

## TWO BOOKS ON ART

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ART. By Ralph Adams Cram. (Calvert Series; Burns, Oates & Washbourne; 1929; 4/-).

ART NONSENSE. By Eric Gill. (Cassell & Co. and Francis Walterston; 21/- net).

THE first-named work deals with all that manifestation of the aesthetic instinct which flowered within the influence or the territory of Christendom whilst Christendom was at variance on things mainly human and material; and with its curious deviations and altered canalisations ensuing from Iconoclasm, as well as with the blight which came to it from Manicheism and the sour-faced offspring Puritanism, that palmer-worm which devoured the leavings of the locust. It is truly a great little book, a masterly synthesis of all the movements which moved anything in the category of things that may be made. It is not only scholarly but abounding in observations which bespeak a right intuition upon a realm much enhavocked by people who are sure of what is not so. But can Bach be called a Catholic musician? He wrote a Mass in B minor which is one of the world's chief treasures, but of no use to the Catholic Liturgy even were nothing enacted *Motu Proprio*. A greater than Bach is here, William Byrd, but though he is a very Catholic, even Papist, musician, I do not remember that he is mentioned. He labours under the disadvantage of being English. He also conducted Anglican chapels-royal for Elizabeth in her spacious time. But there is documentary evidence that both he and his organist, John Bull, kept their places at court on purpose to be able to hear Mass and get others to

Mass, with impunity. Sometimes it had to be at three in the morning, but there it is.

Again, Italian Gothic is dismissed as negligible; whereas in such unspoiled scraps as those inveterate destroyers and untiring builders have allowed to survive, there is manifest a balance and a severe common sense much to seek in Northern Gothic. Glorious and surpassing all other works of man it may be, but running to seed before its flowers are fully opened. No mention is made, in giving Cluny its due, of monastic influence on the church of SS. Vincent and Anastasius in Rome at the Three Fountains, which stands alone in mysterious perfection, a veritable *cathedrale engloutie*, which nobody seems to be aware of.

This is the nearest thing to deprecation that I can say about Mr. Cram's admirable essay. In a hundred and twenty-one pages he contrives to tell us not only what happened in fifteen hundred years in all the enormous battle-line of civilisation from Byzantium to Bangor and Kells, but to give acute and compelling reasons why things fell out so.

*Art Nonsense*, by Eric Gill, is as different a work as even a priest-ridden Papist can evolve on the same subject with the identical aim, or very nearly identical. Mr. Cram concludes with a chapter on 'What, in the premisses, is the duty, and what may be the function, of the Catholic Church?

'It seems to me the answer is reasonably clear. The Church must *consciously* resume the position she once more or less consciously held as the creator, patron and protector of the arts, at least in so far as they enter into her service.'

Here let *Art Nonsense* take up the parable. Of course the Church must, who else can? but why is she doing less and less, instead of more and more? Because unbridled competition and the rush for gain have reduced the toiling masses to a condition worse

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than old-time slavery. The service of God is perfect freedom, but much time and many mighty forces must break up the servile State before God can be served by Art, the natural (no, not artificial) outcome of perfect freedom. When you talk about Art, what Art do you mean? Modern motor-boats and racing-cars and even aeroplanes are works of exquisite art, still more so are modern artillery and the wonderful shell that feeds it, but there is no *charity* in their making. God is served for love, the highest manifestation of liberty. Love God and do what you will.

‘We Catholics have got to agree first among ourselves; until that is achieved, we have not to bother about agreement with anyone else.’ And: ‘It must be made clear to every Catholic man and woman that the Church is the poor man’s friend—that she stands for Freedom, Responsibility, Ownership and Union, that she is the enemy of Servility and the opponent of those whose riches depend upon the degradation of men to the level of slaves.’

‘These facts have got to be made as notorious as her notorious views on marriage and education, and as uncomfortable and discomfoting for her enemies.’

What a horrid man! You have to be uncomfortable and disconcerting before Art can come into her own. And this is why Art is not arriving, nor taste nor wisdom, and the scrap-heap is the biggest thing in civilization, while the young barbarians who play on it and the old barbarians who talk down to them, whether in school or journal or even Houses of Study, are swapping fallacies about how good or bad it is or how it might be bettered.

Next he discourses quite unfeelingly about Bentley’s greatness and what is wrong with Westminster Cathedral. ‘Outside of the building almost entirely ruined by . . . pandering to the appetite for ornamentation.’ ‘Dead stylistic ornament.’ ‘But the

merit of the cathedral goes entirely beyond stylism.' Here he quotes Lethaby with strong approval.

How far are we here from the madding crowd which raved because the Cathedral was not 'Gothic' and then got entirely out of hand because the Stations were! When the thorns give up crackling beneath the pot, its contents will doubtless subside and clarify, but Thou O Lord! how long?

In a chapter on Dress the man is horrider still. Women are now the immodest sex. This is disgustingly true, the present writer has seen it grow for forty years—but why say true instead of comfortable things? Only a thinker has any use for truth, but the mob must have comfort at any cost. It pays at least a penny a day per head to read discussions on what is wrong with anything, discussions which always end by saying: Whatever is wrong, you're all right.

Next a disconcerting article entitled Songs without Clothes. Religious and Secular, are these contradictions? No, but ecclesiastical and secular be so. 'It is impossible to speak of God otherwise than heraldically.' Here is a dire booby-trap for the wise in their own conceit.

Another essay is to prove that if you take care of Truth and Goodness, Beauty will take care of itself. Which prompts us to say that the whole book is a most interesting application of the Unity and Trinity of God.

What has the Church done for Art? What, according to the Catholic conception, is the Relation of Art to Life? These questions he answers both briefly and at length. Briefly, the Church does not talk about Art. She has no aesthetic theories nor dogmas because Nature is an infallible guide in such matters. What, then, does she *do* for Art? She is a supreme artist in making things for her immediate use, but in those things for which she is but indirectly answerable, she

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often as not takes what she can get. Nowadays especially. *'She was responsible for maintaining the ideas and attitude of mind in which alone any great art is possible.'*

What is Beauty? He answers in the words of St. Thomas : That which pleases, being seen. But here is where everyone's trouble begins. Sixteen plausible and comprehensive objections are answered in scholastic form or nearly so; and emerges the crucial definition of pleasure. None are so blind as those who will not see, and in this democratic age the name is legion of them that will not see beauty or that know it not when seen. Anyhow they are too numerous to be arrested, but very vocal and all saying different things in confused and confounding voices.

The Essay on Art-Nonsense is the last in the book, and is a keen stricture on the cross-chat or back-chat of the Artist versus the Industrialist. We should not be happier or nobler if all mass-production ceased, nor does mass-production raise our dignity even though designed and guided by the 'greatest living artists.' 'I am all for concrete and iron buildings which not only look like such, but proudly proclaim the fact.'

The book is vast, patient, profound, a delight to the analytical faculty or habit, and seems to say the last word on matters which have long been spoken of in vain.

JOHN O'CONNOR.