

## Robert Speaight and Adrian Cunningham

Mr Cunningham's very fair comments on my biography of Eric Gill suggest the curiosity of post-graduate research, and if we are all to be judged by what we said or thought in the dirty Thirties who shall 'scape whipping? The naiveté of those who believed in General Franco (or Juan March) as the last Crusader was matched by those who believed in the Spanish Republic as the bastion of liberal democracy. Miguel de Unamuno was only the most eminent of many liberal thinkers who exercised the normal human prerogative of changing his mind.

Mr Cunningham's review raises the very interesting question of the climate in which Catholic political thinking in the first half of the century grew up. Much of this thinking was done by converts. Now it is a fact that men who are naturally drawn to the principle of conservation and authority are more easily attracted to Catholicism than men of an opposite psychological and intellectual bent. This is not the best reason for joining the Church, but it is one of them. The ecclesial structure of the Church, however you qualify it, is in the last analysis monarchical. The Papacy is 'a career open to all the talents', but the Pope is absolute; and the devolution of his authority is hierarchically graded. When the Spanish Falangists called their revue *Jerarchia*, it was natural that many Catholics should have thought it was on the right lines. Re-reading an essay on my own conversion, written in 1932, I discover the names of De Maistre and T. E. Hulme. They are not the names I should quote today, but I am not surprised that I should have quoted them then.

The Catholic convert intelligentsia were all people of a reasonably good, and often of a profound, education. Most of them were steeped in the classics. They had a deep concern for what they called 'Christian civilisation', and they would have agreed with Maurras that it was much easier to destroy or erode a civilisation than to build it up. Some of them took over Belloc's simplifications lock, stock and barrel; others leant gratefully on the superior erudition and more balanced judgment

of Christopher Dawson. They applauded the Proto but not the Deutero Maritain, and they had scarcely heard of Le Roy or Blondel. With their reverence for the Papacy went a romantic *romanité*, which probably explained their incomprehensible indulgence towards the crudities of Italian Fascism. Mr Cunningham rightly points out that their reaction was essentially radical, although not in the sense that he approves. But when he comes to write his thesis, he must in justice make certain distinctions. Christopher Dawson, for example, had supported Franco, but his constitutional liberalism – the nearest approach that any of these writers made to the classical English political *ethos* – was too much for Douglas Jerrold when Jerrold had control of the *Dublin Review*. Dawson was the most distinguished editor the *Dublin* had ever had, and the manner of his removal from it was anything but *chic*. I presume that Mr Cunningham reads the *Tablet* – since he reads everything – although I certainly don't presume that he likes it. But if he compares the *Tablet* of thirty, or still more of thirty-five, years ago he will surely admit that some of the leopard's spots are not so blind that they can't be changed.

What has largely disappeared is Messianic anti-Communism. For this Eric Gill deserves all the credit that Mr Cunningham allows him; indeed there is nothing of what he says about Gill to which I should not subscribe. If I said the same thing with less sharp as emphasis, it was because a biography is not an apologia; and I was anxious to rescue Gill from some of his disciples as well as from any of his detractors. Nor could I undertake an autopsy of the Catholic intelligentsia; as it was, one reviewer complained of 'too much inner Catholicism'. I am also at one with Mr Cunningham in recognizing the importance of the *Action Française* condemnation – perhaps the most fertile act of the magisterium in the first half of the century. This divided Maritain from his more extreme right-wing adherents and led straight to *Humanisme Intégral*, which is quite obviously the breviary of the present Pontificate. But the *Action Française* has no

relevance to a life of Eric Gill; I doubt whether he knew what it was. Gill had a deep reverence for Chesterton and a deep regard for Christopher Dawson, but otherwise – some personal friendships apart – he stood quite outside the school of thought we are discussing, as Mr Cunningham very well sees. If you talked to him about ‘Christian civilisation’, he would have said, as he said to me, ‘I suppose you mean Manchester?’ The philofascist wing of Catholic thought made the same mistake about politics as they made about dogma; they assumed that both were fixed whereas both were developing, Communism included. But the failure of Eric

*Adrian Cunningham comments:*

Mr Speaight takes up the points made in my review accurately and generously. On the details of Gill’s importance and of the period as a whole I think we should probably come to agreement. But on the interpretation of these details, their placing in a full context and their relevance for us now, there are differences which are worth spelling out a little further for they have implications far beyond the issue of Mr Speaight’s book.

My interest in the catholic climate of the twenties and thirties is not in raking up particular bits of biographical information or in judging people by what they wrote then. Belonging to the English catholic community means that although I did not participate in it this is part of my history. Those debates developed standards of what is and what is not relevant to being catholic, set a context of assumptions about the role and function of the church which tend to predispose our current thinking, the kind of questions we ask, the kind of expectations we have. To understand our present position clearly we must understand how it came about. This seems very obvious, but it is precisely the work that is not being done; the reasons for this reluctance, the way in which it is simply not found important, provide an immediate starting point. What is required over and above histories of theology and events is a study of catholic *ideology*.

A similar point needs to be made on the nature of biography. That Gill may not have known what the Action Française was does *not* mean that it is irrelevant to his biography. To understand a person, one needs to clarify as much as possible his total situation, the setting of people, events, weltanschauungen, social forces which help define him and render his position intelligible. The implication would seem to be that relevant information about a

Gill to make the impact which his intelligence and his integrity deserved was due to the same causes as the failure of the right-wingers to whom, almost alone, he stood opposed. Neither understood the political instincts of the community for which they were legislating. If I suggest that the Catholic neo-Marxists of today are making a similar mistake, I shall embroil myself in fruitless controversy with Mr Cunningham. I shall therefore wish him well in his inquest on a corpse which may now be only twitching, but which was once more vigorously and variously alive than perhaps he imagines.

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man is restricted to what he was himself conscious of, an assumption that Mr Speaight does not make when he discusses the possible influence of Gill’s early years. What interests me here is that the directly personal influences of infancy are found relevant and the influences of the public context in which they are operative not so. In the same way, it is interesting that ‘an autopsy of the catholic intelligentsia’ is equated with ‘too much inner catholicism’. An analysis of the intelligentsia is an analysis of a general cultural fact of importance not only to the whole catholic community but to the wider national life of the time in which it was a not unimportant element.

The third point of general importance is a partly theological one. The differences between the catholic intelligentsia of thirty or forty years ago and that of today, seem increasingly striking the more one reflects upon them. When, for example, Mr Speaight says that men of a conservative bent are more easily attracted to catholicism (seeming to take this as a permanent fact) or that the ecclesial structure of the church is ultimately monarchical, a great number of us would surely want to dissent and see these as particular and alterable ways of seeing the question not the essence of the question itself. And we should also want to relate these ways of viewing to particular cultural forces, particular social and historical conditions; something that the old intelligentsia could not undertake without abandoning its central positions. In so far as we do still inhabit their world then this cultural relativity of the church is a disturbing phenomenon; the complex question of the relations between theology and ideology has been raised. In what ways one can formulate the necessary questions to preserve the distinction seems to me as yet far from clear.