

REVIEWS

Kathy Rees and Christine Alexander, Editors. *Tristram Jones*, by Edmund Gosse. Juvenilia Press, 2022.

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THIS BEAUTIFULLY edited first edition of Edmund Gosse's novella *Tristram Jones*, written in 1872 but never previously published, has several *raisons d'être*: it is part of the Juvenilia Press's mission to bring to light early writings by children and adolescents, both those who went on to become professional writers and those who did not; it focuses on a man who became eminent, not only for his own writings, but for his unparalleled readings of Victorian and Edwardian literature; and, lastly, it sheds light on that man's masterpiece, *Father and Son* (1907), the crucial text in the transition from Victorian to modern life-writing.

It is this last function that provides, arguably, the ultimate justification for the study of juvenilia and therefore the ultimate justification for the existence of the Juvenilia Press: the belief that these early productions can be crucial for the understanding of later masterpieces. They are to be read, it is implied, not for any intrinsic literary merit of their own, but as signposts towards later achievement.

Even if this point is acknowledged, Gosse's early "fragment of a novel" (his own words) provides much enjoyment for the reader in its own right. It is set in a vividly evoked late-Victorian London and tells the story of the eponymous hero, a pompous young man who wishes he had been named after the Arthurian Tristram but, as the reader quickly recognises, has much more in common with Sterne's comical anti-hero, Tristram Shandy. The central relationship between Tristram and Emma turns out to be not so much a love affair as two parallel *self*-love affairs. Both protagonists are dealt with ruthlessly by the narrator: "It will be perceived that neither Tristram nor Emma doubted the heat of the other's devotion. It was their own that was so rapidly falling towards zero" (51).

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Young Gosse was famously prohibited by his puritanical parents from reading fiction in his childhood. *Tristram Jones* is nevertheless full of echoes of Dickens and Austen. There is a painful Austenian picnic, a cast of Dickensian grotesques, including the inevitable Cockney servant (“Oh Susan, if you was an iron block you couldn’t speak harsher to me!” [43]), but in addition, most tellingly, there is a ruthless narrative voice that cuts through any trace of Dickensian sentiment with a cynicism more crude than Austenian irony, and which is obviously young Gosse’s own.

Rees and Alexander argue cogently that the narrator’s appeal to an educated readership, as it were behind the backs of the novel’s characters, is a valuable experiment with narrative voice drawn upon later, much more subtly, in *Father and Son*—and that the juvenile novel thus prepared the way for the later masterpiece. However, for me, the cynical narrative voice is the most fascinating feature of *Tristram Jones*, particularly since it is *not* a voice that is heard in *Father and Son*. Gosse’s cover note to the early novel unambiguously confesses, “I am Tristram Jones.” There is a degree of unself-pitying self-knowledge here that is absent from *Father and Son*, where the plight of the child is what is stressed. Consider this extract, in which the narrator draws the reader into comic disparagement of Tristram:

And, first, we must make what seems a painful discovery, namely, that though Tristram has plenty of characteristics, he has as yet, properly speaking, developed no character at all. The best thing we can find in him is a happy negation of all strong vicious impulses. He is good-natured, affectionate, impressible, but the impressions fade away like morning dew beneath the ray of a new book or a new friend.
(3)

This is a remarkably astute piece of self-analysis from a young man in his early twenties. It is much more unforgiving than Dickens’s treatment of the young David Copperfield, a slightly more disguised self-portrait. Dickens also treats of First Love—but with nothing of the young Gosse’s precocious world-weariness. It is only years later, in *Little Dorrit*, that Dickens can see through his youthful passion for Maria Beadnell and reinvent Dora Spenlow as garrulous, comical Flora Finching. Young Gosse’s feelings for Emma Beddow, whom he courted and almost married, are presented with considerable cynicism through Tristram’s feelings for Emma Fields: “Tristram Jones supposes that he is going to drink tea with his beloved, and yet his steps have none of the fierce swiftness that an ardent lover’s has when he moves to meet his mistress” (2).

Later, when Tristram meets Margaret, a girl full of imagination and infinitely more suitable to be loved than Emma, he is nervous and glad when she departs. The narrator takes the reader into his confidence and comments, “Stupid Tristram!” (25).

The whole novella has the feel of someone delighting in the playfulness possible in fiction. This certainly does put it in dialogue with *Father and Son*, where the son’s

escape is into the world of the imagination he has been denied by his parents, through their interdict on his reading of fiction. In particular, Edmund seems infatuated by what must have been his recent discovery of Dickens. *Tristram Jones* is full of Dickensian touches as well as direct allusions. At the opening party there is a reading from *The Pickwick Papers*; among the guests is a “Miss Finching” (a reference to the Flora Finching already mentioned); there is a “violent newness” to the décor of the vulgar Field family (8)—recalling the disconcerting newness of the Veneerings in the opening chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*; the two Miss Campions, one sweet, the other sour (13), have a Dickensian flavour about them; a Virginia creeper is personified as it “clutched the very chimney pots, as though to save itself from falling” (14) in a way that, as the editors note, also sounds “very Dickensian” (14n34); and little Mr Cartwright, “The Old Bibliographer,” with his papers and busyness, initially seems to have more than a touch of Mr Dick.

However, Mr Cartwright turns out to have a much more serious function in the narrative, as the genuine disinterested scholar used to expose Tristram’s shallowness. The young Gosse is, with breath-taking clear-sightedness, condemning his own desire for publicity and fame in Tristram’s response to Mr Cartwright’s self-abnegation (31). Again, he seems, as a very young man, to see through himself with uncomfortable acuteness, indeed, to pre-empt criticisms later made of his older self. In his reveries before meeting the author, Tristram imagines “the veteran author pronounce him the Man of the Future and pledge himself to further his genius” (27). The older Gosse’s self-aggrandisement and simultaneous tendency to sycophancy would, on this evidence, have been seen through at once by his clear-eyed younger self—a self whose nature seems worlds away from that of the young protagonist of *Father and Son*, at least as imagined by his parents. The theme of parental misunderstanding and misappropriation is there even in Tristram’s name, which he takes to be a reference to the knight of Arthurian legend but which (as the narrator divulges to the reader) is actually a parental reference to Tristram Shandy, in other words, a figure of comedy. This is therefore a comic inflexion of the theme treated tragically in *Father and Son*, where the child cannot bear the weight of parental expectation that he will succeed in a world for which, he increasingly realises, he is intellectually and temperamentally peculiarly unsuited.

The lightness of touch of *Tristram Jones* is given a tragic inflexion in *Father and Son*—and Rees and Alexander’s argument is that the former contributes to and possibly enables the latter. The two works are certainly in dialogue: the editors, in their introduction, point to the common theme of “restraint and release”; the shared use of bird imagery; and a narrative voice that draws the reader into complicity and excludes the protagonist. Again, the comparison with Dickens is striking: in *Great Expectations*, which was written only after Dickens had reread *David Copperfield*, the adult narrator treats his younger self, the protagonist, with humour, condescension, only occasionally real empathy. In Edmund Gosse’s case, the older man never, to my mind, measures up to the heroic clarity of his younger self. There is something

disingenuous even about the older Gosse's reference to this slight but enjoyable novella as a "fragment": Rees and Alexander have sensibly recognised that the work does in fact stand on its own, and have changed Gosse's numbering of the chapters so that what the author called "Chapter II" becomes, very plausibly, "Chapter I." This is a long short story or a novella, rather than a fragment of something much greater.

Rereading by an author of an earlier work, in preparation for the writing of a later one, is, on this evidence, a process worthy of much more critical analysis. It is certainly arguable that Dickens and Gosse could not have written *Great Expectations* and *Father and Son*, respectively, without recourse to work written when they were younger. The final sentence of the fascinating introduction sums up the editors' argument about the significance of *Tristram Jones*:

Just as Tristram's misgivings about his union with Emma Fields mount during the course of the narrative, so the protagonist of *Father and Son* develops doubts and questions about parentally-imposed religion, and hence the fundamental drive of *Father and Son*—a journey from restraint to release—repeats the trajectory of *Tristram Jones*. (xxix).

In revealing these parallel trajectories, the editors have amply justified the mission of the Juvenilia Press: but, in introducing the ruthlessly clear-sighted, precociously world-weary narrator of *Tristram Jones*, they have in addition given a new and unexpected insight into the nature of the young man who emerged, newly fledged and vulnerable, into the adult world at the end of *Father and Son*.

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Tim Fulton and others. *Henry Kirke White, 1785–1806.*

<https://kirkewhitecom.wordpress.com>

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TIM FULFORD'S website kirkewhitecom.wordpress.com is at once an advertisement for and complement to his scholarly collected edition of Henry Kirke White's poetry, which is a work in progress. Fulford notes that this edition will be the first of its kind,

providing readers with the historical context and literary analysis Kirke White so richly deserves. The Wordpress site that is my subject here sets the scene for Kirke White's formal debut into literary study. The site consists of biographical material and a series of short essays or extended notes that either examine Kirke White's poetry or connect his work with that of his peers and successors. Featuring contributions from several scholars and treating topics such as working-class authorship, poetic patronage, transatlantic exchange, and, of course, published juvenilia and the cultural impact of young poets, Fulford's website will attract the interest of scholars working in all areas of Romantic studies.

What becomes clear after only a few minutes of perusing Fulford's site is that Henry Kirke White is a figure worth learning about. A prototype in more ways than one for Keats, Kirke White was a juvenile, Romantic poet who died early in his pursuit of a Cambridge education after succumbing to consumption. His illness had worsened because of years spent trying to balance his working-class responsibilities with his academic aspirations. Consequently, many of his poems are melancholic contemplations of mortality, illness, and earthly inequities, though as Fulford and others show Kirke White's deep faith and writerly finesse prevent his work from sliding into self-pitying complaint. Kirke White's biography and literary chops tie him closely with Thomas Chatterton, who died thirty-five years before him; as did Chatterton, Kirke White (briefly) overcame his economic circumstances because of his demonstrated poetic skill and relentless work ethic, and, as with Chatterton, his untimely death consolidated his cultural reputation. A genius poet all the more alluring because of his youth and the toll his genius took during his short life, it is easy to see how Kirke White and his work resonate with some of the major Romantic figures and themes that would emerge in the years following his death.

Fulford's website is effective because it so clearly situates Kirke White as a figure significant to his moment and, consequently, as someone with cultural relevance throughout the nineteenth century. This is achieved through a series of short essays: either close readings of specific poems by Kirke White alongside those of others or dives into various archives to illustrate the reach of his published work as well as his cachet as a tragic figure. Fulford is responsible for many of these short pieces; his entries are especially successful at succinctly and convincingly making the case for Kirke White's literary influence. Fulford positions Kirke White in a broader network of writers including John Keats, John Clare, Robert Southey, William Bryant, Walt Whitman, and the Brontë family. In some cases, the story is really one of personal interaction or biographical influence. Fulford's analysis of the material at Haworth, for example, paints a picture of intergenerational influence beginning with Patrick Brontë's acquaintance with Kirke White at Cambridge and perpetuated by family lore surrounding Maria Branwell's possessions. Kirke White in this story is clearly something of a celebrity, a name Branwell considered worth dropping as much because of his reputation as a genius cut down in his prime as because of his poems.

This appears to be how others like Walt Whitman understood Kirke White; Fulford explains in his entry on Southey that “Kirke White was read, almost from the start, as a dead poet.” In fact, the “dead poet” characterization is largely because of Robert Southey. Though Kirke White had published a collection during his lifetime (*Clifton Grove*, 1803), the poet’s posthumous reputation was really the result of Southey’s publication, *The Remains of Henry Kirke White ... with an Account of his Life* (2 vols, Vernor and Hood, 1807). As the title suggests, this collection comprised Kirke White’s work and a biography of the poet, the latter of which Southey composed with the help of Kirke White’s brother. Fulford tells us in the same entry that “the *Remains* went through eleven editions in seventeen years before copyright was broken in 1824. After that, dozens more collections followed from over twenty different publishers: Kirke White was one of the most widely printed poets of the entire nineteenth century.” Southey’s text did much to reinforce Kirke White’s image as a tragic genius and his reputation as a poet.

Fulford’s website effectively demonstrates that Kirke White’s poetry merits that reputation. In his essay explicating “Ode on Disappointment,” for instance, Fulford shows that Kirke White was both a technical innovator and an educated emulator whose creativity with form and even word choice recurs throughout his corpus, as does evidence of his deep reading across genres and topics. Fulford explores the latter in his entries on rural, comic, and graveyard poems, underscoring Kirke White’s participation in and influence upon some of the poetic trends of his day. He was at his most influential as combined poet and cultural icon: Fulford’s essays on Bryant (who composed a pale, and very American, imitation of Kirke White’s poetry), Clare and other working-class poets, and Keats suggest that part of Kirke White’s significance to the Romantic period is that his particular persona (brilliant, moral, natural) paired with his poetic output in a way that is representative of the literary period. That is, Kirke White’s story and work is in some senses the story and work of Romanticism. Because of Keats’s legacy both during his period and ours, Fulford’s assessment of the dialogue between Keats and Kirke White does much to advance this interpretation of the latter’s importance. Drawing thematic and stylistic parallels between Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” and Kirke White’s “Clifton Grove,” as well as between the two poets’ use of figures like Endymion, Fulford shows that the young poet’s influence on his literary successor is worth investigating further.

The impact of Kirke White on a range of writers and topics is explored further in a series of entries by other contributors. R. J. Ellis, in “Harriet Wilson, Our Nig [*sic*] and Henry Kirke White’s Poetry,” notes the frequent appearance of Kirke White in *Our Nig* and speculates about the connotations and attraction of a figure like Kirke White for marginalized writers like Wilson. Johnny Cammish applies a fine analytical lens to “To the Herb Rosemary,” supporting Fulford’s claim that Kirke White’s poetry is learned and complex; Alexander Freer does similar work in his entry on “moongazing,” which considers several moon-themed poems that have a Wordsworthian flavour. Joseph Phelan and Nora Crook contribute pieces that

connect Kirke White to still more major literary figures of the period. Phelan uses a reference to Kirke White in Browning's courtship correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett as a launching point for considering the young poet's lasting impact on Browning's literary imagination; Crook likewise identifies notes of Kirke White in Shelley, occurring sometimes on the level of a single word (as in the appearance of the word "solium," which features in Kirke White's "The Christiad" and in a fragment from Shelley). In two especially interesting contributions, John Goodridge and Christopher Catanese provide historical and archival context for the publishing atmosphere of the time and that of the decades that precede and succeed Kirke White. Goodridge's "Henry Kirke White and the Labouring-Class Poets: a Preliminary Survey" traces interactions between Kirke White and other poets of his background who strove to make a similar transition into the opportunities afforded by a Cambridge education, both during his lifetime and after (in all cases these poets use Kirke White as a model or inspiration). Catanese's essay, detailing the complicated relationship between Kirke White and his desired patron, Capel Lofft (a relationship represented in two odd, public, and pointed sonnets authored by each), works to showcase Kirke White's talent as well as provide useful information regarding his path to becoming a known, polished poet.

While these essays do much to communicate the significance of Kirke White to the nineteenth-century English-reading public, the difference in scope and even tone between these entries is one of the website's shortcomings. The contributions at times read like informal blog posts or notes and at other times like scholarly essays. What is more, because there is little introductory material explaining the goals for the site, it comes a little as a surprise to stumble upon a guest-authored entry midway through the reading experience. More information about the website's intended audience and its relationship to the in-progress scholarly edition of Kirke White's poems would help readers better appreciate the material hosted on kirkewhitecom.wordpress.com.

That so much excellent research is available for free on Fulford's site is of course one of the many benefits of using digital space to share academic work. Yet in many other ways, kirkewhitecom.wordpress.com does not take advantage of its online platform. While the sparse, black and white design works nicely to focus users on the content, it is ultimately a little too sparse with respect to user engagement. The mechanics of the site are inconsistent (sometimes entries open in a new tab, for instance, but other times they do not). There is a notable lack of interconnectivity. Why is there not more of a wiki-like design, with key names or events linked, or at the very least indexed? Why are the entries not arranged more thematically or chronologically, and organized in a dropdown menu? Why is there not more information about the contributors or links to existing resources to do with Kirke White or other relevant juvenile or under-researched poets? To engage with kirkewhitecom.wordpress.com is to feel both excited about the wealth of information being presented and frustrated by the site's unfulfilled potential as a digital hub for

Kirke White studies. Here again, though, more information about the intent for the site would help—as an informative blog, however, it works very well.

Issues with presentation aside, Fulford's website is a welcome addition to juvenilia and Romantic studies. Kirke White's poetry and legacy was clearly important to readers and aspiring writers of the nineteenth century, and consequently should be important to those of us who study the period. Fulford's blog makes the case that Kirke White deserves attention from literary scholars as well as cultural historians, and especially from those interested in the creative and intellectual work of young people. That scholarly material of this calibre is available to all who wish to learn from it makes Tim Fulford's project especially admirable.

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