

BRETHREN OR PHILISTINE?

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When Edmund Gosse wrote *Father and Son* he went out of his way to claim in the preface that he had been ‘punctiliously scrupulous’ about telling the truth in his portrayal of the conflict between his father, Philip Gosse, and himself. Over the years a number of writers have ventured to question the reliability of Edmund Gosse’s account but for some reason their efforts have been ignored by the literary world. Robert Boyd of Fort William, drew attention on more than one occasion to a host of inaccuracies, distortions and inventions in Gosse’s account of his father most notably in 1975 in a very careful and perceptive review of a new edition of *Father and Son*.¹ Less than a year later, a Canadian scholar, Dr Douglas Wertheimer of the University of British Columbia, provided very precise identifications for some twenty-five characters who appear in *Father and Son*.² He refrained from discussing the implications of his discoveries but his account made it even more apparent that Gosse’s book was a singularly unreliable source of factual information. In 1984 Mrs Ann Thwaite’s *Edmund Gosse: a Literary Landscape* was welcomed as a major contribution to our understanding of a somewhat forgotten figure. It was a sensitive and thorough piece of work but the author was probably a little too sympathetic to her subject. Although she made clear that she was well aware of the unreliability of Edmund Gosse’s masterpiece she quoted many of his judgements from *Father and Son* as if his book was basically truthful.³ In fact it can be argued that this eminently readable essay in autobiography is as fanciful as many a work of fiction.

It is not clear how much notice Gosse took of the Irish novelist George Moore who repeatedly pressed him to write *Father and Son* but Moore’s portrayal of the Plymouth Brethren in *Esther Waters* (1894) had been comparatively mild and gentle. Perhaps Gosse felt that his youthful experiences should be able to compete with those of Samuel Butler whose *The Way of all Flesh* had appeared more recently in 1903. Gosse’s book is certainly a very carefully structured account of the writer’s discovery of literature and his loss of faith—a story which in some ways is strikingly reminiscent of St Augustine’s description of his own spiritual development in *The Confessions*. At several points one cannot but feel that Gosse was trying to rewrite the Bishop of Hippo’s account of his conversion in reverse. Where Augustine’s education had been integrally bound up with literature and the theatre, Gosse claims to have been denied these things and to have been brought up in a home where God and the truth (embodied in his father) were the only considerations of importance. Unlike Augustine’s mother who died with the satisfaction of seeing her son embrace

1. J. Hepburn (ed.), *Father and Son*, (Oxford 1975), reviewed by R. Boyd, ‘Father and Son—a new look’, *The Witness* (July 1975), pp. 264-6.

2. D. Wertheimer, ‘The identification of some characters and incidents in Gosse’s “Father and Son”’, *Notes and Queries*, 221 (January 1976), pp. 4-11.

3. See R. Boyd’s review in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 58 (October 1986), pp. 373-5.

the faith, Gosse's mother dies before he abandons the inherited faith of his childhood. Where Augustine in a moment of mystical release 'leaning from a window which overlooked the garden... for one fleeting instant... reached out and touched [the Eternal Wisdom],'⁴ Gosse in what he presents as the crucial moment of his spiritual development lies 'on a sofa, drawn across a large open window' gazing 'down on a labyrinth of gardens'. In the wake of 'an immense wave of emotion' in which he had 'leaned upon the window-sill and waited for the glorious apparition' of Christ Himself, his 'artificial edifice of extravagant faith began to totter and crumble'.⁵ In contrast to Augustine who breaks free from the temptations of the theatre, Gosse discovers the pleasures of reading Shakespeare—a discovery which eventually leads to an irrevocable break with his father who, we are told, 'prided himself on never having read a page of Shakespeare, and on never having entered a theatre but once.'⁶

Now clearly in the portrayal of such a conversion-in-reverse, it was essential for Gosse to emphasise the inherent hostility between the two worlds of which he was writing and to present his father as a latter day Tertullian who might any moment indignantly exclaim 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church?' Given the scenario which he was creating we need hardly be surprised that Gosse's account touches only lightly on reality and that historical truths had to be jettisoned. In fact, as Robert Boyd pointed out twenty-five years ago, Philip Gosse quoted several lines from 'Twelfth Night' and from 'Measure for Measure' in *Omphalos*, his defence of a non-evolutionary cosmology, and indeed in 1868 when Edmund indicated that he wanted to obtain a set of the Shakespeare Library, his father was happy to keep an eye out for one. Less than twenty years earlier in his biography of his father, when Edmund referred to Philip Gosse's distaste for the works of Shakespeare, he had nevertheless mentioned his father's 'passion for poetry' and his earlier enthusiasm for the O'Hara Tales of John Banim and the apocalyptic romances of George Croly 'whose once-famous Salathiel he almost knew by heart.'⁷ Such observations could not be included in *Father and Son*. They would have spoiled the drama.

Nevertheless, the seductive power of fiction, or at least of creative autobiography, has to be recognised. For the best part of a century the myth has persisted that the Plymouth Brethren are *par excellence* the enemies of Arnold's ideal of 'sweetness and light' and whenever writers have wanted to talk about this phenomenon, Gosse's totally unreliable account of his father has been trundled out to serve duty. Two fairly recent examples will suffice. In an otherwise useful volume on *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain* (1986), Elizabeth Jay has a brief section entitled 'Separation from the World or Philistinism'. Over half of it is devoted to quotation *in extenso* from extracts of *Father and Son*.⁸ With the somewhat larger readership of a Booker Prizewinner, Peter Carey acknowledged in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) his debt to Edmund Gosse 'from whose life I have borrowed Plymouth Brethren... and a father who was proud of never having read Shakespeare.'⁹

It is therefore encouraging to discover that a literary scholar has seen fit to

4. R.S. Pine Coffin (ed.), *Saint Augustine's Confessions* (1961), p. 197.

5. E. Gosse, *Father and Son* (1913 [1907]), pp. 286-7

6. *Ibid.*, p.203

7. E. Gosse, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse. FRS.* (1890), pp.350,345.

8. E. Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (1986), pp. 95-8.

9. P. Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), acknowledgements.

question the myth from a different direction. The credentials of Dr W.G McCormack of Goldsmiths College are well established and in his excellent *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (1980), as well as in subsequent works, he has successfully related his literary subjects to the Anglo-Irish world in which they lived. In an American collection of essays, 'The Endless Knot: Literature and Religion in Ireland', he has dared to ask whether the Brethren really do match the philistine stereotype of Father and Son. His paper is entitled 'The "Plymouth" Brethren? Prolegomena to the re-writing of J.M. Synge's Biography"¹⁰ and he begins by mentioning the popular view of the Brethren as philistines to which Gosse's autobiography has given rise. He then goes on to raise a number of useful questions about John Millington Synge and his connections with the Brethren. He discusses Synge's grandfather who was associated with the earliest Brethren,¹¹ and glances at the 'more rigorous' Brethren background of Editha Truell, J.M. Synge's mother. He provides us with valuable information concerning the Brethren home background of Cherrie Matheson whom Synge so much wanted to marry but who repeatedly refused him because of their incompatible religious opinions. Of particular interest to this writer was the discovery that one of Cherrie Matheson's grandmothers was Victorine Jossevel, a French speaking Protestant from Switzerland. In spite of his apparent apostasy Synge was by no means entirely cut off from his Brethren roots. Where Gosse had claimed that literature was an alien element in his own upbringing and that a total rupture had been necessary for him to be able to lead a literary life, in Synge's case there were certainly painful tensions but apparently nothing comparable to the supposed drama described in *Father and Son*. When Synge died in 1909 Yeats was worried because Synge's executor was a Plymouth Brother, namely the dramatist's eldest brother, Robert Anthony Synge, who, it was said, was threatening to expurgate his brother's unpublished works. As this was just two years after the appearance of *Father and Son* one is tempted to ask whether Gosse's philistine stereotype was already taking hold of public perceptions.

Dr McCormack's paper is full of interesting questions and throw away suggestions. In one striking sentence he claims that 'Brethrenism can be accounted as the product of Irish religious life to a degree which no other denomination can rival'.¹² More remarkable, in view of the seriousness with which generations of readers have taken Gosse's autobiographical fiction, are Dr McCormack's expectations for the future:

In due course, a full account of Synge's relations with Matheson will probably show that popular suppositions about the philistinism of the Brethren are ill founded at least in her case and that of her family. That is to say, a fresh biographical approach to the author of *The Playboy of the Western World* will involve a deeper understanding both of the complex religious background out of which he painfully emerged and of the continuing presence of such modes of thinking and feeling and judging in his maturity.

10. W.G. McCormack, 'The "Plymouth" Brethren? Prolegomena to the re-writing of J.M. Synge's Biography', *Religion and Literature* (University of Notre Dame, Indiana) 28 (1996), pp. 83-96.

11. McCormack refers in a footnote to the present writer's 'John Synge and the Early Brethren', in *Christian Brethren Review*, 28 (1976), pp. 39-59, but does not appear to have made use of it.

12. One would not have guessed that this was Dr McCormack's opinion from his recently edited *Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Oxford 1999) in which the only Brethren to be given a mention are the Moravians, and where J.M. Synge (unlike some other writers with a Protestant background) is not even given an article in his own right.

For myself, I fear that Gosse's wonderful book—and it is a wonderful book—will hold sway for many more years.

POSTSCRIPT

Since writing the above, my attention has been drawn to Dr Heather Henderson's *The Victorian Self: Autobiography and Biblical Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). This includes a fascinating chapter, 'Rewriting Revelation: the Autobiographer as Idolater in Gosse's *Father and Son*' which refers to several other writers who have discussed the literary conventions of Gosse's work and of whose work I was also unaware. These include Howard Helsing who at one point in his reading of *Father and Son* observes 'This is the stuff of fiction' (H. Helsing, 'Credence and Credibility: The Concern for Honesty in Victorian Autobiography', in G.P. Landow (ed.) *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography* (Athens, OH, 1979), p.58). Emphasizing the biblical and typological overtones of Gosse's account, Dr Henderson also draws attention, as I have done, to the parallel between the conversion/deconversion of Augustine and Edmund Gosse. However, in spite of her insistence that the structure of Gosse's autobiography is highly artificial and full of literary and theological conceits, she still takes Edmund's account of his father's philistinism at face value.