a John the Baptist or a Jeremiah . . . whether you believed him inspired or merely opinionated; whether you considered him a sublime failure or an amateur revolutionary – he could not be ignored.

Indeed both the elements indicated are frequently mixed in Gill's life but when Mr Speaight comments on a pretty commonplace remark of the 1930s that it has 'prophetic reverberations' of the nuclear threat, the almost ludicrously portentous nature of the

<sup>1</sup>*The Life of Eric Gill*, Methuen, 63s.

comment makes one wonder about his qualifications as an interpreter, his sense of relevance. The doubt is enforced when one reads that 'The Spanish Civil War divided the catholics in England less than it divided them in France, but it divided them all the same,' for what follows is merely a brief account of Gill's attacks on Franco and his row with Archbishop Hinsley. (It may not be irrelevant to note on this and the general handling of Gill's 'fellow travelling' in the 30s that Mr Speaight was himself at that time very decidedly in the Franco camp.) For that cursory, apparently neutral statement is doing a lot of hard work, presumably unconscious, evading one of the decisive events in English catholicism this century. The other two are the reaction to modernism, and the condemnation of the Action Francaise in 1926: the latter is not even mentioned. Once one has noted these omissions the essential structure of intelligibility which the book lacks is revealed. For Gill's position can only be understood, on the one hand, in terms of that overpowering tradition which tried to absorb him and drove him to many of his extreme and probably indefensible assertions, and on the other, in terms of the work of his catholic contemporaries who represented the delusively radical reaction to that tradition, whilst in fact they were its final flower. An understanding of that period is of the first importance for ourselves as well for it formed, either directly or indirectly our contemporary catholic critical establishment; we need to get it into perspective so that we can see how we got to where we are and thus gain some real measure of our progress.

Such an analysis would have to show the impact on English catholicism of the condemnation of modernism and of the reactions to the Action Francaise and to neo-scholasticism in all its forms (once perhaps unfairly but provocatively described as 'thomistic fascism'). It would also have to show how the distributist movement came about, how far it was a real response to the pressures of contemporary experience and how far an escape from them; how far it was akin to some forms of guild socialism and how far it was simply the best that could be done with inherited catholic social thinking. Why was it that such an alarming number of its adherents ended in the Mosley movement or other forms of fascism? Or again, why was it that when a good proportion of catholics were de facto socialists, the whole catholic press with the honourable exception of the neutralist *Blackfriars* swung stridently behind Franco? Did these events, these particular schools of thought, represent a temporary aberration, or were they (as I would think) the zenith of catholic conservatism and liberalism as intellectually defensible and powerful arguments? Does that era represent the heyday of a lovable eccentricity and rather wild opinions, or is it in fact the ending of a whole tradition of catholic thinking despite the current twitchings of the corpse?

One was not expecting Mr Speaight to engage in an analytical

history of the catholic intelligentsia, but without at least the feeling for its main lines of intelligibility any proper evaluation of Gill is likely to be disabled from the start, and to fall either into the rather too frequent and lengthy lists his biographer gives us of people who shook hands with Gill or dropped in on him on the way to somewhere else, or in the other direction the remoter reaches of what Kessler called his 'pantheistic lasciviousness'. I stress this point because discussions of Gill's work as an engraver, sculptor and typographer whilst important, often serve to obscure his books and essays which so indelibly bear the mark of the same sensibility and the same preoccupations. It was sadly ironical for one paper reviewing this book to rescue from its typographical limbo a heading in Gill sans which read 'This is his lasting monument' and then have to explain the point in a footnote.

I am not so sure, not that is about his artistic work, but whether one can so sweepingly ignore his writings. Repetitive, naive, downright perverse they often seem; but they are also the repetitiveness of a man forced to hammer away at the blindingly obvious, the naiveté of a man who combined theory and practice with a ruthless consistency and the perversity of a man so justly at odds with his time that the extreme and the self-parodyingly humorous – an often forgotten element, I think, in Gill's makeup – afforded some refuge for sanity. When he said, 'I am an ordinary person who refuses to be bamboozled' one goes disastrously wrong if one cannot separate a determined and embattled integrity from the tone of the auto-didact. With all the reservations one might want to make, his essays wear extraordinarily well; it is not easy to think of another essayist of that period whom one could read today with as great an interest and sense of sympathy. One might certainly want to disagree with, or simply find no longer germane, some of his conclusions about private property and the machine, but the integrity and shrewdness of his imaginative and polemical judgment upon the threadbare 30's, upon the sheer degradation of industrialism, the obscenely effete twitterings of the nouveau riche and the supine bien-pensance of the church are still highly readable and the shafts still hit the target.

From the rural community to the vague anarchism of the late 30's Gill is a vulnerable figure from our present standpoint, a source of amusement to the liberals, an embarrassment to some of the radicals, and a thorn in the side of the Dominicans. But in dismissing him, ever so regretfully, of course, we are dismissing one of the few attempts at prophetic honesty in our own fairly recent past. The two page essay of 1918 *Slavery and Freedom* indicates more concisely than anything else the key to his work and to his continuing significance:

'That state is a state of slavery in which a man does what he likes to do in his spare time and in his working time that which is required of him . . . That state is a state of freedom in which a man does what he likes to do in his working time and in his spare

time that which is required of him . . . The test of a man's freedom is his responsibility as a workman. He who is free is responsible for his work. He who is not responsible for his work is not free.'

An amateur revolutionary? Well, perhaps yes, but the amateurism was that of a pioneer in a moral and intellectual desert and, though the terms have changed, the revolution remains just as necessary.

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A limited number of offprints are available (at 1s. 6d.) of Roy Shaw's article *Television: Freedom and Responsibility* which appeared in June 1966. (Mrs Mary Whitehouse comments on this article on page 54 of this issue.)