

Nature Vs Naturalist: Paths Diverging and Converging in Edmund Gosse's

Father and Son

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Abstract

I examine the impulses which drove Edmund Gosse to follow the formal biography of his father with *Father and Son*. Before looking for 'gay sensibility' in the text, I consider how scientific discourse in the late 19th century opened an understanding of homosexuality to Gosse, and consider how *Father and Son* preceded societal acceptance of Freudian analysis. Gosse's father was a naturalist, and I consider how Gosse eroticized childhood memory as 'natural' and 'intuitive'. I chart his attraction to a sub-culture of literature which expresses 'manly love', and track his expansion from the boyhood appreciation of *Hero and Leander*, which expelled him from the family home, to his devotional approaches to Whitman, the poet replacing the father as an eroticized father figure. Symonds presented himself as another older man, with explicit teachings about 'Greek love'. Gosse then became the older figure to Andre Gide, ultimately disturbed by the younger man's sexual explicitness. Ending this substitute father theme, I document how Gosse's 'true love' the sculptor Thornycroft removed himself to a 'father figure' role. The writing of *Father and Son* delivered child Edmund as the innocent companion the adult Edmund needed, and freed him from a disappointed paternal narrative.

Key words: Gosse; Gide; homosexuality; Victorian

Introduction: *Father and Son* as a writer's act of self-definition

Edmund Gosse did full duty by his father, the eminent naturalist Philip Henry Gosse. Within two years of the father dying in 1888, the son's biography *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse F.R.S.* was published.

Edmund was a literary man. Beyond the usual legacy issues of collecting and collating the story of a parent, one can presume some satisfaction when a man who lives by books renders his father as a book. It turns the tide of begetting, for the son becomes the author of his father's life.

And yet Edmund remained dissatisfied. This is perhaps a factor in any true writer's experience: you continue to write because something in you remains unexpressed.

Edmund returned to the story of his father, but this time he entered the narrative. *Father and Son* created a new form; that of a memoir in which writers seek self-definition by contrasting their own life with their father's. Freed from patriarchal commentary, qualities within the writer that the father might have dismissed as frail and unworthy are re-evaluated for their strength and uniqueness.

This essay considers Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* as a pioneering act of writer's self-definition.

Victorian advances behind Gosse's understanding of homosexuality as a 'natural' force.

Edmund Gosse was born in 1849, and the main account of *Father and Son* takes him to the age of sixteen. The man who reflected on his own childhood some forty years later could draw on decades of advance in societal understanding. Adam Parkes notes how 'it was at the end of the nineteenth century that homosexuality, and the entire concept of sexuality as the index of one's being, was first defined in scientific terms' (Parkes 13). For Foucault:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went

into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality... It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. (Foucault 43)

Sexual Inversion, co-authored with Havelock Ellis by Gosse's good friend John Addington Symonds, was published in English in 1897 and objectified homosexuality in a manner to be picked up by Freud. Gosse's writing of *Father and Son* predates the active current of Freudian thought which 'allowed educated men and women to speak in public about subjects that, a generation earlier, had been reserved for Latin treatises and bedroom whispers' (Kendrick, 189). With a century of practice under our belts we have all become amateur adepts at Freudian analysis. As Siegmunt Praver notes, 'Freud's intense scrutiny of the psychological patterns of family relationships gives modern readers greater insight into typical aspects of Gosse's loving struggle with his father than would have been possible to the author's contemporaries—or indeed to the author himself' (Praver 89). Symonds' biographer Phyllis Grosskurth reflected on how such an 'author himself' might have considered 'Freud's theory that homosexuality was the expression of an infantile fixation, a neurosis frequently caused by an early trauma,' and concluded that 'he would have found it hard to accept that his own propensity was not innate' (Symonds 21-22).

'Innate' implies 'natural'. The Edmund who is presented in *Father and Son* is a natural being. The book recounts his resistance to his naturalist father's intent to label and collect him. He did not need new vocabulary of labelling such as Havelock Ellis's 'invert' or 'homosexual'. His was a subjective rather than an objective experience, its naturalness related in images of nature and adherence to the guidance of 'instinct'.

As a child Gosse conceived of a secret magic through which he countered his religious training, envisaging for example a second self which could float from his body and look down at it from the ceiling. As a part of this 'practical magic' he decided that he 'should hurt' himself. 'I began, in extreme secrecy, to run pins into my flesh,' he recalled, 'and bang my joints with books' (Gosse 26).

From a psychoanalytical perspective of this later age it is simple to recognize the boy's self-abuse stemming from an internalized self-hatred, the boy freeing his true self to look

down from the ceiling even while his physical self is anchored to the pew. The book then takes as its objective the replacement of self-hatred with love, in this case the love of an adult male (Gosse looking back on his childhood from his mid 50s) replacing the lack of self-worth given him as an inheritance by a previous adult male, his father. He writes his younger self into being as a companion for himself.

For one summer in his childhood Gosse lived with another family. That period became 'a blaze of sunshine' in his memory, but he recalled that 'of the glorious life among wild boys on the margin of the sea I have nothing but vague and broken memories, delicious and illusive' (Gosse 130). In her incisive study of the nuances in *Father and Son*, Harley notes Gosse's 'fascination with masculinities distinct from the paternal, authoritative one displayed in his father' (Harley 16) and notes how his 'glorying in the boys by the sea prefigures his glorying in Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, which contains its own homoerotic and pagan account of a man in the sea' (Harley 19).

In the story of Gosse's journey of self-recognition of a gay sensibility¹ through reading, the pages of Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* gave him his first exultant steps. He was already touching sixteen, though the naivety he exhibited suggests someone far younger. From the hindsight of middle-age, Gosse himself remarked on his 'almost infantile innocence,' and of course this would be so. Where were his role models? It is bewildering for the young to discover their gay sensibility inside a culture of denial. The child with strong heterosexual instincts will receive constant affirmation that their development is approved. The child of a gay sensibility will likely find his or her enthusiasms snuffed, for the adult parent views the gay child from a sexualized perspective that child has yet to acquire. Survival means not expressing feelings that bring disapproval.

¹ My use of the term 'gay sensibility' is akin to Robinson's sense of Mark Doty and Cavafy: '(Doty) is recognizing in Cavafy a specifically gay sensibility which eroticizes memory and with which he himself can identify' (Robinson 270).

A twenty-first century boy has a hard enough job when coming out to his father, but the societal model for such action is at least in place. For the young Edmund Gosse, trembling in the beauty of poetry as he walks the Devon coastline in the 1860s, no coming out was possible because no gay identity existed. His culture lacked both the concept and vocabulary that might give any understanding of a queer mindset. The young Edmund's job was made profoundly harder by the nature of his father. Philip Henry Gosse was a leading naturalist who managed to stand alone against a tide of scientific opinion that found increasing credibility in Darwin's new evolutionary theory. For the father, where science and his Christian fundamentalist outlook did not cohere, fundamentalism held sway.

The loneliness that comes with a gay sensibility and its concomitant separation from the societal norm can prompt discovery of a subculture through reading. Literature evokes the truth of feeling which resonates with readers and transcends its age. As Symonds observed of himself in one example:

I took 'Venus and Adonis' in the way Shakespeare undoubtedly meant it to be taken. And doing so, it stimulated while it etherealized my inborn craving after persons of my own sex... Boys of more normal sexuality might have preferred the 'Rape of Lucrece' to 'Venus and Adonis' (Symonds 63).

Young Gosse had long coveted a book from the window display of a bookstore in town, and at last saved up enough pennies to buy it. This single volume combined the poetry of Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe. Jonson meant nothing to him, but when he turned to *Hero and Leander* he 'was lifted to a heaven of passion and music. It was a marvellous revelation of romantic beauty' (Gosse 166).

Gosse wrote his tale of reading *Hero and Leander* for two readerships. For one, (as will later be noted in an early letter from Symonds' to Gosse) the very mention of *Hero and Leander* brought a coded understanding. The other readership could simply be led to believe that young Gosse was carried away by this grand encounter with romantic versifying.

Gosse's stepmother snatched the book from him in shock at what she was hearing. His father strode into the son's bedroom that night and denounced his son 'in unmeasured terms, for bringing into the house, for possessing at all or reading, so abominable a book.'

He had read it, and burned it. 'You will soon be leaving us,' he told his son, 'and going up to lodgings in London, and if your landlady should come into your room, and find such a book lying about, she would immediately set you down as a profligate' (Gosse 167).

Gosse and Whitman: the eroticized father

Father and Son ends where Edmund has left home and taken up a job in the British Museum Library. From the Library, aged 23, he wrote a letter for a friend to carry to Walt Whitman. In it he sought permission to send Whitman a copy of his new book of verse, *On Viol and Flute*:

I should hardly have liked to trouble you with it, and yet there is no one living by whom I am more desirous to be known than by you. The "Leaves of Grass" have become a part of my every-day thought and experience. I have considered myself as "the new person drawn toward" you; I have taken your warning, I have weighed all the doubts and the dangers, and the result is that I draw only closer and closer to you. (EGP, 12/12/1873)

Gosse's quotation of 'the new person drawn toward,' and the warning he has taken, shows his focus on the 'Calamus' poems included by Whitman in the 1860 edition:

Are you the new person drawn toward me and asking something significant from me?
 To begin with, take warning -- I am probably far different from what you suppose;
 Do you suppose you will find in me your ideal?
 Do you think it is easy to have me become your lover? ...
 Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground toward a real heroic man?
 (Whitman 358)

In her biography of Gosse, Ann Thwaite offers snippets of this letter to Whitman, commenting only that 'he did not seem to realize how controversial his admiration was' (Thwaite 137). I give the letter at fuller length here, for the fervour of the response to *Leaves of Grass* shows the agony from which Gosse was emerging. The sheer lyricism of his letter portrays his freedom in expressing what was previously felt but not understood:

As I write this I consider how little it can matter to you in America, how you are regarded by a young man in England of whom you have never heard. And yet I cannot believe that you, the poet of comrades, will refuse the sympathy I lay at your feet. In any case I can but thank you for all that I have learned from you, all the beauty you have taught me to see in the common life of healthy men and women, and all the pleasure there is in the mere humanity of other people. The sense of all this was in me, but it was you and you alone, who really gave it power to express itself. Often when I have been alone in the company of one or other of my dearest

friends in the very deliciousness of nearness and sympathy, it has seemed to me that you were somewhere invisibly with us.

Accept the homage and love, and forgive the importunity of your sincere disciple.

It was Whitman who termed himself 'the poet of comrades' (Whitman 348). The poem goes on to make clear what is implied should Whitman accept Gosse as his 'new friend':

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss, or the new husband's kiss,
For I am the new husband, and I am the comrade. (Whitman 346)

This is not carnal behaviour, but it is a fair expression of what I term a gay sensibility in strong arousal. D.H.Lawrence offers some guidance towards the import of Whitman's

Calamus poems from the generation succeeding Gosse's:

I find in his Calamus & Comrades one of the clues to a real solution – the new adjustment. I believe in what he calls 'manly love', the real implicit reliance of one man on another; as sacred a union as marriage: only it must be deeper, more ultimate than emotion and personality, cool separateness and yet the ultimate reliance. For the rest of morality, je m'en fiche. One should keep one's own soul proud and integral, that's all. (Thornycroft 61-62)

Whitman was writing from 'this delicious Ninth Month, in my forty-first year ... for all who are, or have been, young men' (Whitman, 342). He was an elder, positing himself as a father figure. Edmund had just accepted, as seen at the close of *Father and Son*, that his father had no counsel worth his receiving. With the epilogue's last gasp we hear how the father is deemed 'defiant' of 'the intelligence of a thoughtful and honest young man with the normal impulses of his twenty-one years.' And so the young man threw off 'the yoke of his 'dedication' and ... took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself' (Gosse 186). Gosse does not determine to live as he pleases; the book's big assertion is that he will honour 'honest impulses' to shape an 'inner life', something peculiarly distinct from his public one. It is hard to do such a thing for oneself. In dropping the shaping counsel of his father, Edmund found something of a substitute in Whitman.

Gosse and Symonds: The father-figure with the facts of life

Just two years later an older poet made the first approach to Gosse. John Addington Symonds wrote in appreciation of Gosse's essay on Herrick, but in his second letter of January 4th 1876 he had already moved forward to offering observations on Gosse's 'King Erik': 'I note throughout this poem what I always feel as characteristic of your work, a strong & tender sympathy with the beauty of youth in men as well as women' (EGP 4/1/1876).

Gosse wrote back and spoke of friendship. Symonds flashed back with two privately printed poems which explicitly touched on 'Greek love'. They came with a caveat: 'Of course this Greek love is different in quality from what can be expected to flourish in the modern world, & to attempt to replant it would be anachronistic. Yet I do not see, having the root of Calamus within our souls why we should not make the Hellenic passion of friendship a motive in art.'

Gosse's response was terse. The vocabulary in Whitman's 'Calamus' was suggestive: 'Or, if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing, / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart, or rest upon your hip, / Carry me when you go forth over land and sea' (Whitman, 347), but Whitman did not presume more of a manly comrade than a touch, a kiss, a holding of hands. Symonds was leading him further. Symonds backtracked, assuring Gosse that his poems had 'no didactically ethical intention':

The two poems I sent are distinctly archaeological. The (Greek love) which they attempt to set forth, finds no place in modern life and never has found one. It is a special Greek compound of chivalrous enthusiasm & perverted sexual passion – the second of its two factors finding ample realization in renaissance literature (chiefly Italian, but see also Marlowe's Hero & Leander), while the former and more spiritual has been absorbed by the romance ideal of love... (EGP, 20/1/1876)

Symonds was not being disingenuous here. He did separate his reading from his life and his own homosexual relationships were apparently shy of penetrative acts. In reflecting on Andre Gide, Didier Eribon looks back from an account of Andre Gide to reflect on Symonds' sexual life:

We know, thanks to the stories Gide himself tells in *If It Die...* (just as we know thanks to Symonds memoirs) to what extent the apologetic drive to desexualize homosexuality in order to make it more acceptable, the drive which finds expression in *Corydon*, participates in a project of mystification, even self-mystification. (Eribon 226)

Gosse and Gide: The Son Becomes a Father-figure

Gosse reached out to Whitman and Symonds reached out to Gosse. At sixty years of age Gosse in turn shipped a letter to a writer thirty years younger than himself. 'I wonder if you ever saw a book of mine, called "Father and Son?"' he asked Andre Gide in 1909. 'If not, will you let me have the pleasure of sending it to you? When you read it, you will see why I particularly desire that you should read it' (Brugmans 45).

Gosse offered his book in response to the 'real emotion' he experienced on reading Gide's *Strait is the Gate (La Porte Étroite)*. Passages brought him 'real agitation and despair.' 'I do not know how long it is since I have read a book which so profoundly moved me,' he confessed. Perhaps it was 1873 when he was so inspired by *Leaves of Grass*. For Gosse, his own works and Gide's were directly related.

After sending *Father and Son* he held himself back for six months and then chased Gide down. 'I never heard that you read it. I should be disappointed to think that you could never find time to do so, for I put the whole passion of my mind into it, and I should like to think that you, for whom I have so great a sympathy, had some sympathy for me' (Brugmans 54).

Gosse praised Gide for a 'searching analysis of Calvinistic pietism' and indeed their books share an exploration of extreme Puritanism. Gosse's sense of *Strait is the Gate* as a parallel to *Father and Son* becomes peculiar, though, given the focus on the father and son relationship explicit in Gosse's title. Gide absents such a relationship entirely from his novel, its narrator confirming from the outset that the story begins in the year of his father's death.

In that opening letter about *Strait is the Gate* Gosse declared: 'For many years past, dear Monsieur Gide, - I have felt that between you and me there exist some very close spiritual and intellectual ties'. Gide would come to tell Gosse that *Father and Son* 'was a book that I have lived with and felt was written *for me*, one with the power to stir up the most intrusive echoes' (Brugmans 187).

That phase 'most intrusive echoes' suggests something dangerous, returning from a distance, emanating from something resonant. The writers were finding hidden messages in

each other's work. A brief summary of *Strait is the Gate* below shows how 'intellectual' can mean the 'beautiful tenacity of a tender faithful mind,' to be seen as a positive alternative to physical love, and 'spiritual' can merge with 'religious' as an enemy of creative expression.

Strait is the Gate involves a forlorn love triangle. Jerome is loved by young Juliette but he sees her more as a friend. He gives his love to her quiet older sister Alissa. The sisters' mother Lucile runs off with her lover, and it is when finding Juliette in anguish about her mother's affair that Jerome truly commits to her. Jerome has already responded violently to Lucile when her tickling of him went too far: 'I dipped my handkerchief into a little tank, put it to my forehead—washed, scrubbed—my cheeks, my neck, every part of me the woman had touched' (*Strait* 1948), such was his aversion to female physicality. When Juliette marries, out of convenience rather than love, she frees Jerome to be with her sister. Instead Jerome roams the world and writes letters. When the couple meet, they seem ever more estranged. Alissa notes how he can talk about their relationship to others but not to her which 'made me think—long before you suspected it—that your love was above all intellectual, the beautiful tenacity of a tender faithful mind' (*Strait* 91). 'You are in love with a phantom,' Alissa tells him, 'With a creature of your imagination' (*Strait* 108). The model of marriage offered by Juliette discomforts her, 'perhaps from feeling that such happiness is so practical, so easily obtained, so perfectly "to measure" that it seems to cramp the soul and stifle it ...' (*Strait* 123).

Jerome starts to view Alissa in a harsher light. She turned to religious tracts:

This frightful obliteration of all poetry, which had chilled my very heart, was nothing, after all, but a return to the natural course of things; if by slow degrees I had exalted her, if out of her I had made myself an idol, and adorned it with all that I was enamoured of, what now remained to me as a result of my labours but my fatigue? As soon as she was left to herself, Alissa had relapsed to her own level—a mediocre level, on which I found myself too, but on which I no longer desired her. (*Strait* 110)

Alissa's sexual passion, frustrated by Jerome's inability to earth his own love in his body, redirects itself as love of the divine. She recognizes her love is unendurable for

Jerome and so sacrifices herself on the altar of that love: 'If it is Thy Will, Lord,' she declares, 'that to save him from me I must offer my own perdition, then so be it' (*Strait* 133).

Her death is a lonely transfiguration in a convent in Rome. Jerome stays single and visits Juliette ten years on. She has sacrificed her music and reading to attune with her husband's stiffness, but her love for Jerome has not dimmed. She weeps into her hands.

It is a heartbreaking take on love that cannot be. Jerome had 'but a single sign to make' (*Strait* 127) for Alissa to be with him but he could not make it. His love for this woman was intense and fed upon itself; it did not want a physical outlet. Marriage would have meant a sinking to mediocrity, a loss of poetry, a diminishment. The heterosexual norm was a phantom, and by playing out that sublime romance Jerome was caught in a mental game which could find no physical expression.

Gide's autobiographical *Si le Grain ne Meurt (As it Dies)* was issued privately in 1926. Gosse wrote to demand a copy 'at once: if you do not, I shall know that you have no confidence in my discretion or my indulgence' (Brugmans 184).

Gide obliged, and Gosse duly learned how the plot of *Strait is the Gate* fed directly from Gide's own life. The difference lay in the details. Gide's real-life cousin Emmanuelle was the fictional Juliette and their budding relationship stemmed from soon after the death of Gide's father.

While Gide was following the narrative line of Jerome's travels, he was also enjoying his first homosexual experiences in Algiers. The love of his life at that point was Mohammed, a young musician procured for him by Oscar Wilde. He was able subsequently to make love to women, as practised in the brothels of Algiers, but only by imagining them as Mohammed. The manner of Juliette's death he borrowed from the unattended death in a convent of his mother's companion. In true life he asked his cousin Emmanuelle to marry him, and she accepted. He would later admit responsibility for his wife's unhappiness and confess the marriage was a mistake.

Gosse loved Part One of the book. The 'Deuxième Partie' caused him 'immense difficulty', however. The facts did not surprise him. Alert to coding and what was implicit in the text he had guessed at Gide's sexual tastes on reading *l'Immoraliste*. But now Gide had gone so much further. 'Was it wise?' he asked.

'Was it necessary? Is it useful? I am incapable of answering these questions, which leaves me in a very painful perplexity.

'Heaven forbid that I should be such a prig as to put my instinct in the matter before yours. You have acted not without reflection, certainly not without a marvellous courage. You possess so unusual a genius that perhaps it may claim to be a law to itself. But *why* have you done it, and what advantages to anyone can accrue from it? (Brugmans 189)

Gosse was writing near the end of his life. His instinct was not to speak of homosexuality. He saw frank expression in this area as unwise and brought no obvious advantages. He asked his questions 'in deep sympathy and in an earnest wish to comprehend your position.'

Why did he write it? Because he *had* to, Gide responded. He expected none but painful consequences, and explained to his friend:

I had the feeling that I could not have died in peace if I had kept all this locked up in me. My dear friend, I abominate falsehood. I can't endure having a share in the customary camouflage that deliberately belies the writing of X, Y, and many another. I wrote this book to "create a precedent," to set an example of candor; to enlighten some persons, hearten others, and compel public opinion to reckon with something of which it is oblivious or pretends to be, to the immense impairment of psychology, morality, art—and society. I wrote this book because I would rather be hated than loved for what I am not. (Brugmans 191)

Ironically, Gosse came to be somewhat despised for the very reticence that Gide thought might see him falsely loved. In her own coded way, Virginia Woolf worked to 'out' Gosse in her review of his biography. For ammunition she used that letter to Gide and another to Robbie Ross the friend of Oscar Wilde. She spoke of his 'youthful affections for Thornycroft' (Woolf 85). 'A most original and entertaining book,' she says of *Father and Son*, 'but how little and light, how dapper and superficial Gosse's portraits appear if we compare them with the portraits left by Boswell himself! Fear seems always to dog his footsteps ... But we know all that can be known by someone who is always a little afraid to be found out' (Woolf 84).

It is a summary set to diminish Gosse, and its attacks took root as shown by the understanding which Hermione Lee draws from the more recent Thwaite biography: 'Gosse disapproved of Wilde, and backed off from his friend Robbie Ross during the Wilde scandal' (Lee 113). Labelling this the 'Wilde scandal' lays the focus on the societal impact rather than the brutal harriving of a writer previously loved by society, imprisoned and shunted from his country for his homosexuality. Gosse had a strong marriage to a wife who appreciated something of his passion for men, but given the example of what happened to Oscar Wilde's wife and children you can see why she might want to batten the hatches at such a point. Her husband's 'proclivities' made them vulnerable. While modelling his public life in one way, Gosse remained true to his 'inner' life in private correspondence and support for an intimate circle of literary friends. Ross faced legal harassment over his sexuality up till his death and letters show Gosse's continuing support. On Ross's death his sister Mary Jones wrote to Gosse, 'May I say ... how grateful I have always been to you for your devoted & loyal friendship to Robbie all through the dark hours. Your support and friendship made all the difference to him I know, in his own feelings in the eyes of the censorious portions of society' (EGP, 13/8/1918). Reflecting on the custom of his father's Plymouth Brethren to term each other 'saints', Gosse was perhaps amused when Ross wrote to him to call him to the bedside of the wounded Siegfried Sassoon: 'I know he would like to see you as like all of us he has a special devotion to you as popish people of (a) rare particular saint' (EGP 22/4/1917). This is the devotion he once offered to Whitman, now offered by the young to himself.

Gosse and Thornycroft: Neither Father nor Lover

Lee observes of Thwaite in her Gosse biography: 'In her desire to be fair and balanced she makes the childhood less traumatic and plays down Gosse's homosexuality' (Lee 114). Thwaite does strike a note of weary stridency when she remarks of the reputation surrounding her subject: 'It seems to me that the confession of strong feelings at one period

for one person of the same sex does not qualify him as a 'secret homosexual', as he has been called in recent years' (Thwaite 534). The 'one person of the same sex' was Hamo Thornycroft, the uncle of Siegfried Sassoon who was a noted sculptor of Greek-influenced statuary. Lytton Strachey's quip about the pair is often quoted: Gosse for him was not homosexual but he was 'Hamosexual'.

While Thornycroft spent eighty hours a week working in his studio, his daughter Rosalind Thornycroft recalled in her memoir how 'Gosse was his cheerful companion and could always make him laugh' (Thornycroft 14). *Father and Son* tells how young Edmund had been roused to pagan heights by a book containing plates of Greek sculpture. The images attracted Gosse 'violently' and so he asked his father about the 'old Greek Gods'. These 'so-called Gods of the Greeks,' the father responded, his face 'blazing white with Puritan fury':

were the shadows cast by the vices of the heathen and reflected their infamous lives; "it was for such things as these that God poured down brimstone and fire on the Cities of the Plain, and there is nothing in the legends of these gods, or rather devils, that it is not better for a Christian not to know." (Gosse 146)

Gosse bowed before the advice but turned back to his book of statues even so, and felt them 'too beautiful to be wicked as my Father thought they were. The dangerous and pagan notion that beauty palliates evil budded in my mind, without any external suggestion.' As Alexis Harley points out, 'The "Cities of the Plain" to which the father refers are Sodom and Gomorrah... Philip Henry Gosse's transferral of the "vices of the heathen" from Sodom to Mount Olympus condemns the Greek gods, not for being rivals to his own god, but for their homoeroticism' (Harley 20). This inner studio of Thornycroft's, 'warm and comfortable,' must have been beguiling. Thornycroft worked with his nudes here, artists' models arriving from Italy, a favourite being 'Orazio Cervi, a man much esteemed for his perfect proportions and his gentle character' (Thornycroft 12) who walked to London each year from his farm in the Abruzzi.

From their holidays together, one particular boat-trip held days which Gosse would recall as the happiest of his life. Thornycroft wrote in his journal how, 'We reached Goring

and there stayed a day or two, much to our delight, and had many happy bathes and sports afterwards in the sunshine in a state of nudity, in the meadows by the river, times long to be remembered' (Thornycroft 14).

That was in 1879 and the memory did indeed hold for him. From 1903 he looked out over the Coquet River in Northumberland and wrote to tell Gosse how it 'reminds me of our old days ... & our famous walk' (EGP 20/12/1903).

For Gosse, that walk was elemental. From it he wrote to his wife Nellie, casting a riverside moment in the light of Whitman's poem. 'Calamus' was a reed, but with a story bound to a mythic 'Greek love'. The lover in this myth was Kalamos, the son of the river god Maeander. His loved one was Karpos, the son of the west wind and of spring. Racing across the river of Meander (the home, tellingly, of Kalamos's father) Karpos drowned. In his grief, Kalamos let himself drown too. He was transformed into a reed, which lets out his sighs of loss as it rustles in the wind.

'We are lying now in a delicious quiet creek full of scented rush – the calamus' (Thwaite 186), Gosse told Nellie, and for Thornycroft, he wrote some verse:

Already that flushed moment grows
 So dark, so distant; through the ranks
 Of scented reed the river flows
 Still murmuring to its river banks
 But we can never hope to share
 Again that rapture fond and rare,
 Unless you run immortal there ...
 Some for tomorrow rashly pray,
 And some desire to hold today
 But I am sick for yesterday ... (Thwaite 187)

Was that too frank to send to a man? Perhaps it was. Gosse sought to ease any worries Thornycroft might have on that score with an accompanying letter. 'You will be able to read between the lines,' he counselled, 'to understand how the regret of such a beautiful time being over got translated into this exaggerated key' (Thwaite 186).

Thwaite notes how, 'several years later,' Gosse 'referred to the creek at Goring: he was "so much haunted all the time ... with a memory of that sedgey creek at the back of Goring, with the silence and the sunshine, and that mood of unbelief, the Pilgrim at the very gates of

Happiness, turning back with tears to renounce Hope for ever.” Can we help seeing that as a moment of significant denial?’ (Thwaite 187).

Indeed, but whose was the denial? Gosse’s, Thornycroft’s, or society’s? Gosse experienced a love that for a few sun-filled moments found a private place in which it could express itself. Within a society that would allow it no expression, that was perhaps a miracle. ‘Above all things I put the fact that *You* have come up out of the rank of a common friend into the first place of all, as something better than a brother,’ Gosse wrote to Thornycroft on New Year’s Eve 1879. ‘You are the inestimable treasure for which I was waiting nearly thirty years, and which, God knows, I long ago thought would never come at all ... I do not think there is any peak or alp of the sculptor’s art that you may not reach ...’ (Thwaite 184).

Already Gosse accepted that Thornycroft could not reciprocate beyond the scope of those few summer days. Had Thornycroft been a rebel – had he been stirred by a passion the equal of Gosse’s – then the world might have been turned on its head. But Thornycroft was a sculptor. He admired perfect physical form and turned it into stone.

Thornycroft's letters to Gosse are mostly about his own work and reputation. One gentler note comes in, containing some leaves from the violets planted on Keats’ grave on a visit to Rome, but a more telling letter comes on Thornycroft’s return to London on May 9 1921. The newspapers are filled with reports of the divorce case of his daughter Rosalind. ‘One sees now that she ought to have divorced him for his wild animalism,’ he tells Gosse, ‘but he kept praying her to be forgiven & still continuing his horrid ways; and without desertion she could not get rid of him, such is the law.’ He reflects on his name, that of an Academician no less, appearing ‘in such large type in the papers! ... & though I laugh at it I feel that I should like to hit somebody & more especially that big black animal who has spoilt the life of my dear beautiful child.’

The ‘big black animal’ was Godwin Bayne. Rosalind Thornycroft (said to be D.H. Lawrence’s model for the physical appearance of Lady Chatterley) wrote of him:

Godwin ... was a subscriber to the neo-pagan philosophy of which Rupert Brooke was the chief exponent. They scorned the conventions and everything philistine. They camped out, they climbed mountains, they skied, they bathed in the nude.

They believed in equality and comradeship between the sexes, though did not, it seems, indulge much in physical sex. The open road, youth, and every minute of life lived to the full – these were the things extolled by the neo-pagans.
(Thornycroft 35)

Her father realized 'Godwin was not, like himself, the sort of practical man who enjoyed nature and objects in a realistic country way. He found Godwin rather incomprehensible' (Thornycroft 29). As to whether Godwin's animalism included homosexuality, Godwin's father wrote of him, 'Of course the answer is that Rosalind knew all about Godwin's free and easy ways with both sexes long before she married him' (Thornycroft 61).

Thornycroft is revolted in his son-in-law by the very behaviour which Edmund Gosse took as his ideal. Such revulsion can find its extremes from fear of what lies in oneself, which for Thornycroft had glimmered for a while on those riverside days with Gosse. When Gosse did meet with Whitman, he was impressed at the old man's musings over 'lovely days when he was young, and about with 'the boys' in the sun.' He saw Whitman championing 'bare human nature, stripped not merely of all its trappings, but even of those garments which are universally held necessary to keep the cold away' (Thwaite 258). In short, Thornycroft had become a father-figure, set against the neo-paganism that stirred in Gosse's youth.

Throughout 1906 Gosse had been in correspondence with George Moore about the writing of *Father and Son*. He kept it quiet from his friend Thornycroft, however. In January 1908 Thornycroft wrote to Gosse:

We read nightly, over the fire that delightful book "Father & Son", &, like children with a diminishing bag of sweets regret to see the pages in the right hand getting so thin & few. Admirable and delightful work it is! – How dark you kept it! But Santa Claus put it on our Xmas Tree.
I hope that it is (a) success financially. (EGP 13/1/1908)

It is a kind and friendly note (and the wishes for financial success suggest such a need in Gosse, which his following the model of Symonds' sexually candid yet unpublishable *Memoirs* would not have met). It shows his book, however, being consumed by nothing like a lover, every element of it affirming the family setting of the reading. The lover who Gosse sensed on those few riverside days gave some deeply personal resonance to such lines from 'Calamus': 'Is there even one other like me -- distracted -- his friend, his lover, lost to

him? / Is he too as I am now? Does he still rise in the morning, dejected, thinking who is lost to him? and at night, awaking, think who is lost?' (Whitman 347).

Gosse and his father: Repression of an 'inner life' of great force?

In 1883 Gosse wrote to Thornycroft of a summer trip to see his father. 'The latter is very sweet and gentle, wonderfully mellowed at last by the softening hand of age; and I have felt an affection for him and a pleasure in his company, this visit, that I am afraid I never really felt before. And so, in the evening there is light' (Thwaite 303).

In life, then, he had achieved some resolution. He did not need to take to the field in *Father and Son* to serve his father a whipping. Other issues stirred in him, however. Here he is writing to Symonds in 1890 and looking back toward 1883:

Years ago I wanted to write to you about all this, and withdrew through cowardice. I have had a very fortunate life, but there has been this obstinate twist in it! I have reached a quieter time – some beginnings of that Sophoclean period when the wild beast dies. He is not dead, but tamer; I understand him and the trick of his claws ... And the curious thing is that it is precisely to this volcanic force, ever on the verge of destructive ebullition, that one owes the most beautiful episodes of existence, exquisite in all respects' (Thwaite 194).

Gosse wrote this letter carefully. He crossed out the word 'happy' to replace it with 'fortunate'. The 'wild beast' of homosexuality (a term also used by Symonds), this 'volcanic force,' grows tamer with age but it is to this force that all that is most beautiful is owed.

Memories of the summer with wild boys by the margin of the sea were 'delicious and illusive'. The volcanic force brings 'exquisite' moments. This is vocabulary that shimmers. Vulgarity shocked Gosse. He was never going to write an explicit book. Gide remarked of him that 'his movements seemed to me prompted perhaps a bit more by his mind than by his heart, or at least by a sort of *self-respect*. Intelligence, which with him always has a weather-eye out, intervenes and checks him on the slope of surrender ... It is perhaps not so much me as himself he distrusts' (*Journals* 148).

The writer George Moore had put down Gosse's formal biography of his father and taken a carriage to visit Gosse, stirred by the potential for a further volume in which Edmund

did not remove himself from his father's narrative. He wrote to Gosse with admiration for the book he had prompted into being. He found *Father and Son* to have 'more than truth in it; the rich and abundant vocabulary of which you are master enables you to tell your story beautifully as well as truthfully, and with beauty and truth the life of a writer is indefinitely prolonged.' He regretted, though, the lack of 'dramatic persuasion.' 'And if it has not gotten this quality it is because yourself willed that it should not have it. That sense of decency, which as a writer you should not have, you could not overcome.' Most specifically he wanted 'the narrative of the struggle you endured in London trying to make your living' which 'would have been, if you had written it, of absorbing interest' (EGP, 15/11/07).

This tallies with Virginia Woolf's criticism that *Father and Son* 'and his portraits suffer from his innate regard for caution' (Woolf 84). However they miss a point. Moore pushed Gosse into writing an Epilogue, a move supported by Gosse's editor at Heinemann. The epilogue gives useful archival material, but the book has greater coherence and resonance without it.

Gosse wrapped up his memoir on the verge of his young self's sexualisation. *Father and Son* was an act of self-recovery, and the self he recovered was his young one. The father required his son to respond to life in one way; the son, drawing support from nature and what he would learn to hold on to as natural feelings, found his own responses. Adult life graced him with what he recognized as ultimate love in some days along a riverbank, but society did not want a sexualized version of his true self. The pre-sexualized one could be presented to the public. In doing so, he could restore to his narrative those pulses in his life that had been rejected as inappropriate by his father.

'Nature, the clouds, the grass, everything takes on new freshness and brightness now I have you to share the world with,' Gosse wrote to Thornycroft in the throes of his passion. 'How your friendship has reawakened me, made me young again' (Thwaite 193).

Thornycroft, once Gosse's 'golden Animal' in letters to Symonds, an animal who would help him banish all terrors (Thwaite 195), was morphing into the father-figure, the enemy of neo-paganism, averse to 'animalism' and set to kill the 'black animal' of his son-in-law.

Gosse needed new companionship if he was to be made young again. He found that companion in the recovery of his own young self.

Conclusion: The Point Where Narratives Diverged

Gosse closed the main part of *Father and Son* with a fairly direct equation of the spiritual and sexual drive. The other schoolboys had left the building and the sixteen-year old Gosse stared through an open window. He roused himself into a state of passion as he anticipated the 'advent of the Lord and the rapture of his saints.' The rapture of this particular young saint was set to be orgasmic. His 'unwholesome excitement, bubbling up in this violent way, reached at last a climax and foamed over' (Gosse 171).

The boy rose from the sofa and leaned by the window looking out across the school grounds. He called on the Lord to come and take him now, to lift him from future temptations and settle him in Paradise. Meanwhile Nature responded:

A wonderful warm light of approaching sunset modelled the shadows and set the broad summits of the trees in a rich glow. There was an absolute silence below and around me, a magic of suspense seemed to keep every topmost twig from waving. Over my soul there swept an immense wave of emotion.

The call did not come, but of course it did. 'A little breeze sprang up, and the branches danced' (Gosse 172). Nature responded where the Lord did not. Gosse shed his faith while Nature in its immensity took him in.

Eribon notes: 'Authenticity is to be found in the decision to assume the burden of being what one is: to be gay not simply as it were *en soi* (which is to say according to the gaze of others, of society), but rather *pour soi* (that is, having assumed the identity for oneself as a project of freedom)' (Eribon 111). Gosse's '*pour soi*', his 'inner life', eludes his father's definition. He sustains a high position in society in the knowledge that society will never think to look where he is hiding himself. The boy who once floated toward the ceiling now floats toward the sky. He is not unnatural after all. Nature and his nature are perfectly aligned.

A father can impose a strong narrative on a son, one which requires the son to follow the father's path. Edmund Gosse finessed that paternal narrative in the formal biography of his father. In *Father and Son* he broke from biographical constraints and devised a literary form which has since become its own genre. The deep purpose of the form is to return the writer to the point when narratives diverged, when the father first noticed the son slip away from the father's expectations, when the father sought to correct the son's life. The son as writer resumes the narrative from that point, to show no correction was ever needed.

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