EDMUND GOSSE'S *TRISTRAM JONES* AND THE LEGACY OF THE MATERNAL PORTRAIT

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EDMUND Gosse broke the mould of nineteenth-century life writing with his study of family relationships, in *Father and Son* (1907), a book now widely recognised as having made a crucial intervention in the transition from Victorian to modern forms of biography. Modern academic interest in *Father and Son* was first stimulated by the rise of auto/biographical studies in the 1970s, and the book has continued to attract attention from a wide range of disciplines.[1] *Father and Son* has, however, never been read in the light of Gosse's juvenilia, an approach that I adopt in this essay, using Gosse's "autobiographical romance," *Tristram Jones* (c. 1872), as my lens.[2] (The manuscript of this novella, archived at Cambridge University Library since 1941, was published for the first time by the Juvenilia Press in 2022.) Written when Gosse was twenty-two, *Tristram Jones*[3] provides a novelistic treatment of Gosse's own life after leaving home in 1867 and starting to work in London: the very period encapsulated in the epilogue of *Father and Son*. In terms of life-writing, *Tristram Jones* is a very revealing narrative, since it imparts a synchronous perspective on Gosse's life and outlook during his early twenties, in contrast to the epilogue, written some thirty-five years after the events. Despite the lengthy interval between the two works, *Tristram Jones* contains ideas and imagery that anticipate *Father and Son*, and both narratives, strikingly, conclude with a gesture of freedom. At the end of *Tristram Jones*, the eponymous protagonist celebrates having extricated himself from an incompatible engagement and looks forward to the single-minded pursuit of an aesthetic career. Similarly, in *Father and Son*, Gosse rejects a parentally determined life of Christian service to devote himself to a literary vocation. A shift from limitation to liberation thus structures both texts.

Against this background, my focus in this essay is on Gosse's importation into *Tristram Jones* of a chain of conflicting emotions and memories impelled by a material object, namely, a portrait of his mother, Emily, then known as Emily Bowes, painted

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in 1831 when she was twenty-four: a portrait that, I argue, hovers almost uncannily over Gosse's fiction. *Tristram Jones* is a coming-of-age story set in the late 1860s, where the eponymous protagonist is preoccupied with his future in terms of career and marriage, themes that were uppermost in Gosse's mind at that time. More specifically, Gosse's responses to women are powerfully shaped by the haunting presence of the portrait of Emily Bowes, which both animates and troubles the text. Using Roland Barthes's notion in *Camera Lucida* (1980) of the relationship between what he calls the *studium*, the cultural context of a given image, and the *punctum*, an aspect of that image that disturbs or "wounds" a specific viewer, I show how allusions to Emily's portrait destabilise Gosse's story. Gosse's imaginative deployment of this portrait in his 1872 fiction has a powerfully unsettling impact, one which, moreover, he reintroduced four decades later into his 1912 Booklover's edition of *Father and Son*. Here, Gosse reopened the juvenile "wound" by inserting a reproduction of the portrait into the text of *Father and Son*, conveying to a new generation of readers the portrait's power to disturb.

Tristram Jones (c. 1872) and Gosse's Cover Note (1902)

ONE EXTRAORDINARY feature of the manuscript of "Tristram Jones" is the fact that its author, some thirty years after composition, set down his reflections on it in a cover note.[4] Dated 1902, this was presumably intended for a future biographer or archivist; by this date, Gosse was an established man of letters and biographer, cognisant of the value of juvenilia in a writer's archive. In the cover note he explains that "I, of course, am Tristram Jones," and that the story constitutes a "record of my own feelings" at a time of "sudden expansion of feeling and observation" during his "life at Tottenham" where he lodged with a former friend of his mother from 1867 to 1875. "In reading these poor pages, thirty years later," Gosse reflects, "my life at Tottenham stands out as full and strong as yesterday. This is why I refrain from tearing the rubbish into the wastepaper-basket." Although he dismisses "Tristram Jones" as the "rubbish" of his pre-maturity, he is in fact carefully curating his archive to forge the narrative of his cultural apprenticeship and literary ambition.

The novella is certainly relevant to this narrative, as its intertwining themes concern Tristram Jones's career as well as his marriage. Tristram's aspirations in music, literature, and art history reflect Gosse's involvement starting in 1870 with the Pre-Raphaelite circle, particularly Ford Madox Brown, A. C. Swinburne, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The very name, Tristram, resonates with Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism, especially the group's interest in the medieval romance of Tristram and Yseult. Not only had William Morris, together with his Pre-Raphaelite colleagues, produced a series of thirteen stained-glass panels depicting scenes from the Tristram legend for Harden Grange in Yorkshire in 1862,[5] but Swinburne was also in 1871

writing the prelude to his epic poem, "Tristram of Lyonnesse," which he eventually published in 1882 (Gosse, *Life* 261). Gosse iterates the presence of this legend in his novella by having his protagonist view an amateur painting of Tristram and Yseult, depicted drinking the love potion on board ship (*Tristram Jones* 31). This romantic name suits Tristram Jones's literary and artistic nature, as well as his tendency to indulge fantasies about his cultural and marital ambitions.

Fig. 1. Portrait of Emily Bowes, 1831, Add MS 890 20/93/1 [5035 G]: folio 1, (courtesy British Library).

The novella's focus on marital ambitions—on the search for a suitable marriage-partner, in other words—may have prompted Gosse's choice of surname for his title character, since "Jones" conjures the title character of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), but the two narratives' trajectories are quite different. The noble-minded but susceptible hero of *Tom Jones* is ensnared by various women but attains his true love in the end. In Fielding's novel, the right choice for Tom is always clear, but Gosse provides two possible marriage-candidates for Tristram, neither of whom finally wins his affection. The first is the mercenary and manipulative Emma Fields, whose

character, according to Gosse's cover note, is based on one of the daughters of "a non-conformist family called Beddow or Beddoes" to whom he was "very nearly engaged," an experience that in 1902 he "shudder[s] to recollect" (Gosse, *Tristram Jones* xvi). Tristram and Emma are similarly "very nearly engaged," but failings on both sides make their separation inevitable. The second candidate is an imaginative and fanciful young woman Margaret Wilbye, who is a ward of two eccentric spinsters. In a traditional romance, Emma's withdrawal would have provided an opening for the more whimsical Margaret. However, Gosse weights Margaret with characteristics derived from his mother's portrait, rendering a conventional happy-ever-after conclusion impossible.

Emily Bowes and the Romantic-Era Portrait

THE 1831 portrait of Emily Bowes was painted almost half-way through Emily's seventeen-year-period of employment as a governess at the home of an Anglican vicar in the isolated village of Compton Beauchamp, then Berkshire, now Oxfordshire. She is dressed in a fashionable lilac gown, with her hair arranged *à la chinoise* (Figure 1). As

Fig. 2. The Last and Newest Fashions, 1836: Opera and Evening Dresses, from World of Fashion, *April 1836, opposite p. 96, (reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library).*

is evident from the 1836 fashion plate above (Figure 2), Emily is wearing a Romantic-Era dress, a style that favoured the hourglass figure, achieved in part by tight, boned corsets. The diminutive waist is further emphasised by the belt and by the leg-of-mutton or gigot sleeves, full at the upper arm and fitted at the elbow (Takeda and Spilker 38). The only other adult image of Emily that exists is the deathbed photograph (Figure 3), taken at Emily's request in order that Edmund have "some means of keeping in remembrance his mother's features" (Philip Gosse 67). The image of the splendidly attired and coiffured young woman of 1831 would have provided a startling contrast with the 1857 image of the saintly bedridden figure clutching her Bible. Emily's belief that fairy-tales were a heinous distraction from the Christian life had led her to forbid Edmund access to any form of fiction.[6] The 1831 portrait, then, might have been one of the most fanciful images young Edmund encountered, and we can understand his having been drawn to it more readily than to the familiar but foreboding figure in the deathbed scene.

Fig. 3. Hand-tinted photograph of Emily Gosse taken four days before her death on 10 February 1857, Add.9713 (reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library).

By 1831, Emily had already been a governess at the clerical household for seven years, this employment having been necessitated by her parents' bankruptcy in 1814.

As for many young women of the impoverished gentry, there was little other choice of occupation for Emily. The vicarage setting would, however, have gratified her: we know from Emily's manuscript, "Recollections of the Earlier Life of Emily Bowes to the Year 1835" (Add.7035/II)), that she had been intensely religious from the age of nine, and that at the time when she sat for the portrait, Emily was preparing to publish her first collection of devotional verses, *Hymns and Sacred Poems by EB* (1832). In one of these poems, "Walk by faith, and not by sight," she uses the clothing motif to urge sanctity: "As you your body neatly dress, / Strive to be clothed with holiness" (206). Given Emily's self-disciplined and serious nature, and her deep engagement with the Bible, it is strange that she should wear such frivolous attire for the portrait. Governesses usually presented themselves in practical and plain dress, as illustrated by this portrait of Sarah Andrews, who looked after Edmund from the age of seven to ten, seen here demurely buttoned up in modest black (Figure 4). It is possible that Emily's glamorous dress was a hand-me-down. In her "Recollections" she records her gratitude to wealthy friends of her parents: "The Mowasons and Miss Rupak were very kind in giving me clothes" (21). Emily's modish hairstyle (which resembles that of the fashion-plate model wearing the yellow gown) is, however, more difficult to account for.

Fig. 4. Portrait of Sarah Andrews, originally captioned "A careful and conscientious governess" in Father and Son *(The Booklover's Edition, 1912), opposite p.106.*

The portrait certainly appears to have troubled Gosse. As the sitter, Emily chooses her gown and hairstyle and adopts a bodily pose and facial expression, thus transforming herself in advance of the image being created. The artist makes the aesthetic choices, depicting Emily in a semi-profile pose against a plain background, and setting the figure in an oval frame. These documentary acts produce the *studium*, which according to Barthes encompasses the conventional elements and rules that allow for an unambiguous coding of the meaning of an image: the *studium* is "a kind of education, to inform, to represent, to surprise, to provoke desire" (Barthes 28). In *Tristram Jones*, however, we find evidence that young Gosse's experience of viewing this image of Emily as she was eighteen years before his birth was overwhelming for him. The foreignness of the Romantic-Era dress disrupts or punctures the *studium*, coming over him like a shock. Gosse is arrested by what Barthes calls the *punctum*, "the sting, speck, cut" or the thing that "pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)," that is, the unintended agency of the picture (27). In fact, I would argue that Gosse's contemplation of Emily's portrait is comparable with Barthes's meditation on an early photograph of his own deceased mother: "I could read my non-existence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her. There is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed *differently*" (64). The Romantic-Era dress exerts such a powerful *punctum* on the stupefied Gosse that when he employs it as a feature in his fiction, it determines the destiny of its wearer.

In *Tristram Jones*, Gosse expresses his experience of *punctum* in relation to his mother's Romantic-Era gown through Tristram's response to the sight of Margaret's dress:

> The first thing he noticed was that she was dressed in most exquisite old garments that she must have gathered out of her grandmother's wardrobe, a dress of the days of Sir Joshua,[7] soft and pale …. It was something quite out of his previous experience to see a girl so sweetly and yet so strangely dressed. (22)

Tristram's consciousness of Margaret is dominated by the idea of the dress: he is, in Barthes' terminology, stung, cut, or pricked by its strangeness. The dress strikes Tristram as incongruent with Margaret's age and situation, just as Emily's frivolous 1831 appearance is incongruent with the strict Evangelical figure of Gosse's childhood, the woman whose published writings had urged young mothers to deny their children "foolish nursery ditties … and other trash" (Emily Gosse, "Page" 29).

A little later in the story, Gosse employs a different mouthpiece to reiterate the way his own subjectivity has been wounded by the portrait, when the garrulous servant, Sarah Solomon, exclaims derisively, "But don't she dress up in queer clothes rather!" (*Tristram Jones* 43). Although Sarah is a comic character, her biblically resonant surname, Solomon, lends her judgement a sharp edge, reminding us that, indeed, Margaret's dress is peculiar. According to the *OED*, "queer" means "strange, odd,

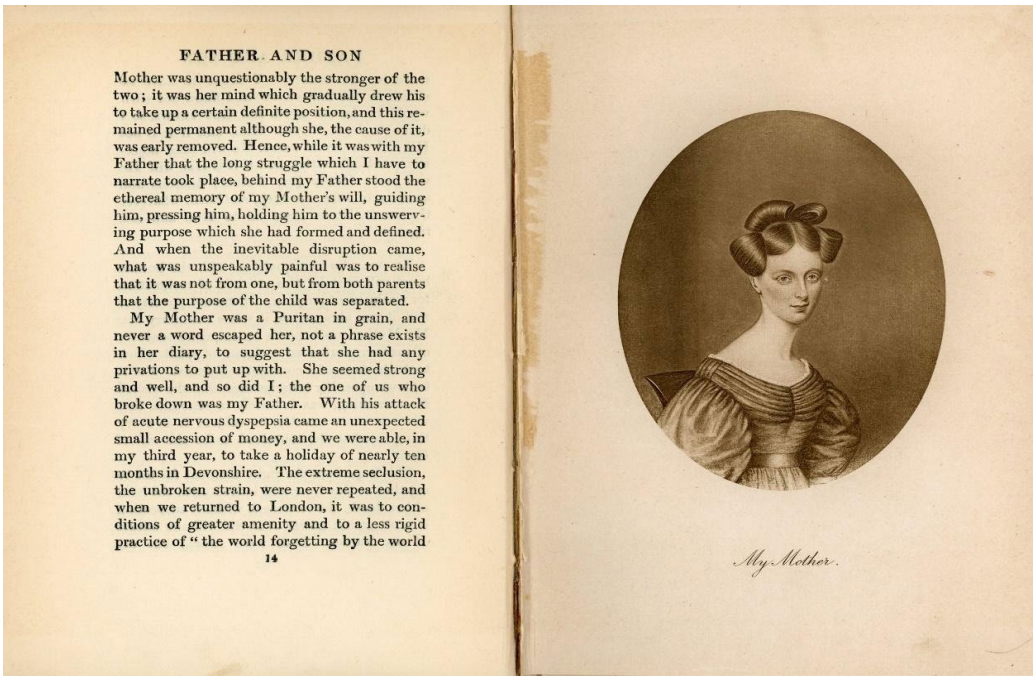
peculiar, eccentric," but also refers to something "of questionable character, suspicious, dubious." I read Emily's dress as likewise "questionable" insofar as it represents, to Gosse, a betrayal. Emily had denied young Edmund fairy-stories, and yet as a young woman she had posed in this fairy-tale dress. Emily's strictures and posthumous legacy had required him always to live up to his religious dedication; he never had an opportunity in his youth to assume another identity, however transitory. He could never figuratively dress up and be fanciful. And yet his strict religious mother had in her youth, at least on this one occasion, taken the opportunity to play with an alternative identity. The portrait thus, I believe, simultaneously engrosses and embitters him.

Our final view of Margaret in *Tristram Jones* shows her seated on the grass, dressed as Gosse's mother had been in 1831, dreaming of fairy-princes on white steeds: "Was her horizon always to be bounded by the river-shallows on the one side and the vestry of the Baptist Chapel on the other? Oh! that the fairy-prince would come at once!" (47). Margaret is trapped. The river is not deep enough for her to sail away, and the presence of the "vestry" (derived from Latin *vestarium* or wardrobe) reminds her that she must—metaphorically—clothe herself in religious vestments. It is as though, once dressed in Emily's gown, Margaret becomes freshly aware of the material and psychological constraints of poverty and dependence. Margaret's exclamation, "Oh! that the fairy-prince would come at once!" makes this an urgent, never-to-be repeated-moment, just as Emily's assumption of the fashionable gown for the portrait in 1831 seems to have been a unique moment when she deviated from her single-minded pursuit of Puritan ways. In *Tristram Jones*, the heightened moment passes, and the amalgamated figure of Margaret-Emily moves into "the shadow of the sun-dial" (47). Gosse leaves her in the shade, concealed—ironically—by the penumbra of an instrument activated by the passage of light. Knowing too well the trajectory of Emily's story from the Romantic-Era portrait to the Evangelical deathbed photograph, Gosse leaves the rest of Margaret's story untold.

The Reappearance of the Portrait in 1912

WE HAVE seen how the characterisation of Margaret Wilbye is driven by the portrait of Emily, but how does this offer new insights into *Father and Son*? I suggest that it moves Emily centre stage, reinforcing Gosse's assertion that "behind my Father stood the ethereal memory of my Mother's will, guiding him, pressing him, holding him to the unswerving purpose which she had formed and designed" (*Father and Son* 14). It would have been impossible for Gosse to criticise his mother openly, since the dead Emily had attained the status of domestic sainthood among Victorian believers as a result of Anna Shipton's *Tell Jesus: Recollections of Emily Gosse* (1863), an Evangelical bestseller that remained in print until 1911 (Cunningham 323). Yet clearly, the portrait

still consumed Gosse, and five years after first publishing *Father and Son,* he was moved to restate its disconcerting effect. This time, instead of conjuring the maternal presence by references to the dress, Gosse imported the portrait wholesale into the Booklover's edition of *Father and Son* (1912). Given his long-term connection as author, editor, and mentor for the publisher, William Heinemann (St. John 15–16), Gosse would have been able to dictate the placement of images within the text. It is unlikely to have been accidental, then, that the portrait of Emily was so positioned as to exert the most disruptive effect. It stands opposite the paragraph that begins: "My Mother was Puritan in grain," and Gosse binds this statement to the image by abbreviating the caption of the latter to *My Mother* (*Father and Son* 14, Figure 5). Readers are plunged into confusion as there seems to be no connection between the stereotypical puritanical figure in the text and the figure of the fashionably coiffured young woman in the portrait. By evoking this feeling of disturbance in the reader, Gosse transmits his own experience of adolescent confusion and wounding, his sense that there was something "questionable" about his sainted mother.



FATHER AND SON

Mother was unquestionably the stronger of the two; it was her mind which gradually drew his to take up a certain definite position, and this remained permanent although she, the cause of it, was early removed. Hence, while it was with my Father that the long struggle which I have to narrate took place, behind my Father stood the ethereal memory of my Mother's will, guiding him, pressing him, holding him to the unswerving purpose which she had formed and defined. And when the inevitable disruption came, what was unspeakably painful was to realise that it was not from one, but from both parents that the purpose of the child was separated.

My Mother was a Puritan in grain, and never a word escaped her, not a phrase exists in her diary, to suggest that she had any privations to put up with. She seemed strong and well, and so did I; the one of us who broke down was my Father. With his attack of acute nervous dyspepsia came an unexpected small accession of money, and we were able, in my third year, to take a holiday of nearly ten months in Devonshire. The extreme seclusion, the unbroken strain, were never repeated, and when we returned to London, it was to conditions of greater amenity and to a less rigid practice of " the world forgetting by the world

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My Mother.

Fig. 5. Gosse's placement of the Romantic-Era portrait of his mother, opposite his assertion that she was "a Puritan in grain" in Father and Son *(The Booklover's Edition, 1912).*

When Emily died, she wanted her son to have a picture by which to remember her: this was the deathbed photograph, a powerful image of a good Evangelical death. Young Gosse was, I suggest, drawn rather to the poise and prettiness of the Romantic-Era portrait despite the confusing gamut of feelings it produced. This image disrupted his first autobiographical fiction. Forty years on, it still haunted him.

NOTES

[1] For a survey of the critical literature on Gosse, see my entry, "Edmund Gosse," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*.

[2] The term is Gosse's, written on a label attached to the manuscript in 1902 (Add. 2769/15).

[3] All page numbers in this essay refer to the Juvenilia Press edition of *Tristram Jones*.

[4] Gosse's cover note (archived as Add. 2769/15) is reproduced in full in *Tristram Jones* p. xvi.

[5] See Paul Lawson, "The Tristram and Isoude Stained Glass Panels." *The Bradford Antiquary*, 3rd series, vol. 1, 1985, pp. 50–55. www.bradfordhistorical.org.uk/tristram.html. Accessed 29 June 2022.

[6] For Emily's attitude to fiction, see Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* 24–27, 232. See also Emily and Philip Gosse, "Tract 19: The Towing Net" in *Narrative Tracts* (unpaginated) and Emily Gosse, "A Page for Young Mothers" 28–30.

[7] Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* were delivered in 1776 and first published in 1797. In the Seventh Discourse, he advised his students "not to paint [a lady] in modern dress, the familiarity of which alone is sufficient to destroy all dignity." *Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (edited by Edmund Gosse, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench & Co, 1884), p. 139. Gosse's allusion to Reynolds thus reinforces the idea that the dress is anachronistic.

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