

THE ART OF MR. ERIC GILL

TWO recent reviews of Mr. Eric Gill's latest book, *Art Nonsense*, make us think that it is time Mr. Gill's art was discussed from the point of view of his own writings and the Thomistic philosophy of which he professes to be so ardent a follower.

Few living artists enjoy the distinction of being the subject of special books; both Mr. Joseph Thorp¹ and J.K.M.R. in Mr. A. Rutherston's series of *Contemporary British Artists*² have written with keen appreciation of Mr. Gill's artistic achievements, illustrating their books with numerous reproductions of his sculpture and carving. Yet opinion as to the merits of his work is widely divergent. Whilst some admire it unreservedly, others dislike it as intensely. Undoubtedly the same divergence of opinion exists concerning all artists' works, but in the given case the Artist who is at the same time a writer will help us to a correct appreciation of his work as judged by his own principles. And in fact it is not the writing but the work that matters, for, as Mr. Gill himself reminds us: 'There are plenty of lying documents, and very great skill and judgment is required to use them. But works are infallible guides . . . You may write an elaborate series of lies on paper, but your handwriting will betray you and show what manner of man you are.'³ So we shall proceed with the examination of these 'infallible guides' in the light of *Art Nonsense* which one of its reviewers declares to 'say the last word on matters which have long been spoken of in vain.'

¹*Eric Gill*. By Joseph Thorp. London, 1929.

²*Eric Gill*. By J.K.M.R. *Contemporary British Artists*. Edited by Albert Rutherston. London.

³*Art Nonsense*, p. 76.

The Art of Mr. Eric Gill

One of the first questions upon which we must be quite clear is the true conception of beauty. It is agreed that the beautiful belongs to the order of transcendentals⁴ and as such belongs to the very essence of the being like truth and goodness. As Mr. Gill rightly puts it, Beauty . . . 'is a shining out of the true and good in things,' and 'as all that *is* is True . . . and as all that *is* is Good . . . so all that *is* is Beautiful.'⁵

Everything that has existence is beautiful. Are we to conclude from this that *everything* is beautiful? Certainly not, only that which exists as a being or a thing. Here is an example from Mr. Gill's own work. Mr. Thorp's book contains the reproduction of a headless and armless female torso, *Mankind* (in the making). This symbolic figure apparently is intended to express the procreative aspect of mankind, whilst its higher rational side is completely ignored. How is this work to be judged? A visit to the department of Greek sculpture of the British Museum will show that an incomplete statue can certainly be an object of art and of great beauty. A work of art can also be conceived as incomplete and still be beautiful. But as regards Mr. Gill's *Mankind* it would seem that the term *beautiful* as applied to it is unsuitable. Ought not mankind to convey to us primarily an idea of *rationality*, of *spirituality*, of the *image of God*?⁶ As a piece of perfectly polished Hoptonwood stone it may possess a certain degree of beauty; but, if we at-

⁴See on this subject Note 63-bis of J. Maritain's *Art et Scholastique*. Paris, 1927; pp. 265-268.

⁵*Art Nonsense*, p. 146.

⁶We are uncertain whether the words 'in the making' are the Artist's or Mr. Thorp's. Do they merely mean that Mr. Thorp saw the torso whilst still unfinished or did the Artist mean 'mankind in process of evolution'? If so, a mankind deprived of the symbol of rationality is merely animal.

Blackfriars

tach to it the symbolic significance the Artist desired to convey, it lacks beauty, for it does not fulfil the essential conditions of a beautiful thing: it has no integrity or unity, it lacks proportion, and it is striking not because of the *shining out of the true and the good* but by their absence. In fact it is a thing 'deprived of what it ought to have,' and therefore it has no beauty.

The best known works of Mr. Gill, the *Westminster Stations* and the *Leeds War Memorial* have been so exhaustively discussed that we shall not speak of them here, though our personal opinion is that it is precisely from the point of view of the Artist's philosophy that both these works are subject to criticism. We shall restrict ourselves to the examination of Mr. Gill's other works.

From the conception of the beautiful we inevitably pass to the artist. Who is an artist? Again we have a correct definition by Mr. Gill: 'Only he is called artist who works as one making things worth making for their own sakes independently of any use to which they may be put,'⁷ and elsewhere he explains that 'the term "fine art" is rightly confined to those arts in which men, forgetting all the business of doing, of service, of utility, concentrate their whole attention upon *making*.'⁸ The artist is a person 'concerned for the rightness and goodness of his work, and in whose work beauty is the measure of his concern,'¹⁰ or 'the maker of things as such, is not concerned with the effect (uplifting or otherwise) of his work upon the beholder . . .'¹¹ and so on.

⁷*Art Nonsense*, p. 148.

⁸*G.K.'s Weekly*, April 5th, 1930, p. 58.

⁹*Art Nonsense*, p. 290.

¹⁰*Ibid*, p. 71.

¹¹*Ibid*, p. 155.

The Art of Mr. Eric Gill

Anyone would be ready to endorse these views of Mr. Gill upon art in general and fine arts in particular; however they demand further explanation. Art is a habit of the practical intellect, it is even a virtue, and from the point of view of the workman exercising his art the work made is not indifferent. The object made is merely the realisation of what the artist has in his mind. The work to be made is the *matter* of art, its *form* is the right reason.¹² And Mr. Gill is again right when he tells his readers that artists 'are instruments through whom passes God's own creative power' or that the artist is 'God's way of carrying on material creation to a higher pitch.'¹³ This, no doubt, applies even more to the fine arts tending to produce beautiful things. The right reason necessary to the artist for the conception of an object of art is, as M. Maritain says again, 'a footprint or a ray of the Creative Intelligence impressed upon the heart of the created being.'¹⁴ Thus we understand the artist, and expect him to live up to this high standard in his works, his personal life being nobody else's concern.

Pure art teaches men the delectation of the spirit; it contains a certain analogy with wisdom, it leads men to contemplation.¹⁵ Such an effect is produced not by the selection of certain uplifting subjects represented in the works of art, but by the action of beauty upon men. We see this effect in the contemplation of the primitives whose 'awkwardness' according to M. Maritain was 'a sacred weakness, by which one glimpsed the subtle intellectuality of art.'¹⁶ Now we do not find this 'awkwardness,' this 'sacred weakness'

¹² J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 11—12.

¹³ *Art Nonsense*, p. 262.

¹⁴ J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Blackfriars

in the works of contemporary artists; rather there are dangers which threaten to cause the artist to deviate from his direct object. Not only is there what Mr. Gill calls 'photographic representation' or 'illusion-making,' but also the danger of an exaggeration of technical dexterity, the desire to please, to promote emotions, passions. According to M. Maritain the very idea of the beautiful needs to be purified, and this thinker reminds us of St. Thomas's warning that 'those who find no joy in spiritual pleasures, have recourse to pleasures of the body' (*Summa*, II-IIae, Qu. 35, a. 4 ad 2).¹⁷ When art is unable to give the spiritual pleasure which it should, it is lowered to sensual delectation alone.

But let us return to Mr. Gill's artistic work and endeavour to find the spiritual delectation it may give us. Leaving out the works we have spoken of we shall examine those we know from the exhibition in the Goupil Gallery two years ago and from the books already mentioned. We find two Crucifixes and several works representing the Madonna and Child. Christian iconography or the art of representing the Sacred Persons possesses definite rules. There are traditional types and ways in which the spiritual is conveyed to the senses. At all times artists have striven to express primarily the spiritual character of the Sacred Persons. The Byzantine artists succeeded in this perhaps better than any others, for their icons do not represent real Persons—they are but conventional representations of ideal types. The material side is reduced to a minimum, only the face, hands and feet are uncovered, even the legs of the Child Jesus are veiled by long robes, but an attentive study reveals that the eyes are full of expression—the shining out of the soul. Mr. Gill breaks with this tradition: his Madonnas are also conventional representa-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

tions, yet of how different a character! Frankly we like none of them, but the one of 1912 executed, we imagine, in Mr. Gill's pre-Catholic days, ought to have been destroyed by him. Whilst Byzantine and early Italian artists saw in Our Lady the Theotokos, the Mother of God, for Mr. Gill She is merely the human Mother, and, as in *Mankind*, in depicting Her he ever emphasises one aspect only—the one men share with animals. To one brought up in Catholic traditions such insistence is not merely revolting, but blasphemous. We could scarcely imagine the feelings of a devout Russian peasant who would be shown a 'Madonna' by Mr. Gill and told that it was meant to represent Her whom he reverences as 'more honourable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim.'

The artist's biblical subjects both sculptured and drawn are all hall-marked by the same defect—an over-emphasis of sex, and we admit our complete inability to experience any spiritual delectation at the sight of these works. But in the *Headdress* exhibited in the Goupil Gallery, where it faced the Crucifix, and *Splits* Mr. Gill has strayed further than ever from his principle that all works of art become acts of worship.¹⁸ Mr. Joseph Thorp calls the *Splits* 'jolly little pagan jokes,' but such *jokes* are not permitted to one who loudly proclaims himself the disciple of the Angelic Doctor. *Thomisme oblige!*

In the matter of religious art Mr. Gill seems to have ideas of his own. An act of worship in art consists for him in the devotion: 'to the well-making of the thing to be made, be it house or chair or carved stone idol, be it his family or his own soul,'¹⁹ and religious art means 'anything done or made according

¹⁸*Art Nonsense*, p. 33.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 196.

Blackfriars

to the rule of God; and as the service of God is perfect freedom, it follows that, loving God, we may do and therefore *make* what we like—we shall not therefore incur the blame attaching to the irreligious.' The right way of making things is 'the way God would have them made, the way God makes things Himself.'²⁰ This seems a great presumption. But who is to judge whether a work of art is such as God wishes it to be if not the Church? The artist has some scathing remarks about the Church as art critic. 'The Church,' and he means the Catholic Church, 'is not a cultured set.'²¹ 'She knows nothing of art—she buys what is to hand.' The Church 'is not concerned with the end of man's WORK—hence she is not an authority on aesthetics and knows nothing of art.'²² Her ministers as judges of art are contemptible. 'As critic of the works of men he (the priest) is often beneath contempt . . .'²³ 'that rare thing among ecclesiastics, a man of culture . . .'²⁴ 'it is only by a happy accident that a priest is a man of culture'²⁵—are sentences scattered all through Mr. Gill's writings. And it is obvious that without possessing the technical knowledge necessary for the making of an object of art a representative of the Church may blunder, but the priest with his philosophical and theological training is the very person to judge art, provided he does it by this standard, and does not let himself be dragged into technicalities which are outside his sphere.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 260-261.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

²² *Art Nonsense*, p. 305.

²³ *Art and Love*. By Eric Gill. Bristol, 1927. In the reprint of the same essay in *Art Nonsense* this offensive remark has been omitted.

²⁴ *Art Nonsense*, p. 260.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

The Church indeed does judge works of art. The XXVth Session of the Council of Trent has ordained 'that no one be allowed to place, or cause to be placed any *unusual* (*insolitam*) image, in any place or church, howsoever exempted, except that image have been approved of by the bishop.' It would seem that, were this command enforced, almost every religious work of Mr. Gill would be condemned as unusual. In the Crucifix exhibited in the Goupil Galleries the artist, departing from his customary style, makes an attempt to be realistic. The result is most unpleasant and the work belongs precisely to the category which the Church prohibits—not in the capacity of art critic, but as the defender of the religious feelings of the faithful. Championing the true, she at the same time champions the beautiful.

St. Thomas has a chapter upon *Scandal*, and in his essay upon the 'Enormities of Religious Art' Mr. Gill says very rightly that in judging objects of art it has to be asked: 'Are they occasions of sin? Do they promote good deeds? Are they harmful to the young?'²⁶ Mr. Gill applies this standard only to that art which he calls 'illusion-making' or 'the making of criticism,' but it seems to us that this excellent principle should hold good with any art. Yet we cannot see how it fits in with two of Mr. Gill's books, text and illustrations, which we even mention reluctantly, namely, 'The Song of Songs' and 'Art and Love'—the latter has been included in *Art Nonsense*. The technical merits of the illustrations may be very high, yet these works would scarcely be passed by the censor were his attention drawn to them. We are sorry to say the plates of 'Art and Love' were shown at the Catholic Art and Crafts Exhibition in 1929, and are also published in the April number of the *Studio*, where Mr. Chesterton used them to illustrate his re-

²⁶*Art Nonsense*, p. 263.

Blackfriars

view of Mr. Gill's book. The *Tablet's* indignant 'abominable' was none too strong an adjective to apply to these plates. Such work will not add to the artist's reputation.

Mr. Gill in *Art and Love* and in another of his essays on *Dress in Art Nonsense* expounds ideas which have already been expressed by the notorious Dukhobor leader Peter Verighin. The practical application of these theories is giving sufficient trouble to the Canadian Police who, when these ardent sectarians, discarding every shred of clothing march in procession, chase them with the clothes which our artist considers as 'foul.' We are also afraid that Mr. Gill lays too great a stress upon one aspect of conjugal love, forgetting its highest form—the friendship which according to Père Lacordaire 'is in Christianity the term and supreme reward of conjugal love.'²⁷

But possibly the strange character of some of Mr. Gill's works is due to his belief that man is still in a state of innocence. If so he would disagree with the Holy Father, who quite recently reminded us that man had lost his innocence through original sin and that all educational systems based on negation or oblivion of this fact were to be condemned. Art being a powerful weapon of education, such a condemnation undoubtedly includes it, too.

What, then, is the general conclusion? Mr. Gill undoubtedly possesses many natural gifts—the *inchoatio naturalis*—a necessary condition for Art. This natural gift, as M. Maritain reminds us, is not Art itself, as Art is a virtue which demands a special culture and discipline.²⁸ The Church alone can discipline Christian art. There is a world of difference in the way the two thinkers, Mr. Gill and M. Maritain,

²⁷P. H. D. Lacordaire. *Sainte Marie Madeleine*, p. 38.

²⁸J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

The Art of Mr. Eric Gill

speak of the Church's attitude to Art. The former appears chiefly concerned with the utilitarian aspect, the 'Church as buyer,' the 'principal customer' are expressions which he freely uses. According to Mr. Gill the Church 'has always bought in the cheapest market,'²⁹ and considering that she is 'down and out' as far as sculptors are concerned³⁰ he believes the sculptor 'free from any collaboration with the Church . . . ' which enables him 'to try innumerable amusing experiments in purely aesthetic development.'³¹ Hence the *Splits*, the *Headdress*, the *Song of Songs*!

But the profound French thinker shows us a very different aspect of the part the Bride of Christ plays in art:

'This great Contemplative, instructed by the gift of knowledge, has deep discernment of all that the human heart needs, she knows the unique value of Art. This is why she has so well protected it in the world. Much more, she has summoned it unto the *opus Dei* and she requires it to compound perfumes of great price to be shed by her upon the head and feet of her Master. *Ut quid perditio ista?* say the philanthropists. She continues to embalm the body of the One she loves whose death she announces each day, *donec veniat.*'³²

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²⁹*Art Nonsense*, pp. 304-305.

³⁰*Art Nonsense*, p. 304.

³¹*Art Nonsense*, p. 308.

³²J. Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 133.