

Reading About . . .

Edmund Gosse

It has often been said—though sometimes tongue-in-cheek—that there is as much to be learnt from great works of literature about the malfunctioning of human thoughts and feelings as from the standard textbooks of psychiatry. This obviously over-simplifies the situation; very much more of psychiatric interest will be found in classic writings by one who knows what he is looking for, through knowledge of the discipline's basic texts. But it is true enough to make the ever-increasing emphasis on scientific and technical information in psychiatric training a matter of some regret. What shall it profit us, in trying to help patients, if we know more and more biochemistry and pharmacology, but at the same time lose the insight that artists and writers have recorded over centuries about the human condition?

Thinking more specifically of family relationships (which were never more important than now, whether the subject is schizophrenia, depression, or anorexia nervosa) there is one work whose title ought to grab every psychiatrist's attention—*Father and Son* by Edmund Gosse. Though first published 77 years ago, it has continued to be read widely ever since, and probably stands in the world's literature among the few classic works about parent-child relationships. After the endless turgid and jargon-ridden prose on this subject to be found in professional literature—particularly the psycho-analytical—this comes as an oasis of writing that is positively enjoyable, as well as enlightening. But who was Edmund Gosse—his name has little other significance today—and was this extraordinary story of his mid-Victorian childhood a true one?

It has taken a long time since his death in 1928 for someone with both the necessary scholarship and determination to take on the huge quantity of sources which significantly relate to Gosse. Fortunately, Ann Thwaite has proved more than equal to this task, and the result is a major contribution to existing knowledge of the English literary scene for some fifty years from the 1870s, as well as allowing us, for the first time, to assess the accuracy—as well as the fascination—of his best known work.

Edmund Gosse was born in Tottenham in 1849, the only child of exceptionally devout evangelical parents, who had married fairly late. For long afterwards, he had the feeling that he had not been wanted; Mrs

Thwaite says he imagined his parents had been made uneasy by his intrusion into their scholarly devout lives and as a result, “spent a good deal of his life making himself feel loved, wanted, admired, appreciated.” Yet her research shows that his actual experience was quite the opposite—“wrapped in a lavish love and parental concern, unusual for the period.” Furthermore, the child doesn't seem to have been at all inhibited in his response to this; when not yet four, he sent a letter (written by his mother) to his father who was away on a short visit, in which “Dear Papa I want to see you”, “Dear Papa I want you to come home”, and many similar phrases give no hint of a child who felt unwanted. Was the idea of rejection, then, a later reconstruction of this period in fantasy?

Perhaps it had more to do with the central experience of his childhood, which was the death of Gosse's mother, when he was aged seven, from a fulminating carcinoma of the breast; the account of this in *Father and Son* is harrowing, and should cause those who are over-enthusiastic for ‘community’ or ‘non-professional care’ to think again. Since it was inconceivable then for a lower middle-class person to go into hospital, the dying woman was taken to lodgings where she was supposed to be nursed; but this care was so incompetent and unreliable that much of it had in fact to be done by the seven year-old child. After reading this passage, many will feel inclined to give renewed thanks for the life and work of Florence Nightingale.

In spite of their overwhelming piety, his parents had been “always cheerful and often gay”, but Gosse was now plunged into his father's grief and mourning, and was spared little of it. P. H. Gosse, who had pioneered the science of marine biology, now moved permanently to Devon, where there was a community of his sect of Brethren; on coastal expeditions, he treated Edmund almost as a friend, though he was also responsible for most of the boy's education, which was in general haphazard. But bereavement had further heightened his evangelical piety, and this included—peculiarly enough—a rejection of any celebration of Christmas; one of the unforgettable episodes in *Father and Son* describes a Christmas Day when Gosse *père* came unexpectedly into the kitchen and found the cook and maid secretly eating a Christmas pudding. Seizing the heathenish object from the table, he threw

it out through the opened window; it was not a happy atmosphere for a boy's upbringing. Yet such fanaticism did not repel the adolescent Edmund, and at the age of 16, his faith was such that he decided it was time to leave this earthly abode and join his Maker; a summer night seemed the right time, and he prayed fervently to be 'taken' immediately. When this failed to happen, his faith was never quite the same again, though it was to be a good many years before he separated from his father's practices.

Ann Thwaite gives a sensitive account of Gosse's gradual achievement of independence, after he had come to London as a lowly clerk in the British Museum Library. Although physically removed from Devon, he remained under his father's scrutiny through immensely long, detailed, and demanding letters, which arrived almost daily—one was of 20 closely written pages. The father's view of worldly life was such that when Edmund received his first invitation to a dinner party (at a highly respectable household), he exhorted the young man to pray before going, and to be constantly on his guard there against sin.

In *Father and Son*, Gosse suggests that at the age of 20, he threw off his evangelical heritage—in which interpersonal contacts were seen only as a means of 'saving' others—and went his own way. Ann Thwaite finds that this was not so; the process was much longer and more gradual, with Gosse leading a kind of double life for many years in which he was both part of the fashionable London literary scene, yet continuing to teach at a dissenting Sunday school in Tottenham. He suffered his father's postal barrage of pessimistic instructions and interrogations good-temperedly on the whole, though sometimes feeling in despair that this millstone round his neck would keep him from a literary career, and not encouraged by the fact that his first book sold precisely 12 copies. In fact, spells of depression continued regularly throughout his life

except between 1879 and 1883; they were worst when he was just turned sixty, though his poems published at the age of 45 had been described as showing "the subdued gloom of middle age". At the same time, the memory of his own bleak and lonely childhood—or rather his mixed memory and fantasy—made him determined that the lives of his own children should be full of warmth and pleasure; he entertained every Sunday, in contrast to the dreary Sabbaths he had known when young. His family does indeed seem to have been a happy one, though none of the children followed his interests or way of life, and he was mystified by their total lack of ambition.

There was no lack of that in Gosse himself. By determination, enormous industry, and a capacity to make most people like him, he became eventually the most influential literary critic in England. As Librarian of the House of Lords, he had an entrée to aristocratic society, where he played at times the role of its court jester. How much real satisfaction this produced seems uncertain; according to A. C. Benson (a fairly shrewd observer) "The more assured his position is, the more greedy he seems to be of honour and reputation." He was strongly disliked by Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Virginia Woolf, but that need not be held against him. Mrs Thwaite believes that the love of friends was the ruling passion of his life—"He became afraid of solitude . . . Friendship was as necessary to him as sunlight and as sleep."

Can this be related to the traumatic early loss of his mother, and to that intense relationship which was the subject of *Father and Son*, within a home of fanatical religiosity? Psychiatrists should read *Edmund Gosse*, and decide for themselves.

Reference

- THWAITE, ANN (1984) *Edmund Gosse. A Literary Landscape*. Pp 567. £15.00. London: Secker & Warburg.