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ERIC GILL'S 'ART NONSENSE'

Lawrence wrote this unfinished review a few days before he died. The book interested him, and he agreed with much in it. Then he got tired of writing and I persuaded him not to go on. It is the last thing he wrote.—Frieda Lawrence.

Art Nonsense and Other Essays, reads the title of this expensive, handsomely-printed book. Instinctively the eye reads 'Art Nonsense and Other Nonsense', especially as the letter 'O' in Mr. Gill's type rolls so large and important, in comparison with the other vowels.

But it isn't really fair. 'Art Nonsense' is the last essay in the book, and not the most interesting. It is the little essays at the beginning that cut most ice. Then in one goes, with a plunge.

Let us say all the bad things first. Mr. Gill is not a born writer: he is a crude and crass amateur. Still less is he a born thinker, in the reasoning and argumentative sense of the word. He is again a crude and crass amateur: crass is the only word, maddening, like a tiresome uneducated workman arguing in a pub—'argefyng' would describe it better—and banging his fist. Even, from his argument, one would have to conclude that Mr. Gill is not a born artist. A born craftsman rather. He deliberately takes up the craftsman's point of view, argues about it like a craftsman, like a man in a pub, and really has a craftsman's dislike of the fine arts. He

has, *au fond*, the man-in-a-pub's moral mistrust of art, though he tries to get over it.

So that there is not really much about art in this book. There is what Mr. Gill feels and thinks as a craftsman, shall we say as a medieval craftsman? We start off with a two-page Apology: bad. Then comes an essay on 'Slavery and Freedom' (1918), followed by 'Essential Perfection' (1918), 'A Grammar of Industry' (1919), 'Westminster Cathedral' (1920), 'Dress' (1920), 'Songs Without Clothes' (1921), 'Of Things Necessary and Unnecessary' (1921), 'Quae ex Veritate et Bono' (1921), on to the last essay, the twenty-fourth, on 'Art Nonsense', written in 1929. The dates are interesting; the titles are interesting. What is 'Essential Perfection'? and what are 'Songs Without Clothes'? and why these tags of Latin? and what is a 'Grammar of Industry'? since industry is nothing to do with words. So much of it is jargon, like a workman in a pub.

So much of it is jargon. Take the blurb on the wrapper, which is extracted from Mr. Gill's 'Apology'. 'Two primary ideas run through all the essays of this book: that "art is simply the well making of what needs making", and that "art is collaboration with God in creating."'

Could anything, I ask you, be worse? 'Art is *simply* the well making of what needs making.' There's a sentence for you! So simple! Imagine that a song like 'Sally in our Alley'—which is art—should be 'simply the well making of what needs making'. Or that it should be 'collaboration with God in creating'. What a nasty, conceited, American sort of phrase! And how

one dislikes this modern hobnobbing with God, or giving Him the go-by.

But if one once begins to quarrel with Mr. Gill, one will never leave off. His trick of saying, over and over, 'upon the contrary' instead of 'on the contrary', his trick of firing off phrases, as in the essay on 'Essential Perfection', which opens: 'God is Love. That is not to say merely that God is loving or lovable, but that he *is* Love. In this, Love is an absolute, not a relative term. The Love of God is man's Essential Perfection. The Essential Perfection of man is not in his physical functions—the proper material exercise of his organs—but in his worship of God, and the worship of God is perfect in Charity'—all of which means really nothing: even his trick of printing a line under a word, for emphasis, instead of using italics—an untidy proceeding; if he doesn't like italics, why not space wider, in the Continental fashion?—all this is most irritating. Irritating like an uneducated workman in a pub holding forth and showing off, making a great noise with a lot of clichés, and saying nothing at all.

Then we learn that Mr. Gill is a Roman Catholic: surely a convert. And we know these new English Catholics. They are the last word in Protest. They are Protestants protesting against Protestantism, and so becoming Catholics to Protestants, they have protested against every absolute. As Catholics, therefore, they will swallow all the old absolutes whole, swallow the pill without looking at it, and call that Faith. The big pill being God, and the little pills being terms like Charity and Chastity and Obedience and Humility.

Swallow them whole, and you are a good Catholic; lick at them and see what they taste like, and you are a queasy Protestant. Mr. Gill is a Catholic, so he uses terms like 'Holy Church' and 'a good R.C.' quite easily, at first; but as the years go by, more rarely. The mere function of swallowing things whole becomes tedious.

That is a long preamble, and perhaps an unkind one. But Mr. Gill is so bad at the mere craft of language that he sets a real writer's nerves on edge all the time.

Now for the good side of the book. Mr. Gill is primarily a craftsman, a workman, and he has looked into his own soul deeply to know what he feels about work. And he has seen a truth which, in my opinion, is a great truth, an invaluable truth for humanity, and a truth of which Mr. Gill is almost the discoverer. The gist of it lies in the first two paragraphs of the first essay, 'Slavery and Freedom'.

That state is a state of Slavery in which a 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 a 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 seems to me there is more in those two paragraphs than in all Karl Marx or Professor Whitehead, or a

dozen other philosophers rolled together. True, we have to swallow whole the phrase 'to please God', but when we think of a man happily working away in concentration on the job he is doing, if it is only soldering a kettle, then we know what living state it refers to. 'To please God' in this sense only means happily doing one's best at the job in hand, and being livingly absorbed in an activity which makes one in touch with—with the heart of all things; call it God. It is a state which any man or woman achieves when busy and concentrated on a job which calls forth real skill and attention, or devotion. It is a state of absorption into the creative spirit, which is God.

Here, then, is a great truth which Mr. Gill has found in his living experience, and which he flings in the teeth of modern industrialism. Under present conditions, it is useless to utter such truth: and that is why none of the clever blighters do utter it. But it is only the truth that is useless which really matters.

The test of a man's freedom is his responsibility as a workman. Freedom is not incompatible with discipline, it is only incompatible with irresponsibility. He who is free is responsible for his work. He who is not responsible for his work is not free.

There is nothing to be said for freedom except that it is the will of God.

The Service of God is perfect freedom.

Here, again, the 'service of God' is only that condition in which we feel ourselves most truly alive, and vital,

and the 'will of God' is the inrush of pure life to which we gladly yield ourselves.

It all depends what you make of the word 'God'. To most of us to-day it is a fetish word, dead, yet useful for invocation. It is not a question of Jesus. It is a question of God, Almighty God. We have to square ourselves with the very words, and to do so, we must rid them of their maddening moral import, and give them back—Almighty God—the old vital meaning, strength and glory, and honour and might, and beauty and wisdom. These are the continual attributes of Almighty God, in the far past. And the same to-day, the god who enters us and imbues us with his strength and glory, and might and honour, and beauty and wisdom, this is a god we are eager to worship; and this is the god of the craftsman who makes things well, so that the presence of the god enters into the thing made. The workman making a pair of shoes with happy absorption in skill is imbued with the god of strength and honour and beauty, undeniable. Happy, intense absorption in any work, which is to be brought as near to perfection as possible, this is a state of being with God, and the men who have not known it have missed life itself.

This is what Mr. Gill means, I take it, and it is an enormously important truth. It is a truth on which a true civilization might be established. But first you must give men back their belief in God, and then their free responsibility in work. For belief, Mr. Gill turns to the Catholic Church. Well, it is a great institution, and we all like to feel romantic about it. But the

Catholic Church needs to be born again, quite as badly as the Protestant. I cannot feel there is much more belief in God in Naples or Barcelona, than there is in Liverpool or Leeds. Yet they are truly Catholic cities. No, the Catholic Church has fallen into the same disaster as the Protestant: of preaching a *moral* God, instead of Almighty God, the God of strength and glory, and might and wisdom; a 'good' God, instead of a vital and magnificent God, and we no longer any of us *really* believe in an exclusively 'good' God. The Catholic Church in the cities is as dead as the Protestant Church. Only in the country, among peasants, where the old ritual of the seasons lives on in its beauty, is there still some living, instinctive 'faith' in the God of Life.

Mr. Gill has two main themes: 'work done well', and 'beauty'—or rather 'Beauty'. He is almost always good, simple and profound, truly a prophet, when he is speaking of work done well. And he is nearly always tiresome about Beauty. Why, oh why, will people keep on trying to define words like Art and Beauty and God, words which represent deep emotional states in us, and are therefore incapable of definition? Why bother about it? 'Beauty is absolute, loveliness is relative', says Mr. Gill. Yes, yes, but really, what does it matter? Beauty is beauty, loveliness is loveliness, and if Mr. Gill thinks that Beauty ought really to have a subtly moral character, while loveliness is merely casual, or equivalent for prettiness—well, why not? But other people don't care.