

type

The SECRET HISTORY
of LETTERS

SIMON LOXLEY

I.B. TAURIS

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12 | Leper messiah: Gill semi-light, Gill heavy

He really believed in it all. You see, there comes a time, you know, when people who, say, join the ILP or the Communist Party or something of that kind, and they get used to a certain jargon, they really think they believe in it. They *think* they believe in it. All of a sudden they find out – they find out they don't really. And they can't live up to it. Now Gill *did* live up to it. It takes a lot of doing, a lot of doing... (Stanley Morrison on Eric Gill, BBC radio portrait, 1961)

Stanley Morrison, the man who commissioned Eric Gill to design the Perpetua typeface, and his most famous creation, Gill Sans, found him a deeply impressive figure. In this he was not alone. An immensely gifted sculptor, illustrator, letter carver and type designer, and a profoundly influential teacher, Gill also wrote passionately and with searing logic on many of the major questions of his age, plus a host of minor personal interests and obsessions.

Eric Gill is the most complex figure in the whole history of type design. A hero for many of his contemporaries, his posthumously published autobiography, surprisingly for a memoir of a stonecutter, became a bestseller. Gill told the publishers that they wouldn't dare print what he would want to write: 'I do not see how my kind of life ... could be written without intimate details.' His frank approach to sexual matters doubtless played a major role in maintaining buoyant sales. But even so, there was much that he didn't tell. In the twenty-first century, we like to submit our heroes to detailed scrutiny, and if the microscope reveals deep character flaws, then so much the better. In this aspect, as in many others, Eric Gill does not disappoint.

Gill presented himself as a man of unswerving dedication to his beliefs, not just in religion, but in his work and every aspect of his life. In his autobiography he recalled overhearing a schoolteacher describe him as 'easily led', and claimed to recognize the truth of this. But there is nothing wrong with this, he asserted, as long as you are capable of choosing good leaders, a skill he considered



56 Eric Gill
in full regalia:
he brought
the same
attention
to rolling
a cigarette
that he gave
to cutting a
letter.

himself to have. However, the impression Gill leaves is not of a devoted, clear-headed follower, but of a control freak, with a need to be in total charge, uncompromising in outlook and unbending in principles, except when he himself wished to compromise those principles.

He looks an odd and slightly forbidding presence in photographs, with his thick beard (which he saw as an essential part of masculinity), and beret or broad-brimmed hat. Sometimes he wore a square hat made of folded paper, of the type worn by the carpenter in Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice through the Looking Glass*, and also used by stonemasons to keep dust and chippings out of their hair while working.

Gill favoured medieval-looking smocks, not just for work clothes, and had an aversion to trousers. Indeed, he wrote a small book called *Trousers and the Most Precious Ornament*, in which he argued that the restrictions of the garment in question dishonoured the male sexual organ. His former apprentice David Kindersley – later himself to become a distinguished stonecutter and typographer

— recalled when he and Gill were working *in situ* on a set of carvings for the entrance to Dorset House in London. Following a complaint from 'an elderly spinster' living in some nearby flats, a policeman arrived on the scene to ascertain that Gill was not indulging in public cross-dressing.¹

Gill's appearance was all part of what would now be called his image. He wanted to appear as the honest workman and craftsman, which on one level he was, but that wasn't the whole story. Gill also saw himself as a freethinker and social rebel. His appearance was a statement: 'I am not like you, and you cannot judge me on the terms by which you run your own life.' Understandably, such a personality tends to divide opinion, but many found him to be a man of great charm; Morison was convinced that if Gill had chosen to play the West End 'society' personality, he could easily have done so.

He was born in 1882, one of thirteen children. His father was a curate in Brighton, and although life was financially a struggle, the family was a caring one, and as Gill observed: 'it's impossible to be a poor relation without having rich relations'. With the help of said relations, on leaving school the young Eric was found a position as a trainee draughtsman in the offices of W. D. Caröe, a London architect whose large practice made a speciality of ecclesiastical commissions. 'I was not immediately told that architecture was "a rotten job"; but I was led gradually and surely to discover that fact ...'²

Gill evinced a profound disgust for the whole industrial and capitalistic system of late Victorian and Edwardian England. He considered inhuman the process whereby the builders and craftsmen who realized the architect's designs were not entrusted with any task that the architect hadn't specified in minute detail, and the fact that as long as these specifications were properly followed it didn't matter what opinion the construction workers had of the building they were making. An increasingly reluctant part of this system, Gill hated making drawings of things that other people were then going to have to build. He subscribed completely to the Arts and Crafts ideals, which said that the person who conceived a design should execute it as well, and decided, despite his family's financial investment, to abandon this career path for one of his own choosing.

1 David Kindersley, *Mr Eric Gill; Further Thoughts by an Apprentice*, Cambridge, 1967, revised edn 1982.

2 Eric Gill, *Autobiography*, 1940.

Gill had retained an enthusiasm for lettering from boyhood, when he had been attracted to the name plates on railway engines. In Caröe's offices he had made the lettering on architectural drawings his speciality. He enrolled in classes in masonry and lettering: 'I would rather be a workman myself and start my rebellion from that end. I would be a workman and demand a workman's rights, the right to design what he made; and a workman's duties, the duty to make what he designed.'³

The teacher at the lettering classes Gill attended at the Central School was Edward Johnston. Gill compared first seeing him in action to being 'struck as by lightning': 'the first time I saw him writing, and saw the writing that came as he wrote, I had that thrill and tremble of the heart which otherwise I can only remember having had when first I touched her body ...'⁴

This was a characteristic Gill analogy. Johnston quickly recognized the potential in his new pupil; they became close friends, and before long Johnston even invited Gill to share his rooms in Lincoln's Inn. Walking home one night after college, they were struck by the painted sans serif lettering on some tradesmen's vehicles. Gill exclaimed, 'I wish I could do that!'⁵ Like Emery Walker's 1888 Arts and Crafts lecture, this was one of typography's golden evenings. Johnston was to reclaim the sans serif lettering as an exalted letter form, Gill to produce one of the greatest twentieth-century examples of the style. Gill freely acknowledged the influences of Johnston's work and helped out in the early stages of the latter's Underground lettering, his former teacher recognizing his contribution by giving him 10 per cent of the fee.

In 1905 Johnston moved into Emery Walker's old house in Hammersmith, and Gill, now married with a baby daughter, was soon to follow. Walker was still in Hammersmith, a few doors away, as was William Morris's daughter May, with Thomas Cobden-Sanderson round the corner at the Doves Press. In some ways this Hammersmith coterie was an urban prototype for the creative communities that Gill would later establish in the country.

Lettering and stone cutting work began to flow in. He hand-painted the shop fascia for newsagent and booksellers WH Smith for their new branch in the rue de Rivoli in Paris, and in 1913 was given the prestigious

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ James Moran, *The Double Crown Club: a history of fifty years*, London, 1974.

task of carving the fourteen low-relief images depicting Christ's road to the crucifixion, the Stations of the Cross, for the new Westminster Cathedral. Gill was later self-deprecating about the commission, claiming he was only given the job because no more famous sculptor would have done it for the money on offer. Some of the reliefs were good, and some bad, he drily stated, but as no one had ever agreed as to which was which, he felt he'd got away with it.

The commission also proved useful to Gill in another way; an exemption from military service was obtained for him until he'd finished the work. This suited him; although not a conscientious objector, he hated the political and industrial systems that had brought the war upon Europe, and apart from its effect on enlisted friends and relations, felt the conflict was nothing to do with him. He was finally called up in August 1918 and spent a few miserable months in army camp. Military regulations meant he had to shave off his beard, not the least of what he saw as the degradations of army life. The war ended before he was sent into action.

Gill's long, close association with Edward Johnston also ended not long after this. In 1907 they had both left the city, moving to the village of Ditchling in Sussex. With Hilary Pepler, a former social worker who had been a near-neighbour of Gill's in Hammersmith, Gill worked on a self-produced magazine, *The Game*. At Ditchling, Gill and Pepler were steadily establishing an artistic and Catholic community of families, built around faith and Gill's ideas about how society should properly be run – all farming work was carried out using pre-industrial methods. Johnston's wife was strongly anti-Catholic in her religious leanings, and Johnston himself was too much of a lone spirit to be drawn into the communal life. He increasingly disassociated himself from the Catholic opinions expressed in *The Game*, and this accelerated the decline in the two men's relationship. Gill saw little of him in the last twenty years of his life. Edward Johnston died in 1944, and lies in the churchyard in Ditchling.

As time went on, Gill and Pepler's relationship, once so harmonious, also became increasingly fraught, a power struggle over who should be the paterfamilias of the community. Resentment grew over finances; Pepler had money, whereas Gill only ever charged a workman's

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57 Perpetua: named after the first book in which it was used, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. The A bears Gill's approved flat top.

wage, not an artist's. Gill split the community in two by moving to the Welsh mountains in 1924.

For those interested in Gill's thoughts on typeface design, and his relations with Stanley Morison and the Monotype Corporation, the autobiography says disappointingly little. Beyond a list of the faces he designed, Gill says only that his association with the type designing business was honourable, pleasant and helpful. He states that although he hated the world of business, he had met many 'nice' businessmen. Obviously it was Gill's prerogative to select those areas of his life and philosophy he wanted to talk about, but perhaps he felt his involvement in what was industry and mass production ran too obviously counter to his own beliefs. Although in many ways Morison wasn't at all a conventional businessman, and he and Gill shared a similar approach; both regarded 'leisure' as an alien concept, and built working projects out of friendships and personal associations. It is tempting to play the amateur psychologist and speculate that Morison saw in Gill the depths of conviction that he himself lacked; Morison certainly believed this was so, at least in terms of the Catholic faith they shared.

David Kindersley recounted a story that illustrates Gill's prickly approach to men of business, an encounter that ironically only served to convince them that he was of their kind. Gill's proposals for the sculptures for the Dorset House entrance were over budget:

Mr Gill was invited to appear before the Board. One member who had heard about Mr Gill's clothes thought he should warn his fellow directors. He explained that he wore a habit similar, though shorter, than a monk's, and being an artist of some distinction he should be treated with due respect. 'How could the cost be reduced?' they asked. At once Mr Gill said, 'Each leaf is £5, so if you do away with the whole branch that will save £25.' The Directors, already bitterly disappointed because Mr Gill had turned up in an overcoat, turned on the one that had thought to smooth the way saying, 'He is not an artist. He is a business man. Moreover, we have not seen his monk's habit.'⁶

Whatever moral dilemmas Gill may have undergone through his association with Monotype, we can be thankful he was able to override them. Morison had seen some

6 Kindersley, op. cit.

of Gill's work for the Ditchling Press, as well as his carved lettering, which he greatly admired. He first of all asked Gill to draw out the alphabet he had been cutting in stone, and this became the basis of Perpetua, Gill's first typeface for Monotype in 1925.

Morison believed that the greatness of Gill's typefaces stemmed from the fact that Gill was a letter cutter: 'A cut line is very different from a drawn line ... When he was cutting, he *cut*. He committed himself. He wasn't *afraid* of committing himself.'⁷

In 1927 Gill painted the shop fascia board for his friend Douglas Cleverdon's antiquarian bookshop in Bristol, using sans serif letters. The probability is that Morison, who visited the shop in 1927, conceived the idea of asking Gill to produce a sans serif alphabet when he saw this lettering – from which request was to come Gill Sans. By the mid-1920s the spectre of German competition in the field of type design was beginning to loom once more – the reawakened fear that the Germans were taking Johnston's ideas and work on sans serif alphabets and turning out a new wave of type. Gill Sans was a British answer to the threat from across the Channel.

Of Gill's typefaces, both Perpetua and Gill Sans have long been personal favourites. Perpetua is an elegant face; its pointed serifs recall the speculative origins of these features – a neat way for a stonecutter to finish off a vertical or horizontal stroke. Perhaps as a text face it can suffer a little from its relatively low x-height, but for small quantities of wording it looks characterful and sophisticated.

Gill Sans has the same qualities as a piece of Charles Rennie Mackintosh furniture; timeless, yet unmistakably of its time as well, a superb combination of resonances. In his pursuit of the ultimate legible letter, Gill used Johnston's work as the basis for his own sans serif typeface, but while acknowledging the influence, stressed that Gill Sans was intended as a text face, whereas Johnston's was purely for display.

There are differences, of course. Gill was less enamoured of the classic Roman proportions – his capitals are a little narrower. The ratio of height to stroke thickness is slightly greater, so the strokes are thinner. Gill's V and W end as points rather than a blunt edge. The leg of the R is curved, not a straight line, something Gill felt

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58 Gill Sans: it owes a debt to Johnston, but the drawing of the lower case is more delicate and skilful, and the Roman proportions were not followed.

⁷ Stanley Morison on Gill, BBC radio portrait, 1961.

strongly about. Crucially, on the lower case, again a little more condensed than Johnston's, the strokes are not all monoline. The a is quite distinctive, with its small counter and slightly top-heavy upper loop. The dots on the i and j are round, the t has a crossbar of more conventional length. The g looks more attenuated, its two counters farther apart, with a longer link.

It has been claimed that in the inter-war period sans serif type was hardly ever used for continuous reading in Britain or America. However, as one example, *The Daily Express Coronation Souvenir Book* of 1937 used Gill Sans for its text face, although large at 12pt (9 or 10pt would be more expected). But Gill Sans is the great text face that has never actually been used very much for continuous reading. Even today, when a lot of style magazines use sans serif fonts as text, Gill wouldn't be used. Compared to Futura, Helvetica and most decidedly Univers, there is a humanity, a gentleness, in Gill Sans that the others lack. It feels organic, like the work of a stonecutter. Its very character works against it as a sans serif text face – it's just not anonymous enough.

Although the italic, like many sans serif italics, is little more than a sloped version of the roman, it does contain a couple of features to differentiate it, and as a consequence has some contrast when used amidst the roman. In an advisory capacity for Monotype, Gill assisted in the creation of the more extreme versions of his face, such as Gill Sans Ultra Bold, also known as Kayo. These superb, quirky heavier weights look startlingly like a creation of the 1960s, but would definitely fall into the category Gill himself contemptuously described as 'suitable for advertisements of Bovril'⁸ – not at all the kind of thing to which one would imagine him giving the go-ahead. But in the land of Gill, expect the unexpected.

Gill's boyhood love of locomotive lettering came full circle in the early thirties when the railway company LNER adopted Gill Sans as its corporate face, and Gill lettered the name plate for the *Flying Scotsman*. He also executed two important sculptural commissions, for the League of Nations building in Geneva, and figures of Prospero and Ariel for the BBC's Broadcasting House in London. (In 1928 he had carved the figures representing winds on the London Underground headquarters above St James's Park station.) The latter caused contro-

⁸ *Lettering, an Essay on Typography*, London, 1931.

versy even before they were unveiled. The governors of the BBC, viewing the work from behind the tarpaulin, were startled by what they considered the extravagant dimensions of Ariel's penis, and Gill was ordered to make a reduction.

Sex was a dominant theme in both Gill's life and his art, and he saw himself as frank and uninhibited, a crusader at odds with the hypocrisy of the prevailing moral climate. A visitor to the Gill workshops once described seeing what he called a 'nimbus', a halo, around Gill's head, and was convinced it was not just a trick of the light. But there was another side to this spiritual leader of the community; his sexual freethinking had a dark aspect.

Fiona MacCarthy, in the definitive biography, 1989's *Eric Gill*, had access to his diaries; these revealed Gill to have conducted possessive and incestuous relationships with his daughters, and to have had a steady stream of relationships with adult women outside of his marriage, to which his wife Mary seems generally to have turned a blindly tolerant eye, the perfect supportive and fondly indulgent artist's wife. Whether she accepted Gill's excesses as all part of his creative spirit, his hunger for knowledge and for pushing the boundaries of experience, we can only surmise. 'In all his close relationships with married couples he compulsively, inevitably sought the wife. He was childishly jealous of other people's women, not even allowing his apprentices at Pigotts [Gill's home and workshop from the late 1920s until his death] to bring their girl-friends into the workshops. He liked to feel all women in the world belonged to him.'⁹

As Gill's association with Stanley Morison developed, he inevitably came into contact with Beatrice Warde. She was the complete antithesis of what Gill expected a woman to be and how he expected her to behave. Childless, divorced, she lived alone, forging a successful career in a male-dominated world, lively, with strong opinions and a keen intellect: 'her powerful brain probed and tested facts and theories with the assurance of an experienced lawyer'.¹⁰ Gill's opinion of the opposite sex was low; women were incapable of being artists of any worth, and unable to participate in serious debate. His own daughters were not formally educated. His whole view of sex was that it was a man's game; women were

⁹ Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill*, London, 1989.

¹⁰ John Dreyfus, 'Eric Gill, Stanley Morison and Beatrice Warde: their collaboration at the Monotype Corporation', *Into Print*, London, 1994.

merely passive receptacles for male desire, ideally modest of dress and demeanour.

But despite all this, Gill was attracted. It was a meeting of type's two great sorcerers, each capable of casting a spell, albeit of very different formulae, over those they encountered. The two styles of magic were none the less compatible:

Beatrice Warde had no official ties with Morison; his wife was still alive, although they did not live together. It seems unlikely, on the evidence of friends close to them both, that Morison's relationship with Beatrice was physical. He was a strict Catholic, still playing by the rules. But their obvious affection and dependence had made them a couple of a kind, and the triangular relationship ... was irresistible to Gill.¹¹

Gill soon joined the list of Warde's lovers; she in turn became one of the principal models for his *Twenty-Five Nudes* series of wood engravings. How did Morison take all this? At least publicly, he expressed only profound admiration for Gill, but it's hard to imagine he couldn't have felt some resentment; whatever the basis of their relationship (and close friends, especially those protective of posthumous reputations, can be self-deluding or evasive on such matters), this was the woman he had broken his marriage for – no light matter, especially for a committed Catholic.

But between himself and his workers Gill always maintained a distance; he insisted his apprentices call him 'sir', and when he set up a printing business with his son-in-law René Hague, he did so only on the condition that Hague called him 'master'. David Kindersley's widow Lida Lopes Cardozo recalled how Gill used a system of bells to summon apprentices across the yard when he wanted them. One bell for Laurie Cribb, two for Anthony Foster, and three for Kindersley. However, she says that for Kindersley, Gill was always jolly, full of anecdotes, lovable. 'David always said, if he could have loved a man, it would have been Gill.'

By the end of his life the rebel was slowly allowing himself to be reeled into the Establishment. He designed banknotes and stamps. He was elected an Honorary Associate of the Institute of British Architects in 1935, became an associate of the Royal Academy, and was awarded



59 What Gill called Beatrice Warde's 'fine American carcass', in the service of art.

¹¹ MacCarthy, op. cit.

the Royal Society of Arts insignia of Royal Designer for Industry. This was Gill the arch anti-monarchist and anti-industrialist.

But it is unfair to criticize Gill for undertaking work that ran counter to previously stated beliefs; finances were always a problem for him, and he had several people to support by his work. Sometimes, like everyone else, he just needed the money. On starting his independent career, and in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, David Kindersley was offered a commission for a memorial for those killed in the Alcázar in Toledo.¹² The work would be used to raise funds for General Franco's rebels. Despite his Catholicism, Gill, like so many artists and writers, was fervently on the side of the Republicans, as was Kindersley: 'As I remember I wrote at some length to Mr Gill asking whether I should accept the commission, and how I felt and what my conscience would have to bear, until my dying day, if I undertook the job. Mr Gill's reply came by return on a postcard. "Plenty biz. no do! No biz. DO!"'¹³

Eric Gill died in 1940 following an operation for lung cancer. What are we to make of him and his work in the light of subsequent revelations about his life? Not long after the publication of Fiona MacCarthy's biography, a letter appeared in a Sunday newspaper calling for the removal of the Stations of the Cross from Westminster Cathedral. To have in a holy place the work of a man who had committed such acts as Gill had, argued the writer, was a profanity. It's interesting to consider that if Gill were alive today, and such details of his life were made public, we would be seeing him on the evening news, a coat thrown over his head, being bundled into a white security van, photographers holding up their cameras to the windows as it drove away.

But whatever we think of Gill the man, in the end his output must stand apart from its creator. He produced many beautiful works of art, and one of the best-ever typefaces, and these are his gifts to the world. It was to the world's benefit that the energies of such a personality as Eric Gill's were channelled into art. Perhaps we should be thankful he didn't go into politics. If only Hitler had succeeded as an artist ...

¹² The Alcázar fortress was besieged by Republican forces in 1936. The siege and the subsequent relief were great emotive symbols and propaganda tools for the Nationalists, led by Franco.

¹³ Kindersley, *op. cit.*