



EDMUND GOSSE (1849-1928)



Sargent, John Singer. *Portrait of Sir Edmund Gosse*. 1886. Oil on canvas. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Edmund Gosse is now known predominantly for *Father and Son* (1907), a work he originally published anonymously. This biographical reminiscence retraces his relationship with his father, the celebrated naturalist Philip Henry Gosse (1810-1888), a prominent member of the Protestant sect, the Plymouth Brethren. The memoir is underpinned by a fundamental opposition between Gosse's pagan and his father's Puritan sensibilities. He recalls his violent pubescent attraction on first exposure to engravings figuring statues of Apollo,

Venus, Diana, and Jupiter, to which his father responded with condemnatory fury. The moment symbolises a cultural rupture between father and son. Gosse writes: "I did not accept his condemnation of the Greeks, although I bowed to it[. ...] The dangerous and pagan notion that beauty palliates evil budded in my mind[...] and by this reflection alone I was still further sundered from the faith in which I had been trained" (146).

This textual moment of self-analysis highlights the tension between Gosse's upbringing and his inclinations. Educated at St. Marychurch in Devon, and later at Thorn Park, a boarding school in nearby Teignmouth, Gosse was baptised at 10 years of age and became a member of the Brethren.

Nevertheless, he was clearly drawn to a very different world, a world of art, poetry, and aestheticism. The conflict between worthy industry and the Arts is figured in his life and his literary production. In 1866 he became a librarian at the British Museum; in 1875 he began work as a translator at the Board of Trade; from 1884 to 1889 he succeeded Leslie Stephen as Clark Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge; and from 1904 to 1914, he was the librarian at the House of Lords library. Alongside these official appointments he sustained a parallel career as a poet, embracing a literary form that evidently functioned as an outlet for his suppressed paganism. Comparing Gosse's poetry with that of Christina Rossetti, A. C. Benson noted that there could be no greater contrast, "for Miss Rossetti is at heart a *dévôte* and Mr. Gosse a pagan" (308).

Gosse's move to London in 1866 marked a transition between his life in Devon among the Plymouth Brethren and a new social world informed and enriched by the artistic circles in which he began to move. While he first lodged in Tottenham with two members of the faith, he soon became interested in the wider horizons London life could offer. In 1870, he forged a friendship with the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter William Bell Scott, and began to frequent gatherings that included writers, artists, and sculptors such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, William Morris, and Algernon Swinburne. Gosse would become Swinburne's first biographer, and with Thomas J. Wise, edit *Posthumous Poems by Algernon Charles Swinburne* (1917). His friendship with the sculptor Hamo Thornycroft, identified by Jason Edwards as homoerotic, led to an influential four-part series of articles published in the *Art Journal* in 1894 in which Gosse coined the term "New Sculpture" to describe the rejection of neoclassicism in favour of an increasingly dynamic form of sculptural representation ("New Sculpture").

In 1870, Gosse took a trip to Scotland, where he met Robert Louis Stevenson, who was to become a lifelong friend. The following year he visited Norway, where he discovered the work of Henrik Ibsen, with whom he later corresponded. Gosse wrote an influential essay on Ibsen for the *Fortnightly Review* (January 1873), translated a number of Ibsen's works, and (according to Gosse's early biographer, Evan Charteris), introduced Ibsen to British

audiences (38). After Ibsen's death, Gosse wrote the first complete biography of the playwright. Gosse's commitment to Scandinavian literature was reinforced by the 1879 publication of *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe*, a work of literary criticism that was followed over the years by others including *From Shakespeare to Pope* (1885), which had been developed originally as a series of lectures Gosse gave on a tour of the United States, *French Profiles* (1905), and *More Books on the Table* (1923).

In the 1890s Gosse contributed to *The Yellow Book*. He counted both Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley among his friends, together with other contributors to the periodical such as Benson, Henry James, and Arthur Symons. Two poems – “Alere Flamman” (dedicated to Benson) and “A Dream in November,” both later published in his 1894 collection *In Russett and Silver*, appeared in Volume 1 (April 1894). In April 1895, “The Ring of Life” was published in Volume 5. John Lane also utilized *The Yellow Book's* pages to advertise other works by Gosse, including *The Letters of Thomas Lovell Beddoes* (1894).

Gosse was knighted in 1925 and died three years later, on 16 May 1928 at the age of 79. In the preceding years, his health had declined considerably. His sight had been failing and a fall had affected his mobility, but his mental faculties had retained an unexpected agility. To the end of his life he continued to write articles and correspond with friends, including Thomas Hardy, G. K. Chesterton, and Siegfried Sassoon. In his introduction to *Father and Son*, Michael Newton writes “No-one believes a laureate will write a good poem, and Gosse was the laureate of *belles lettres*” (ix). While there may be a grain of truth in Newton's comment, Gosse's work is ripe for rediscovery: its scope, diversity, and historical value urge a reassessment alongside that of many of his contemporaries in whose lives he remains an interesting but often neglected footnote.

Patricia Pulham is Reader in Victorian Literature at the University of Portsmouth. She is author of *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (2008) and co-editor (with Catherine Maxwell) of *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (Broadview Press, 2006), and *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Recent publications include articles on the sculptural body in the works of Thomas Hardy, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Olive Custance in academic journals such as the *Yearbook of English Studies* and the *Victorian Review*.

Selected Publications by Gosse

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Hypolympia, or the Gods on the Island: an Ironic Fantasy. London: William Heinemann, 1901.

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