

licity, can also pack the wallop of a worker's fist. His thinking apparatus is so earthy that it seems conditioned by touch and smell rather than logic, so salty that the pen moves impulsed by the loins as well as the brain. Gill the stonemason digs into things of thought as a mole into the black soil, carving patient tunnels that open at the end on true blue vistas.

Coming from the mind of a man accustomed to think and feel in images, this book can be summed up in a picture more easily than in an abstract train of thought. Reading it conjures a penny sheet with gaudy coloring, a Currier and Ives in robust style: wearing the leather apron proper to stonemasons and the folded paper cap that printers sport, a bearded patriarch holds the chisel of the sculptor and the burils of the wood-engraver; surrounded by cases of sans-serif, he stands silhouetted against the bulk of a screw-press that assistants slowly feed with hand-made sheets; one sees through the door the women baking bread, tending cattle, giving the breast to their brood among the arches of a crumbling monastery. It is a composite image that superimposes reminiscences of the patron saints of many trades, Saint Luke the icon maker, Saint Eloy the smith, Crispin and Crispinian in leather aprons working at their bench, Saint Isidore who watches over the farm chores, and a kind of Tobias who does care for the dead by lettering their virtues on tombstones.

From the man that the book evokes, artisan rather than artist, shorn of theories, hot-blooded and hirsute, an unknowing reader would expect works as good, as imperfect, as humorous and as sanguine as himself. Indeed it is hard to reconcile Gill the man, as seen through the eyes of Gill the writer, with the mannered and somewhat bloodless productions of Gill the artist; the author somewhat clarifies the paradox by detailing the influences that concurred in shaping his style.

At the start of his career he specialized exclusively in carved lettering on monuments and tombstones. A carved letter is most peculiar among sculptured beings because, in spite of beveled uprights and incised serifs, it has no real volume or existence in space, its members are rigidly flush with the frontal plane of the slab. Thus Gill became familiar with this paradox: a sculpture in calligraphic terms that depend neither on volume nor on space. Nature offers no subject matter as unsubstantial as man-created letters. Even a blade of grass pressed between blotters suffers violence as it is thus ushered into two dimensions; though paper thin, the helicoidal torsion of its live body already postulates space and volume.

Gill well realized the limitations of his calling. He dared carve garlands of leaves and flowers in the margins of his text; but when his design included embellishments in the round, such as cheeky cherub's heads, the young letterer would wisely give the job to a sculptor, as it seemed to him then outside the range of his craft. He soon hardened his heart to such adolescent scruples, came eventually to carve not only heads but bodies, whole clusters of personages in action. In spite of the applause this more ambitious work received, one may question at least its influence on many a younger artist. The flatness that letters possess by nature, that leaves and flowers may acquire (still retaining a measure of their former entity), does mortal violence to man; in his bas-reliefs the volume gives way to the slice, the human body with its elbows and knees painfully profiled appears crushed into the surface of the stone slab.

*Autobiography. Eric Gill. Devin-Adair. \$3.50.*

A LEADER among the pitifully small group of Catholic artists, Gill has aroused as much opposition as he had found loyalties. His detractors are usually people of gross taste who pray as well, or better, in front of a "photographic" daub as they would before a masterpiece, clerics who gladly cram their churches with the gaudiest plaster saints that mass production markets; while on the other hand those who unconditionally worship Gill and his work are faithfuls of enlightened taste, instrumental in building and decorating churches in a modern style that slowly pushes aside the monstrosities of a phony gothic. Thus to give Gill's work only restricted praise is a somewhat perilous affair, a partial strengthening of dubious allies against their esthetic betters.

Under the egis of Saint Paul was this book of confessions written; having completed it, its author, with finely clocked timing, laid himself to sleep robed in the Dominican habit of a tertiary. Clearly soaked in an atmosphere of Grace, the telling of his life brings to literature the precise horse sense of a craftsman accustomed to carve hard materials, wood and stone, whose grain and density make short work of attempted nonsense. The plastic thought of Gill the carver that ponders the angle of the chisel and weighs the stroke of the mallet informs with both caution and confidence the articulate thoughts of Gill the writer. His style, clothed in worker-like sim-

For sure Gill, the skilled letterer, often weaves his silhouettes into calligraphic purity, spins a line as precisely stream-lined as the profiles cut by a tooling-machine; one may however question the propriety of transmuting man, and especially the Man-God, into a pattern. Gill worked, perhaps unknowingly, closer to the "modern" movement of the Parisian abstractionists than he would have cared to admit, but while Braque and Picasso humbly worked their magic on a guitar, a pipe or a package of tobacco, Gill collected and pressed into his strange herbarium the most sacred objects that his faith grasped.

Gill submits candid and lucid explanations for his other activities: how he came to carve a nude woman as a kind of sexual outlet, how he adopted an "unnatural" style because it was the only one he knew. Such humbleness relying more on artisan's sweat than on higher logic contrasts with the assurance of some of his followers, who stoop from metaphysical truths to the physical problems of art, who show a tendency to solve esthetic dilemmas by wielding the "Summa" as if it was a tomahawk.

All his life Gill remained suspicious of theorists, and yet he attracted them in swarms. There is a wistful portrait of his friends (page 168) penned apropos of his doing his first sculpture in the round; we give it here in full as it is also a brisk sample of his style:

My friends in the arts and crafts circles rather looked askance at me. I seemed to be deserting their homely fireside and going into brothels and dance-halls. They really are like that; they're terribly strait-laced and prim . . . there was something very emasculate and lacking in guts as well as other appurtenances about most of the products of the arts and crafts movement. You can see the boys don't drink; you can see they're not on speaking terms with the devil.

Gill put into his work all he knew, all he loved, with most intense concentration. One would like to say that the results of such life-long devotion were truly important. But are reforms as essentially good as they are novel? Of the Impressionists Renoir used to say, "They boast that they paint the shadows blue while others paint them black." Of the liturgical art movement that Gill leavened it may be similarly said: They rejoice at having replaced in their churches the neo-gothic style by the pseudo-byzantine.

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