

SOME REFLECTIONS ON GANDHI

A DIFFICULTY constantly confronting the writer of obituary notices is the question of what mood and tense to employ, and it is a difficulty which comes very much to the fore with the death of a man like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Somehow neither the subjunctive mood nor pluperfect tense comes readily to mind since the bereavement seems too personal and world-wide to allow of such historical impersonality; instead the loss is so great that it seems to call for something less final, less absolute. Better the present indicative, especially as there can be little doubt that his influence in India will grow rather than diminish with the years, and that the effect of such an influence on a country so vast will have repercussions which are not only global, but which internationally will be more or less immediate. Certainly the indecision as to which style to adopt in the tributes paid at his death, and the vacillating already apparent in the numerous leaders and notices over what mood and tense to choose, are proof enough of his importance, even if the true significance of that importance cannot be fully estimated until it is seen how many more similar violent deaths will flow out of that policy which he inaugurated. Upon such a determination must rest the final verdict of history. Yet, irrespective of the level of political home rule and contemporary affairs, there are other and deeper reasons for his prestige; reasons that to be genuinely understood call first for an evaluation of his philosophy since it was from that philosophy that his political actions sprang. Indeed in one sense his decisions were never made after the event for his mind was not dependent upon the exteriorisation of public events before he could act, but proceeded rather from an achieved centre of being. Fortunately, too, this wisdom which he gained both through contemplation and experience, and which never suffered, as it so often does, from being conceived in a state antecedent to full personal integration, emerges with crystal clarity in the book he wrote about his life.

This autobiography Gandhi called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*,¹ although by Western terminology it can scarcely be called an autobiography at all; it is true in it he narrates much of his life, but his concern is not with his political successes, but rather with those spiritual exercises that made possible such political feats. If it has affinities with any Western autobiography, then it is closest to *The Way of Perfection* by Saint Teresa of Avila, for both books present their stories as only incidental to a number of maxims and

¹ Translated from the Gujurati by Mahadev Desai and published in India by Navajivan Kargalaya (Ahmedabad), the last edition of which appeared in 1945. An English edition by the Phoenix Press (London) is now in preparation.

counsels which their authors wished to expound. As Gandhi says in the introduction to the book: 'If the experiments are really spiritual then there can be no room for self-praise', and all that will come of setting them down will not be additional glory as the world knows it, but only that of added humility for the writer concerned. Again, as he says later on: 'I am not writing this autobiography to please critics. Writing it is itself one of the experiments with truth'. The author neither pontificates nor attempts by showing his weaknesses thereby to build his defence. His one concern is with the 'Spirit of Truth', for a true understanding of which, as he states, there must be present in the individual an ability to love 'the meanest of creation' as himself. So it is with this proviso in mind Gandhi adds the rider that one who thus aspires cannot afford to keep out of any field of life—be it agriculture, sanitation or politics. 'I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means'. Moreover, such a pronouncement, for all its obvious truth still appears invested with an aura of revolutionary thought which makes it arresting not only in itself, but because it emphasises some of the primary lessons which the late Eric Gill was trying to teach his fellow countrymen. It reads almost like a case of autobiographical telepathy. (Incidentally, it also suggests further lines of development for a synthesis between East and West.)

In writing his life Gill stressed his belief in both private and personal property, and which he stated somewhat like a theorem thus:

- Because property is natural to man;
- because property is a bulwark against the exploitation of man by man;
- because unless you own the means of production you cannot control production;
- because unless you control you cannot be responsible;
- because responsibility for his deeds and what his deeds effect (i.e., both moral and intellectual responsibility) is the very mark of man.²

This conception of responsibility, which is deeply religious at its source, is also political; religious in so far as responsibility is first learnt in the family and political in so far as this responsibility for its maintenance is dependent ultimately upon ethical support. Further, since this ethical support is subject neither to Labour nor Capital nor to the economic laws of supply or demand, its strength is drawn from a very much more permanent stock—a stock which has not only through the ages grown into a tradition but which is the prime-

² See *Autobiography*. Jonathan Cape, 1940.

mover, the first cause of that very tradition. It is in the light of this knowledge that a comment like that of Blake's—'Religion is politics, politics is brotherhood'—takes on its true significance, and to which Gill rejoined: 'Brotherhood is poverty, and poverty is peace', though it would only be fair to add here that Gill's belief in poverty was largely conditioned by his revolt against the triumph of technics. Yet poverty does not always band men together. As Gandhi notes: 'The grinding poverty and starvation with which our country is afflicted is such that it drives more and more men every year into the ranks of beggars, whose desperate struggle for bread renders them insensible to all feelings of decency and self-respect. And our philanthropists, instead of providing work for them and insisting on their working for bread, give them alms.' Obviously there are both degrees and kinds of poverty since to be poor as a church mouse is not to be as poor as Job. In fact both metaphors well exemplify the difference. There is the poverty which is brought about by circumstances and there is that which is self-sought, and, if not actively self-sought, is accepted without complaint when it is believed to be the will of God.

Gandhi's poverty was self-sought, but, as he admits, he knew that his fasting was useless unless it was accompanied by self-restraint. In the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*—

For a man who is fasting his senses
 Outwardly, the sense-objects disappear,
 Leaving the yearning behind; but when
 He has seen the Highest
 Even the yearning disappears.

His life was a continual quest for such a vision.

In this quest, or, as he called it, in his search for the Spirit of Truth, he sought neither pomp nor ostentation. *The Times*, when it wrote the day after his death that he 'was skilful in exhibitionism' blundered badly because his obituary was written from an *exterior point of view*; his life was seen only as a maze of political complexities in which it was his aim by a policy of non-violence to free India of British rule. Yet that is to put the position too baldly: it is true his slogan was 'get off our backs—walk by our side', but from his point of view it was more in the nature of an admonition than a war-cry. The root of the trouble lay in its interpretation so that somewhat paradoxically some of his followers—among them the more fanatical elements of his people—believed that a policy of non-violence could only be made manifest by the use of violence at the outset. That is from where the charge of 'exhibitionism' in *The Times* arises. It is a case of the Indian mis-reading of his philosophy also emerging in England and elsewhere. In actual fact he was extremely

sensitive to his inadequacy; this is made quite clear in his book, for its final note is one of disappointment, a sense of failure because he had failed to achieve that triple purity of becoming absolutely free in thought, speech and action. It was for this reason he could say without false humility—'the world's praise fails to move me, indeed very often stings me'. He knew that the conquest of oneself can be a greater task than the conquest of the world; he knew that it profited a man naught if he gained the whole world and suffered the loss of his own soul; he knew that it was better that a people should remain subject than win as apostates. In this lay his difference from Lenin.

Both men were prophets, but at the same time the antithesis of each other. Whereas Lenin stood for violence and as a symbol of the apotheosis of pragmatism, with Gandhi it was otherwise; he believed in peace at every cost and that passive acceptance was preferable to active resistance. In contrast to Lenin he believed there were eternal truths and that philosophy was not the expression of its age, but that there was an eternal philosophy which had its roots in the past and which mattered above all else because the future can only be built upon the real past. For him the eternal centre was the soul and from it everything radiated outwards. Each man had within him the potentiality of being a still centre around which the world might revolve, and in ratio to his achieving such tranquillity lay the sphere of his influence. From such a conception it naturally arose that he could yet remain friendly with officials whose departments and rulings he often had actively to oppose. 'Hate the sin and not the sinner' was one of the precepts which he never tired of teaching nor of showing by personal example.

It was in this personal approach that his strength lay and which has been the cause of the generous estimates bestowed upon him both by his disciples and those who knew, but could not stand in full agreement with, his aims and objects. Always he tried where he saw the cause was non-political, but where the end might be political, to avoid the latter aspect and keep it as much as possible within the bounds of a personal relationship, for he understood how personal service which is also disinterested is ultimately of more service to a country politically than the fostering of party animosity. Indeed, his end, which had a certain dramatic irony about it, is no mere negation of his life-work; it is, on the contrary, the surest affirmation which one can have that, long after the flames of the pyre have burnt his mortal body to ash, his philosophy will remain as a torch burning radiantly in the dark nights of many souls.

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