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Book Review: 'An Autobiography' by Jacob Epstein

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Jacob Epstein: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY *

THIS revised and extended edition of Sir Jacob Epstein's *Let There Be Sculpture* could well be subtitled: The Story of an Embattled Artist. His own aim in his work was lofty. "The sculptor with his vision, planning, working, laying loving hands upon the willing and love-returning stone, the creation of a work, the form embodying the idea, strange copulation of spirit and matter, the intellect dominating hammer and chisel—the conception that at last becomes a piece of sculpture. This seems to me fit work for a man" (p. 153). But the world did not agree with him about the nature of his art. One viewer cried out: "I should like to take Epstein out to a butcher's shop and have his hands chopped off" (p. 106).

Born in New York in 1880, Epstein went to Paris at the age of twenty-two and to London at twenty-five, where he settled and married a "Scottish lady," who has since died. Recently he was married again, to his secretary, known to the art world by his study "Girl with the Gardenias." He remarks of his youth that he was a "tremendous reader" and that he would go off to Central Park and there give himself up to solitary reading, "coming back home burnt by the sun and filled with ideas from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, or Tolstoy's novels. Also I absorbed the New Testament and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*" (p. 5). When he arrived in London in 1905, he haunted the British Museum, studying the Elgin Marbles, Greek sculpture generally, and "the Egyptian rooms and the vast and wonderful collections from Polynesia and Africa" (p. 20).

Three years later he received his first major commission: to decorate the new British Medical Association building in the Strand. With these Strand Statues—representing man and woman in all their various stages from birth to old age, "a primitive, but in no way a bizarre program," he remarks—the saga of the "Epstein scandal" began. The statues were attacked and their removal demanded, even before the scaffolding had been entirely taken down. Father Bernard Vaughan, fearing that many

* New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1955.

of the public might not look upon the nude figures with the temperament of the artist but with the hunger of sensualists, joined in the demand: "Let us teach self-reverence and self-respect, and not convert London into a Fiji Island, where there may be some excuse for want of drapery" (p. 240). Others defended the statues, while Epstein himself wrote: "I wished to create noble and heroic forms to embody in sculpture the great primal facts of man and woman . . . figures joyous, energetic, and mystical . . . [having] an ideal aspect, and . . . possessed of an inner life" (p. 245). For thirty years the controversy did not die down till, in 1937, the statues were in large part demolished because of deterioration of the stone and an alleged danger of falling fragments. In the meantime, however, the artist had gone on to new and mightier battles.

These battles had the fervor of religious wars. What impresses us in Epstein's autobiography is the struggle of an artist who wishes to communicate his own religious feelings through human forms that challenge conventional notions, ingrained preconceptions, of how the human figure ought to be portrayed. Had he projected his religious feelings in abstractions; or, at least, had the religious promptings to which he was impelled to give form been a vague religiosity embracing everything and nothing, shunning the real, the historic, Christ as the heretic shuns the rack, he might have avoided his "rack." But with a kind of essential realism, Epstein hurled himself into the very heart of the matter: from 1917 to 1920, he did his first statue of Christ, and followed it with many others on Christian themes.

His "Christ" had been preceded by work on a number of portrait busts, and it was from a portrait in clay that his first inspiration for the Christ-figure came. We must note, at this point, the respect, the deep, almost reverent, concern for the human personality his portrait busts reveal. Speaking of Franz Hals, he observes that "his outlook on humanity is cold and detached . . . human beings [his sitters] evidently aroused in him no feeling of sympathy, and he turned to their clothes with greater pleasure than he got from their faces." But of his beloved Rembrandt, he says: "His great heart seemed to warm towards the men and women who sat for him, and he seemed to penetrate into their inner selves, and reveal their very souls" (p. 70). Similarly, Epstein's portrait busts of Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, and Ernest Bloch, among others, disclose a sharp sensitivity to the human condition.

While working on a mask of Bernard Van Dieren, a gravely ill friend, Epstein felt that his head was "so spiritual and worn with suffering," his face "so noble and [having] such a high quality of intellectual life, I thought of him as the suffering Christ, and developed the mask into a head, then into a bust with arms, and extended it again, and so made my first image of Christ in bronze" (pp. 101, 79). So intense was Epstein's feeling that this face with "its pitying accusing eyes" *was* "the Christ head" that he compares his experience of recognition with one recorded by Turgenev, "how, standing in the crowd somewhere, he instantly felt, in some man beside him, the presence of the Christ Himself and the awe that overcame him" (p. 101). To see, as Epstein did, the pain of Christ reflected in the pain of a neighbor, to be reminded by some present sorrow of the past and ever present sorrow of Christ—this is an experience that can be had only by one who has had a genuine glimpse of the Redeemer.

Yet when the statue was exhibited, it was assailed. John Galsworthy left it with "clenched fists and an angry, furious face" (p. 106). Father Vaughan leaped again to the attack:

I have studied the unshapely head, the receding brow, the thick lips, the untipped nose, the uncanny eyes, the poorly built body, with its ugly feet and uglier hands, till I felt ready to cry out with indignation that in this Christian England there should be exhibited the figure of a Christ which suggested to me some degraded Chaldean or African, which wore the appearance of an Asiatic-American or Hun-Jew, which reminded me of some emaciated Hindu, or a badly grown Egyptian swathed in the cerements of the grave. I call it positively wicked and insulting to perpetrate such a travesty of the Risen Christ and to invite a Christian people, to whom the Founder of Christianity is the Man-God, to come and admire it (pp. 103-104).

How beside himself with anger Father Vaughan must have been to forget that Chaldean and African, not only European, features are made in the likeness of God; that not only an English gentleman, but also an "Asiatic-American" or a "Hun-Jew," is shaped in His image; and that none of them is foreign to Him who is the Saviour of them all. One is thankful that God in His mercy does not permit our anger to kindle His. For it would have been terrible had Father Vaughan's words been challenged by a glimpse of Christ as He was seen by Isaiah: "Unregarded as

brushwood shoot, as a plant in waterless soil; no stateliness here, no majesty, no beauty, as we gaze upon Him" (53:2; Knox trans.). A suggestion of this may well be in Epstein's vision, seeing Christ as he did at once in His passion and in His rising. "The statue rose swathed in clothes," he tells, "a pillar firmly set on the two naked feet—Christ risen supernatural, a portent for all time" (p. 101).

This is how some of the friendly critics saw the statue:

Epstein's conception of Christ—a strong, stern, ascetic young Christ—is not an ordinary one (p. 261).

Mr. Epstein has made his Christ before all things powerful. . . . Power is in every line; the flat crown of the head; the shoulders; the defiant chin; the intellectual brows; the immense hands and feet; by all such means the artist shows that for him Christ is not the gentle and passive being of Christian art [more accurately, of a great deal of conventional Christian art—C. and I. S.], but the fierce and even violent leader of men. There is an absence of charm; clearly there is no beauty that man should desire Him; He looks stern and austere, and yet terrible in His intensity of passion. . . . This may have been the Christ of whom men said: "Elijah is returned." This may have been the Christ who strode ahead of His disciples towards the city, and they were afraid of Him. This Christ might have cleansed the Temple and cursed the fig-tree. It is as though the artist has personified this aspect of the historical Christ (pp. 261–262).

Epstein's own feelings about his statue are deeply sincere; one cannot doubt the purity of his intention. As we have seen, his first inspiration for the figure came while he was at the bedside of a dying friend. It was a work of love and grief, and the artist knew it to be so:

I must maintain that my statue of Christ still stands for what I intended it to be. It stands and accuses the world for its grossness, inhumanity, cruelty, and beastliness. . . . How prophetic a figure! Not the early Evangelical Christ of Byzantium and Rome, nor the condemning Apollonian Christ of Michelangelo, or the sweet rising and blessing Christ of Raphael, but the modern living Christ, compassionate and accusing at the same time. I should like to remodel this "Christ." I should like to make it hundreds of feet high, and set it up on some high place where all could see it, and where it would give out its warning, its mighty symbolic warning to all lands. The Jew—the Galilean—con-

demns our wars, and warns us that "Shalom, Shalom," must be still the watchword between man and man (p. 102).

This indignant, almost flaunting faith in his work, in the validity of his vision, has given many the feeling that Epstein lacks humility. But he is a man who has had to fight for his work against a fiercely hostile public; if he has gone to an extreme in praising his own work while defending it, one is surely required, in all charity, to remember his embattled position. He is fighting not just for his work but for the religious impulses he has expressed through his work. But what are Epstein's religious impulses, what his beliefs? To what is he giving form? Here is an artist, a Jew, who has sculptured some of the most arousing Christian statues. In speaking of his "Christ," he calls Him "the Jew," "the Galilean." Does he think of Him as God incarnate? Or as a great man? It is impossible for us to answer, and yet we must not overlook that he speaks of the "living Christ," that for him Christ lives.

First of all, in what sense can Jacob Epstein be named a Jew? Just as little as he thinks of his work "as peculiarly of London or of [his] time" (p. 115), so he is "most often annoyed rather than flattered to be told that [he is] the best or foremost Jewish artist" (p. 198). And as little interest as he shows in British politics, or in the London weather for that matter (p. 140), so little does he have in Jewish affairs—which has not endeared him to some Jewish critics. Once, arriving in New York, he was asked his attitude toward Zionism. When he replied that he had none, the reporter warned: "We will want to know your attitude, make no mistake about it." But Epstein did not care, and left him (p. 124). He seems to have cared even less for the religious faith and practice of his boyhood home:

Saturday in the synagogue was a place of ennui for me, and the wailing prayers would get on my nerves, and my one desire would be to make excuses to get away. The picturesque shawls with the strange faces underneath only held my attention for a short while; then the tedium of the interminable services would drown every other emotion. Certainly I had no devotional feelings, and later, with my reading and free-thinking ideas, I dropped all practice of ceremonial forms, and as my parents were only conventionally interested in religion, they did not insist (pp. 6-7).

On the other hand, he recalls his grandparents and their blessing hands most tenderly:

My grandparents on my mother's side were a dear old couple, whose kindness and patriarchal simplicity I remember well. Every Friday evening the children would go to them to get their blessing. Before the Sabbath candles they would take our heads in their hands and pronounce a blessing on each one of us in turn. Then followed gifts of fruit and sweets (p. 6).

That Epstein came from an Orthodox Jewish background and tradition is almost all one can say about his Jewishness. Yet despite his reading in Christian literature, and despite his habits, studies, friendships, in no way different from those of any non-Jewish artist, he carries deep in his being the stamp of his childhood. He himself writes:

I saw a great deal of Jewish orthodox life, traditional and narrow. As my thoughts were elsewhere, this did not greatly influence me, but I imagine that the feeling I have for expressing a human point of view, giving human rather than abstract implications to my work, comes from these early formation years (p. 9).

When he looks at Rembrandt's Jews, he recognizes them as a child recognizes his father in the dark. Doubtless the sufferings of the Jewish people awaken in him an empathic understanding. He tells us also that he has painted and sketched Jews of New York's lower East Side, European Jews (and, much later, Old Testament figures). It must have been more than the plastic beauty of these subjects which called to him; it must have been a voice from his early years. The connecting link between these drawings and the figures he has made of Christ and Mary, whether or not he is conscious of it, is worth thinking about. But in no way does it explain them.

It would be gratifying if somewhere in this autobiography one could point to an explicit statement by Jacob Epstein on why he, a Jew, has turned with passionate absorption to Christian subjects. But ever since he chose as a motto, "I rest silent in my work" (p. 100), he has demanded that his work speak for him. There is a striking pattern in it: he perpetuates in stone what for want of a better word we might call essential moments of Jesus' life, moments which are living Catholic belief. He feels deeply about them, so deeply that, in defending them, he seems

again and again to overstep the bounds between self-defense and self-praise. He does not seem to be defending himself. He seems to be defending these moments and what they mean to him. Of his "Visitation" (1926), he says: "This figure stands with folded hands, and expresses a humility so profound as to shame the beholder who comes to my sculpture expecting rhetoric or splendor of gesture" (p. 112). Indeed, so tender is his feeling about this bronze figure of Mary that he could not bear the thought of controversy over it, and hence, when it was first exhibited, called it simply "A Study." He offers yet another name for it, "Charity," perhaps the sweetest title that could be given to Mary.

Again, while some repudiated his "Behold the Man" (1935) as "debased," "ugly and vile," "an outrage," "an Asiatic monstrosity" (p. 147), and others spoke of its "Romanesque affinities," its "austere pattern," and saw in it "a caryatid of suffering," conveying, it seems, "the idea of the unending sorrows of the Master whose teachings were denied by the world every day and of that cumulative denial crushing down upon him" (p. 148), to Epstein this statue in Subiaco marble is "a symbol of man, bound, crowned with thorns and facing with a relentless and over-mastering gaze of pity and prescience our unhappy world" (p. 145).

His "Consummatum Est" (1937), which aroused the same bitter protests, was conceived by the artist during a transporting experience—the "Credo" of Bach's *B minor Mass*:

I have been listening to Bach's *B minor Mass*. In the section, Crucifixus, I have a feeling of tremendous quiet, of awe. The music comes from a great distance and in this mood I conceive my "Consummatum Est." I see the figure complete as a whole. I see immediately the upturned hands, with the wounds in the feet, stark, crude, with the stigmata. I even imagine the setting for the finished figure, a dim crypt, with a subdued light on the semi-transparent alabaster (p. 152).

With all his heart, Epstein longed to see his religious works placed in churches or monasteries. For many years his wish remained unfulfilled, but eventually one of his works found its proper home. A few years ago his "Lazarus" (1948)—still in the bands of death but ready to be awakened and waiting for the word "Come forth!"—a statue which proclaims as loudly as stone can that death's Master is in our midst, was installed in the New College chapel at Oxford. He thought it miraculous how its

stone harmonized with the ancient stone walls. An even greater victory and joy came to him when the London Convent of the Holy Child Jesus commissioned a "Madonna and Child." Thirteen and a half feet high, and placed above an arch connecting two Palladian-style buildings on Cavendish Square, it was unveiled in May 1952 by the Chancellor of the Exchequer—a ceremony that "seemed to reach back to the days of the Renaissance when the appearance of a new religious work was the occasion for public rejoicing" (p. 236). Happily he recounts how the work absorbed him for over six months and how the Mother Superior came with another Sister to view it. "They immediately showed the warmest interest in the work and asked to be allowed to contemplate it quietly and alone for some time" (p. 235).

"The modern sculptor without religion, without direction, tradition, and stability, is at a terrible disadvantage compared with the sculptors of previous periods" (p. 192), Epstein writes, but he never analyzes his interest in Christ and Mary. Despite his verbal inexplicitness, his inner inclination is made quite clear, not only through his work, but through his "loves." Outside of sculpture his major love is religious music:

We crowd into the hall to listen to Beethoven's *Mass in D*, as in other periods worshippers devoutly made their way into cathedrals to attend Holy Mass. . . . Powerful massive chords lead to the majestic choral outburst of the "Kyrie Eleison" and then on to the triumphant "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." With dramatic suddenness comes the contrasting "Et in terra pax." The music now is hushed and filled with divine peace. Soon, to the words "Pater omnipotens," there comes the magnificent outburst of chorus with orchestra and organ. The slow prayer, "Qui tollis peccata mundi," rising and falling, male and female voices alternating, pleading, and supplicating, die mysteriously away. Then distant drums announcing the "Quoniam Tu Solus Sanctus" growing in glory, ending with the majestic fugue. . . . The "Credo" begins. A song of divine praise, until the sudden change of key and mood with the words "descendit de coelis." The hushed mystery of the section "et incarnatus est" is sung by the solo quartet. The throbbing passionate statement of the tenor declaims "Et Homo Factus Est" rising to a culminating ecstasy. The solemn tragedy of the Crucifixion, the dramatic resurrection at the end with the great fugue "Et Vitam Venturi". . . . The "Agnus Dei" begins with a solemn prayer from the bass voice answered by a chorus of male voices, and this final movement is pierced through and through by a poignant female cry, as if it were the voice of Eve, as in Michel-

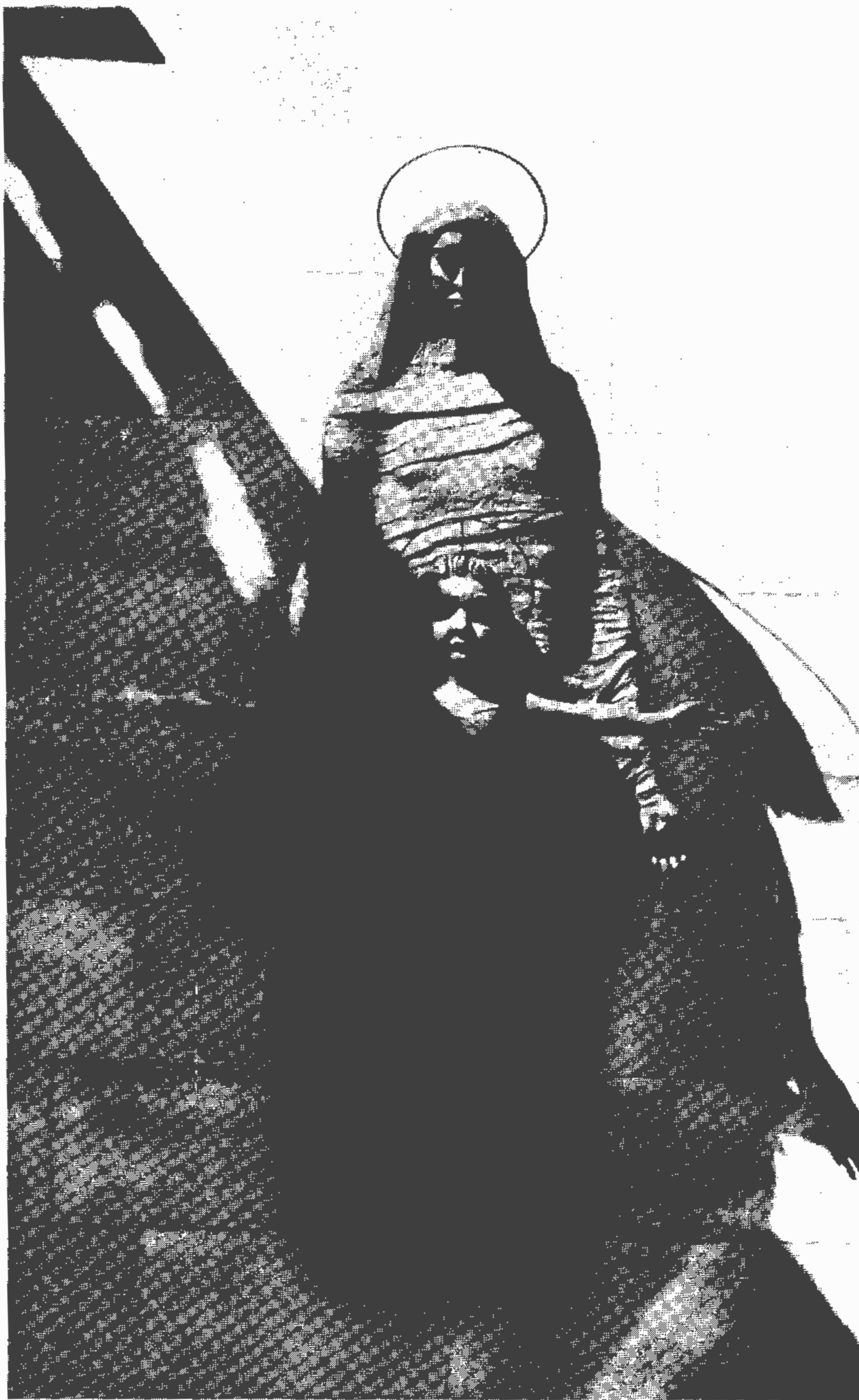
angelo's "Last Judgment," where Eve lifts her hands to the enthroned figure pleading for her children (pp. 205-206).

Whether this awed experience remains for Epstein within the realm of music, or takes him into the realm of truth and worship, we do not know. One is driven to ask: Are his sculptures of Christ and Mary merely concepts, immense concepts, but concepts only?

Christ, the Word made flesh, demands that the world follow Him, and that, to be His disciple, a man leave, if need be, his father, mother, or wife, and always himself. This is not a "concept." This is an "either-or" demand. So to believe in Him as to follow Him, to let Him redeem us—this is what He asks of us, what He asked two thousand years ago, asks today, will ask tomorrow, unto the Last Judgment. We do not know how much of this Epstein acknowledges. Nor do we know how deeply he, the inner man, is committed. We know only his work.

There is his "Genesis" (1931), the mother of the human race. He tells that he deliberately carved this Seravezza marble "without the trappings and charm of what is known as feminine" so as to express "the profoundly elemental in motherhood" (p. 139). Here is the loving hand that protects the child to be born; here, the fruitfulness which gives an ever new chance to man; here, then, a glimpse of the Creator's blessing, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). But one is taken aback to hear Epstein say that this Eve of his is "serene and majestic" when we rather find in it a sullen dignity; and again, that her expression is one of "calm, mindless wonder," as if all that mattered in motherhood were the elemental, the instinctive. Surely, the hope portrayed in this "Genesis" is altogether natural; she has not yet heard the first good tidings of the Redeemer.

As with all art that aspires to any degree of greatness, one finds implicit meanings in this Eve configuration that go beyond the artist's own words. Dorothy Sayers in her *Introductory Papers on Dante* speaks of the validity of the "reading-in" process (never violating the inner logic of the subject) and says in part: "If an image displays the universal pattern, it will display it at all levels and in all circumstances, whether the poet was or could have been conscious of these possible applications or not." So, in Epstein's "Genesis" one may discover implicit significances of great force. For this statue can be seen as Eve, at the instant after the fall, the anger of God having deprived her of



JACOB EPSTEIN: Madonna and Child (1952)



JACOB EPSTEIN: Madonna and Child (1926)



JACOB EPSTEIN: Madonna and Child (1926)



JACOB EPSTEIN: Madonna and Child (1952)

spiritual beauty: in this image of stricken resignation, pregnant with new life, and also with the sins that the world will be made to bear—some of the vast overtones of a true work of art disclose themselves to the wondering viewer.

Epstein's "Adam" (1939), carved in alabaster, is Adam after the fall. This is not the pure man made in God's image. This is Adam who has lost paradise and must go into the world, setting out on his task of fulfilling creation's purpose with the dignity and ferocity of the legendary bull who, with his broad back, tempted Europa and so founded a continent. Does he remember his sin and cry up to God for forgiveness? Is he listening for a voice which will announce the coming of another Adam? In any case, he is bound to earth and yet knows that the earth does not fulfill his destiny. While the massiveness of his body shows that it was made from what lies beneath its feet, the marked upward thrust of breast, hands, and head shows that he is made for God alone.

Whether or not this "Adam" is open to the promise of the new Adam, He has come, and, in order to come, He willed to need a mother. Epstein has spoken of Him and His mother in the "Madonna and Child" of 1926 and again in that of 1952. In the first, the Child leans against His mother; her hands embrace and yet barely hold Him, for He can stand on His own feet. More than that: He stands erect; though still a Child, He is conscious of His mission and so beckons all to come to Him. In the second, she is the handmaid: having borne Him for the world, she has no other life but His, that life He is ready to give so that His brethren may live. Could Epstein's bronze in Cavendish Square tell more clearly than it does that Christ has come to serve, to love, to heal?

In Epstein's "Lazarus," Christ is not visible, yet He is present as the Quickener, as the Death of death. He is the Quickener by His own suffering and dying, and Epstein's "Behold the Man" shows Him as wronged, crowned with thorns, grieved by mute hearts. Not only was He wronged, He emptied the cup of suffering; thus in Epstein's "Consummatum Est," His dead body is stretched out as if His passion had been in vain. Here Epstein seems to look at the Son of Man (he himself uses the title on page 153) very much the way the disciples did for a while. To him, *Consummatum est* seems to mean only "It is finished," and not also "It is fulfilled," the mandate of the Father carried out, the errand of mercy done. Still, in his "Christ" the Son of Man is risen. His

face does not reveal His glory; but this is not surprising, for His glory was veiled from Mary Magdalene and from the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Accusingly He points to His wounds, for He is wronged again and again; and again this is not surprising, for He redeems *and* judges, precisely because He loves.

Ever since 1917, when he began work on his "Christ," Epstein has wrestled with religious themes. Does his powerful "Jacob and the Angel" (1941) tell his own story? All we have are his works. There can be no doubt that they, his works and his sculptor's heart and hands, are saying that Christ was born of Mary; that He wrought miracles, raised the dead; that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; that He arose from the dead. Though we would wish that the sculptor's was an ultimate commitment, this witness of bronze and stone is one the Christian cannot but be grateful for.

CORNELIA AND IRVING SÜSSMAN