

Art. Eric Gill. *Devin-Adair*. \$2.
25 *Nudes*. Eric Gill. *Devin-Adair*.
\$3.

Books

THESE two books complete each other. The former is Gill's word-picture of the role of art in society. The latter is an album of line-engravings, sprung not only from Gill's hand, but equally from the imponderables of his philosophy.

In Gill's blue-print of the universe, art is far from being an afterthought. Rather it is a major cog, inextricably dependent and depended upon, without which society would cease to function, even at its present machine-set stage of mass produced objects, or should we say merchandise. Gill hardly sees eye to eye with bankers and with Marx who assume a quasi-theological role for money as man's prime mover.

Gill sees the modern world as esthetically horrid and morally reprehensible, shaped as it is—or rather,

forcefully misshaped—on racks set up by industry and commerce. In contrast, Gill's golden age is the medieval, where communal work was the norm, when "artist" and "artisan" meant the same thing, and anonymity of the art work was the rule. Gill's treatment of the Middle Ages compounds in a polychrome panorama history and benign myth, as we see dairymaids milking unicorns in some of the gothic *millefleurs*. Naturally enough, when set against such a background, the lords of today, engrossed in buying and selling, are seen at a disadvantage.

THE second book, 25 *Nudes*, carries us from Gill's world of words into Gill's world of forms, and it is tempting for another artist, more familiar with forms than with words, to set these engravings as the proof of the pudding, that is, to test the validity of Gill's thoughts by the kind of art that Gill makes. There is a simplicity and purity wholly admirable in these white-line drawings set on black, so consistent with the logic of the medium.

There is also—as is always the case when I look at Gill's art—the unease of attempting to reconcile his catholicity of thought with the pride of craft, hardly healthier than moral pride. The elegant shorthand with which Gill 'writes' organic forms in these drawings, though consistent with his tools and his materials, at times carries over into the merely decorative.

In the woodcuts of other English masters, Bewick or Blake, it is not so much, as is the case with Gill, the razor sharpness of the burin or of the blade with which we are confronted, but rather the pressure, action and torsion of fingers, wrist, and arm, with results admirable, and yet only rarely wholly successful, with a margin of hesitation and error that is clearly human.

In contrast, Gill's line remains so pure as to be dehumanized. Later generations may read in the style of

his autography how difficult it is to escape from one's own age, and how the cut of the machine that the artist disavowed in words permeates nevertheless his drawings, free from error and passion as are mechanical renderings. Thus Gill became, *à contre-cœur*, a man of his time, and incidentally escaped the fate of the men of Beuron, or of the German Nazarenes, who managed only too successfully to produce art in the vacuum of a wish-dream.

Paradoxically, these two books that are paeans, set in words and lines, to the virtues of craftsmanship, fall somewhat below standard where the craft of bookmaking is concerned. The proofreading of *Art* should have been more exacting; for example, Maratain, for Maritain, comes as a shock. Two of the plates of *Nudes* are set head side down, if we are to go by the way in which Gill himself signed them.

JEAN CHARLOT.