BLACKFRIARS

A MONTHLY REVIEW

Edited by the English Dominicans

Published at Blackfriars, St Giles, Oxford

Vol. XXIX **MAY 1948** **No. 338**

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THE LETTERS OF ERIC GILL

FEW readers of BLACKFRIARS will be unaware that Eric Gill stood for and vigorously defended many of the principles for which this review has also been fighting. For this reason any work of his demands close and sympathetic attention in these pages. We have a clear determination to avoid turning him into a prophet, or, what is far worse, into the founder of some new '-ism' (he was not the sort of man for that); but his simple appreciation of what Christian integrity demanded in modern surroundings, together with his clarity in outlining this appreciation, have lent importance to what he has to say.

The publication of his Letters would, therefore, be an event of significance to BLACKFRIARS whatever their character might be; and the edition under review is more particularly interesting from this point of view because it cannot fairly represent any other. In brief, the *Letters of Eric Gill* [1] cannot be read fairly as an insight into the private life of the artist, nor as a revelation of his friendships and enmities, nor even as an outline of his mental development. But the book can and should be read for the ideas therein contained; for it is in fact a scattered summary of most of the theses which Gill defended, with an occasional hint as to how these ideas arose.

The reason for this limitation in the scope of the letters demands emphasis. A man of fame and affection dying in his prime leaves his contemporaries, those who are intimately connected with him by the

1 *The Letters of Eric Gill.* Edited by Walter Shewring (Cape; 15s.).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1948.tb06970.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

bonds of family or friendship or yet of companionship in work, still living to cherish his correspondence but unwilling in the awkward relationship of the living with the dead to publish them to the world. A true correspondence is a dual affair and reveals two personalities, so that it is impossible to disclose the one partner without the other. In fairness the letters to should accompany the letters from. Again, a man of fame was not born so; his letters at first will be of little worth and usually destroyed. They are only preserved when affection deepens or fame spreads. It is impossible therefore to present a series of letters which preserve the sort of continuity that a personal journal does.

For these and other similar reasons Mr Walter Shewring was faced with a thorny task when he set about editing the letters of Eric Gill so soon after the latter's death. Of the friends who must have received letters of interest only a few unearthed their treasures for the public's inspection, and even among these the more personal passages had to be omitted. No family letters—surely the most revealing of all—could be included except for the more superficial ones to his brothers. Personalities have not been excluded, but they are very often merely initials or Christian names which can only have meaning for actual friends and acquaintances and therefore remain impersonal for the general reader. And the use of the first person plural will in particular remain obscure to the 'outsider'. For example, in the last three lines of letter No. 59 the first 'we' refers to Edward Johnston, Hilary Pepler and Eric Gill, the second 'we' only to himself and his wife. Again it is difficult even with this impersonal term of reference to avoid misunderstandings with their inevitable pain among those who may have shared and contributed to his idea but could not follow the more individualistic aspects of the artist's life.

However, under these disadvantages Mr Shewring has made a useful handbook of ideas and has therefore included a large number of letters to the press which have the impersonality of that form of discussion—however warmly conducted—and which are certainly worth preserving in permanent form though some of them are bound to seem somewhat secondhand to many readers.

The majority of the ideas are familiar; but stated as they are with the brevity of a busy man for whom correspondence was a spare time occupation, they stand out often with greater force. There are, for example, brief and striking outlines of the artist's view of 'functionalism' in art for which he became almost notorious towards the end of his life. Gill makes it quite clear, in his letters to Romney Green, for instance, that he had not lapsed into a worship of mechanical efficiency nor adopted the modern habit of

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utilitarian thinking. He was always insisting that the thing made, the work of art, must be made true to its purpose and therefore good; and when that was done the thing would be of necessity beautiful. A table is made not merely to support weights, but to fit into a house and to become part of a family, and therefore mechanical efficiency is not sufficient to make it true or good. It was this metaphysical view of the nature of his own work which made the pattern in Gill's life, and if we read these letters with intent to unearth the idea rather than to follow the secret path of his inner life, we shall learn a great deal from this book.

Thus, we already know from the *Autobiography* that it was by his 'invention' of Roman Catholicism that Gill was introduced to the theology and philosophy of St Thomas; but it is from his letter to William Rothenstein (No. 23) that we learn of his motives and what he meant by 'invention'. He did not mean any suitability of temperament which demanded the Church, but rather that he found, what reason would lead him to expect to find in the true Church, an orderliness, a neatness which emanated from an ordering Mind. Gill himself was always orderly in thought and habit and the tidyness of the Church which left no dichotomies unchallenged but gathered all reality under the Brotherhood of God, that tidyness appealed to his manner. And again it was the same sort of tidyness which he discovered within the Church in the philosophy of St Thomas that provided the most effective instrument in the development of his ideas. Under the influence of this new outlook the idea can be seen to develop rapidly and soon he is disagreeing in theory with his great friend and fellow artist William Rothenstein (cf. Letters, No. 61 et seq.). Art must be fitted into the wider scheme of the whole of reality and not made into a world on its own; the art-for-art's-sake idea does not fit into a complete scheme and its untidyness disgusted the sculptor. 'It all goes together' was a favourite dictum of his, and it could apply to his ideals of religion, society and art as well as to the evils of industrialism.

Contact with St Thomas by frequent visits to the Dominican house of studies at Hawkesyard soon clarified and burnished the idea of a whole Christian life so that with his friends—Hilary Pepler in particular—he became a Dominican Tertiary and started a community life which was to be lived round the Church and as independent as possible of the industrial society which was so disgustingly disorderly. No sooner had the idea begun to be lived than he was removed into the whale's belly of the army in the 1914-8 war and some of his most poignant letters are those written in exile, nostalgic for the true life he had already experienced. He is, for

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example, rejoiced to hear of the practices for Compline with the children, for that was to be the evening prayer of the united families. And in the same letter (to Desmond Chute, No. 73) he writes: 'Take Saturday afternoon tea for instance—the hot new bread from our own oven, baked by our own women folk—it is holy bread. The little land—the workshop—the stone—the animals and garden—all are riches—but if we give God the praise and have compassion on our fellow men I believe God blesses such riches'. He was trying to fit the ideal of the independent family into the wider concept of Christian poverty which was one of the principal themes of his whole life and which he lived in fact, for he was always financially poor up to his death, even when fame had reached him. It was at this time that Gill and Pepler bought a 100 acre farm with a view to breaking it up into small holdings to be sold preferably to Catholics, and they were able to establish a Guild of Tertiaries and craftsmen on a five acre plot of its own (it is here that the 'we' of the correspondence is apt to be confusing).

The idea when it is an end to be achieved is most clearly seen at the beginning. The details are indistinct or wholly out of sight so that the outline stands forth in all its brilliance. 'Finis est primum in intentione'. But when it comes to making the idea into concrete reality, whether it be in chipping stone from a large block, or in living from day to day the mixture of spiritual and corporeal occupations and concerns which lead to the full realisation of the end, there begin to arise the difficulties which form the constricting womb in which the word, the idea, is made flesh. For the 'finis est ultimum in executione'. The first stage of inspiration and exaltation, characterised perhaps by the formal Byzantine figures of the Stations of the Cross in Westminster Cathedral which make a background to the correspondence of those years, had to give place to the disagreeable details of finance and misunderstanding. In 1920 Gill writes to André Raffalovich describing the community but hinting at the serious financial difficulties in which they were already immersed. In 1924 he pulled out of the community and went to Wales. It is not possible to analyse the rights and wrongs of this break. But it is certain that the Nightingale and the Owl were always disturbing each other in Gill, and the former often gained temporary successes; the emotions of the poet, without making life untidy, conquered the reason of the philosopher. But in any case it meant that the original idea as it began to be incarnated in the concrete of life had to be modified and tried by adversity, and Wales, whither he fled, was in many ways a desert (cf. Letter No. 129), and Salies-de-Béarn about which he wrote so warmly in the *Autobiography* was

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itself an escape. The sharp edge of the idea became softened in consequence; things are not so cut and dried in real life. 'I hope you won't lay it on too thick about religion', he writes to Fr Chute, who was contributing a preface to a Gill book. 'In my mind a consciously religious attitude of mind in the artist and (definitely so called) "religious" subjects become less and less necessary. It makes me quite "all overish" to read old *Games* [in which a great deal of his early writing appeared] again and to remember how "outward" it all was'. (p. 227.) And again a little later, 'I get more and more painfully aware of the fact that I ought not to be writing at all—not sufficient philosophical training. It's painful —every week I get the thing clearer in my mind, and last week's writing seems mostly tosh'. (pp. 239-40.) 'The thing' was in fact becoming more realistic, more flesh and blood; but it was evidently a painful process of generation. Conflict, only hinted at in these letters, with his old master Father Vincent McNabb was in fact superficial and temperamental rather than about the essence of the idea itself, but it meant desert and pain to himself and to others.

Only when Gill returned as an A.R.A. to live within easy reach of London, no longer escaping from but more and more violently grappling with the industrialist society he hated, did he begin to reach somewhere near the *Finis*. The idea was reduced to a more workable living reality. He could in fact live the Christian life only in a community composed of his family, daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren, over which he exercised the beneficent, moderating authority of a patriarch. This was not the ideal, but it was practical; it was also to a certain extent subsistent and independent. It was lived round an altar—as soon as he acquired Pigotts he allocated a room in it to be the chapel (cf. p. 237). The original self-consciousness about religion and life and work and poverty are gone, but the same idea, the same orderliness, the same neatness pervade his mind and life. 'The whole trouble of our civilisation is involved —its godlessness and its false gods and its consequent economic muddle and injustice, and its consequent ugliness and disorder. The only real advice I can give . . . is that you by "prayer and fasting", perfect your mind—by reading, writing, talking, loving, thinking, probing, criticising—referring all things to their sources. . . . Thus, in spite of all the misery which you must necessarily suffer you will have an interior peace of mind'. (Letter No. 212.) Order incarnate is peace, and throughout the violent controversies in which he was now engaged, there was a far greater approximation to this peace as the idea took on flesh. Some of the old personal enmities were healed; and though the Nightingale was still trying to outwit

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the Owl (cf. the final letter to Desmond Chute) and there were injudicious sallies into enemy positions in such matters as the article in the nudist review (pp. 320-1), tranquillity in the midst of intense activity is the mark of this last period. Gill has himself summed up the character of the final period in his 'Jerusalem' section of the *Autobiography*. The realisation that the Christ of true Christianity does not make all things tidy here and now ('I saw, as it were eye to eye, the revealing face of Christ', he says in the *Autobiography* p. 253), brought home to him the need to fight for peace against the real corruption of 'sanitary' orderliness.

The true peace of the idea-made-life, as Gill experienced it and has described it, lay in Christian poverty. It is interesting to notice how this poverty appears throughout his correspondence in various forms. The first glimpse of the importance of Christ turning the money changers from the Temple seems to come as a reward for denying the Nightingale his licence. He was sitting in July 1916 for his portrait to Rothenstein and decided to occupy his thoughts with a proposed design for an L.C.C. Monument; and 'it suddenly occurred to me that the act of Jesus in turning out the buyers and sellers from the Temple as he did was really a most courageous act and most warlike' (p. 82). This theme was finally executed for the Leeds war memorial three or four years later. But it was still uppermost in his mind when he was asked to design the large sculpture for the League of Nations building in Geneva in 1935. The design was turned down because it was too Christian, and probably too realistic, as he explains in the *Autobiography*. We learn from his letters to Anthony Eden how the Sistine Chapel 'Creation of Adam' idea sprang up from the abandonment of the money-changers theme. Holy poverty is required to safeguard human nature and to preserve it from 'filthy and obscene destruction' instigated by the spirit of riches and materialism. Man has come out from God made in his image; man, to be saved, must return to God—'Thou mastering me, God' (cf. pp. 336-339). These three great Genevan panels sum up the final conclusion of Eric Gill's life. Poverty is only a means; poverty in itself is only a negative thing but it is used by the power of liberality to move all things Godward. It enables the reason and the spirit of man to proceed in peace towards his final destiny under the integrating power of God. The end is peace, the means is poverty, the moving idea is man made to the image of God.

The last piece of sculpture that Gill carved at the time when he was sickening of his mortal disease was the altar piece only recently erected in Westminster Cathedral. The reader who has an

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opportunity should visit the Cathedral to compare the Stations with this plaque of the Crucifixion with SS. John Fisher and Thomas More at the foot. He will see there the original thesis, the clarity of the idea first conceived almost side by side with the final elaboration in which the idea has taken on the softness and rhythm of flesh. They are both works of stone; they both fulfil Gill's principle that the stone should look like stone, but the Station shows the first exaltation and the altar-piece the ultimate realisation. The contrast will give him an insight into the meaning of these Letters.

Glimpses of this progressive movement of thesis, antithesis, synthesis from the first conception of the idea to its birth, a movement which may be found in the life of any man who makes thoughts and things but which is set out in Gill's with wonderful clarity and precision, glimpses of this appear throughout the correspondence, and it might be argued that therefore the book provides a biography. But it is not so. It provides a wider view in some respects than the *Autobiography* which is purely the view of the artist from his death bed rather than the artist's successive views as they were born and progressed as hinted at in the correspondence. But in order to understand anything of the life which lay behind these letters a greater knowledge of the man himself derived from other sources is necessarily presupposed. The thesis-antithesis-synthesis movement can only be guessed at unless there is other matter from which to judge. And the uninformed reader will make many wild and wide guesses about the life of Eric Gill. But if he is wise he will take this as an anthology of the Idea of Eric Gill, the idea of Order and Orderliness, of Wholeness and of all things going together. Most of these letters give glimpses of the one idea which, conceived in exaltation, was brought forth in adversity but which incarnated spelt peace for him who lived it.

THE EDITOR

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1948.tb06970.x Published online by Cambridge University Press