

# A NOTE ON THE CONTROVERSY CONCERNING ERIC GILL

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## GILL AS A MORAL MONSTER

On the 12th January 2022 there was an attempt to destroy, or at least damage the statue, *Prospero and Ariel*, installed outside the BBC's Broadcasting House in London, on the grounds that the sculptor, Eric Gill, was a 'paedophile'. A petition has been launched on the website of the left wing petition organiser, 38 degrees, calling for the removal of the statue. At the time of writing (February 2022) it has nearly reached its target of 3,000 signatures. Save the Children has withdrawn its recommendation that one of the many type-fonts developed by Gill - Gill Sans - should be used in its publicity material.

In the course of the media response to the attack, Gill was described as a 'known paedophile' who 'sexually abused his two eldest daughters' (Daily Mail<sup>1</sup>) and 'a monster, a depraved paedophile who abused his daughters and others ... a man who committed horrific sexual crimes' (BBC<sup>2</sup>). The Wikipedia entry on Gill has a section on his 'sexual crimes.' The 38 Degrees petition reads:

*Please sign to demand that the BBC remove the sculpture depicting a naked child, created by known paedophile Eric Gill, which is above the main entrance of BBC Broadcasting House.*

*Gill had an incestuous relationship with his sister, sexual relationships with two of his pubescent daughters and even his family dog.*

*The BBC likes to think a naked boy submissively leaning into the raised leg of a wizard is simply a metaphor for broadcasting. To the BBC Eric Gill was a major British artist rather than a child and animal abuser.*

*Why is this important?*

*I believe that the BBC would regain some credibility with their reputation, if they were seen to act upon the image of a naked child created by a known pedophile. It will show that they do not approve of the crimes committed by their past stars, Savile, King, Hall and Harris and show that they don't condone anybody who carries out child abuse.*

Comments left by signatories include: *'To have a sculpture made by a pedo outside a building that harbors [sic] pedos is a disgrace to decent normal people. pull down the statue and also the building the BBC is a disgrace to the British people'; 'The BBC are a disgrace from savil to hall and all the other monsters they helped .the pedos statue want smashed into a million bits and the building burnt to the ground'; 'Because it's absolutely grim mate, how is there a child penis on a sculpture of all things?? We don't even celebrate some of our greatest heroes yet we apparently support wizards and pedos, no thanks I'll stick to dungeons and dragons'*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Feehan: 'Man scales BBC Broadcasting House and spends four hours destroying sculpture by paedophile artist Eric Gill', *Daily Mail*, 12th January 2022 - [tps://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10395493/Hammer-wielding-activist-scales-BBCs-Broadcasting-House-starts-destroying-Eric-Gill-sculpture.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10395493/Hammer-wielding-activist-scales-BBCs-Broadcasting-House-starts-destroying-Eric-Gill-sculpture.html)

<sup>2</sup> Katie Razzall, BBC culture editor: 'The Artwork vs the artist', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-59972806> (13th January 2022).

<sup>3</sup> <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/remove-bbc-statue-by-paedophile-eric-gill>

The controversy, such as it is, turns on whether it is right to admire work done by a depraved monster ('Eric Gill's crimes were unforgivable, but his statue is blameless' - *The Spectator*<sup>4</sup>; 'Eric Gill: can we separate the artist from the abuser?' - *The Observer*<sup>5</sup>) and, if it is, whether such work should not be shown in a more discreet setting, perhaps adorned with some sort of explanatory text. There seems to be little disagreement over whether or not Gill can be characterised as a 'paedophile'<sup>6</sup> - 'a man who committed horrific sexual crimes'.

## GILL AS A MORAL AUTHORITY

I developed an interest in Gill through my interest in the French Cubist painter, Albert Gleizes. Both Gill and Gleizes were in correspondence with the Ceylonese metaphysician and writer on traditional art, Ananda Coomaraswamy. Both were fond of quoting Coomaraswamy's well-known dictum: 'An artist is not a special sort of man but every man is a special sort of artist.' Neither Gill nor Gleizes knew each other but Coomaraswamy grouped them together with himself and the American engraver (friend and correspondent of Gill), Arthur Graham Carey, as people assumed to be 'mediaevalists', though of course that wasn't how he saw it himself. He preferred the term 'traditionalist.'<sup>7</sup>

I set about reading Gill and was impressed by his general philosophy on the nature of work and art which could perhaps be summarised in the opening two paragraphs of his essay from 1918, *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.'*<sup>8</sup>

D.H.Lawrence, who disliked Gill's prose in general ('*Crass is the only word: maddening like a tiresome uneducated workman arguing in a pub - argufying would describe it better - and banging his*

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Doyle: 'Eric Gill's crimes were unforgivable, but his statue is blameless', *The Spectator*, 16th January, 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/we-gain-nothing-by-destroying-eric-gill-s-beautiful-works-of-art>

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Cooke: 'Eric Gill: can we separate the artist from the abuser?', *The Observer*, Sunday, 9th April, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/09/eric-gill-the-body-ditchling-exhibition-rachel-cooke>

<sup>6</sup> I should say that the use of the word 'paedophile' as a synonym for 'child molester' seems to me to be an abuse of language. To characterise someone who wants to rape children as a 'paedophile' is rather like characterising someone who wants to burn books as a 'bibliophile.'

<sup>7</sup> I discuss Gleizes's relations with Coomaraswamy, with a glancing reference to Gill, in my essay 'Albert Gleizes, Ananda Coomaraswamy and "tradition"', accessible on my website at <http://www.peterbrooke.org/form-and-history/coomaraswamy/>. I am the author of the major study of Gleizes - Peter Brooke: *Albert Gleizes - For and Against the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Gill: 'Slavery and Freedom', in idem: *Art Nonsense and other essays*, London, Cassel and Co Ltd & Francis Waterson, 1929, p.1.

*fist*') nonetheless, and despite the mention of 'God', found 'more in those two paragraphs than in all Karl Marx or Professor Whitehead or a dozen other philosophers rolled together.'<sup>9</sup>

Gill's life and work was a long protest against everything that 'art' has become in our own time. He recognised and vigorously asserted the principle put forward by William Morris that 'art' is just another word for work well done; he successfully established the kind of rural community life which provides the best conditions for such work; he recognised that the function of his own art form - sculpture - was inseparable from religion and that indeed all art, which is to say all work, can only realise its highest value if it is done in a spirit of worship; he detested the business spirit and mechanised production, always asserting the importance of the human over the economic. All that brought him very close to the thinking of Albert Gleizes, who also distrusted 'art', emphasised the importance of craftsmanship, tried (with much less success than Gill) to establish a communal way of working and living, and believed that painting and sculpture had lost their way with the Renaissance and its imitation of the external appearances of nature. Both Gleizes and Gill liked to quote the dictum of Thomas Aquinas (also favoured by Coomaraswamy): 'Art imitates nature not in its effects but in its way of working.'

#### AN UNHAPPY SEX LIFE?

It seemed to me, reading Gill, that, like Gleizes, he was one of the necessary voices of the twentieth century. The *Autobiography*, in particular, struck me as one of the most delightful books I had ever read. I was therefore upset when, just at the moment that I was discovering him, his reputation as a moral thinker was trashed with the publication of Fiona MacCarthy's biography.<sup>10</sup>

The book was published in 1989 with a great deal of publicity, including a special TV programme on Gill and an article in *The Independent* colour supplement, all pursuing the theme that startling revelations were to be found in it concerning sexually aberrant behaviour with his daughters, at least one sister, maybe two, and even the family dog. It is a theme hammered home by the Introduction. Gill is presented as a 'tragic' figure riven by contradictions between his fine religious and social ideal and his disorderly life and passions (pp.vii-viii):

*'He was taken very seriously in his day. At his death, the obituaries suggested he was one of the most important figures of his period, not just as an artist and craftsman but as a social reformer, a man who had pushed out the boundaries of possibility of how we live and work; a man who set examples. But how convincing was he? One of his great slogans (for Gill was a prize sloganist) was 'It All Goes Together'. As I traced his long and extraordinary journeys around Britain in search of integration, the twentieth-century artistic pilgrim's progress, I started to discover aspects of Gill's life which do not go together in the least, a number of very basic contradictions between precept and practice, ambition and reality, which few people have questioned. There is an official and an unofficial Gill and the official, although much the least interesting, has been the version most generally accepted. ...*

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<sup>9</sup> D.H.Lawrence: 'Eric Gill's Art Nonsense', *Book Collector's Quarterly*, no XII, Oct-Dec 1933, pp.1-7, quoted in Malcolm Yorke: *Eric Gill, Man of Flesh and Spirit*, London, Constable, pp.48-9. Yorke goes on to quote Gill saying that *Lady Chatterly's Lover* 'states the Catholic view of sex and marriage more clearly and with more enthusiasm than most of our text books.'

<sup>10</sup> Fiona MacCarthy: *Eric Gill*, London & Boston, Faber and Faber, 1989. The book was republished in 2017.

She refers (p.x) to *'the smokescreen Gill himself and others so determinedly erected'* and affirms boldly: *'At least I can be confident that Gill was not what he said he was. The Autobiography is full of obfuscation'*.

And yet this is not at all the impression that is conveyed once we get into the substance of the book. Indeed even the Introduction itself makes it plain that, whatever about the details of his sexual activity, no-one who came into contact with him could be in any doubt that he regarded sex as a matter of immense importance, of endless wonder and delight and that he was, or seemed to be, completely lacking in any inhibitions on the subject, that he expected the same of all the others around him. I don't myself share that attitude and, for the sake of the ideas that he had in common with Gleizes, I regret that he had it. But I can't accuse him of 'obfuscation' on the matter.

Having made this accusation, the Introduction continues (p.xi):

*'In earlier years Eric Gill had alighted on and promulgated in his own version Ananda Coomaraswamy's Hindu doctrines of the erotic elements in art. Later on, at Ditchling, with the same conviction, he began propounding a complicated theory, or succession of theories, in which sexual activity is aligned to godliness, in which the sexual organs, far from their conventional depiction as the source of scandal, are 'redeemed' by Christ and 'made dear'. It is a very radical and interesting theory, where Gill challenges Christendom's traditional confrontation of matter and spirit, and indeed his theory is justified in part, at least for connoisseurs of art, by the wonderful erotic engravings of that period. But one senses something frantic in the zeal with which Gill exfoliated his passion, in contexts likely and unlikely, and in his evident enjoyment of the waves of consternation which followed, particularly from the monasteries.'*

When she comes to discussing the *Autobiography* she herself quotes, with evident relish, the wonderful passage in which Gill recounts his first discovery of the joys of masturbation (p.20):

*'But how shall I ever forget the strange, inexplicable rapture of my first experience? What marvellous thing was this that suddenly transformed a mere water-tap into a pillar of fire, and water into an elixir of life? I lived henceforth in a strange world of contradiction: something was called filthy which was obviously clean; something was called ridiculous which was obviously solemn and momentous; something was called ugly which was obviously lovely. Strange days and nights of mystery and fear mixed with excitement and wonder - strange days and nights, strange months and years.'*<sup>11</sup>

Not much sign of 'obfuscation' there! Nor in the passage which she quotes (p.290) with equal enthusiasm in which Gill describes the beauty of the flowers of the field as a magnificent display of sexual parts designed to entice for the purpose of procreation. And accordingly invites us to see our own genitalia, male and female, as our most precious 'ornaments.'<sup>12</sup>

She makes the remarkable, almost perverse, observation that *'Gill the patriarchal figure surrounded by what at times seems dozens of his children and his grandchildren, is also a scene of pathos, fertility run wild, the all-too-logical conclusion of his "let 'em all come" theories'* (pp.xi-xii). She is referring to a passage, again in the *Autobiography*, when at the time of their marriage Gill and his wife, Mary (or Ethel as she was before her conversion to Catholicism) agreed not to bother with

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Gill: *Autobiography*, London, The Right Book Club, 1944, pp.53-4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.225.

contraception: *"Always ready and willing" was our motto in respect to lovemaking and "let 'em all come" was our motto in respect of babies.*<sup>13</sup> But they only had three daughters as well as one adopted son. Gill came from a family of thirteen children and he and Mary may well have wanted more but after a series of miscarriages they knew it was not to be. The 'fertility run wild' was the fertility of their daughters. Is Gill to be blamed - assuming it is a bad thing - for that?

She says (p.x) that she has *'come to see Gill as a rather tragic figure'*, because of the contradiction between his role as a model English Catholic *'paterfamilias'* and his unruly sexual appetite. What is astonishing about Gill, however, and this book confirms it, is the apparent absence of any such contradiction. Gill had sexual relations with his housekeepers, with female colleagues, the wives of his friends, his sisters (or at least one sister) and even - and we shall be discussing this in a bit more detail later - his daughters. Yet the book gives little evidence of the ill-feeling, tension and jealousy which such behaviour should normally have provoked. It is as if the normal rules don't apply, and at one point, MacCarthy (following one of Gill's Dominican friends) asks (p.214): *'Was Gill honestly entitled to the privilege of innocence? Had he really been unaffected by the Fall?'*

The question is an interesting one, given that Gill believed in the Fall and Fiona MacCarthy, one assumes, rightly or wrongly, does not. In fact, the whole prurient glee with which the media establishment has swooped on Gill's sexual misdeeds is interesting.

In theory, sexual innocence should be an easy matter for those who do not believe that the sinfulness of sexual passion has been revealed by God. Yet here is a man who is apparently incapable of feeling sexual guilt and whose sexual activities seem to have caused no lasting damage to anyone, and Fiona MacCarthy tries to persuade herself that he was unhappy, tragic, eaten up by contradictions, even though all the evidence she gives proclaims the contrary.

## A HAPPY SEX LIFE?

While MacCarthy thinks that there should have been a tension between Gill's sexual activity and his Catholicism, Gill maintains that the two were mutually complementary. She tells us (p. 212) about a visit Gill paid with his then protégé, the Welsh writer and artist, David Jones, to a certain *'big fat man with a taste for true pornography ... The walls of his flat in Lincoln's Inn Fields were almost papered over with pornographic postcards. At the sight of these, Gill turned to David Jones, saying: "If I were not a Catholic, I should have been like this."*

Again, Gill complained about his brother whose marriage was breaking up that *'Brother Max is so virtuous by nature and so stupid and muddle-headed ... that he prefers to cast M. adrift and break up the home (thus depriving his children of all that home implies) rather than have a love affair to go to confession about'* (p.287). The same attitude to acknowledging sin is found in the *Autobiography* in which he proclaims it as a privilege, an assertion of one's pride in being a man and thus capable of sinning.<sup>14</sup> One has the feeling that having a good sin to confess was all part of the fun (one of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.132.

<sup>14</sup> At least that is how I interpret the passage in the *Autobiography*, pp.223-7.

his confessors, incidentally, was Fr John O'Connor, thought to have been the model for Chesterton's Father Brown. That must have made things easier).

He develops an argument that Catholics, confident in their membership of the True Church, can afford to take a lighter attitude to life than Protestants and agnostics, who continually have to prove themselves.<sup>15</sup> And, especially towards the end of his life, MacCarthy tells us, new visitors to Pigott's, the last of the rural artistic communities he founded, had to pass through a sort of initiation test in which Gill held forth to them about Christ's genitals which, given that He was the Perfect Man, could be assumed to have been of a goodly size. While he was receiving instruction to enter the Church in 1913, he was working on a life size marble replica of his own phallus. One feels a certain sympathy for MacCarthy. He ought to have been a neurotic and unhappy soul. It somehow seems unjust that he wasn't.

MacCarthy argues (p.xi), in support of her view that he was a tragic figure, that '*a chain of destructiveness began at Ditchling, not long after his conversion to Catholicism. Perhaps a part of his tragedy is that he was both ahead of his times and behind them. His urge to experiment with social conventions, especially the prevailing sexual mores, became more obviously and more painfully at variance with the Gills' accepted role as the ideal Catholic family, the public demonstration of fidelity and cohesiveness.*'

In fact, Gill's life at Ditchling Common, at Capel-y-ffin, and at Pigott's (the three rural craft communities he founded or co-founded after his conversion to Catholicism) was astonishingly creative, not just for his own work but for his ability to attract and train loyal followers and apprentices, bringing out their own creative capacities. Of course there were immense problems, and it is quite believable that he was crushed by his workload, his financial responsibilities and his despair at the direction in which political events were moving in the 1930s. But anyone who knows anything about the difficulties of maintaining his kind of life, and of holding such communities together, will be impressed by his achievement, especially remembering that, unlike Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter or Ashbee, he had no inherited wealth. All his ventures were financed only by his own work.

The main evidence for Gill's 'destructiveness' is his quarrel with his former close friend, the printer, Hilary Pepler. But though MacCarthy discusses this at some length and tells us that there is a long correspondence on the subject, she doesn't in my view quite come to grips with it. Was it, as she hints in the Introduction, prompted by jealousy because his eldest daughter Elizabeth had fallen in love with Hilary's son, David (whom she eventually married, against her father's opposition)? Or did his opposition to this affair spring from an already established rift with Pepler, which he attributed to questions of finance and also (a major part of the account in the *Autobiography*) to his complaint that Ditchling was more and more taking on the character of a Catholic tourist resort. This would seem to be confirmed by his withdrawal to the - at the time - nearly inaccessible Capel y Finn. MacCarthy's account of the joyous arrival at Capel and the subsequent life there (and a couple of years later when the whole menagerie moved again to Pigotts, near High Wycombe in the Chilterns) hardly fits the idea that it was a 'chain of destructiveness.'

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.164,

Gill, MacCarthy says, was both ahead of his times and behind them. Presumably it is as a sexual libertarian that he was ahead of the times, and as a Catholic family man, who loved being surrounded by children and grandchildren, that he was behind. But Gill's sexual libertarianism is utterly different from the unhappy obsessions of modern society. He lived in a different world from that of William Burroughs, Hubert Selby Jr, Peter Greenaway or Tom Sharpe. What is so striking about post war sexual permissiveness, chronically so in the case of pop music (David Bowie, Lou Reed, Ultravox, The Smiths, Prince - I don't claim to be up-to-date in these matters!), is the carefully cultivated atmosphere of misery and degradation that surrounds it. There is a feeling of the obsessive scratching of an itch, knowing that it will only make the wound deeper. Compare them with Gill, a passage from the diaries which I have taken at random from MacCarthy's book:

*'C.L. (the discretion is my own - P.B.) came in and I drew her portrait. We talked a lot about fucking and agreed how much we loved it. Afterwards we fondled one another a little and I put my penis between her legs. She then arranged herself so that when I pushed a little it went into her. I pushed it in about six times and then we kissed and went into lunch.'* (p.262)

Gill, incidentally, was a strong opponent of artificial contraception. It is a curious thing that, while he had three daughters by his wife, he does not seem to have had any children outside marriage. I think we can safely assume that he would have accepted responsibility for them if he had. MacCarthy gives what might be the answer in her account of his exchanges with Dr Helena Wright, well-known as an adviser on sexual matters and advocate of contraception. After telling her *'You are entitled to believe in and work for a matriarchal state. Men are equally entitled to resist it'*, he continues: *'I believe in birth control by the man by means of:– (1) Karetza. (2) Abstinence from intercourse. (3) Withdrawal before ejaculation. (4) French letters'* but *'I don't think 3 and 4 are good. I don't think abstinence from orgasm is necessarily a bad thing. It depends on the state of mind and states of mind can be cultivated.'* (p.261) 'Karetza' is a form of sexual activity without orgasm. Gill, as we know, did not practise abstinence. Karetza may also explain the willingness of the most improbable women to have sex with him. They didn't take it very seriously.

## THE EVIDENCE

But this brings us to the question of sexual relations with his daughters. Considering the impact her revelations have had on Gill's reputation, MacCarthy's attitude, expressed in the Introduction (p.viii), is surprisingly casual:

*'There is nothing so very unusual in Gill's succession of adulteries, some casual, some long-lasting, several pursued within the protective walls of his own household. Nor is there anything so absolutely shocking about his long record of incestuous relationships with sisters and with daughters: we are becoming conscious that incest was (and is) a great deal more common than was generally imagined. Even his preoccupations and his practical experiments [sic. She only mentions one - PB] with bestiality, though they may strike one as bizarre, are not in themselves especially horrifying or amazing. Stranger things have been recorded.'*

Well, yes, certainly, stranger things have been recorded. But, she continues: *'It is the context which makes them so alarming, which gives one such a frisson. This degree of sexual anarchy within the ostentatiously well-regulated household astonishes.'*

But what is truly astonishing is the change of mood that occurs at the end of her introduction: *'No one who knew him well failed to like him, to respond to him. And his personality is still enormously arresting. In his agility, his social and sexual mobility, his professional expertise and purposefulness, the totally unpompous seriousness with which he looks anew at what he sees as the real issues, he seems extremely modern, almost of our own age.'* (p.xiii) But maybe she is wrong about 'our own age' catching up with Gill's 'sexual mobility.' At least if the man chipping away at the BBC's *Prospero and Ariel* can be taken as representative of our age. Indeed in an article written for *The Guardian* she suggests that *'Gill in 2006 would no doubt be in prison.'*<sup>16</sup>

The only deeds she records that could have landed him in prison are of course his sexual relations with his two eldest daughters, Elizabeth and Petra. This takes up one paragraph in MacCarthy's book (pp.155-6):

*"For instance in July 1921, when Betty was sixteen, Gill records how one afternoon while Mary and Joan were in Chichester he made her 'come', and she him, to watch the effect on the anus: '(1) Why should it', he queries, 'contract during the orgasm, and (2) why should a woman's do the same as a man's?' This is characteristic of Gill's quasi-scientific curiosity: his urge to know and prove. It is very much a part of the Gill family inheritance. (His doctor brother Cecil, in his memoirs, incidentally shows a comparable fascination with the anus.) It can be related to Gill's persona of domestic potentate, the notion of owning all the females in his household. It can even perhaps be seen as an imaginative overriding of taboos: the three Gill daughters all grew up, so far as one can see, to be contented and well-adjusted married women. Happy family photographs, thronging with small children, bear out their later record of fertility. But the fact remains, and it is a contradiction which Gill, with his discipline of logic, his antipathy for nonsense, must in his heart of hearts have been aware of, that his private behaviour was at war with his public image – confused it, undermined it. Things did not go together. There is a clear anxiety in his diary description of visiting one of the younger daughter's bedrooms: "stayed ½ hour – put p. in her a/hole". He ends almost on a note of panic, "This must stop."*

The paragraph begins 'For instance ...' and in the Guardian article I quoted earlier MacCarthy says that *'during those years at Ditchling, Gill was habitually abusing his two elder daughters'* so we must assume that these are not the only examples. But so far as I know this paragraph is all there is in the public domain, the sole basis on which Gill has been characterised as a 'paedophile' (MacCarthy gives no examples of sexual relations with any others among the many young teenagers and children in Gill's circle). We're not told if these two incidents are typical, if similar things occurred frequently, if these are particularly bad cases, or if there is worse. Nor are we told, in the second case, if, when he says 'This must stop,' it did stop, or if this is - or isn't - the only case of penetration occurring.

## YOU THE JURY

In 2017 the Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft which has a very important collection of his work, put on an exhibition - *Eric Gill - The Body* designed to face up to this embarrassing part of its legacy. This might have been an opportunity to explore the Diaries further but it does not appear to have been taken. Instead the assumption was that all that needed to be known was

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<sup>16</sup> Fiona MacCarthy: 'Written in stone', *The Guardian*, 22nd July 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/jul/22/art.art>

known. To quote an account prepared by Index on Censorship<sup>17</sup>: *'awareness of this aspect of his biography is widespread and has been fully discussed and debated.'* The approach was to invite visitors to the exhibition to respond to the works - many of them naked bodies, lovers embracing, detailed studies of male genitalia - in light of the knowledge that they were done by a man who abused his daughters. According to a statement by the Museum director, Nathaniel Hepburn:

*'This exhibition is the result of two years of intense discussions both within the museum and beyond, including contributing to an article in The Art Newspaper in July 2015, hosting #museumhour twitter discussions on 22 February 2016 on 'tackling tricky subjects', a workshop day with colleagues from museums across the country hosted at the museum with Index on Censorship, and a panel discussion at 2016 Museums Association Conference in Glasgow. Through these discussions Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft feels compelled to confront an issue which is unpleasant, difficult and extremely sensitive. It has by no means been an easy process yet we feel confident that not turning a blind eye to this story is the right thing to do. This exhibition is just the beginning of the museum's process of taking a more open and honest position with the visitor and we already have legacy plans in place including ensuring there will continue to be public acknowledgement of the abuse within the museum's display.'*<sup>18</sup>

It was a delicate exercise. There were consultations with charities helping survivors of abuse, there were two writers in residence, helplines and support literature for people who could have been adversely affected by the content of the show. The sculptor Cathie Pilkington was co-curator and had a little exhibition of her own, based round a wooden doll Gill had made for Petra when she was four years old. In its atmosphere of high seriousness it was all a far cry from MacCarthy's summing up of the life at Ditchling, where the events described occurred (she says they didn't occur later):

*'It was not an unhappy childhood, far from it. All accounts, from the Gill and Pepler children, the children of the Cribbs and the other Ditchling families, so closely interrelated through the life of the workshops and the life around the chapel, verge on the idyllic. Simple pleasures, intense friendships, great events – like the annual Ditchling Flower Show and the sports on Ditchling Common, with Father Vincent, as timekeeper, stopwatch in hand; followed by a giant Ditchling children's tea party. There were profound advantages in growing up at Ditchling. But the children always felt – this was the price of self-containment – that it was other people who were odd.'* (p.154)

Among the 'frequently asked questions' prepared for the exhibition, there was this:

*'Isn't it true that Gill's daughters did not regard themselves as 'abused'? They are reported as having normal happy and fulfilled lives and Petra at almost 90 commented that she wasn't embarrassed by revelations about her family life and that they just 'took it for granted'. Aren't we all perhaps making more of this than the people affected?'*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Julia Farrington: 'Case Study - Eric Gill/The Body', 15th May, 2019, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2019/05/eric-gill-the-body-case-study/>

<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel Hepburn: 'Eric Gill / The Body: Statement from the Director', <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2019/05/eric-gill-the-body-statement-from-the-director/>

<sup>19</sup> 'Eric Gill / The Body: Q&A for visitor services', <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2019/05/eric-gill-the-body-qa-for-visitor-services/>

The quote comes from an obituary of the weaver, Petra Tegetmeier, which appeared in *the Guardian*:

*'A remarkable aspect of those liaisons with Petra is that she seems not only to have been undamaged by the experience, but to have become the most calm, reflective and straightforward wife and mother. When I asked her about it shortly before her 90th birthday, she assured me that she was not at all embarrassed - 'We just took it for granted'. She agreed that had she gone to school she might have learned how unconventional her father's behaviour was. He had, she explained, 'endless curiosity about sex'. His bed companions were not only family but domestic helpers and even (to my astonishment when I heard about it) the teacher who ran the school at Pigotts'*<sup>20</sup>

The Museum's reply to the question was as follows:

*'Elizabeth was no longer alive when Fiona McCarthy's book was published, and those who met Petra certainly record a calm woman who managed to come to terms with her past abuse, and still greatly admired her father as an artist. I don't think that we should try to imagine her process to reaching this acceptance as we know too little about her own experiences.'*

'We know too little about her own experiences' but we do know that 'her past abuse' was a problem she had to come to terms with, despite her own statement that it wasn't. A certain disquiet about the position of Petra in all this is expressed by some of the people involved in the project. One of the writers in residence, Bethan Roberts, wrote a short story about her called 'Gospels' which was posted on the Ditchling Museum website but now seems to have disappeared. The other, Alison Macleod, commented: *'Yes, the biography is upsetting disturbing in part and there was clearly a history of abuse that is without question. But it is made slightly more complex by the fact that the two daughters [who] were abused said they were unembarrassed about it, not angry about it, loved their father, and didn't give the response that perhaps I'm imagining, or some people expected them to give – to be angry about it and condemn their father's behaviour. They didn't. So maybe they have internalised their trauma, but you could say that that response is almost patronising to the two women, the elderly women who were very clear about what they felt, so it goes into a loop of paradoxes of riddles that you cannot really ever solve.'*<sup>21</sup>

The resident artist, Cathie Pilkington, carved a series of heads based on the doll Gill had made for Petra and labelled them 'Petra'. Steph Fuller, an artistic director of the Museum who said that she had been on the outside of the project but 'recruited while the show was on' felt uneasy about this:

*'The real legacy issue, which I am grappling with at the moment, is that the voice that was not in the room, was Petra's. She was very front and centre as far as Cathie's commission was concerned, but there is something about how the work conflated Petra with the doll and being a child victim, that I'm a bit uncomfortable about actually. There is lots of evidence of Petra's views about her experiences, and how she internalised them, that was not present at all anywhere. It is easy to project things on to someone being just a victim and Petra would have completely rejected that.'*

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Nuttgens: 'Unorthodox liaisons' (obituary for Petra Tegmeteier, 6th January, 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/jan/06/guardianobituaries>)

<sup>21</sup> Julia Farrington: Case Study.

*'In terms of legacy how we continue to talk about Gill and his child sexual abuse and other sexual activities which were fairly well outside the mainstream, I think – yes acknowledge it, but also – how? I am feeling my way round it at the moment. There are plenty of living people, her children and grandchildren who are protective of her, quite reasonably. I need to feel satisfied that when we speak about Petra, we represent her side of it and we don't just tell it from the point of view of the abuser, to put it bluntly. If it is about Petra, how do we do it in a way that respects her views and her family's views?'*<sup>22</sup>

According to Rachel Cooke, who was brought in as a sort of resident journalist, Pilkington had commented on the doll: *'This is a very potent object. It looks to me just like a penis'*. She continues:

*'Her installation, central to which are five scaled-up versions of the head of Petra's doll (one decorated by her 11-year-old daughter, Chloe), will explore different aspects of Gill's practice, and the way we are inclined to project his life on to his work, sometimes in contradiction of the facts: "The tendency – if there is a picture of a figure – is to chuck all this interpretation on it... it can't just be a beautiful drawing or a taut piece of carving. But sometimes it is. Where, I'm asking, is Petra in all this? There are aspects to her life apart from the fact that her father had sex with her."*<sup>23</sup>

Exactly. Though I for one was left wondering how exactly her installation - a sort of doll's house full of little knickknacks including the doll's heads - contributed to our understanding that Petra and Elizabeth were something other than just victims of sex abuse, and that there was more, much more, to their relation with their father than the sex.

A catalogue was produced.<sup>24</sup> Apart from Cathie Pilkington's installation it consisted largely of highly representational life drawings including some of his studies of his friends' (male) genitalia. Material that will appeal to the 'art connoisseur' for whom Gill expressed such lofty contempt. It leaves me wishing that he had taken Thomas Aquinas's instruction to imitate nature in its way of working not in its effects - the renunciation of post-Renaissance representational art - more seriously. As Gleizes did, advancing into non-representational art, an art that Gleizes claimed<sup>25</sup> might eventually be worthy of comparison with the non-representational art of the oriental carpet.

## MacCARTHY IS DISMAYED

Rachel Cooke quotes Fiona MacCarthy saying:

*'she has watched in "dismay" as the fact of Gill's abuse of his daughters has grown to become the thing that defines him. "My book was never a book about incest, which is what one would imagine from many hysterical contemporary responses," she says. "It was a book about the multifaceted life of a multi-talented artist and an absorbingly interesting man." As people demand the demolition of his sculpture in public places – the Stations of the Cross in Westminster Cathedral, Prospero and Ariel at Broadcasting*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Cooke: 'Eric Gill: can we separate the artist from the abuser?'

<sup>24</sup> Nathaniel Hepburn and Catherine Pilkington, curators: *Eric Gill: the body*, with Catherine Pilkington: *Doll for Petra* Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft, Exhibition catalogue, 230 April - 3 September, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished ms note in the Gleizes archive formerly kept at Aubard.

*House – she asks where this will end: “Get rid of Gill, but who chooses the artist with morals so impeccable that they could take his place? ... I would not deny that Gill’s sex drive was unusually strong and in some cases aberrant,” she says, “but to reduce the motivation of a richly complicated human being to such simplification is ludicrous.” Reducing art to a matter of the sexual irregularities of the artist, she believes, “can only in the end seriously damage our appreciation of the rich possibilities of art in general.”*

MacCarthy's book is impressive and enjoyable and does indeed give a good account of the 'multifaceted life of a multi-talented artist and an absorbingly interesting man'. I have no problems with the mention of sexual relations with Elizabeth and Petra which are unquestionably part of the story. But the book was sold vigorously and no doubt successfully on the basis of the scandals it revealed. That may have been the responsibility of the publisher but MacCarthy played this element up in her Introduction which has an atmosphere all its own and may well have been the only part most of the reviewers bothered to read. The result is that, as she says, 'the fact of Gill's abuse of his daughters has grown to become the thing that defines him.' I have no idea why the man who attacked Gill's statue or the people who have signed the 38 degrees petition have felt so strongly on the matter. It may well be that they themselves suffered some sort of abuse in their childhood and I can hardly blame them for their feelings confronted with the work of a man whom they know, simply and exclusively, as an abuser. The more so when the BBC's own 'culture editor' characterises him as 'a monster, a depraved paedophile who ... committed horrific sexual crimes'. But it also needs to be understood that different kinds of sexual activity can cover a wide variety of feelings and reactions on the part of both 'perpetrator' and 'victim' and that a blanket categorisation that would throw Eric Gill and his relations with his daughters (unquestionably very loving independently of the sexual side) into the same category as Jimmy Savile and his relations with his victims really doesn't contribute very much to our understanding of what it is to be human.

Peter Brooke, February 2022