



# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Sexing the Aesthete: the Autobiography and Apostasy of Edmund Gosse

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<1> In 1890, two years after his father's death, Edmund Gosse published *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse FRS*, a sympathetic biography that presented its subject as both scientific explorer and thoroughly amiable man. In 1907 he began *Father and Son* with an assurance of its polemic intentions. The father in *Father and Son* is still a likeable man and scientific explorer, but now he is also a doctrinaire Puritan tyrant. Edmund Gosse represents him thus (exaggeratedly, if the *Life* is any guide) in order to dramatise a narrative of religious liberation. Gosse's autobiography describes itself as a chronicle of the generation gap between its apostate protagonist and his famously creationist father. The protagonist's struggle with his father and his father's religion broadens into a struggle with the ideology that more generally authorizes fathers, so that Gosse's riposte to his father's version of Christianity becomes a riposte also to the version of upright Christian masculinity his father prescribes. In representing the tension between a feminized late nineteenth-century Aestheticism and Protestant austerity, Gosse labours the question of gender, feminizing himself, depicting "Hellenized" (and so sexually transgressive) sensibilities, in order to emphasize his distinct aesthetic, religious, and sexual identity.

<2> Gosse was born in 1849 into the Plymouth Brethren. His father was the community's chaplain and a famous naturalist. His mother, Emily Bowes, died in her son's mid-childhood. Gosse conspicuously excludes her from his autobiography's title, so that despite her evangelistic career and the posthumous spiritual authority she exercises over her family, she is not allowed overly to complicate the association of religious authority with paternity in Gosse's narrative. Gosse depicts his father's least successful work, a creationist thesis entitled *Omphalos: an attempt to untie the geological knot*, as enshrining the divine sanction given to maternal absence. Philip Henry Gosse sought to reconcile the biblical literalism of an earth created a few thousand years ago with popular geological claims that the earth was in fact *millions* of years old: his argument, weighing down in favour of a younger earth, was that in the case of a creation *ex nihilo* the earth would bear traces of a previous existence that had never been. As with Adam, who "would certainly ... display an 'omphalos', yet no umbilical cord had ever attached him to a mother" (Edmund Gosse 104), so mountains might display the signs of having formed over æons, despite being spontaneously brought into being by God a few thousand years ago. Struck by the book's allegorical investment in Adam's "omphalos," or navel, Douglas Brooks-Davies pulls no punches in describing *Omphalos* as "a totally male-oriented text written by a man convinced that the Creation was perpetrated by a male god and that Adam's navel (in the existence of which Henry Gosse was a fervent believer) is the sign and mark of the god's paternity" (119). Edmund Gosse implies a relationship between his father's theory of God as sole parent and his father's intellectual solecism, writing, "My Father, and my Father alone, possessed the secret of the enigma; he alone held the key which could smoothly open the lock of geological mystery" (105). Heather Henderson describes the adult Gosse's repeated capitalising of "Father" as a means of reflecting the child's confusion between his father and God (30), but the emphasis on "Father" here also aligns Henry Gosse's truth-denying intellectual hubris with patriarchy. Gosse's childhood alignment of his father with God means that his self-authorship in *Father and Son* makes up both for the loss of God the Father *and* for the Father as God. But not only is this autobiographical de-conversion narrative a *response* to the Father's and God's de-authorization, it is also a *means* of de-authorizing them. The emergence of Gosse's sense of self is dependent on his contention with this figure of theocratic and patriarchal authority. Indeed, to a considerable extent, Gosse invents the figure of theocratic and patriarchal authority in order to contend with it.

<3> The initial ground of contention is the father's lapse from apparent divinity. Gosse recollects his father saying something that "was not true", not with intent to deceive, but by accident: "Here

was the appalling discovery, never suspected before, that my Father was not as God, and did not know everything. The shock was not caused by any suspicion that he was not telling the truth, as it appeared to him, but by the awful proof that he was not, as I had supposed, omniscient” (Gosse 56). Later, when Gosse pierces an underground pipe, ruining the rockery fountain, his mother attributes the ruined fountain to the plumbers – an idea which his father takes up eagerly – so that “No suspicion fell on me; no question was asked of me. I sat there, turned to stone within, but outwardly sympathetic and with unchecked appetite” (Gosse 57). The moment is pivotal, both for revealing the fallibility of the father, who “as a deity, as a natural force of immense prestige, fell in my eyes to a human level” (Gosse 57) and for Gosse’s “finding a companion and a confidant in myself” (Gosse 58). Gosse implies that the emergence of his sense of self is dependent on the destruction of the Father’s authority.

<4> Gosse’s stance against patriarchal authority is enacted both when he aligns himself with women and when he engages in a self-feminization. Through identifying with women, Gosse is able to express his own marginality to the Brethren, a community whose very name is invested with ideas of Christian brotherhood and manliness. Even Gosse’s mother, more than complicit in Gosse’s spiritual dedication, uses her maternity to avoid the masculine milieu of the Brethren. The sudden, bodily reinforcement of the fact of femaleness that goes with Emily Gosse’s new motherhood sees her cordon herself and her child off. Gosse writes:

She, however, who had been so much isolated, now made the care of her child an excuse for retiring still further into silence. With those religious persons who met at the Room, as the modest chapel was called, she had little spiritual and no intellectual sympathy. She noted: “I do not think it would increase my happiness to be in the midst of the saints at Hackney. I have made up my mind to give myself up to Baby for the winter, and to accept no invitations. To go when I can to the Sunday morning meetings and to see my own Mother.” (Gosse 40)

Gosse never permits his readers to accompany him on visits to his maternal grandmother, but his father’s mother is another source of female-driven dissent from the Brethren mould. This grandmother is an embodied contradiction of Puritanism, with “bold carnations and black tresses.” She lodges herself “in a bright room, her household gods and bits of excellent eighteenth-century furniture around her, her miniatures and sparkling china arranged on shelves” (Gosse 39). Gods and carnal carnations and all, she is depicted sparkling with the philhellenic, pantheist aestheticism that Gosse himself later acquires. Due to the exertions of another female relative, Edmund finds himself, for the first time, with “young people,” at Islington, where his “girl-cousins” induce “spiritual laxity” through their lenience about bedtime prayers (Gosse 84).

<5> Even within the context of his father’s religious community, Gosse finds himself in a state of sympathy with misfit women. Miss Mary Flaw, he recollects, was “what the French call a *détraquée*, she had enjoyed a good intelligence and an active mind, but her wits had left the rails and were careering about the country” (Gosse 129). But while she is publicly deemed insane, young Gosse thinks her brilliant and original. The insanity of this woman of “good intelligence” and “active mind” allows her to parody with impunity Philip Henry Gosse’s directives from the pulpit, timing her praying and hymning and her reposing before imaginary sermons so precisely that these religious observations are at odds with everyone else’s. She apparently achieves what Edmund later longs to achieve: individuality, a separation of his self from the gamut of those who are dutifully faithful to God the Father and to Philip Henry Gosse the father. In conferring upon her the pseudonym of “Mary Flaw,” Gosse juxtaposes the Madonna (Mary) with imperfection (the Flaw) – it is a name that itself denotes her travesty of the religious – and Gosse has it that she sets a precedent for the religious parodies he later performs in *Father and Son*.

<6> Gosse relates an evening when his younger self and Mary Flaw find themselves in tacit conspiracy achieved via eye contact across the chapel. Mary kidnaps Edmund, and they flee together from the chapel, halting his father’s sermon in the process. They terminate upon the step of the butcher’s shop, a fleshly affront to the spiritual business of the chapel and a bold destination for one whose parents think of him as a dedicated Lamb of God. The affront is picked up again in the series of dreams Gosse attributes to the trauma of this escapade. In these dreams, he says:

We were pushing feverishly on towards a goal which our whole concentrated energies were bent on reaching, but which a frenzied despair in my heart told me we never could reach, yet the attainment of which alone could save us from destruction.

... a ruby-coloured point waxing and waning, and it bore, or to be exact it consisted of, the letters of the word CARMINE. (Gosse 133)

Carmine is the colour of blood, birth-blood, menstrual blood, the blood of Christ; the colour, also, as Henderson notes, of “the scarlet woman” of Revelation, the Whore of Babylon, who in nineteenth-century Calvinist typological analyses represented the Catholic Church (Henderson 134). Under the instructions of his father, Gosse is “strictly forbidden to let a hair of my paintbrush touch the little broken mass of carmine” (Gosse 135). The young Edmund’s lust for carmine suggests not only his yearning for the aesthetic rituals of Rome, but also an identification with the scarlet woman’s femininity. Alongside Henderson’s typological reading, the text also invites a psychoanalytic one: the Lamb’s headlong rush towards the butcher’s shop – an obvious incarnation of the death drive – is reworked in dream as an erotic pursuit of the throbbing ruby-coloured point that in daylight Gosse is forbidden by his father. His flight – still in Mary Flaw’s company – towards the phallic taboo of this waxing and waning point was necessary, he recalls, to “save us from destruction.” By rushing to the butcher’s shop, Gosse risks destruction as a Lamb of God, but by rushing towards the taboo, Gosse avoids destruction of himself. All of this works to vindicate Gosse’s own adult flight, from within the safety of his heterosexual marriage, towards the taboo of homosexuality; a taboo, which, as Gosse relates later in his autobiography, is explicitly identified by his father.

<7> The resolution to the young Edmund’s spiritual tumult, the only resolution acceptable to Edmund’s father, that is, is that he be baptised, and join the Brethren communion (both Protestant and brotherly), drinking the carmine-coloured blood of Christ. The baptism, if not the Eucharist itself, is a negation of specifically female blood-lettings. In John 3: 1–6, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. Nicodemus, bemused, asks: “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” To this Jesus answers, “Except a man be born of water and [of] the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Nicodemus’ questions take Jesus’ metaphor of a spiritual rebirth, and set it in opposition to a birth from “the flesh.” The mother’s role in generating life is patently insufficient to ensure her child’s entry to the kingdom of God, and must be replaced with a bloodless, wombless birth, administered by the Spirit, supervised, in Gosse’s case, by “Mr S. ... an impressive hieratic figure,” from a neighbouring congregation. Such a baptism, together with Philip Henry Gosse’s thesis on the instantaneous and motherless creation of humanity, denotes again the father’s apparent attempt at a masculine and theocratic appropriation of birth. The father’s desire to hasten his son’s baptism is partially motivated by a desire to assert his sufficiency as Edmund’s only parent. Edmund’s mother is absent. Gosse senior is left the sole custodian of his son’s spiritual welfare. An act that signals Edmund’s having reached spiritual maturity safe and sound proclaims the father’s adequacy as parent and renders the mother finally redundant. But in *Father and Son*, whose author assures us his soul is anything but safe and sound, it does so ironically. The father’s ambition to see his son reborn of water and the Spirit flounders in Edmund Gosse’s own testimony of apostasy.

<8> Gosse not only portrays himself as a beneficiary of female resistance to masculine theocratic authority; he also deploys comparisons with mythological, historical and fictional women to suggest both empathy and identification with a marginalized sex. The trope of Gosse as woman recurs within the autobiography and in Gosse’s oeuvre generally. Virginia Woolf observes that Gosse “could be as touchy as a housemaid and as suspicious as a governess” (Woolf 72). But Woolf’s insinuations of effeminacy are quite different from Gosse’s self-feminisations, which constantly reinforce his emergent singularity, his separation from the patriarchal institutions of the family and the Brethren, and his definition against those institutions.

<9> In recollecting his father’s attempts to turn him into an evangelist, Gosse writes: “He was accustomed to urge upon me the necessity of ‘speaking for Jesus in season and out of season’, and he so worked upon my feelings that I would start forth like St. Teresa, wild for the Moors and martyrdom” (Gosse 167). St. Teresa is the sixteenth-century Spanish seven year old who leaves home with her brother Rodrigo, intending to go to Moorish territory to be beheaded for Christ (they are happily apprehended by their uncle as they are leaving the city). Cast as St. Teresa, Gosse poses as a continental Renaissance Catholic girl. The Catholicism is startling, given that the anecdote in question pertains to the religious instruction doled out by his militantly Protestant father. But placing himself in sixteenth-century Spain – thereby transferring himself from Protestant England to the depths of Catholic Europe – he places himself, also, in a scenario apt for transplantation to a Gothic romance. The embattled and pious girl, thwarted by a father...

for transplantation to a Gothic romance. The embezzled and proud girl, unwed by a father substitute, is a likely Gothic heroine. Narrating a series of occasions when the nocturnally rattling card of framed texts in his bedroom incites terror, Gosse writes: "I was half beside myself with ghostly fears, increased and pointed by the fact that there had been some daring burglaries in our street" (Gosse 62), and adds "my nerves were a packet of spillikins" (Gosse 63). Here again, his behaviour is characteristic of the Gothic romance heroine. The framed texts moving in the draught – biblical texts, in this case – induce ghostly fears. These fears are not able to be assuaged by prayer, but only by the presence of his mother. Gosse's construction of his childhood self as the heroine of a horror story points to his allegiance with the feminine and his estrangement from the divine Father figure (whose rattling texts inspire terror, and who offers no remedy).

<10> Reflecting on the emergence of his special sensibility, Gosse again feminises himself, writing:

In my own case, I was most carefully withdrawn, like Princess Blanche fleur in her marble fortress, from every outside influence whatever, yet to me the instinctive life came as unexpectedly as her lover came to her in the basket of roses. What came to me was the consciousness of self, as a force and a companion. (Gosse 55)

The heroine of twelfth-century French romance, *Floire et Blanchefleur*, Blanchefleur is sold into slavery by her lover's disapproving father. Encased by her purchaser in a marble tower, the "white flower" in the white stone edifice, she is a consciously constructed image of virginal impenetrability, invoked by Gosse to demonstrate his sense of self-containment and opposition to an exterior patriarchy. He envisages the "consciousness of self" coming to him in the same way as Floris, Blanchefleur's lover, comes to her: disguised in a basket of roses. Gosse's allusion to St. Teresa endows him with a Catholicity which would have been deeply offensive to his father. With this allusion, however, Gosse aspires to an even more ecumenical identity. In the French version of the tale, Floire is the son of a Saracen king of Spain, brought up alongside Blanchefleur, daughter of a Christian – that is, Catholic – slave. When Floire comes bounding, rose-bedecked, into Blanchefleur's fortress (to rescue her from the harem of an oriental monarch), he mingles her Christianity with his sweetly scented heathenism. In a similar way, Gosse has it, his evolving consciousness of self, as it turns out, seduces him from his father's patriarchal theology and towards a rebellious aestheticism.

<11> Representations of Edmund Gosse, or at least of his "self" or "soul," as a fortress-bound woman, proliferate to such an extent that imperilled femininity, seeking refuge from masculine violence, becomes the defining figuration of young Gosse in *Father and Son*. Gosse's description, of how "My soul was shut up, like Fatima, in a tower" (Gosse 172), is another particularly dire depiction of his psychological predicament. Fatima, to whom Gosse alludes, is shut up in that tower in anticipation of having her throat slit by her husband, the famed serial uxoricide, Bluebeard.

<12> Fatima appeared a good two decades earlier in Gosse's essay, "Walt Whitman," which begins:

Fatima was permitted, nay encouraged, to make use of all the rooms, so elegantly and commodiously furnished, in Bluebeard Castle, with one exception. It was in vain that the housemaid and the cook pointed out to her that each of the ladies who had preceded her as a tenant had smuggled herself into that one forbidden chamber and had never come out again. Their sad experience was thrown away upon Fatima, who penetrated the fatal apartment and became an object of melancholy derision. The little room called "Walt Whitman," in the castle of literature, reminds one of that in which the relics of Bluebeard's levity were stored. We all know that discomfort and perplexity await us there, that nobody ever came back from it with an intelligible message, that it is piled with the bones of critics; yet such is the perversity of the analytic mind, that each one of us, sooner or later, finds himself peeping through the keyhole and fumbling at the lock. (98)

Gosse writes coyly here. "One" is reminded by Whitman of the corpses in the forbidden chamber, and "we all know" of its perils and charms. Fatima tries to hide from Bluebeard the fact that she has entered the forbidden chamber, just as Gosse is here half disguising, with the occlusion of his "I," that he is the one who has experienced the discomfort and perplexity of Whitman first hand. But there is no hiding the fact that Gosse has turned the key in the lock of the forbidden chamber

opened the door and been fascinated and appalled by what is inside. And there is no concealing that now, like Fatima, Gosse cannot admit directly to his voyeurism. Such reticence on his part invites further speculation as to the nature of his engagement with Whitman, particularly when we find the Whitman-room already disclosed, and Whitman so famously uncloseted. Both Fatima and Bluebeard's Chamber give rise to some ambiguous gendering. The Chamber is a kind of uterine space, smothered in female blood; a "fatal apartment" that is repeatedly "penetrated" – by a woman. Then again, this chamber is Whitman, who widely champions his own masculinity. The chamber becomes, under Gosse's handling, an awful and fascinating androgynous space

<13> Gosse's critical penetration of Whitman's chamber, and his rhetorical handling of that penetration, both speak of his transgressive sexuality (a sexuality that certainly transgresses Philip Henry Gosse's hyper-Calvinist ethics). In a letter of 1908 to Robert Ross, following his receipt of *De Profundis*, Gosse writes:

Less and less can I endure the idea of punishing a man – who is not cruel – because he is unlike other men. Probably if the hideous new religions of Science do not smother all liberty, we are in the darkness before the dawn of a humane and intelligent recognition of the right to differences. Perhaps poor Wilde (who alas! was in life so distasteful to me) may come to be honoured as the proto-martyr to freedom, now he is in his grave. (Charteris 313)

In describing Wilde as a "proto-martyr to freedom," Gosse establishes "freedom" – by which he probably means what his correspondent, John Addington Symonds, called "Greek love" – as a religion. It is a religion persecuted by the "hideous new religions of Science." But it was just as liable to persecution, or at the very least, serious disapproval, from the older religion of Gosse's own father. Gosse deliberately depicts his sensibilities as Hellenized, as a way of simultaneously pointing to his spiritual conflict with his father and placing himself in league with men whose Hellenism had shaped the art and criticism of the late nineteenth century, whose homosexuality was entangled with their aesthetics. Gosse does not only ally himself with "poor Wilde," but with Wilde's teacher, Walter Pater, and with Algernon Swinburne, with both of whom Gosse socialized, both of whom he read.

<14> Gosse-biographer, Ann Thwaite, argues for Gosse's bisexuality. She explores Gosse's relationship with Hamo Thornycroft in a chapter suggestively titled, "Something better than a brother;" she recollects an anecdote regarding John Addington Symonds, who, reading Gosse's *King Erik*, thought he detected "a 'strong and tender sympathy with the beauty of men as well as with women', and tested Gosse out by sending him a privately printed pamphlet of poems on the theme of Greek love;" and she probes the "regular suggestions" that Gosse "had been a secret homosexual" (Thwaite 182).

<15> Symonds' autobiography, which announces both his homosexuality and apostasy, was bequeathed to the London Library by Symonds' literary executor, Horatio Brown, upon Brown's death in 1926, with the condition that the memoirs not be published for a further fifty years. In 1926, the Chairman of the Library Committee was Edmund Gosse. Hermione Lee implies a relationship between Gosse's custodianship of Symonds' papers (the most revealing of which Gosse burnt) with the "many painful letters on sexuality" he and Symonds had exchanged. She also suggests that Horatio Brown's "euphemistic" biography of John Addington Symonds (1903), "translated all [Symonds'] self-tortured homosexuality into religious crises" (Lee 113). The similarities between Gosse's and Symonds' autobiographies are startling, from the fact that Symonds' mother died when he was young and he played (as Gosse, we shall see in a moment, also did) with tin soldiers, to his being, as a child, "unreasonably shy and timid", even given, like the young Gosse who is terrified by rattling cards, to hearing "phantasmal noises" at night (Symonds 38), to his rejection of "cankering Calvinism" (Symonds 169), to his assertion, "I adored beauty" (Symonds 233), to his fascination with Greek mythological figures, to his Plymouth Brethren grandmother, his aspirations to authorship, his talk of an "inner self" (Symonds 86), the very metaphors with which he describes the onset of scepticism, which "checked the further growth of faith; just as a frost may throw back budding vegetation" (Symonds 243).<sup>(1)</sup> In Symonds' case, the connection between sexuality and apostasy is explicit. Less so in Gosse's, although his association between overbearing religion and paternity translates into an association between overbearing religion and the practice of masculinity advocated by his father.

<16> Whether Gosse was, in Thwaite's phrase, "a secret homosexual" or not, he certainly exhibits a fascination with masculinities distinct from the paternal, authoritative one displayed in his father. The first example Gosse supplies of this fascination is with his maternal uncle, "E". The proximity of the male relative of the father's generation to the father makes the contrast between them more obvious, rendering the uncle someone who is decisively not-father. In this case, moreover, the uncle is so not-father that he resembles Gosse's mother: "he was tall, fair, with auburn curls" (Gosse 46). He is romantic, cultivating "a certain tendency to the Byronic type, fatal and melancholy" (Gosse 46). He never marries. Gosse recollects: "As a little child, I adored my Uncle E., who sat silent by the fireside holding me against his knee, saying nothing, but looking unutterably sad, and occasionally shaking his warm-coloured tresses" (Gosse 46). This adoration takes on a distinctly sensory dimension, as Gosse recalls how the house of his uncles "had a strange, delicious smell, so unlike anything I smelt anywhere else, that it used to fill my eyes with tears of mysterious pleasure. I know now that this was the odour of cigars, tobacco being a species of incense tabooed at home on the highest religious grounds" (Gosse 46). The "mysterious pleasure" derived from the cigar's emissions is indicative here of the jarring between a sensuous, sensual masculinity and the upright paternal masculinity of Gosse's father. Indeed, the jarring is explicitly taken to the level of religious conflict. The word "incense", to describe tobacco, suggests, at best, Anglo-Catholicism, and at worst something unutterably pagan (and so, we can assume, of immediate appeal to young Gosse). Gosse observes earlier that his uncles "were not religious men" (Gosse 45). They are, however, obviously men. In being so, they demonstrate the attractive possibility of being male without being religious.

<17> Gosse recollects another incident from his childhood, where he resents an adult's presumption of his heterosociality:

I had three dolls, to whom my attitude was not very intelligible. Two of these were female, one with a shapeless face of rags, the other in wax. But, in my fifth year, when the Crimean War broke out, I was given a third doll, a soldier, dressed very smartly in a scarlet cloth tunic. I used to put the dolls on three chairs, and harangue them aloud, but my sentiment to them was never confidential, until our maidservant one day, intruding on my audience, and misunderstanding the occasion of it, said: 'What? a boy, and playing with a soldier when he's got two lady-dolls to play with?' I had never thought of my dolls as confidants before, but from that time forth I paid a special attention to the soldier, in order to make up to him for Lizzie's unwarrantable insult. (Gosse 53)

The soldier doll is newer and smarter than the female dolls, but Gosse does not come to favour him until their common masculinity is pointed out. A little later, a soldier he meets who is leaving for the Crimean War becomes a mesmerising object. He cuts:

an amazing figure, a very tall young man, as stiff as my doll, in a gorgeous scarlet tunic ... He was killed in that battle, and this added an extraordinary lustre to my dream of him. I see him still in my mind's eye, large, stiff, and unspeakably brilliant.

(Gosse p. 54)

In an inconsistent bout of English nationalism prompted by the outbreak of the Crimean War, Gosse's parents embrace militarism. It is not, then, as if the soldier performs a parentally outlawed version of masculinity. The description Gosse offers of him, however, goes beyond an appreciation of the man as an emblem of British imperial might. His gorgeous scarlet recalls the forbidden carmine. Details of the soldier's body and appearance dominate Gosse's account. While the soldier is large, unspeakable, brilliant, he is also subjected to a diminishing comparison with Gosse's doll. He becomes, then, a utensil of imaginative play. Gosse concludes the passage by showing that the dream his young self has of the soldier (as if that lustrous dream of something "large, stiff, and unspeakably brilliant" were not enough in itself to suggest an admiration bordering on, or spilling over into, desire) continues to haunt the adult author.

<18> Gosse is alert to the conflict between his father's religious priorities and his own sexuality. He recalls how his father "wished to secure me finally, exhaustively, before the age of puberty could dawn, before my soul was fettered with the love of carnal things" (Gosse 150). The father's fears for the effects of his son's increasing carnality, as it turns out, are in part justified. Gosse recalls the associations he forms with other boys after his stepmother begins to influence his upbringing. He speaks glowingly of "the glorious life among wild boys on the margin of the sea," but his memories are based on a kind of visceral apprehension, on feeling, rather than on

concretely intellectual recollection. They are “nothing but vague and broken impressions, delicious and illusive” (Gosse 185), appealing to Gosse’s body, rather than to his mind (which is the space inhabited by the father, of whom Gosse recalls scenes, anchored into reality, “with the minuteness of a photograph”). Among these boys, he says, “I began, in fact, more and more to keep my own religion for use on Sundays” (Gosse 186). The outdoors and the sea offer possibilities more vast than the “scenes in which my Father and I were the sole actors within the four walls of a room” (Gosse 185).

<19> Gosse’s 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. Gosse remembers, rather hyperbolically, and apparently unaware of the poem’s parodic elements, how “when I turned to ‘Hero and Leander’, I was lifted to a heaven of passion and music. It was a marvellous revelation of romantic beauty to me” (Gosse 227). It is “a heaven” not “Heaven” to which he is transported, which suggests already the displacement of Christian paradise by a philhellenic aestheticism. As with the boys’ appeal to a very visceral sort of sensory impression, so *Hero and Leander* “all seemed to my fancy intoxicating beyond anything I had ever dreamed of” (Gosse 228), with that intoxication, of course, signalling the triumph of bodily sense over mental. Upon arriving home, he reads:

Marlowe’s voluptuous poem aloud to that blameless Christian gentlewoman [his stepmother]. We got on very well in the opening, but at the episode of Cupid’s pining, my stepmother’s needles began nervously to clash, and when we launched on the description of Leander’s person, she interrupted me by saying, rather sharply, ‘Give me that book, please, I should like to read the rest to myself.’ (Gosse 228)

The step-mother’s request, “Give me that book, please, I should like to read the rest to myself,” suggests the possibility, not only of moral outrage, but of her seduction by the text too, her preference for a solitary reading. There is something to be made of the complicity between stepmother and stepson. It is under her influence that some of the religious vetoes on Gosse’s activities are lifted, he is encouraged to play with other boys, and permitted access to imaginative literature: allegiance with her does not just bestow upon the adult Gosse a symbolic association with marginalised womanhood but it actually gives the child Gosse a greater measure of freedom. On the other hand, the step-mother passes the book on to Gosse’s father and so permanently deprives Gosse of its company. It is the erotic description of the hero’s body that provokes the reading’s interruption by blameless Christian gentlewomanliness. Although the poem is, ostensibly, a tale of the love between male Leander and female Hero, there is no denying the preponderance of men and male gods attracted to the male hero. He sports “dangling tresses,” a white belly, a hand fit for Jove to sip from, a beauty of which wild Hippolytus would have been enamoured. When amorous Neptune swallows Leander into the sea (bringing to mind again the wild boys with whom Edmund Gosse gloried by the sea), Leander is finally forced to protest, “You are deceived, I am no woman, I.” Leander’s protestations carry no weight with Neptune. Presumably, moreover, they carry no weight with Philip Henry Gosse, who could not endorse a masculinity so sensual and liquid, nor a narrative – despite its throng of gods – so humanist, so prone to make humanity an object of the veneration due to God, with even Leander’s mortal backbone “a heavenly path.” Philip Henry Gosse attacks Leander (and Marlowe) in the most elemental way possibly: to Marlowe’s watery cavorting he puts an end with fire, burning his son’s book. Matthew Arnold, on whom Gosse lectured, had characterised Hellenism as offering “sweetness and light” and Hebraism “fire and strength”. Gosse’s depiction of his father hurling *Hero and Leander* into the fire dramatizes the Hebraic-Hellenic conflict: sweetness and light are immolated by strength and fire.

<20> Of course, it is not just *Hero and Leander*’s homoeroticism, or its non-patriarchal, non-theocratic revision of masculinity that affronts Philip Henry Gosse. The text is also trenchantly pagan, with its narrative vested in the enterprises of the ancient Greek pantheon. The “Greek love”, discussed in the poetry John Addington Symonds later sends to Gosse, denotes homoeroticism, and the discourses of sexuality founded in retrospective notions of classical Greece are an attack on Judaeo-Christian constructions of both divinity and masculinity. Gosse finds in the ancient Greek mythology a rich haven from the Brethren’s preferred enactments of masculinity. Gosse’s stepmother brings with her from an earlier home a book containing the steel engravings of various statues, of which Edmund writes:

These attracted me violently, and here for the first time I gazed on Apollo with his proud æsture. Venus in her undulations. the kirtled shane of Diana. and Juniter

voluminously bearded. Very little information, and that to me unintelligible, was given in the text, but these were said to be figures of the old Greek gods. I asked my Father to tell me about these 'old Greek gods'. His answer was direct and disconcerting. He said ... that the so-called gods of the Greeks 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 204)

The "Cities of the Plain" to which the father refers are Sodom and Gomorrah. The biblical account of these cities, wherein "the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven" (Genesis 19: 24), is generally read as a narrative of God's condemnation of homosexuality. Before Sodom is destroyed, its people attempt the rape of two angels. The term "Sodomite" not only refers to an inhabitant of Sodom, but is a derogatory synonym for a homosexual man. 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. The father's position is parodied as an incitement to conscientious ignorance, with Gosse representing his father as saying that of the pagan gods, "it is better for a Christian not to know". In the Genesis 19 account, the inhabitants of Sodom demand to "know" the angels, and this "to know" occurs elsewhere in the King James translation of the Old Testament in lieu of "to have sexual intercourse." The father presumably advises his son merely to be ignorant of the Greek gods; but as Edmund tells it, his father might as well have advised him to remain abstinent as well. Such is the correlation between the Greek pantheon and sexual deviance. Gosse is moved to jovial alliteration in a mockingly melodramatic depiction of his father fleeing Greece in homophobic panic, writing: "You might have thought that he had himself escaped with horror from some Hellenic hippodrome" (Gosse 205). To his father's denunciation of these Greek gods, Gosse remembers responding with the reflection, "that they were too beautiful to be so wicked as my Father thought they were." This is, he retrospectively acknowledges, the "dangerous and pagan notion that beauty palliates evil", by which he "was still further sundered from the faith" (Gosse 205). As well he might have been. His citations of physical beauty do nothing to contradict his father's implied accusations regarding the Greek gods' homosexuality. Gosse's reflection upon the beauty of these gods seems to be intended to valorize their sexuality, rather than deny it.

<21> Influenced by his preference for bodily apprehension over intellectual comprehension, for the beautiful and beguiling over the stark and rigid, *Father and Son's* narrator replaces the Brethren's version of a Judaeo-Christian father God with the Greek pantheon. The Hebraic-Hellenic dichotomy allows Gosse to identify the private conflict between father and son with the nineteenth century's public tussle between Hebraic Scripture and Hellenic literature. Gosse's larger narrative of self-liberation is twisted around episodic accounts of Greco-Brethren conflict. One of the members of the Brethren, Susan Flood, is zealously moved to assault a series of statues in the Crystal Palace. Gosse records: "what her sacrilegious parasol had attacked were the bodies of my mysterious friends, the Greek gods, and if all the rest of the village applauded iconoclastic Susan, I at least would be ardent on the other side" (Gosse 206). Susan and her parasol are described by Gosse as "sacrilegious" and "iconoclastic", both of which imply that Hellenic paganism is sacred enough to be desecrated and iconic enough to be an object of iconoclasm. The eager Brethren member, on the other hand, is represented as the defiler of religion, and a laughably ineffective defiler too (as the comic juxtaposition of "sacrilegious" and "parasol" would suggest). The day on which her activities are discussed finds Gosse, unable to stifle his horror, running into the garden, whereupon he "dived under the snake-like boughs of the laurel and came up again in absolute seclusion" (Gosse 206). The laurel is so named for Latin *laurus*, equivalent to Greek *daphne*, the nymph who escaped Apollo's sexual advances by means of her father's metamorphosing her into a tree. Apollo quenches his frustration by resolving to take her leaves for his crown and her wood for his lyre. The term "bachelor", which Gosse uses to describe the habitually unmarried state of his two maternal uncles (Gosse 46), was falsely supposed during the nineteenth century to derive from *bacca-laureus*, or laurel-berry, through the French *bachelier*.<sup>(2)</sup> The laurel under which Gosse dives, then, is another symbol of androgyny – bringing to mind both feminine nymph and masculine bachelor (with phallic snake-like boughs, for good measure). The laurel is also a symbol of resistance to heterosexual encounters, evoking both Daphne, who refuses Apollo, and the bachelor, who is, by the definition Gosse appears to use (in reference to his uncles, for instance), an unmarried man. The laurel is, moreover, the paragon of Hellenic flora. After weeping for Hermes and Aphrodite under an Apollonian tree, Gosse reads from "The Dair" and "Swimming to the hot and aromatic sea" falls asleep (Gosse

Gosse reads from *The Deity*, and yielding to the hot and aromatic air falls asleep (Gosse 207). There is something intensely sensuous about this image, the “hot and aromatic air” redolent of an ancient Mediterranean scene, and there is also something (perhaps the fact that Gosse reads a book, clearly not a paternally endorsed work of theology, entitled “*The Deity*”) to indicate that Plymouth’s Christianity is displaced in exact measure by Europe’s sultry paganism.

<22> We see that displacement effected throughout Gosse’s narrative, as he intrudes Hellenic images into his parents’ Hebraic paradigm. But this strategy only effectively conveys Gosse’s place in a grand cultural struggle because he has pre-emptively established that Hebraic paradigm on their behalf. Gosse’s depiction of his and his parents’ roles in a Hebraic-Hellenic conflict has an air of contrivance, evident in the strategic positioning of terms and images from both cultural movements throughout the text. When Gosse explains his parents’ plans for him, he gives full force to the Hebraic origins of those plans – indeed, a fuller force, even more pleonastically Scripture-soaked, than they themselves might have mustered:

The Great Scheme (I cannot resist giving it the mortuary of capital letters) had been, as my readers know, that I should be exclusively and consecutively dedicated through the whole of my life, to the manifest and uninterrupted and uncompromised ‘service of the Lord’. That had been the aspiration of my Mother, and at her death she had bequeathed that desire to my Father, like a dream of the Promised Land. In their ecstasy, my parents had taken me, as Elkanah and Hannah had long ago taken Samuel, from their mountain-home of Ramathaim-Zophim down to sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts in Shiloh. They had girt me about with a linen ephod, and had hoped to leave me there; ‘as long as he liveth,’ they had said, ‘he shall be lent unto the Lord.’ (Gosse 212)

The dominant scriptural reference operates through the analogy drawn between the Gosses’ dedication of their son and Hannah’s dedication of Samuel, in I Samuel 1, which Gosse surreptitiously adapts to give Elkanah, and thus his own father, more active roles in their sons’ spiritual history. The narrative is redundantly littered with Hebrew place names – Ramathaim-Zophim and Shiloh – thereby reinforcing its Old Testament origins, and Gosse deploys the diction of the King James Version Bible, both within quotation marks (“‘as long as he liveth’”) and without (“They ... girt me about with a linen ephod”), in order to endow his parents’ doings with biblical moment. The “dream of the Promised Land” is an anachronistic interpolation into the Samuel story, which achieves an effect of scriptural excess. Gosse’s narrative of the dedication is intentionally hyper-biblical, positioning his parents at the extreme end of the Hebraic-Hellenic dichotomy and then outdoing them. The dedication itself occurs when Gosse’s mother dies. She gathers her strength and says to Gosse’s father:

‘I shall walk with Him in white. Won’t you take our lamb and walk with me?’ ... Then my Father comprehended, and pressed me forward; her hand fell softly upon mine and she seemed content. Thus was my dedication, that had begun in my cradle, sealed with the most solemn, the most poignant and irresistible insistence, at the death-bed of the holiest and purest of women. (Gosse 81)

Despite the sincerity and solemnity with which Gosse apparently recollects his mother’s death, he responds to the recollection with: “But what a weight, intolerable as the burden of Atlas, to lay on the shoulders of a little fragile child!” It is here that Gosse’s and Samuel’s vocations part ways, and Gosse’s Hellenism becomes a means for him to distinguish himself from the Hebrew Samuel. Into this moment of such Hebraic import, Gosse sneaks the Titan Atlas.

<23> Gosse repeatedly subjects the religious occasions into which he is manoeuvred to a retrospective Hellenification; narratives of Brethren ceremonies are seasoned with allusions to Greek mythology. Gosse recalls his baptist as “an impressive hieratic figure” (*hieratic* not only conjuring something more priestly than the Brethren minister, but also being a word of Greek origin), who, moreover, has “Titanic arms” (Gosse 159). Gosse’s text is laced with such allusions to Greek mythology. James Petherbridge, one of the Brethren, is described, apropos of Homer’s *Iliad*, as “the Nestor of our meetings” (Gosse 117). And of the childhood which is so dominated, not by tales of Greek messengers, but of Hebraic angels, Gosse writes that, it “is short, as we count the shortness of after years, when the drag of lead pulls down to earth the foot that used to flutter with a winged impetuosity, and to float with the pulse of Hermes” (Gosse 85).

<24> However dangerous and pagan Gosse acknowledges such notions to be, in *Father and Son*

he not only recollects embracing them, he does embrace them – placing himself within a distinct *fin-de-siècle* homosexual subculture in the process, and allying himself with decadent Aestheticism. The self-feminising metaphors and the philhellenic rhetoric enumerated here are not just rhetoric, or rather, are not empty rhetoric: they are a way of signifying what cannot be declared, sexual deviation. The relationship, in turn, between sexual and religious deviation is written into Gosse's identification with pagan women, Catholic women, the Whore of Babylon, women who don't comply with his father's spiritual authority or the notion of a masculine God. It is captured in Gosse's mobilization of Hellenic imagery, of Greek gods with their "Greek love". *Father and Son* is autobiographical, which is to say that *how* its author narrates discloses and reifies as much of his identity as *what* its author narrates. Gosse's rhetoric declares and encodes the heresy of who he is.

#### Endnotes

(1)By comparison, Gosse describes his young soul being planted "as on a ledge, split in the granite of some mountain. The ledge was hung between night and the snows on one hand, and the dizzy depths of the world upon the other; was furnished with just soil enough for a gentian to struggle skywards and open its stiff azure stars; and offered no lodgement, no hope of salvation, to any rootlet which should stray beyond its inexorable limits" (Gosse 44).<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)*OED*, s. v. "bachelor" notes that "latinized as baccalarius," bachelor was "subsequently altered by a pun or word-play to baccalaureus as if connected with bacca lauri laurel berry, which has sometimes been gravely given as the 'etymology.'"<sup>(^)</sup>

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