HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Edmund Gosse

Although Edmund Gosse was a prolific author of biography and literary and dramatic criticism, *Father and Son* (1907) is his most engaging book and the book for which today he is best known. It has also been called the first psychological autobiography.

Gosse's father, Philip Gosse, was once a very prominent zoologist, as Edmund shows in the first part of the book. A contemporary of Charles Darwin and the geologist Charles Lyell, he was highly respected for his detailed descriptions of sea anemones and the other life in tidal pools. But he was also a stern evangelical Christian who refused to believe in evolution and doggedly defended the Biblical account of creation. His argument was that God had created the world, Adam and Eve, and all the plants and animals in just six days but with all the evidence in it of an older evolution, such as fossils and geological strata. He expounded this theory in 1857 in his book *Omphalos* – named for the argument that Adam and Eve had navels. But the book was ridiculed ("defined by a hasty press as being this—that God hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity," says Edmund, pp. 77-8), and it was rejected by all sides. In the same year Gosse's wife, Edmund's mother, died of breast cancer.

As a result of these crushing blows and losses, Philip took Edmund and a nurse-housekeeper to live in a seaside village in Devon, where he became a minister to the Plymouth Brethren, his Puritan sect. The remainder of *Father and Son* describes Edmund's education by his father, who wished to raise him as a perfect embodiment of Christian virtue. His father led him in long prayer sessions. He was forbidden to read anything but the Bible and religious tracts. He did not go to the theater or look at art. And his father baptized him and had him admitted as an adult member of his father's church when he was only ten.

Gradually Edmund rebelled. But the rebellion was painful to both father and son, and Edmund describes it with careful reconstructions of the feelings and behaviors of both. Edmund's admission into the church, for instance, was orchestrated by his father so as not to antagonize the adult members. Edmund sensed this and behaved with great piety, intelligence, and restraint. However, once admitted he did become proud and acted very childishly sometimes, even to sticking out his tongue at other boys who were not yet baptized. In another scene Edmund wants to go to a party that his father does not want him to. So they pray together, with his father expecting that he will hear the voice of God telling him not to go, and with Edmund silently becoming resolved to rebel and to go. When the praying is over and he says, "The Lord says I may go to the Browns," his father has no answer. "He was caught in his own trap," writes Gosse,"and though he was certain that the Lord had said nothing of the kind, there was no road open for him but just sheer retreat." (pp. 173-4; ch. XI)

Edmund gains an ally when his father marries an attractive, educated, and cultivated Quaker, Eliza Brightwen. She introduces poetry and even the fiction of Charles Dickens into Edmund's education, using her Quaker tact and gentleness to overcome Philip Gosse's rigidity. She even gains Edmund the right to look at books of art and classic statuary.

The psychological subtlety with which Gosse describes and comments on each character and incident is what keeps the reader engaged. It also raises the book far above many other accounts of a child's conflict with a stern parent. Gosse seems anxious to respect all parties. He exposes his father, but he is ready, too, to expose and criticize himself. "At this time I was a mixture of childishness and priggishness, of curious knowledge and dense ignorance," he says of himself at another point. (p. 185, ch. XI)

Still, one can wonder about his fairness. His "priggishness" and "dense ignorance" always seem finally to derive from his father's character and the prejudices and limitations of the education his father has forced upon him. Is the book primarily a biography of the father or an autobiography of the son? One answer comes towards the end when Gosse passes quickly over his experiences at a boarding school that he later was sent to, writing, "But this is not an autobiography, and with the cold and shrouded details of my uninteresting school life I will not fatigue the reader." (p. 192, ch. 12) Yet neither is it only the biography of his father, of whom he actually had written a biography shortly before. So the best answer is that it is both. It is *Father and Son.*

Questions for Further Study:

1. Compare the childhoods and educations of John Stuart Mill and Edmund Gosse. Which father is more likeable? Which is presented more sympathetically? How do the sons reflect the character of the fathers?

2. Near the end of the Epilogue Gosse writes, "what a charming companion, what a delightful parent, what a courteous and engaging friend, my Father would have been, would pre-eminently have been to me, if it had not for the stringent piety which ruined it all." (p. 223) Is this possible? If his father had been all these things, would Gosse have written the book?

3. Read the last paragraph of the book, ending with "he [Edmund] took a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself." Do all human beings really have this "privilege," or is it only in societies where people can break with their families, clans, social classes, and traditions? Is there autobiography without an "inner life"?

4. Using Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Mill's *Autobiography* as your examples, what is the difference between a romantic and a Victorian education? It is often said that it was the romantic poets (particularly Wordsworth) who "discovered childhood"—that is, recognized the importance of childhood to a person's later development and character. So consider the two men's different childhoods and teachers.

5. One of the major features of Victorian culture was its earnestness. People were expected to be hard-working and serious, and there was little time for play and joy. Is this what Newman, Mill, and Gosse have in common? If so, why was each man so earnest? What does their earnestness have to do with their all writing autobiographies?

6. Compare the meaning and importance of women in the lives and autobiographies of Mill and Gosse.