The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

– Matthew Arnold, ca. 1851

Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” is often invoked to illustrate the Victorian religious crisis generated after Charles Lyell laid bare the ancient geological shingles of the world and Charles Darwin extracted from their vast edges drear powerful evidence of evolutionary processes.¹ For Edmund Gosse, the “Sea of Faith” takes on quite literal dimensions, since the Christianity he eventually eschews was nurtured at the seaside by his father, a reputable marine biologist whose infamous book Omphalos (1857) argued that God put the fossils in the earth at the moment of creation. Edmund’s rejection of his father’s faith is recounted in his 1907 autobiography. Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments covers the first seventeen years of Edmund Gosse’s life, from 1849 until 1866, the year when “the young man’s conscience threw off once for all the yoke of his ‘dedication’” to God (251).² Edmund so vividly recounts the oppressive religious constructs of his father, Philip, that his contemporary readers described the autobiography as “a story of rank cruelty and almost insanity,” claiming that it portrayed a “monstrous father” who was “one of the most terrible people the world has produced” (quoted in Thwaite 436-37).

By analyzing the way the religious discourse of Philip Gosse has been mediated to us by his son, I wish to argue that late Victorian sons often reinscribe the attitudes they seek to defy, demonstrating a type of “anxiety of influence.” However, while Harold Bloom’s “battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites” is a metaphor to describe the
struggle by “strong poets” to escape the “shadow cast by [their] precursors” (11), I will be considering a literal, lived relationship between father and son. Mikhail Bakhtin will be of help in this regard, for his literary criticism builds upon his early work in the ethics of human interaction.³ Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia” draws attention to the way lived experience affects meaning: “At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions” (Holquist 428). Bakhtin calls “authoritative” that discourse which fails to acknowledge the heteroglossia which inscribes it. In contrast he valorizes “dialogism”: “a constant interaction between [heteroglossic] meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Holquist 426). By exploring the way Edmund Gosse presents his father’s “undialogized” authoritative discourse, I shall argue that Father and Son illustrates how the Victorian sea of faith did not retreat so much as undergo a sea change.

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The sea was important to both the religious and scientific perspectives of Philip Gosse, who achieved fame in the 1850s through his publications and lectures on sea anemones, corals, and tide pools. Edmund notes how, after the death of his mother in 1857, “my Father’s existence, and therefore mine, was almost entirely divided between attending to the little community of ‘Saints’ in the village and collecting, examining and describing marine creatures from the sea-shore” (FS 114). The “Saints” were a dissenting congregation of austerely pietistic Calvinists who repudiated such evils as novels, jewelry, and Christmas puddings. When Philip took over leadership of the “Meeting,” as it was called, he insisted that “no one should ‘break bread’” until baptized through total immersion “in the sea”; however, public “jeering” at the activity soon led the group to design a tank in their “little chapel” for private baptisms (115-17).

Edmund considers his own immersion the “central event” of his childhood (156). Because the “Saints” believed in adult-only baptism, the ten year old son felt bound to prove that he “was adult in the knowledge of the Lord” (FS 154). In interviews with “Meeting” representatives, the boy’s answers “had been so full and clear,… [his] acquaintance with Scripture so amazing, [his] testimony to all the leading principles of salvation so distinct and exhaustive, that they could only say that they had felt confounded”