

On the other hand, their art critic has written in one of the glossy monthlies that 'so dominant in Gill's work did the pornographic element become' that his friends (and he is referring to before the 1914 war) thought it might damage his reputation; he is dismissed as absurd, a ranter, a wretched sculptor, though admittedly a very fine draughtsman of a certain sort, one whose work, it seems, deserves no more respect than an Art Deco teapot. In the same number there are two pages, with photographs, about someone who 'has been hailed as the best woman's body in the world'.

However, as part of the recent celebration of Gill's centenary at Spode House there was an exhibition of his work. Here was one of the drawings that were published, severely reduced in size, in *Drawings from Life* – no. 28 I think. He drew these a year or two before he died. It enthralled me as something of exquisite beauty, a convincing answer to the conundrum of his sexuality, a wonderful evocation of God's creative love, a raising of the mind and heart to God.

Bede Bailey O P

Eric Gill and Workers' Control

Adrian Cunningham

*'... all decent people are ultimately anarchists –
certainly all Christians must be.'*

[Letter to Stanley Morrison 16.9.36]

The importance of Gill's political writings lies in their linking of two major traditions of response to industrial capitalism, that of libertarian socialism and that of catholicism. In the line of Morris and Kropotkin he is a significant figure; in the history of modern English catholicism, a major one.

Industrialism in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe can be seen as consisting of two basic phases. In the first industrial revolution there was a breaking of the traditional *vertical* links between social strata and a tendency for them to polarise into self-consciously opposed classes. In the second wave of the industrial revolution the *horizontal* links of family, workplace and voluntary association which had survived are weakened or broken. A basic strand of socialist thought was preoccupied with the first development. It tended to welcome the polarization of social classes and

to stress the conquest of state power and state control of industry as the agent of the liberation of individuals. In their very different ways, anarchists and catholics were as responsive to the second as to the first development of industrialism. Attention to the disruption of horizontal relations of work and domestic life produces an hostility towards, at least a scepticism about, the role of the state, of centralization, and of the mass-organization of work. Issues of control and quality of life predominate, whether the focus is on the family, the individual, or group of workers.

'My socialism was from the beginning a revolt against the intellectual degradation of the factory hand and the damned ugliness of all that capitalist-industrialism produced, and it was not primarily a revolt against the cruelty and injustice of the possessing classes or against the misery of the poor. It was not so much the working *class* that concerned me as the working *man* – not so much what he got *from* working as what he did *by* working.'

(*Autobiography*, p 111)

Although in his writings Gill is usually disparaging of William Morris it is in the context of Ruskin and Morris that his work is best understood. He seemed unwilling or unable to disentangle Morris's stance from that of the arts and crafts movement with which he was associated. One of his earliest articles was 'The Failure of the Arts and Crafts Movement, a lesson for Trade Unionists' (*The Socialist Review* December 1909). He saw the movement as a necessary revolt against the separation of designer and craftsman in modern production, an attempt to overcome division of labour and the loss of personal control that went with it. I stress 'modern', for Gill was no naive medievalizer – some division of labour has been necessary and desirable since the beginning of things, he says, but 'division of labour for mutual aid is a very different thing from division of labour solely to increase profits.' As he saw it, in the craft guilds of Rome, Constantinople and the European middle ages control of production was in the hands of the workers themselves; craft organization was in the interests of good workmanship and a just price, production was primarily for use rather than for profit. The error of the arts and craft movement was that of supposing that it should turn the workman into an artist. In its idea of the 'artist-craftsman' it was simply reinstating the divisions it should be opposing: 'the artist-craftsman has all the vices of the artist and none of the virtues of the tradesman'. Upper-class attempts at revival of craftsmanship could not achieve more than changes of fashion; they lacked any substantial contact with Trade Unionism. In the unions there is no whining about the wickedness of machinery or the laws of art. Once financial domination of work is over-

come, the problem of machinery will solve itself.

'Machinery will then take its place – probably no small one either – and what can be done better with the aid of machinery will so be done, and what can be done better by hand will be done by hand. *Let those who make things judge.*' (my emphasis)

Gill saw both union and guild as organizations of producers to control their conditions of work. The difference between them lay in their situation vis à vis the power of the merchant class. The union has been forced to struggle for the just price and what it entails. 'That gained, they can then demand not only the right to work, but the right to good work:' the struggle over wages and hours of work becomes one about the conditions and nature of work. 'It is not to be supposed that any man not a lunatic actually prefers to do work of which he cannot be proud'. He relies on the inherent desire for good work and the English working class ethic of mutual aid rather than self help to lead to emancipation from wage slavery.

The emphasis upon directness of control, responsibility and good work, and the impossibility of these in a system of production for profit (whether personal *or* collective) led Gill out of mainstream socialism, 'in which a number of Capitalists is exchanged for one Capitalist, viz. the State.' (*Art Nonsense* 1925 p 135). He came to feel increasingly that socialist accounts of modernity and alienation, those of Penty's guild-socialism as well as of the Fabians, were inadequate to the scale of the evil as he felt it. This was a major factor in his rediscovery of Christianity, or as he put it, his invention of Catholicism, which led to his conversion in 1913. He later wrote that he had been grossly misinformed and deceived about the degree of the church's opposition to the modern world. The wearing away of this idealized picture becomes clear and articulate in the writings of the later 1930s.

Important features of Gill's thought on work were shaped by his encounter with Thomist philosophy, in particular its discussion of the dialectical relation between the perfection of the work to be done and the perfection of the worker doing it (*finis operis* and *finis operantis*). The contextualizing of work in a total philosophy of man and man's relation to God was decisive. For Gill it was one of the most damning criticisms of modernity that it deprived most people of glorifying God *in* their work. That preposition 'in' is vital, it separates Gill from christian thought that stops at the possibility of being christian *at* work, a good thing but compatible with any conditions of work. As he observed of slavery, what is inconsistent with christianity may not be incompatible with it. Only a total revolution of the world of work would satisfy his consistent chris-

tianity. His constant awareness of the connexions between work, ownership and control also distanced him from the majority of his catholic contemporaries. The link between freedom and responsibility in work separated him from conventional socialism: the link between responsibility, freedom and control separated him from the ambiguous discussion of ownership and private property in conventional catholicism.

Even with his early enthusiasm for the social principles of the church, Gill maintained the emphases that he had taken, amongst others, from Kropotkin. In the October 1916 issue of the small Ditchling review with suitably Pepleresque title, *The Game*, Gill took for granted a religious basis of national, corporate and personal life as a first principle: the evils of the subordination of the workman to the trader and manufacturer 'can only be remedied by the restoration of religion and the freedom of the workman'. Two years later in *The Game* writing on 'The Factory System and Christianity' the focus is sharper. 'Labour unrest' is not in the end about wages but about control, the worker's responsibility and freedom in work, and thus all schemes of profit-sharing and co-management must fail. For him the factory system depends upon militarism: without military support it would have been destroyed at the beginning, and the ultimate deterrent to the striker is still the rifle. The system promotes wars, it destroys local markets and with inevitable over-production leads to a fight for new markets. It is to these key issues of control and the link between industrialism and war that Gill forcefully returns in the 1930s.

Following his stay at Hawkesyard Priory in 1917 Gill wrote his manifesto 'Slavery and Freedom' which opens,

That state is a state of Slavery in which man does what he likes to do in his spare time and in his working time that which is required of him; This state can only exist when what man likes to do is to please himself.

That state is a state of Freedom in which a man does what he likes to do in his working time and in his spare time that which is required of him. This state can only exist when what a man likes to do is to please God.

It would be wrong to try to unpack all of Gill's ideas from those brief paragraphs but it seemed to D H Lawrence in the last lines that he wrote that in them there was more 'than in all Karl Marx or Professor Whitehead, or a dozen other philosophers rolled together'. Gill insists upon the essential productiveness of human beings, their innate creativity in the daily making and re-making of the world they inhabit. The idea that leisure might consist of compulsory activity and work consist of free activity, of

really being oneself, may sound crazy; to Gill it was a measure of the craziness of the modern world. Gill pursued these themes in many, many addresses and essays over the remaining twenty three years of his life. Before turning to the later writings on work and control, it may be worth commenting on Gill as a writer for 'Slavery and Freedom' shows him at his brilliantly concise and ordered best. His centenary year has seen valuable assessments of his importance as a typographer, sculptor and engraver, whilst his writings are dismissed, often merely in passing and, I suspect, unread.

As Herbert Read remarked in his fine obituary notice, the key to Gill is that he was not an eccentric but a rationalist. It runs from his personal discovery of 'the great secret' that there is a rational way of making letters to his fascination with the rationality of scholasticism, and his practice of modifying life drawings in different versions towards an essential simplicity of line. It is in another sense of his being a rationalist that many have found his habits of thought and of writing wearisome. Elements of the rationalism of his Fabian days and the attraction to H G Wells, the tidiness of the architectural draughtsman and meticulous keeper of accounts, play across and against his passion for intellectual and moral order. At times the downrightness of the common sense common man and the student of the Dominicans go uncomfortably together. Thomism gave a confidence and clarity to his ideas, it also gave an appearance of ticking off items from a ready made list of propositions, imposing over-simple schemes and short cut deductions on complex issues. But in his writing he was deliberately a polemicist and propagandist and like all such material it is best appreciated in small doses. He described himself as one of those writers who can only keep to the point by returning to it. He also observed that many readers can only remember the point if it is repeated often enough. Some of the deficiencies of his writing, the notes of irritation, sarcasm or flippancy that can creep in, might be seen as the response not so much of voice crying in the wilderness as in a madhouse, what Desmond Chute described as 'tuneless echoes of insensitive questioning'.

There is a significant change in Gill's writing towards the last five years of his life. His work in Jerusalem in 1934 on the panels for the New Museum was both an exposure to the Holy Land as holy, like 'living with the Apostles', and a total contrast with all that he detested in England. In all its destitution, 'it is the Holy Land and they live a holy life, whereas England is unholy and people can only live holy lives in secret'. (*Autobiography* p 252)

So I came back from Palestine with my mind made up – or at least on the way to it. But this was not going to make things easy. Henceforward I must take a position even more

antagonistic to my contemporaries than that of a mere critic of the mechanistic system. I must take a position antagonistic to the very basis of their civilization. And I must appear antagonistic even to the Church itself. Of course that is all nonsense but that is how it must appear. For the Christians everywhere have committed themselves to the support of capitalist-industrialism and therefore to the wars in its defence, mechanized war to preserve mechanized living, while I believe that capitalism is robbery, industrialism is blasphemy and war is murder.' (p 257)

With his dissent from the pro-Franco attitudes of many of his Catholic contemporaries, his increasing clarity about the affinity between his ideas and those of anarchism, and between capitalism and preparation for war, a passion enters his writing, giving force and feeling to the sparseness of style and simplicity of message. He had profound influence on the PAX movement from its inception in 1936 and his 1938 Pax pamphlet 'And Who Wants Peace?' is a fine and moving instance of his mature polemical style.

It is around 1934 that Gill's views come to bear more directly on the de facto situation of the political world. In his 1934 collection *Money and Morals* he urges that if people want 'industrialism and the beehive state' then there is a simple choice to be made between Communism and Fascism as the instrument of big business. If that is the only choice allowed then Gill's option is clear. 'Communism, the service of all by all for the good of all, is the only politics compatible with industrialism'. The key question for him is not whether Catholicism is compatible with Communism but the prior question whether Catholicism is consistent with the industrial development of society. For him it is not. Catholicism is the doctrine of human responsibility and it cannot flourish in a state where the majority of people are only fully responsible when they are not working. 'In such a state Catholicism returns to the catacombs. Thence she will emerge when the orgasm of industrial triumph has spent itself'. (p 78)

Gill's position as a Catholic was a lonely one. He had never been other than dismissive of profit-sharing and co-ownership which was the furthest orthodox liberal catholicism could reach. He was increasingly dissatisfied with the adequacy of the 'Babylon is doomed, go out from her' line of some of his radical contemporaries. Whilst as keenly supportive of family and communal land settlements as ever, a new note enters about what is to be done in the present in an industrially organized society.

We live in such a society and we must act in accordance with its nature. In such a society enterprises *must* be owned collectively because they are not otherwise ownable and they are

not otherwise controllable . . . You can't get out of a ditch by pretending that you aren't in it. The first thing to be done is to recognise the nature of our society; and my contention is that we can neither preserve the good nor abolish the evil of industrialism unless we take it over. Then, and then alone, shall we be in a position to destroy it if we decide so to do; for you cannot control a thing which is someone else's, neither can you break it up. Shall we ask the capitalists to be so kind as to destroy their own world because we don't like it? No, we must gain command of that world and then we shall be in a position to decide whether or no mass production and machine industry are of such a kind as to be worth preserving. The capitalist as such can neither ask nor answer such a question. Quomodo potest Satanus Satanam ejicere?

(Gill ran variations on this passage, cf. his June 1936 Jerusalem radio broadcast 'Art in England Now' printed in *In a Strange Land*, and the posthumously published 'Ownership and the Means of Production' *Christendom*, December 1941).

The best presentation of his final position is the 1937 essay 'Ownership and Industrialism' which Read considered one of the best introductions to the principles of anarchism. It first appeared in *Ireland Today* and the lines quoted above come from his rejoinder to Victor White's reservations about it. In book form it appeared in his *Sacred and Secular* 1940. For economy of presentation I incorporate some points from the *Christendom* article. He argues that the object of production is consumption but sees through the mystification of pitting consumer against producer, for the majority of consumers are producers and it is only as producers that we know what good conditions of work are and what good quality work is. His opposition to metropolitan culture picks up from his continuing rejection of the arts and crafts movement as a response to modernity,

To hell with culture, culture as a thing added like a sauce to otherwise unpalatable stale fish! The only culture worth having is that which is the natural and inevitable product of an honourable life of honourable work.

And the key to an honourable life is control of the means of one's livelihood. 'Ownership is meaningless unless it means control, and control is meaningless unless it means personal control'. But this position has widened beyond the emphasis on personal ownership in catholic thought and the aims of the guild of craftsmen and 'the cell of good living in the chaos of the world', essential as they are.

Many forms of modern production and communication, like railways and the post office, require collective ownership and here

syndicalism, ownership and control by those working in these industries, is far preferable to state-ownership, although state ownership will be necessary for some enterprises (the army and armaments for instance supposing they still exist). Gill allows, reluctantly, that state-ownership may be necessary as a transitional phase between capitalism and syndicalism. As for compensating the expropriated capitalists – ‘they’ve had their whack’. With an echo almost of the 1909 essay with which I started, he writes:

Who am I to say that people shouldn’t have railways and telephones and cinemas, if they want them?

What I have the right to say and do say is that it is for the workers to decide – and that they can’t decide until they own.

Gill’s discovery of anarchism within catholicism was a highly personal development. As a controversialist he widened the boundaries of permissible catholic debate in the 1930s, and his direct influence on the stance of *Pax* and the war time land settlements of conscientious objectors was considerable. In all, his was a lonely voice, but it continues to have a powerful and disturbing resonance. As his friend, Philip Haggren summed up the case, there is not one way to earn your living and another to save your soul.

Eric Gill and the Contemporary

Michael Kelly

When I was an undergraduate in the early 1950s Eric Gill was a minor cult figure among Catholics whom I knew. As an apologist, a social, political and aesthetic theoretician rather than anything else. Gill’s lettering in stone was something I had learnt to admire at Ampleforth where Dom Patrick Barry was at that time active in calligraphy and lettering in stone himself. I liked Father Patrick’s work a lot and he introduced me to Gill’s. There was a certain general keenness about Gill at Ampleforth then but I only got to his *Letters* and *Autobiography* as an undergraduate. In those days