

A STUDY IN INTEGRITY

THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF ERIC GILL

WHAT do we mean by 'integration'? A creature is integral when it possesses all it needs for its perfection and completeness. A thing can remain essentially intact without being whole or integral. A car on its trials with engine, wheels and chassis only is essentially a car but it has no integrity. Or again we use integrity of a character that has preserved the wholeness of a good moral life or of fidelity to truth, as opposed to the one who has compromised either of these perfections by his conduct or dishonesty—for even should he repent he will lack something; he will lack that unity of a life unbroken by sin. By integration, then, we mean that quality of wholeness which is given to a thing when it is finally completed; and when applied to human life this quality can only be gauged with respect to the whole of life from childhood to old age, a life begun with a certain perfection given by God the Creator, but with a hundred conflicting possibilities and powers which have to be co-ordinated into a whole, i.e., integrated.

It is just this element of intactness which is absent in modern life. We manage on the whole to preserve the essentials of life for we continue, at least barely, to live. But there is no sense of completeness about it. Our home life is one thing, our work another, our leisure another, and our religion something apart from all these: all are divided off into separate compartments. Life is never a whole; it is chock full of compromises. Modern life is a series of disconnected jolts, like a long cross-country train journey when the passenger has to change trains every half-hour.

But we can take the life of Eric Gill as a whole, and therein lies the secret of his greatness and the authoritative power of his teaching. For his words and doctrines proceed from a whole life, unlike most of our preaching which comes out of our heads instead of from our lives and is therefore without force because without integrity. The *Autobiography* rounded off Gill's life as a whole, as Eric Newton wrote in reviewing it: 'His life when it came to its end was extraordinarily complete, and this book somehow rounds it off, like the cadence that rounds off a melody'.

I do not mean to say that in the life of this artist nothing is lacking. I can hear his musical laugh mocking at such an absurd suggestion. He has made it clear in the *Autobiography* that he never fell into such pride as to imagine that his life was perfect in that sense. The only perfection of this nature is to be found in heaven. (Cf. *Autobiography*, pp. 8, 247-248.)

An integral human life can only be worked out with what we have, namely with a human nature seriously wounded by the sin of Adam, and the life we lead is an attempt, up to the last breath we take, to make up for this deficiency. That is the point of integration—making whole something which is not complete. In another sense it was only at the Resurrection that Christ himself attained an integral life. Gill admits candidly throughout his autobiography that there were certain elements of life, in particular that of sex, which he never completely integrated. (Who indeed has done so? Let him throw the first stone!) But this man unlike others saw the need of bringing these things to completion, so that everything may hold together. And this was his goal. That is why he is the great modern example of integration. This too was given intellectual expression in his mind by St Thomas's perfection of philosophy through Aristotle. For that is the source of Gill's conviction of the reality of *matter* and of *form* working together to make an integral man. Platonism could never have done that, for it made the body some unreal and somewhat unwholesome thing, a prison caging the bird-like soul.

Gill was essentially an artist; not, as he would say, an Artist with a capital A, but a maker, a worker, a craftsman. From his earliest years he used the gifts of mind and will that God had given him to create things, primarily to create his life, to make himself into a man and so to complete what God had begun in him. He made, with the skill of a great artist, not only his own life, but the life of a family and the life of a community. His life would have lacked the integrity we know it possessed had he not fashioned these three modes of life all in one.

In this process the most important piece of formation was his 'invention', as he calls it, of his religion. Charles Marriott made this clear at the time of Gill's death: 'In any consideration of Gill it is impossible to detach his artistic from his religious convictions, and there was a similarity of approach in either case. As is generally known Gill was not a 'born' Catholic, but was received into the Church at 21 [a mistake for 31]. Like most converts he wore his beliefs very much on his sleeve, not to say the tail of his coat, and being an intellectual man he had a more conscious appreciation of the inner meaning of dogma, the "epigram of experience" as it has been called, than most. . . . He was first of all convinced that "the whole nature of man" means exactly what it says, that is to say a compound of body, soul and spirit which must be expressed in everything he does. . . . This belief is at the bottom of Gill's hostility to industrialism which, as he pointed out in several essays, causes the disintegration of the workman.' (*The Listener*, November, 1940.)

Although Charles Marriott has not expressed very clearly the integration of Gill's *Catholic* belief into his attitude towards industrialism, he has set his finger on the central point. The Incarnation was God's seal upon the goodness of body, a seal which remained ever fresh in the Eucharist. If a man forsook that sanctification of human flesh by God, he disintegrated and fell into loose pieces. It was primarily, then, his Catholic belief that welded the whole manifold of life into a unity. Thus he spent the last years of his life in a campaign for bringing the altar of the Eucharist down among the people, so that the children of God might gather round the one table where the Body of Christ lay. He assisted the boys at Blundell's school to revolutionise their altar on these lines; and he designed the church at Gorleston with the altar raised only on a small step, and standing in the very centre of the church. In his own home at Pigotts he had the exceptional privilege of having the blessed Sacrament in the chapel under that same roof, and when the priest offered the Sacrifice of Body and Blood from that simple altar he faced the noble flock of Gill's grandchildren—the parents and grown-ups being behind him, and Eric kneeling at the step to serve.

'The Word was made flesh—became a man and lived among men: He became a real man and really lived, son of a woman. And we have *seen* the Son, the Christ—Jesus the Saviour—he who saves—that is to say, he who makes us *whole*. For by reason of sin—i.e., ill will—we have, so to say, come unstuck. We are disintegrated'.¹

The important thing about Gill's religion was that, even though it came to him from outside with all the impetus of the Roman Church's authority, he had in a sense made it for himself; he found or uncovered a 'new religion' and learnt that it was the old. 'I found a thing in my mind and I opened my eyes and found it in front of me. You don't become a Catholic by joining the Church; you join the Church because you are a Catholic'. This is the secret of human integration for the soul is naturally Christian; grace builds on ground that has had the foundations already dug and prepared. The true faith since it has been prepared, as it were, by God for the final perfection of man, will not come to man as something uncouth and wholly strange. God is the author of nature and grace and he has but one will with which he made all things. This is not to suggest a kind of Pelagianism, as though a man could himself make his religion with his own natural powers since he has a capacity for that religion. But granted that God moves the soul towards the faith a man can co-operate with that movement at first as though it were only inside

¹ *Christianity and the Machine Age*, pp. 3-4. And for his conception of the *Mass* and the *Blessed Sacrament* cf. *Autobiography*, pp. 246 sq.

him, later finding that it is a great objective reality which he can handle and see. This is where he finds his integrity—in the integrity of the divine plan—in the highest reality which rules over the whole of his life, every detail, this is the source of his completion.

And notice how this comes from outside in the form of authority, not from internal whims and fancies. 'I saw a vision of the holy Church ruling the world in the name of God; ruling the world, laying down the law, speaking as one having authority, a magisterium'. St Thomas was a young revolutionary, but moving under the impetus of authority—so was Gill in accepting the most integrating power in his life from outside. But he did invent it; he made it his own, he discovered its foundations in nature. (cf. *Beauty Looks after Herself*, p. 18.)

This integrity in and through religion may be seen working for unity in all the varying facets of the life he made. No one will deny that he was an artist; but not so many, perhaps, will admit that he was an artist in all that he did under the divine power. They will say that he had an artistic temperament, was therefore 'Chelsea' and eccentric. They feel that much of his way of life was forced and unnatural, put on for the sake of display, as with so many would-be artists. Certainly I remember the occasion when he adopted baggy trousers that buttoned at the ankle, and thought them so admirable that he presented each male member of the community at Ditchling with a similar pair. (All the others subsequently gave these unpopular objects to their wives to be made into clothes for the children.) But such foibles, if they could be called such, were all in the picture, part of a life he was making with his art, or, better, with his work or craft. He had a horror of what he called 'Art nonsense' and the 'Chelsea affectations'. A typical remark of his is 'The artist does the work, the critic has the inspiration'. Lettering, drawing, sculpture, engraving, all the things he set his hand to, he brought to perfection; they were all part of his work and work was part of life, and so life and work were things worth making with *skill*, which is art. Art is not being faithful to nature with the faithfulness of a photographer, but being faithful to one's own human nature. And an artist is not faithful to his own human nature if he aims as 'expression' and emotionalism—that is the source of aestheticism and artistic temperaments. The artist, making things with skill, works according to the nature of the material he uses (a statue of stone should look like stone and not like a recently expired corpse) and according to his own nature which perceives beauty in perceiving the *true* and willing the good.

In this sense Gill can be said to have invented his art as he invented

his religion. When he defended his Leeds war memorial against those who were horrified to see Christ turning be-spatted members of the Stock Exchange from the Temple precincts, he showed that he cared not for the critic or the connoisseur, but for the work itself which flowed creatively from his finger-tips. 'There is an "artistic" reason for the representation of modern English clothes rather than ancient Eastern ones. It is this: that the natural subject for the artist's manipulation is what he sees around him, what he has lived with and is intimate with, what he *knows*, rather than what he can learn by reading, or by studying in museums. Reading is very misleading. Museums, full of the works of the past, destroy a keen sense of the needs of the present'. (*War Memorial*, p. 7.)

The skilled work of the sculptor, engraver, writer, had escaped the sophistication of those who become self-conscious over their ideas and ideals and attempt to plank them on top of what they find in reality. There is no integrity in Gothic or Classical revivals when those styles are not part of the life of those who make them and live with them. That is why Balliol College and the Museum in Oxford are so impure, so disintegrated. This artist worked 'in the round', integrally: 'As artists it is for us to see all things as ends in themselves—to see all things in God and God is the end. To see all things as beautiful in themselves. "The beauty of God", says St Thomas Aquinas, quoting Denys, "is the cause of the beauty of all that is".' (*Beauty Looks after Herself*, p. 25.)

The sculpture of Eric Gill and his other work were not set apart from his religion, nor was his family life. It is in fact impossible to build up a completely integral life if religion is omitted from family relationships. It is this christian family life that has left its impression in my memory more than any other of Gill's creations, for I was too young to follow his long talks with my father, Desmond Chute, Edward Johnston and the rest. That constant flow of words made the atmosphere which soaked into me and became part of me, no doubt, but I was not consciously battling with these truths for myself. There was that family life, though, which I was able to share freely. It was good and natural, for I remember the pig-killings and all the 'innards' we used to sort out and help to make ready for eating—the liver and lights, sweetbread and sausages. There was hot bread and, the great treat, hot cake straight out of the great brick oven.

On a higher plane there was the excitement of the arrival of the adopted baby boy. But there were yet higher things. There was Father Vincent and the rheumatically Irish P.P. struggling in the 'lean-to' scullery-kitchen, each wanting the other's blessing ('No

Father, it is *you* who should bless *me!*')—to my extreme embarrassment for I was somehow mixed up in the *melée*. There were, too, the evening singing of Compline in the living-room and the agonised kneeling with bare knees on the cocoanut matting to say the Rosary. That was the test in a way: to a boy of a dozen years it might seem an awkward thing to sing the Office of Compline with the family in their living-room. It might easily in other circumstances have been a pose and any boy will hate a religious pose. But we all took to it as to the most natural thing in the world. So when Chute fainted during the Rosary and we had to struggle with the string of medals round his neck we none of us felt that it served us right for playing at being monks. The children, true, used to play at Vespers, later when the Little Office was sung daily in the chapel; but all this too was in the picture. Christian prayer was part of family life, and the essential part. It went with pig-killing and butter-making; it went with the great, jolly supper parties and home-made wines. If you make religion a private affair, which the husband and wife practise separately and alone, and the children, possibly, pick up in a haphazard way at school, then you are destroying the integrating force of the sacrament of matrimony. For it is a sacrament, a holy sign bringing grace; but it won't bring grace without the family co-operating. So these family prayers were in one sense the life of the family coming from the Church. And some have since regretted that Compline was eventually removed from the hearth to the chapel where as a general rule only the men could attend since the womenfolk had to remain at home to put the babes to bed and prepare the supper. Even this Gill ultimately made possible as a family thing by having his chapel at Pigotts in the house.

A propos of the women of the family, some have been shocked by the account given in the *Autobiography* of the life of constant drudgery his wife and daughters had to support for the sake of his ideals. To modern standards thoroughly influenced by feminism as well as by a wholly erroneous view of work this picture has a seeming truth. The man created the beautiful figures and letters in stone, engraved and drew while the women did the chores, blew the smoky open fire, sweated by the brick oven or washed the milk pails and pans. If work is a bore then this sort of woman's work must be perfect hell. But work being regarded as a good thing these girls and their mother were the happiest of mortals. And so they were. Anyone who knew them and could enter into the excitement of home-making with them would have considered the word 'slavery' as a foul-sounding blasphemy. The *Autobiography* in fact makes this abundantly clear. It was the feminine side of the family who insisted at Ditchling on the

pigs and cows and chickens and ponies and traps—what fun it was, too, learning to drive that handsome brown cob that would fall on its knees unless you held it very deftly. The father of the family said he hesitated. And then again when Capel-y-ffin became too much even for these enthusiastic family workers it was the women who decided to go. (cf. *Autobiography*, p. 243.)

The self-sufficiency of the family was not an all-sufficiency, and since the society in which he found himself was aiming at the destruction of all sufficiency, Gill understood that he must seek another group, larger than his own family but far smaller and more manageable than the sprawling hordes of industrialism and big business. Today there is need to create for oneself not only a family life but also a community life, a small group of families supplying each other's basic needs and together fashioning a culture coloured by the hills and the trees around them, by the folk who are their neighbours—and innumerable were the local friends, farmers and their wives mostly—who will come in to help at the season when help is needed, haying and harvesting, calving and pig-killing. This culture of a community grows up from the locality though it is fed by the great Christian and classical heritage. Man is a social being as is shown by his gift of speech; but he cannot subsist on speech with his family alone; who would not become boorish and dull if kept within such strict and narrow limits? So he gathers other like-minded men and women about him.

The point about a small community of men helping each other to live and to live humanly is that it must become an integral part of the locality, each family quite distinct in character and yet sharing something in common with the other families. The deformity of modern mass-community living lies in the absence of any individuality in the homes and families, and the complete sameness of every house. Even if there is a family there is no home-making. Every house has the same bleak modern furniture, the same drab curtains and formless pictures on the walls. This utter lack of character is most acute in suburbia and least apparent in the tenement. But the same levelling process continues so that a man can enter any semi-detached house in England, up north, down south or in the darkling midlands, and find exactly the same cheerless interior; nothing is taken from the locality, nothing is given to the locality.

Hence the first thing a community must have in common is the locality, so that a community in Sussex will differ from one in Northumberland. Consequently between them Gill and Pepler got a farm. There were one or two fields as common property, so that the workshops and chapel could be built on the land they shared. But

for the rest the complete farm was in the hands of one family which contributed milk, butter, eggs, wheat, and oats etc.—at least in theory—to the whole group. They had to be rooted in the land, and the particular clay land with the chalk Downs as a boundary like a sculptured and painted barrier cutting them off not only from the sea and so from Europe but in a sense from other counties in England. The problem of course was to become Ditchling folk and not just a hustle of cranks who were 'toffs' or strangers in the pubs and inns, however friendly they might be. That was a problem that was never fully solved, and contributed to the break in the community and Gill's flight to the Black Mountains in Wales. The attempt was made however.

There was another thing equally fundamental that had to be in common, and that was their religion—and more than that, a particular way of life in that Catholic religion which has to be the same throughout the world and yet at the same time 'all things to all men'. In an age when crumbling religions are dissipating their energies in a false humanitarianism which cannot see beyond its nose, in an age when even Catholics, as Gill saw them, refuse to face up to the moral and social implications of their Gospel and creed in opposition to the life of big business and industrialism, in such an age a community will need a strong, tough bond to bind all the units together—the Catholic religion made particularly applicable to present circumstances, and encouraging in a special way the Christian asceticism that strengthens moral fibres and counteracts the soft allurements of philanthropy. So a particular Christian rule of life was chosen, the rule of the Third Order of St Dominic. Why St Dominic Gill explains briefly in his defence of the Leeds War Memorial, for 'Behind him (i.e., Christ, in the carving) is the Hound of St Dominic (*Domini canis*—the dog of the Lord) who is calling up the followers of Christ to continue the good work. This particular symbol of the Church is chosen because the Dominicans stand especially for Truth and it is untruth rather than ill will which is damning the modern world'. (*War Memorial*, p. 10.) Order in human living was required and the Order of St Dominic was the pattern the community chose to regulate its life on the groundwork of religion. This meant *Prayer* and *Penance*, both flowing from a devotion to Truth.

Prayer: They gathered daily, and four times in the day, to sing the Little Office, the *Officium Beatæ Mariæ Virginis*, which had been the mainstay of the prayer-life of so many in pre-reformation Europe. There we used to gather to sing and recite the psalms. Gill in his smock-like overall and ankle-buttoned trousers and sandals too. The others in their own working clothes; printers' ink, sawdust and

shavings, paint, dye and flecks of wool, all those signs of a holy labour were brought in to praise the Lord and honour the Blessed Virgin. At Prime, 6 o'clock of a morning, the list of the Church's heroes, the Martyrology, was read in English, and the whole culminated in Compline, now, with the rest of the Office, transferred to the chapel. To work is to pray if thus interspersed with plain song and psalmody; and thus the curse of labour was transformed by that clear voice of the artist singing the *In Manus Tuas Commendo Spiritum Meum*, at the close of his day of chipping stone into a form that when seen caused delight, a form of beauty. To the last days of his life Gill was faithful to the recitation of the Office. There is a wooded path at Pigotts which must still repeat those murmured psalms, for he was there often.

Penance: The rule of the Third Order added weight to the Church's law of fasting and abstinence, forbade worldly frivolities in dress or amusement. In fact its first name was simply the Order of Penance. In this way was the community trained in the austerities of St Dominic. It could be argued that it was not very penitential for such a man to cut himself off from the frivolities he had learned to despise. But this was another of his *inventions*. He had managed to remain uncontaminated by the cheap-jack pleasures of the 20th century, but surely not without an effort of will which was true asceticism. The children were occasionally tempted by the flesh-pots of Egypt, the cinema, the wireless and the expensive mechanical toys. They were not discouraged, but they learnt easily that they were thus leaving the good life for something infinitely inferior and the 'houses' made in woods and hedges, created from what God had given in the countryside there proved far more alluring than anything machine-made, however impressive in size or expense. And the financial poverty that came necessarily to a community that attempted to step aside from the flow of worldly degeneration was fully in keeping with the spirit of the Order. It became not the enforced poverty fraught with dangers and temptations, but the voluntary joyful detachment from specious wealth of which St Thomas spoke with intense conviction when defending the same Order from its slanderers.

A community that is to last must necessarily be welded into a whole by authority and obedience. It was difficult for the women of the community to be active members of the Third Order, and so it was difficult for them to come within the framework of a rule which can be given only by authority.² Even among those men who

² It should not be forgotten that a Guild of Craftsmen was formed concurrently with the Tertiaries and this provided another element in common.

appeared regularly at the chapel it was not easy to exert the authority which was vested from year to year in the prefect. Twice the community proved inoperative for such reasons as these, at Ditchling and then at Capel, so that the final solution was that of a patriarchate. The head of a growing family with sons-in-law engaged in different trades automatically becomes the head of a community and the patriarch acquires from nature the authority needed to bind them all together. The ultimate life at Pigotts was a community within the buildings enclosing the quadrangle and performing the essential functions, of a cloister.

All this flowed from Truth, the truth that constituted the life of the Order of Preachers. It was the Good Life because it flowed from man's nature, and consequently was bound to be also in accordance with the divine nature which made man. Here was something eternal, and therefore a dynamic power for integrating the entire cosmos within the orbit of the microcosm. But the eternal and the true is always present; it can never become outmoded or archaic. The one thing that stood out in all this life-making, this 'invention' of religion, the making of the artist, the family and the community, was that Gill was essentially a man of the present, looking ahead and leading on to the future. The first drawing that he made as a boy of 15 was that of a railway engine, and in 1932 he describes the thrill of a journey on the footplate of the Flying Scotsman to Grantham and back. 'Marvellous, simply marvellous—a jolly sight more marvellous than you'd expect and yet in some ways quite the opposite'. This was not inconsistent with his life-making in the teeth of the industrialism which had given birth to these engines. He designed lettering to ornament them and to appear in the notices of the L.N.E.R. He has described how he escaped from the machine-made life as far as possible (*Autobiography*, pp. 272-3); but it showed a mastery of the machine to be able to admire it when it was well made, made with skill and therefore artistic as so many plain and straightforward machines are. The experience on the footplate was an experience of the primitive in the present. If one can be detached in this way from the machine, well and good; the trouble with most of us is that we are so attached to the machine as to be mastered by it.

He was, too, constantly alive to the problems of the present day. He did not pore over history books and try to emulate the behaviour of squire or serf in an 'age of Faith'. He tried to put eternal principles into the here and now; that marked his approach to Unemployment, the Land, Religion. It was no hankering for the 'good old days'. That should be clear from what has been said.

Finally, anyone who seeks to master reality, to apply truth the

eternal to the human mess we are in at present, will necessarily be a man of peace; so that we cannot conclude this study of integration without a word on the culmination of an integral life, that of the tranquillity of order, the peace of conformity with nature human and divine. Gill was intensely devoted to the pursuit of peace, was a member of 'Pax' and spoke often for the P.P.U. Yet he had written between the two wars: 'The Gospel records the occasion upon which God, in the person of Christ, used violence to enforce his will. Thus for all time the use of violence in a just cause is made lawful. Violence may not always be expedient, it must always be the last resort, but it cannot be called forbidden. Hence a representation of the turning-out of the money-changers has been chosen for a war memorial, for it commemorates the most just of all wars—the war of Justice against Cupidity—a war waged by Christ himself'. (*War Memorial*, pp. 5.6). And in the last war he went as a soldier when called, though he made no attempt to volunteer, and willingly availed himself of the opportunity of exemption. I can well remember going one evening to his house and seeing an insignificant-looking soldier, clean-shaven with an undistinguished chin, sitting at supper with the family. It was only the voice that revealed the man of the house.

He was therefore no blind pacifist; but the longer he lived, and particularly after his vision of Jerusalem, he seemed to find it harder to accept the fact that any modern war could be just. That followed necessarily from his judgment of the evil of industrial civilisation with its lust for filthy lucre. Everything is vitiated by the overmastering desire for gain; it was therefore difficult to see how one could be fighting for justice when the powers that attack each other are economic and financial powers unrelated to the moral law, and unredeemed by Christianity. 'There are "money-changers" in all civilised countries, and modern war, in spite of the patriotism of millions of conscripts and their officers, is mainly about money—for the "white man's burden" consists chiefly in the effort to bestow the advantages of "civilisation" upon those unenlightened "natives" who happen to be living where gold or oil is available'. (*War Memorial*, p. 13.) That was written twenty years ago and so there is no sign of a change of mind, only, towards the end of his life, when another hideous war was upon us he became more passionately convinced of the relation between poverty and peace. That stands out in his autobiography, and one of his 'Last Essays' is devoted to the theme.³

³ We may take occasion of this essay to announce with pleasure the republication of the latest books of essays *In a Strange Land* and *Last Essays* in one volume entitled: 'Essays by Eric Gill; Introduction by Mary Gill' (Cape; 8s. 6d.)

To the end of his life he remained poor in purse as well as in spirit. He had attained great celebrity, was, in spite of all his attacks on the 'Academicians', elected a member of the Royal Academy, he received recognition on all sides. Yet he wrote a month before he died *a propos* of an article: 'I am sorry to have to ask, but is there any chance of BLACKFRIARS paying for articles nowadays? As you, I am sure, understand, my kind of job is not exactly the kind that flourishes at the present time, and we are jolly hard-up, and likely to be more so, so any little would help'.

We might be tempted to regret that so great a man was allowed to die in comparative poverty—only comparative for there was Pigotts which he owned—did we not understand how passionately he sought holy poverty. 'Poverty is the rational attitude towards material things—the only rational attitude in a material world. But poverty begins in the mind—it is first of all a way of believing, thinking, feeling—it is a way of the spirit. And it is precisely the opposite way to the 'way of the world'—our world, the world of England, of Empire, the way of France, America, the way of Communism, which seeks to make the poor rich—but Christ came to make the rich poor and the poor *holy*'.

That was the ultimate secret of the integrity at which he aimed. He invented his religion and his art, and he made his family and the community, but in all that making and creating, in all that blessedness of creation that he admired around him he set himself to be detached and free, and so to possess his soul in peace.

That is why I was not amazed to come across a Carmelite Convent that had read Gill with understanding and enthusiasm, for the only integral life is the contemplative life and Gill was a contemplative by disposition and design.

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