

RESPONSIBILITY AGAIN (Part I)

(for Mary Gill and Ananda Coomaraswamy)

It is nearly twenty years since Eric Gill wrote in *Blackfriars*, 'It has remained for one unworthy to put his pen to the word, and therefore to the argument, which shall give Capitalism and its attendant monster, Industrialism, their death-blow. The word is RESPONSIBILITY.'

The argument, that Capitalism (production for money, in such sense that all things made are means of making money) and Industrialism (production by machinery with the working man as a sentient part of it) both 'reduce the workman to a sub-human condition of intellectual irresponsibility,' was not and is not difficult to follow. It was and is so clearly true as to raise at once the *scandal* of truth. It was received with applause as a brilliant argument, and it was rejected almost universally, by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, as an impractical one. There were also the incidental reactions of those who were 'sneeped' (as they say in the Midlands) by the terms in which it was expressed. 'Sub-human, indeed!' and so on.

So, if there was a great cloud of dust put up when Eric was here to press home his own arguments, there is danger now that the word, *his* word, should be altogether obscured. For the social reformers were, in the main, not really interested, and the interested parties, in the main, wanted his word silenced. It is more than time, therefore, for a restatement.

The Oxford dictionary records the following distinct but connected meanings :

- (1) Correspondent, or answering *to* something.
- (2) Answerable or accountable *to* another *for* something.
- (3) Capable of fulfilling an obligation or trust, and thus reliable, of good credit or repute.

With the last two meanings ordinary speech is readily conversant. As an example of (2) a factory worker might say, 'I am responsible to the firm for pulling this lever whenever the needle on this steam-pressure gauge reaches 500 lbs. to the square inch. If I don't, the plant blows up and I get the sack.' As an example of (3): 'This declaration must be counter-signed by a responsible person (bank-manager, justice of the peace, minister of religion, policeman above the rank of sergeant, and so on). These are all men of good credit or repute. But modern speech may be searched in vain for an example of (1). The dictionary gives this (dated 1698), 'The mouth

large, but not responsible to so large a Body.' One could imagine a more graceful, but perhaps an example was difficult to find, and time is money even to the compilers of dictionaries.

Yet to understand theologically what responsibility implies we must go to this first meaning of the word as the very fountain-head from which the other meanings flow. We cannot expect the banker or the policeman to follow us unless perhaps to see that we find nothing that does not belong to us, for meaning No. 3 flatters them well enough. Why should they want to know more, unless to adorn what they already understand? And we cannot expect the factory worker to follow us. He knows all about responsibility. You get paid extra for it. And seeing the safety of 150 people depends on his pulling this lever at the right time, why shouldn't he get more than the other chap who can go round the corner for a smoke without anyone being the wiser? Only those who love the Image of the Intelligible Beauty can be expected to follow us, and it is to those alone we can speak.

To be responsible, and so qualified by nature, belongs to man precisely in that he is created in the Image of God. The rest of the animal creation, although we may rightly love them and see the beauty of God's handiwork in them, are not created in God's Image and Likeness, and are not responsible. Thus, if a performing seal could be trained to do this job for which the factory hand claims extra money (it would be 'uneconomic' but it is worth considering) he would still not be responsible—any more, I had almost said, than the factory hand, but that is to anticipate the argument.

Created in the divine Image, man is correspondent or answerable *to*—not *something* but *someone* in Whom lives humanly that absolute truth and goodness to Whom the word 'some' does not apply. To someone who *is* that Truth, as with His own lips He told us.

We are dealing with an unaccustomed, however fundamental, meaning of the word responsibility, and we must be careful of our words. To begin: this correspondence is not the inert, flat likeness of a photograph to a living person although, as the coin of the tribute suggests, it has this in common with the inert stamp of likeness that it marks us out as God's. It is not, or is not only, the fittingness and proportion of the mouth to the body, although a certain fittingness and proportion are essential to it: for we have been taught to call God our Father. And it is not, or is not only, a likeness in ways and manners, for who will compare a man's ways with God's?—save in the sense in which He has told us 'Be you therefore perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.'

It is not as if man were ever like God in such a way that he could

be set side by side and compared with Him. There is no such comparison of the creature with the Creator. Our likeness is always face to face with God, in Christ. It is the face of the beloved shining in the apple of the eye. It is not anything we could only metaphorically call answering to God. Primarily it is answering to God without any metaphor. And the responsibility by which we answer to the divine Likeness is the principle of our 'collaborating with God in His work of creation.' For as it is through the Heavenly Word that God creates all things, so it is through His Incarnate Word in the likeness to Him we put on by faith and love that we make the furniture of our human world: furniture fitting for His hands to touch and His limbs to rest in.

Responsibility is our capacity for the bond of love. For as to the banker or the lawyer, to the person of good credit or repute, his word is his bond, so to the truly responsible person his love is his bond. And the bond is the truth of his love, for the beloved is Himself the Truth. So it is that the bond of love is freedom and the Truth has set us free.

Such are the implications of responsibility if we are attentive to the first meaning of the word from which the rest derive. Responsibility has been 'taken up' by sociologists and psychologists: by those who prepare the philosophy behind political movements. Responsibility in the last few years has in fact become very popular. There are plenty of educationists who will talk of nothing else. Perhaps the Atlas burden of the bankers and lawyers, the ministers of religion and policemen above the rank of sergeant is getting heavy for them and they are looking round for others to take it on.

It is these 'responsible' people who bring to bear upon Catholic thought and life that pressure under which it suddenly appears (to the Catholics themselves, mark you) that the truths of human responsibility are 'impractical.' Not very long ago Sir Stafford Cripps was telling us what the post-war world would expect of the Christian body in its midst. More recently the pundits of Hollywood have been showing us what kind of person they expect a Catholic priest to be. The Catholic, so soon as he shows the slightest sign of literacy, is so made aware of his 'responsibilities' that he must feel himself a cad if he does not 'go into politics.' The headmasters and headmistresses of his own schools push the pressure home.

Responsibility, so soon as it is shut off from the responsive light of the Word made Flesh becomes a quite different kind of thing. It becomes a matter of laying burden to burden and trust to trust in the grave assurance that they will all be fulfilled. It becomes some-

thing the workman is paid extra for, and the policeman of the rank of constable is not deemed capable of undertaking. Responsibility of this kind obtains in the sphere of such actions as involve grave consequence to others. It is the sphere of the bond: of the bond in general, and especially of the financial bond. It is the universal power of the bond, but not the bond of love. Men of good credit and repute may well be lenient to this type of bondage. How can they be expected to understand it?

And it is not really responsibility at all. In the one case the performing seal with sufficient training could qualify for that extra five shillings a week as well as the workman. In the case of the man who is 'capable of fulfilling an obligation or trust,' he is deemed to have done so if he farms out his burden with an insurance company of good repute, thus referring the whole matter to a calculus of probabilities in which the actuarial profession is expert. We may find test cases in which, at point of law, a man's responsibility is measured by the insurance policies he holds. And this is not responsibility, not even in the sense of being answerable to somebody for something. It is what is called 'passing the buck'—into the common pool of actuarial chances.

Where conformity to the Image of God is the criterion, there responsibility may be found. Where it is not, 'respectability' may be found but responsibility may not by any chance be met with. Granted the integrity of this first sense of the word, the second sense also retains an integrity which cannot be relegated to the common pool of probabilities. It is governed by the truth of what man is, what the world is and what the things are that furnish man's world. In this sense I am still responsible to somebody for something whether I have entered into a contract or not and whether money has passed between us or not. If I make my wife a gate to prevent the children from falling down the stairs or write a poem in solitude, I am responsible to the Heavenly Word and to my neighbour for the conformity of these things to what they should be. They should be true and good, as proceeding from a principle which is true and good, and thus, in collaboration with the creative Word, implant in material things a reflected radiance of the Image of God.

Thus too, granted the integrity of the first sense of the word, a pre-eminently responsible kind of man (quite a different conception from a 'responsible person' which is a tautology) is a man who knows himself and others in God; who knows how to treat a man as a man, a horse as a horse, a plant and a stone according to their natures. He is a steward of the things of Christ and answers in his work to truth and goodness.

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