

## THE MIND OF MIDDLE AGE

**M**ANY in middle age are finding how far they have travelled from the opinions of their youth, in most of those sublunary matters subject to the rule of opinion. In youth our opinions commonly present themselves to us in the guise of convictions; it is part of the process of growing up (and indeed of growing old), that we learn how much greater the field of mere opinion is than we imagined it in our youth. The two books before us<sup>1</sup> represent for the present writer, and for others of his generation, something of that gradual revolution in ideas which the sheer pressure of events has brought to birth in us.

First let us look at Gill, who recalls our youth, Distributism, Belloc, Chesterton, and all that happy romantic hangover from the 19th century into our own day, which beguiled us in the twenties. Few will take Gill as seriously as does the Editor of these letters, describing him as one of the 'greatest minds of the day', and even gracing his thought with the high name of 'philosophy'. One admits readily the fascination of Gill, his passionate didactic style, his capacity for self-revelation, his sincerity at times almost fanatical, his vision crystal-clear but narrow in range. But these qualities which constitute the attraction of Gill for so many are bought at a high price—the price of a sort of affected ignorance on his part of those many things which did not interest him. Say if you will a sort of refusal to acknowledge the existence of the total field of reality—a vicious habit of simplifying the complex. He was intensely English—at once a strength and a weakness: a strength to his art, a weakness if we judge him as a thinker. Let it be admitted that he was one of the great men of the day, provided we do not go on to say that he was one of the greatest minds or a philosopher. A great man, because he had talent perhaps to the point of genius; a writer whose style combined clarity with passion, persuasiveness, strength, economy. A highly individual artist whose sculpture is certain to rank high among the work of this century; a letterer creative to the point of genius, and one of the greatest for many centuries. But in spite of all this and perhaps because of it, it is an error to rank him with the philosophers and the thinkers; for he had neither the capacity for abstract thought, nor the power of co-ordinating ideas, of interpreting

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Eric Gill*; edited by Walter Shewring (Cape); *A Study of History*, Vol. I, by Arnold J. Toynbee (Oxford U.P.).—These volumes have already been reviewed in this journal. We publish this opposite view of Gill's thought that the reader may be presented with both sides of the picture.—*Editor*.

facts; nor yet that wide field of vision in which great intellectual power consists.

We are perhaps excessively familiar with the old Gillian theses that 'the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist'—that 'the factory reduces man to a state of subhuman degradation', and so on, and while wishing to acknowledge the measure of rather obvious truth which these and other sayings of his contain, it is necessary also to point out that these terse statements will not stand close analysis. Take the statement 'the artist is not a special kind of man'. It may be highly desirable that every man should be a special kind of artist, it may be every man is a potential artist of some sort, as every priest is a potential pope, as the world is full of mute inglorious Miltons, who will only become vocal and glorious in the next life, but either Gill meant that it was here and now eminently possible for every man to be an artist, to be a creative maker of things, and that he would have been such a creative maker of things, if it had not been for the malign influence of industrial capitalism; or if he did not mean that, then his passion was folly, and he meant nothing.

It was essential for a mind like Gill's, if it was to retain its narrow vision clear, that it should remain ignorant of history, important that it should never receive anything like a systematic instruction in any science, as for example that of philosophy. If there are those who are educated above their abilities, there are those who are educated below their abilities, and Gill was one of these. There is nothing derogatory in saying this, for Gill said as much himself, and some of the world's greatest artists have in the literary sense been uneducated. It might be argued that an elaborate literary education is bad for the artist as an artist, because it weakens that sense of the concrete in which art to a great extent consists. But there are certain advantages in being acquainted with ideas and facts; of having some sense of the historical scale of things, and of the diversity of human opinion; there are certain advantages in a measure of education. And some of these are, that granted a certain natural intelligence, the laborious process which goes by the name of education will tend first of all to make a man aware of the existence of other opinions, to make him cautious in judgment, and it will temper those convictions whose root is emotion. Also, alas, it will often blur that clear outline of thought which can be packed into a short aphorism; it will introduce qualification and sub-distinction into what would otherwise be clear untrammelled statements; in a word it would make him for good or ill all that Gill was not. For Gill's passion and sincerity were those of a man who, although he said 'Look after truth and goodness and beauty will look after itself', was emotionally convinced not of the primacy of

truth, but of the primacy of the beautiful. It is significant for example that while he took over from Maritain the thomist distinction between art and prudence, and while he quoted the great French philosopher on the ethics of property, he ignored the latter's distinction between the useful and the fine arts, and his communitarian ideas of ownership for the modern industrial method of production. He never mentioned nor does he seem aware of Maritain's total acceptance of the machine.

Gill's beautiful clarity of style was also in great measure a consequence of his happy ignorance; men and their motives were either good or bad; he was concerned with England, art, and the present; the world as a whole, the past and the complex kaleidoscope of events which we call history for him had only a shadowy existence. He could see his own little world so clearly and simply; its colour and shape were etched sharply; he could write clearly, passionately.

Yet for all his blindness to history as a process, his mind was, to use the term coined by Professor Toynbee, 'archaistic'. His early days were spent in the office of a Victorian Gothic revivalist architect, and though he revolted against that influence he never completely freed himself from it.

Archaism is the illusion of a static conception of the historical process, making men think they can recreate the past; but what we call the past means not only sets of political, social, or cultural institutions, it means also men with given ideas, beliefs, habits of life, and even if at tremendous cost we could refashion the material details of some past state of society, it would be only a dead simulacrum to men of a later age; for the men having changed and the whole historical climate having changed, they would find the institutions unworkable. The archaist must learn to his cost that the heavy burden of human history is one we cannot shed at will, for there are no Lethæan waters in which we can wash away the past; and whether man learns from history or not, he is bound to suffer it, and having suffered it he is not the same. As was said in a different context, '*souffrir c'est rien—avoir souffert c'est tout*'. To the archaist sooner or later the past becomes a *cul de sac* out of which the only escape is to take a leap into the future; in a word, from a slavish imitation of tradition he flies to the repudiation of all tradition; for he has lost faith in the fundamental goodness of things. Gill was doubtless saved by his faith from such dire extremities, but there are indications in his art, at times heavy with a certain despairing sensuality, and in his attitude to sex and property that he was tending in the direction of Futurism.

On the subject of sex it is worth remarking that Gill, like D. H.

Lawrence whom he greatly admired, was brought up in the Non-conformist tradition, and he never really seems to have understood that in the Catholic moral system sex is not an isolated phenomenon, but is part of the virtue of chastity, which is itself part of the cardinal virtue of temperance. Much less does he show any sign of having understood why the Church makes a practical ideal of chastity, imposing it upon those who give themselves to the priestly or the religious life. He seems always to have seen sex physically, but never in its total human situation, as witness his remarks about women being the poor victims of male desire, and the unhappy phrase in the *Autobiography* about the 'pleasures of marriage being beyond the dreams of avarice', which drew down upon him the gentle censure of Mr Algernon Cecil. It was no doubt a momentary aberration which drew from him the statement that Communism was the logical consequence of modern industrialism, but the aberration is again not without its significance.

A man parts with the convictions of his youth with reluctance and the archaistic side of Gill does represent to many of us that happy time, which the rapid succession of events in the past ten years has made seem to belong to another age and another world. The reading of such a book as this Compendium of Professor Toynbee's great work makes one realise how small and parochial was our attitude to problems which in their scale are truly cosmic, and how futile are the twin extremes of Archaism and Futurism—Traditionalism and Revolution. This indeed is one of the great formative works of the age and, whether one accepts Toynbee's philosophy of history or not, it is impossible to undergo the influence of such a powerful mind and not suffer at least a partial intellectual regeneration.

The scale of Professor Toynbee's work, and the vast erudition which goes to its making, render definite criticism of it as a whole impossible by any but a handful of his peers; but its impact on any disinterested mind must be to compel it to create new proportions of depth as well as range in his judgments of history; it forces one to reject that parochialism of mind which tends to see history merely in terms of England or Europe since the Reformation. Nor is this a simple submission to great learning; it is rather a growth in understanding of the complexity of the human story; it is to enter a little more deeply into the meaning of history. The scope of any historical work, and its scale in time and space, are bound to determine not merely its size, but also in large measure its intrinsic quality. For example—to borrow a little light for the moment from Christian revelation—if Christ came to save all men, if he 'recapitulates' in himself all human history, then to see the Church as a Western European or 'Roman institution' is to fail to see it as the genuinely Catholic thing

which it is. The scale in time and space affect the very quality of our history. To have read even this compendium of Toynbee's larger work, to have reflected on it even a little, is a decisive experience; to have surveyed even carelessly the immense panorama of men and events in their perhaps bewildering diversity, engenders a profound sense of the mystery which lies at the heart of history. And this is salutary, since it makes for patience (the ultimate virtue in the practical order), for tolerance, and proportion in judgment. These qualities, so patently lacking in Gill, are powerfully present in Toynbee. The very style of the writers under discussion is a witness to it. Gill sharp, concrete, and clear with the clarity of shallow water; Toynbee subtle, balanced (yet modern in phrase), building up large perspectives which have volume and depth. Gill entertaining, stimulating, surprising with delight; Toynbee leading the mind down a determined path to a foreseen end; instructing, persuading, warning; the one is for youth, the other for maturity.

What, however, of the intellectual apparatus which Toynbee utilises in his interpretation of history? We cannot concern ourselves here with the ultimate validity of his principles; indeed the doubt may remain whether in the metaphysical nature of things any philosophy of history can be more than an approximation to truth. That approximation is however very valuable wherever we may discover it in history, especially in those large questions where even the lesser certitude of history escapes us, and probability is all we can hope to attain. The idea, for example, that the disintegration of civilisations is due to a failure of creative power, that the higher religions find their origins in the internal proletariat, the notions of Archaism and Futurism already mentioned, these and a host of other *idées mères* light up the record of history for us; they reveal to us a pattern and a kind of law; they make history not merely live, they do what is more; they make it instructive.

Perhaps the greatest praise we can give to this present work is to say that in the final pages of this volume there are indications that the author is led to the conclusion that even a philosophy of history is not enough; that light must be sought beyond reason and this world, in Faith and Revelation. To the light from these sources Professor Toynbee is not blind; that he may see the light in its fullness must be the prayer of all who read him, and who in reading him have reached the middle of the road.

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