PART I

Ancestries

CHAPTER 1

Edmund Gosse's Father and Son*, Modernism, and a History of Nerves*

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Why is there so much sickness in Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907)? Virginia Woolf felt literature in general had not taken enough notice of being ill. Given pain's ubiquity, she said in 1930, "it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature."[1] That was an odd comment, for European literature is full of sickness. And Gosse's text is peculiarly addicted to the language of malaise, both physical and mental. How to read that language, however, is not so easy to determine. Ann Thwaite, in her long biographies, *Edmund Gosse: A Literary Landscape 1849–1928* (1984) and *Glimpses of the Wonderful: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (2002), has persuaded many readers of the limits of *Father and Son* as a literal testament, despite Gosse's robust protestations of his accuracy.[2] While recognising the constructed nature of the autobiography, my central concern is not with Edmund Gosse's factuality but with the implications of his descriptive habits and what they reveal about the sometimes mischievous uses to which this text has been put in defining modernism against a construct of "the Victorian." It has been a familiar rhetorical move to describe *Father and Son*, perhaps like Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), as evidence of a clear rupture with the past. This claim has sometimes been supported by the fact that Gosse initially wrote what may look like a traditional "Victorian" biography of his father, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (1890), before turning in *Father and Son* to a more personal and "authentic" account of his family and upbringing, and of the rejection of his father's faith. It is easy to imagine the outlines of the modernist "break" with "the Victorian" can be plotted between these two texts: *Father and Son*, the argument runs, is permitted to say what the earlier biographical volume could not, and both to describe, and to be emblematic of, a rejection of the constraining past in favour of the new.

There are many problems with this argument. Among the most notable is the fact that Gosse was as careful a selector of material about his own life

in *Father and Son* as he was about the lives, beliefs, and habits of others: consider, for instance, the "confidential" statement about Swinburne's drinking and sexual habits locked up in the British Museum for years.[3] But my essay examines the broader issue of how to write history from single cases. I argue, via the suggestiveness of the text's nervousness and fascination with nerves, that *Father and Son* offers itself as *representative* only uncomfortably, nervously, with major qualification. That discomfort is internalised as an explicit part of the book's substance. Fretfully, *Father and Son* invites its readers, against the grain of many critical perceptions, to think harder about how metonymy works in (literary) history. Gosse's narration implies that this one text, and the strange lives narrated there with their peculiar and often pathologised circumstances, can be taken to stand primarily for historical movements, for the shift of epochs, only with considerable cost to intellectual integrity. *Father and Son*, I think, asks its reader to remain undecided: to rest content with living nervously.

Edmund Gosse remarks that his walk to the chapel in the family's first year in Devon was through disgustingly foetid air, and when he arrived at the place of worship he found a congregation "poor, simple, and generally sick" (115).[4] That might be a description – the "generally sick" – of his own condition as a child, so frequently "fragile" (81). The young Gosse, in the early stages of his narrative, is alarmingly frail. He seems also alarmingly tormented. He is "very pale and nervous, and slept badly at nights, with visions and loud screams in my sleep." In a great "ferment of mind," he "runs pins into my flesh" and strikes his "joints with books." This self-torture, a self-abuse that contemporary readers will notice all too readily, culminated in "a sort of fit of hysterics, when I lost all self-control, and sobbed with tears" (61). The "sort of" is unnecessary.

There are other breakdowns. Stolen from his father's congregation by a woman with a serious psychotic condition ("crazed," says Gosse, 130), the child suffers the consequences. His "nerves were shaken," and there is a return of the "distressing visions from which [he] had suffered as a very little child" (132). Confined as a young boy as the principal carer of his terminally sick mother, dying of cancer; suffering in a household from Henry Gosse's constitutional melancholy, which sank into "depression" (106) on the unmitigated failure of his life-defining work, *Omphalos* (1857), it is hardly enough that Gosse observes blandly that "the conditions of our life were unfavourable to our health" (95).[5] He was a "little, nervous child" (135) always attracting comments from family and passers-by that he was not long for this world,[6] even as his birth had nearly been a catastrophe as he "appeared to be dead" (38). The thought of being left

alone if his father were to die, after years of his "too-anxious love," leaves another sorrowful tableau: "I felt like a small and solitary bird, caught and hung out hopelessly and endlessly in a glittering cage" (167). Henry was brought to God when travelling home from Newfoundland in 1832 after hearing that his sister Elizabeth was dangerously ill. But the thought of Henry dying leaves Edmund only in panic. After the nineteenth-century autobiographical accounts of mental sickness – J. S. Mill's breakdown, William Hale White's depression, John Ruskin's failing mind – Gosse's text is a peculiarly frank and seemingly un-self-conscious representation of a life where such things as "a state of depression not to be described" (166) seem to have become, depressingly, a part of the day-to-day.

Father and Son describes an environment crowded with the sick, especially the mentally ill, even if they are not always so named. "If we were suddenly transplanted into the world of only fifty years," Gosse says, "we should be startled and even horror-stricken by the wretchedness to which the step backwards would reintroduce us." It is his own narrative's function to take us back, and wretchedness is indeed a result. Of the suffering body, Gosse writes of a period without anaesthetics, without chloroform's great contribution to the "mitigation of human torment" (75). But the suffering mind, for the most part, is both narrated and unassisted. We watch the death of Emily, Henry's first wife, after "her vain and delusive attempts to obtain alleviation for her anguish" (72). And we also glimpse Henry "depressed and unnerved by anxiety" (71) or, later, "tired out with anxiety and sorrow" (88). These are consistent terms that surround accounts of Henry, as they appear with largely unremarked frequency in *Glimpses of the Wonderful*. We observe the "perverse malady" (112) of Henry's conscience, wound up, in his son's eyes, to an extreme pitch in searching out what sin it was that justified God's punishment of him in the reception of *Omphalos,* a work in which he sought to reconcile Biblical accounts of the Creation with new geological findings of the "datable" age of the earth. We encounter the congregation racked with consumption, but also a village in which there were those "who had more or less unquestionably crossed the barrier which divided the sane from the insane." These "imbeciles" did not include the aptly (re-)named Miss Mary Flaw,[7] who had once a strong mind, but "her wits had left the rails and were careering about the country" (129). She was Edmund's kidnapper. Miss Burmington was "distressingly deformed in the spine" (120), but out in the streets there was madness again: a demented onion seller (loudly denouncing the pope and so winning Henry's support) and a "fat sailor … probably crazed" who spent the entirety of his conscious

life walking up the centre of the street "vociferating with the voice of a bull, Wa-a-atch and pray-hay!|Night and day-hay!" (86). Gosse rarely judges these men and women. His famous caution, for which Woolf so archly, so harshly, criticised him, prevents him from either smiling at the afflicted or drawing conclusions about them in print. He is neither sympathetic nor disgusted. "No doubt," Gosse says quietly, "our peculiar religious community was more likely to attract the feeble members of a population, than to tempt the flush and the fair" (118). And he leaves it at that – any possible judgments neatly suspended, hidden away in that seemingly neutral, unemotional, "No doubt."

Gosse may well be describing, but not naming, a habitation of mental illness. It would be easy to say that Gosse grew up with an obsessive father, whose mental health was fragile and whose sense of the emotional life of others was dreadfully impaired. Many readers have been tempted to draw this conclusion, and it is not hard to see why. When Gosse observes that "both my parents … were devoid of sympathetic imagination" (78), he generously names what may seem to others a more grievous moral failing in their treatment of their son – isolated, pursued with guilt, undernourished intellectually and emotionally. No wonder Edmund put pins in his own flesh. And for the most unsympathetic readers, it is an easy step from this to think that the whole nature of Henry's religion was pathological. Virginia Woolf thought so. Henry suffered from an "almost insane religion mania,"[8] she said, and later critics have repeated her. Jeffrey Meyers's description of the text in 1999 was simply "A Case of Religious Mania."[9] Modern accounts of obsession – Emily Colas, Lennard J. Davis[10] – do not seem so far from Edmund's representation of Henry's absorbed, intently focused sense on his own capacity to know, uniquely, the mind of God, and his desire to cast out all knowledge other than that. But it is hard indeed to write with authority about another's religious faith, and it is especially difficult to decide in *Father and Son* not only because of Edmund's famous unreliability, but because of his careful lack of indication of what, precisely, his own theological position now is. Virginia Woolf criticised Gosse for never entering "the more profound regions"[11] of his subjects' hearts. But Gosse's text, without ever being explicit, invites us, nevertheless, to see a child growing up in a household raddled by physical and mental ill health. It always permits us to conceive of Henry's seemingly obsessive religion as a product of, or at least profoundly shaped by, some form of obsessive disorder. Realising this, some readers may feel they have grasped the key to the growth of Edmund's "neurotic condition" (121).

There is no doubt that *Father and Son* has its own unmissable verbal tics, as if representation is itself obsessed with forms of infirmity. Sickness is everywhere. Edmund thinks of an idea as "demented" (101); he thinks of Henry's attempts to answer the geologists with *Omphalos* as a "system of intellectual therapeutics which could not but heal all the maladies of the age" (105), as if writing about the accuracy of the Bible's account of a six-day Creation could not be conceived outside the terms of ill health. The young Edmund's obsessive imitation of science writing and illustrations, described in Chapter 8, is a "mania" and the product of a "deep depression of spirits" (148). This writing and painting, looked back on from adulthood, is no hobby, fascination, or childhood absorption. It is a symptom. Even Charles Kingsley, waiting outside one day for Henry Gosse to acknowledge him, careers about the garden "nervously" (139) in Gosse's recollection, seemingly prey to some loss of motor control, a nervous convulsion.

From this tragicomedy of ill health, the reader might be tempted to reach more general conclusions about Gosse's beliefs and intentions. Does Gosse's text intend us to think of all extreme forms of Christianity as a kind of mental illness? Surely *Father and Son* does not suggest that *any* form of Christianity is a kind of mental aberration however much some readers are inclined to confuse Henry Gosse's distinctive personal faith, his extraordinary claim to knowledge of the mind of God, with Christianity as a whole? Are we, beyond that, invited to read the narrative as a redemption story that tropes salvation as a breaking away from a place of sickness and death? Is sickness, in other words, a literary figure that helps Gosse organise his life story as a kind of parable of redemption? Is autobiography shaped here (accepting that *Father and Son* troubles and confuses the distinction between biography and autobiography) by the ancient plots of Atonement and Salvation? Or is sickness asked to bear a different ideological weight? Are we to perceive *modernity*, if that is what Gosse thinks he represents, as emerging from the rejection of a world of narrow-minded faith as malady, in favor of the embrace of a healthier culture of individuality and self-determination? Does *Father and Son*'s drama of sickness into health, disease into vigour, allow us to infer a master narrative of the birth of one epoch from the ruins of another as a kind of optimistic healing of wounds inflicted by the past?[12]

Yet, before answering any of these troublesome questions, we arrive at the largest challenge for the reader of Gosse's text, the topic by which *Father and Son*'s reception has been dogged: how to read *Father and Son*'s significance as a cultural document as opposed to a personal one. If this

problem is always in some way relevant to autobiography, it is the largely unrecognised, largely undiscussed centre of Gosse's. How, that is to say, should the reader relate a single man's curious and unusual life-story to a larger narrative of historical change? How should we relate growing up with the St. Marychurch branch of the Plymouth Brethren (Henry never used the word "Plymouth") in the 1850s and 1860s to the whole unfolding of cultural, intellectual, and religious history of Great Britain from the "Victorian" to the modern age? George Moore, it is worth remembering, had used the "Plymouth Brethren" in his gloomy novel of survival *Esther Waters* (1894) to signify his heroine's oddity, her old-fashionedness, her out-of-the-wayness. But does Gosse really suggest it is emblematic of "Victorian Christianity" and of the temper of an age more fully? How might a reader plot the Birth of the Modern from this drama that opposes Father to Son? And is that what we should do, anyway? Hardly surprisingly, on this matter of how to read a text so absorbed with a history of nerves, Gosse is – nervous.

Revealingly, he cannot even decide how to *name* the story, how to define its reach in a summary term. The subtitle is "A Study of Two Temperaments." But Gosse modifies that promptly in the "preface" – it is a "*document*," he says (the emphasis is his), "a record of educational and religious conditions which, having passed away, will never return" (33).[13] This is a book, then, in which characters stand metonymically for religious history, for the ending – so Edmund implies[14] in the "epilogue," linking his father with the tradition of Jeremy Taylor (240)[15] – of an essentially seventeenth-century faith in the midst of the nineteenth. The principal dramatis personae also stand for the falling away of a whole educational system that preferred ignorance to anything but Biblical knowledge. *Father and Son* is, it seems, testimony beyond a mere individual's life story. But then, Gosse modifies that too. "This book," he remarks, opening chapter 1, "is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs" (35). So what, exactly, *is* it? With that remark about epochs – the evasive "almost" notwithstanding – we have the text on the verge of being not only religious history but cultural history. Certainly, we have an invitation to read the lives of Henry and Edmund Gosse as representations of historical movements even as we know the volume to be written by a man who famously, in Henry James's words, had a genius for inaccuracy.[16] Are the Gosses to be thought of as figures in an allegory of the birth of the modern? Certainly Edmund's association with Ibsen and his friendship with André Gide have been taken to place him in the vanguard of the new, though of course, he was also friends with great

Victorians, including Swinburne. Edmund's story is, apparently, epochal. And yet the text cannot sustain this epochal note; it quickly proves unable to live up to the pressure of making its account representative of histories beyond a family's peculiar history, however many readers have preferred to think otherwise. Peter Allen remarks that *Father and Son* offers "the pleasure of reading a dramatic and well-told story, and the further pleasure of feeling that we are adding to our stock of historical understanding as we do so."[17] But, regardless of pleasure, the *pressure* between these two narratives – personal story and historical understanding – is, startlingly, a cause of what might be thought the indisposition, the nervous condition, of the text itself. John Gardiner, in a chapter on "anti-Victorianism," is hardly alone in situating *Father and Son* in the same frame as *The Way of All Flesh*, as a refusal of the "Victorian," and another "crucial reference point for Edwardian critics of the past."[18] "Butler and Gosse are significant," adds Max Saunders, "for their styptic criticism of the Victorian ethos … for marking a break with the past, and the beginning of a modern subjectivity."[19] Yet Gosse's own book insists at once on the representative nature of his life story, and on its remarkable and unrepresentative peculiarity. We cannot tell any straightforward story of the birth of the new from this fretful account of a fretful self.

For the most part, Gosse tries to make no or only the most modest leap from individual history to a greater narrative. There are moments: Henry is once the "last surviving type" (239) of Puritanism, and there is that famous ending (Edmund "took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself," [251]). But elsewhere there is a different language. Even in that "preface," Gosse speaks of the "unusual conditions" (33) of his childhood and he promptly repeats that in chapter 1: the "conditions," he says, "of the two persons (which were unusual)" (3). The parentheses seem an awkward attempt to be honest about the unusualness of those two people, and to bracket unusualness so that the idea of the representative can still be sustained. But for much of the narrative it is precisely the strangeness, the individuality and oddity of Gosse's experience, that is the subject. If Henry's faith made him the last surviving remnant of an older Puritanism, he clung to a life that was like one of the fossils he struggled to understand – his proper environment long gone. Struggling in supposed isolation, he is framed as an obsessive, melancholy preacher and naturalist, regarded after the publication of *Omphalos* as eccentric and marginal even by the most devotedly anti-Darwinian of Christian readers. He is on the outside, even as much of the time be believes himself uniquely on the inside of the divine mind. Almost every detail of *Father and Son* owes its

emotional force to oddity, to the curiosity of an "unnatural" upbringing narrated in prose that might belong in a realist novel. At the very end of the history, Edmund champions the right to his own "normal impulses" (251), as if all that had happened before was abnormal, an aberration, an oddity, and in turn far from representative. Sinners in Henry's congregation use, symptomatically, their own private language ("They were apt in their penitence to use strange symbolic expressions," [165]). That glimpse of the idiosyncrasy of the congregation – so improbably founded by that mysterious group of Cornish fishermen – points to some of the more memorable personal experiences in the text, which hinge, obtrusively, on a recognition of the very curiousness of Gosse's life. There is, for one, the half-comic, half-appalling story of the beetle. In chapter 7, Gosse recalls seeing this creature, "with more legs than a self-respecting insect ought to need" (134), crawling toward him as his father is praying loudly and at length. With a shout of panic when the beetle finally reaches the child's chin, Gosse disturbs Henry – and is severely rebuked for interrupting his father's petitions to God. "But I think, looking back," Edmund says:

> that it was very extraordinary for a man, so instructed and so intelligent as he, to dwell so much on the possible anger of the Lord, rather than on his pity and love. The theory of extreme Puritanism can surely offer no quainter example of its fallacy than this idea that the omnipotent Jehovah – could be seriously offended, and could stoop to revenge, because a little, nervous child of nine had disturbed a prayer by being frightened at a beetle. (135)

The point is about the difference between the inconceivably vast mind of God and the local, individual, moment-in-time case of a trembling, anxious child. The difference of scale is what matters here and, of course, it matters more literally in the small child and the monumental father, recollected through the eyes and pen of someone now as grown-up as that father. And there is another, larger, difference of scale too: that between the text's occasional claim that it represents two epochs and its desire to capture, lucidly, the singularity of highly individual experience, recast by personal memory. There is "no quainter example," no more extreme or exceptional case, in the history of "extreme Puritanism." The quaintest and the most extreme example of the most extreme: these are hardly the terms on which the typical can be built.

The struggle of *Father and Son*, then, is not really between two temperaments or, even, between two epochs. It is between two ways of reading. Peter Allen thinks that Gosse's worry about accuracy in the various prefaces to *Father and Son* – a result of his mauling by John Churton Collins