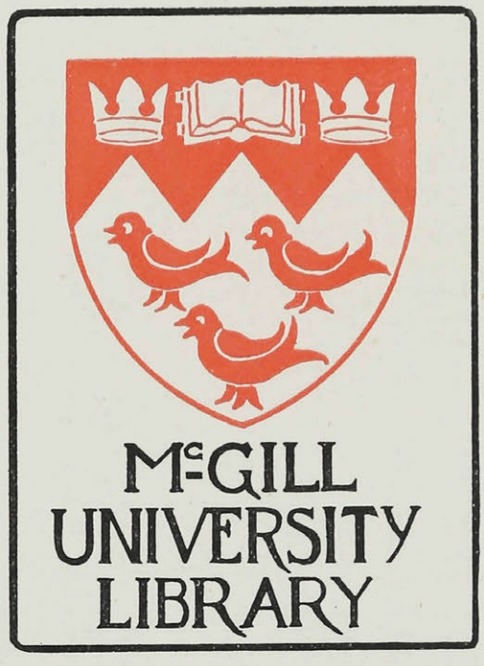
SIR EDMUND GOSSE
AND THE
CRITICAL PORTRAIT



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A THESIS

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of Master of Arts, to the Faculty
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-by-

Lewis Joseph Phelan

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PREFATORY NOTE

Due primarily to the shortness of the time that has elapsed since the death of Sir Edmund Gosse, his biography has not yet been written, nor have his letters been published. In fact, nothing comprehensive in book form has been written at any time about his life,or his works, or any part of them. As a consequence, the present thesis is essentially the result of a study of Sir Edmund Gosse's own works, with particular attention to opinions expressed in books or periodicals which have contained articles about his works or which have made some reference to them. I am informed by his son, Dr. Philip Gosse of London, England, that work on his father's biography has not yet been started and that little more has been done on his letters than to sort them out.

-:C O N T E N T S:-

INTRODUCTION

When Hilaire Belloc undertook a survey of the state of modern literature in 1927, he was inclined to be rather despondent over the perspective which he saw before him. He found consolation, however, in the reflection that there were two men, still living and writing, who acted as vivid luminaries in the otherwise complete darkness. These two, he did not hesitate to say, were Thomas Hardy and Sir Edmund Gosse. If, during the intervening period, Mr. Belloc has found no new illumination for his cosmos, we may presume that it now lies unilluminated, since his causes for consolation in the state of modern literature have been withdrawn by the deaths in 1928 of both Hardy and Gosse. Mr. Belloc's characteristic despondency does not concern us here, but his coupling of Hardy and Gosse gives us food for reflection.

There could have been no greater tribute paid to a man of letters in recent years than to have been coupled with Thomas Hardy, and that it has been done by so rigorous and astute a mind as that of Belloc, makes it doubly enviable. We cannot say that Sir Edmund Gosse is in any way comparable to Thomas Hardy, "just as we cannot say that a triangle is more triangular than a circle is round", but that Gosse

has attained the peak of his profession in his own specialized sphere is, today, not a matter of conjecture but of fact. "Sir Edmund Gosse's eminence as a prose writer", says John Drinkwater, "is now a matter of common assent. Today his criticism shares with Thomas Hardy's poetry the distinction of being defended by the younger lions against imaginary disparagements."(1)

During a long lifetime devoted almost exclusively to literature, we find Gosse assuming many different roles of expression. He was a poet, a critic, a biographer, an essayist, an historian, a translator and an interpreter. Although he has written but one novel, there is little doubt but that he had a good deal of the novelist in him, and it is largely due to this added asset that his work has found such a general appeal and furnishes his serious critical studies with such entertainment as is rarely met with in works of this nature. But the line of work by which he has made his individual mark in literature, and that by which he will be most remembered by succeeding generations is his masterful manipulation of the critical portrait. It may be

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(1) The Poetry of Edmund Gosse, John Drinkwater,(American Bookman, July 1926).

said that it is this field of literary endeavour that Mr. Gosse has made his specialty, and it is when he is engaged in critical portraiture that we find him at his best. Consequently, it is of his work in this field that we propose to deal with him.

It is an interesting fragment of self-revelation that among the first poems which Edmund Gosse wrote, we find four significant lines of verse which embody the aspirations of his youth, and the constant desideratum of his life, and which act as an augury of life as he would lead it, and an estimate of life as he led it.

"But oh! to win my people's eyes
To stand with me -- to gaze, admire,
To praise the statue's form and size, --
That is the goal of my desire."
(1)

We find these lines in Edmund Gosse's first book of poems which appeared at a date when most of the great Victorians were still writing. The stars of Tennyson and Browning were to continue to illumine the literary heavens for almost twenty years later, while that of Swinburne had but recently

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(1) Collected Poems of Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann, London, 1911), Page 71.

swung with great rapidity into the orbit of literary observation. When we consider Gosse's life as a critic the lines become more and more significant. It is his first utterance concerning his proclivity to criticism, and it is singularly applicable to that form of criticism of which he ultimately became the master. The goal of his desire was to stand in the great emporium of English literature, and to gaze and admire, and praise the artistry which he found there. This indeed has been his life's work. But his prolific pen has not been devoted to mere laudation, for, indeed, his critical acumen would not hesitate to dictate the succinct condemnation or the apropos discrimination where such was necessary. It was Gosse's belief that "the uncritical note of praise is almost more surely hurtful to a reputation than the uncritical note of blame, for it makes a wound which is much harder to heal."(1) He was in the true sense a genuine connoisseur; and in order to win his people to stand with him, he poured out during sixty years of constant contact with literature and its makers, the critical estimates of his observation in a series of volumes which cover

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(1) Silhouettes, Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann, London, 1925) Page 37,

the essentials of four centuries of English literature and in a method which is the most appealing form of criticism known. It is the prime duty of the literary critic to know literature, its past as well as its present, and Gosse gave this observation, to the full, the tremendous consideration that it demanded. In point of fact, the scope of Gosse's work is so extraordinarily wide, and the title pages of so many volumes bear his name, that one is tempted to think, what was once thought of George Bernard Shaw, that he was not one man but a syndicate!

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Edmund William Gosse was born in London on the twenty-first of September 1849. He was the only son of Philip Henry Gosse F.R.S., the eminent naturalist and zoologist, and Emily Bowes a writer on religious subjects. His father and mother were earnest students of Holy Scripture and belonged to the sect which has since become known as the "Plymouth Brethren". "By a process of selection" Gosse writes, "my Father and my Mother alike had gradually, without violence, found themselves shut outside all Protestant communions, and at last they met only with a few extreme Calvinists like themselves, on terms of what may be called negation -- with no priest, no ritual, no festivities, no ornament of any kind, nothing but the Lord's Supper and the exposition of Holy Scripture drawing these austere spirits into any sort of cohesion. They called themselves 'the Brethren' simply; a title enlarged by the world outside into 'Plymouth Brethren'".

Gosse recorded the story of his early years and of his relations with his father in a book which is now regarded as a masterpiece - Father and Son. The book appeared anonymously in 1907 and was considered to be "one of the

(1) Father and Son, Edmund Gosse, (Chas.Scribner's Sons,1908) Page 5.

most fascinating and interesting pieces of literature that has been written in recent years." Within six months it went through three editions, and since that time has been reprinted more than a dozen times. Arnold Bennett calls it "a masterpiece"; (1) John Drinkwater says that it "is a book that will survive from this age with greater things than itself but it is as sure of survival as the greatest, and within its own design it is consummate"; (2) St.John Adcock, the distinguished editor of the English Bookman, writes "I could not name any book written this century that is likelier to keep an abiding place in our literature; (3) and Robert Lynd says that "Father and Son is, it seems to me, as certain of survival as any work of imaginative literature that has been published in out time." (4) When Gosse acknowledged the authorship of the book in 1913, it was crowned by the French Academy.

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(1) Literary Digest, June 23, 1928.

(2) Poetry of Edmund Gosse, John Drinkwater, (American Bookman, July 1926).

(3) The Glory that was Grub Street, St. John Adcock, Musson Book Co., Toronto, 1928) Page 64.

(4) Sir Edmund Gosse, Robert Lynd, - (William Heinemann, London, 1927, a brochure)

The book is a blend of autobiography and biography. It is biographical in that Gosse records the story of his father's life and his austere and puritanical temperament; in doing this he brings into play all the powers of anatomization, of critical acumen, and of acute observation which he displayed again and again in his critical studies. It is autobiographical in that he tells the story of his own life up to the age of eighteen or thereabouts, and of his reactions to the rigorous discipline imposed upon him by his father. When he was but six weeks old his father and mother destined him for the ministry. "This was the opening act" he says "of that 'dedication' which was never henceforward forgotten". In those profoundly analytical pages he tells of the early mental conflicts he suffered and of the privations he endured. "In consequence of the stern ordinance which I have described, not a single fiction was read or told to me during my infancy. The rapture of the child who delays the process of going to bed by cajoling 'a story' out of his mother or his nurse, as he sits upon her knee, well tucked up, at the corner of the nursery fire, - this was unknown to me. Never, in all my early childhood, did

any one address to me the affecting preamble, 'Once upon a time!' I was told about missionaries, but never about pirates- I was familiar with humming-birds, but I had never heard of fairies. Jack-the-Giant-Killer, Rumpelstiltskin and Robin Hood were not of my acquaintance, and though I understood about wolves, Little Red Ridinghood was a stranger even by name.(1)

This unusual treatment was natural in bringing up an unusual boy, and it is not without surprise that we learn from his own lips that when he began to go to school he found no friends. When school was over in the afternoon and his class-mates would turn to sports, he would occasionally join them. "But" he says "my company, though not avoided, was not greatly sought for. I think that something of my curious history was known, and that I was, not unkindly, but instinctively, avoided, as an animal of a different species, not allied to the herd."(2) In his early poetry, written some years later, we find him longing to be a child, and to play with those of whose companionship

(1) Father and Son, Edmund Gosse (Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1908) Page 25.
(2) Ibid. Page 233.

he was deprived in his early years. This boy who had been treated so unusually, who had not tasted the delights of childhood, who was out of step with the rest of men, wanted nothing else than to find himself like the rest:

"I do not hunger for a well stored mind
I only wish to live my life and find
My heart in unison with all mankind." (1)

"Although I was sixteen years of age" he says, "and although I was treated with indulgence and affection, I was still but a bird fluttering in the network of my Father's will, and incapable of the smallest independent action.....All the liberation, however, which I desired or dreamed of was only just so much as would bring me into communion with the outer world of Christianity." (2) The coercive restraint of his freedom imposed upon him by his father in these early days, made him all the more eager to know life and to appreciate its value when separation from his father and consequent severance

(1) Collected Poems of Edmund Gosse, William Heinemann, London, 1911) Page 13.

(2) Father and Son, Edmund Grosse, (Chas.Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1908) Page 328.

of the hold which his father had on him, came in a short time. Gosse came to London but the spirit of his father continued to pursue him and dog his footsteps in the form of the "torment of a postal inquisition". But gradually it diminished and "that young soul, removed from the father's personal inspection, began to blossom forth crudely and irregularly enough into new provinces of thought through fresh layers of experience."(1)

Gosse's arrival in London in 1867 marks the beginning of his literary life. He immediately found occupation in the British Museum, where he was soon made a transcriber in the department of Printed Books. In one of his essays he tells of the profound delight he experienced in dipping into the intellectual wealth which surrounded him on every side, and here he developed into the voracious reader which he continued to be during the rest of his life. There could have been found no better surroundings for the aspiring young writer than the Printed Books Department of the British Museum, for not only was he able to come in contact with the best in literature, but also he was

(1) Father and Son, Edmund Gosse, (Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. Page 328.

here able to meet the greatest writers of the day; it is here that he began to form those long literary friendships which were one of his greatest assets when he came to write his studies in literature.

In 1868, not long after he had reached his eighteenth birthday, his first poem - a sonnet - appeared in print. Two years later he collaborated with John Arthur Blaikie, and published a volume of poems entitled Madrigals, Songs and Sonnets. Gosse's contributions to this book are of no great value in consideration of his later works for he was then just feeling his way, perhaps a little insecurely, in the field of poetic expression. It is important, however, to remember that this year, 1870, marks the beginning of his first serious attempts in literature, and the prelude of a concentrated literary career which extended well over half a century.

In 1872, on behalf of the British Museum, Gosse was sent to Denmark and Norway, "for the purpose of reporting on the state of current literature in those countries." Among the letters of introduction from prominent Englishmen

which he obtained before he left, was one from no less a personage than Alfred Lord Tennyson who had visited Denmark a few years previously. The visit to these northern countries is another episode of great significance in Gosse's career, for he began an intimacy with Scandinavian literature which he was to retain throughout his life, and which accounts for three volumes of his works and numerous miscellaneous essays scattered throughout the others. One of his chief services to literature is his introduction of Scandinavian writers to the English public, and among these, his "discovery" of Ibsen, whose life he wrote and whose works he translated, is an achievement well worthy of commendation. He later edited the English translation of the works of Bjornstjerne Bjórnson, and was co-editor of the Oxford Book of Scandinavian Verse. In recognition of his services to Scandinavian literature, he was created in 1901, a Knight of the Norwegian Order of St.Olaf of the first class.

In 1873 he published what might be called his first volume of poems. (He never included in his later collections any of the poetry which he had contributed

to the joint-volume Madrigals, Songs and Sonnets.) He remained at the British Museum until 1875 and then became a translator to the Board of Trade, where he had as a companion his lifelong literary friend, Austin Dobson. In 1876 he published King Erik, a tragedy, and in 1879 appeared his first prose work Northern Studies which was an outcome of his first visit to Norway and Denmark; and the same year another volume of poetry entitled New Poems. In 1882 he edited Gray's works in four volumes and published his "Life of Gray", and the following year there appeared his Seventeenth Century Studies. This volume, his Jacobean Poets and his splendid monographs on Congreve, John Donne, Jeremy Taylor, and Sir Thomas Browne form a considerable body of critical work on the English seventeenth century writers. And it is said that it is largely due to his efforts that the seventeenth century no longer remains in obscurity. In 1884 he visited the United States and lectured on literature at Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins and other universities; and while in America he became acquainted with such prominent men of letters as Walt Whitman, Whittier,

W.D.Howells, Oliver Wendell Holmes and others who were later to become subjects for his critical portraits. In this year (1884) also, he succeeded Sir Leslie Stephen as Clark Lecturer on English Literature in Trinity College, Cambridge. The years from 1885 to 1904, when he left the Board of Trade to become Librarian of the House of Lords, were extraordinarily prolific ones for Gosse's pen. He published in almost yearly succession as many as seventeen volumes which included poetry, studies in literature, biographies and his one and only romance. These were Firdausi in Exile; From Shakespeare to Pope 1885; Life of Raleigh (1886); Life of Congreve (1888); History of 18th Century Literature (1889); Life of Philip Henry Gosse F.R.S.; Robert Browning: Personalia (1890); Gossip in a Library (1891); Secret of Narcisse (1892); Questions at Issue (1893); Jacobean Poets; In Russet and Silver; Collected Poems (1894); Critical Kit-Kats (1896); Short History of Modern English Literature (1897); Life and Letters of John Donne (1899); Hypolympia (1901); Life of Jeremy Taylor and French Profiles (1904).

During these years, besides working at the Board of Trade, and lecturing at Cambridge, we find him editing a magazine, and in 1891, the year after its composition, he translated Ibsen's Hedda Gabler and in 1893, with William Archer he translated Ibsen's The Master Builder. In 1903 and 1904, in collaboration with Dr. Richard Garnett, he published the An Illustrated Record of English Literature in five volumes.

During his term of office as Librarian of the House of Lords which lasted until he resigned in 1914 he published Life of Sir Thos. Browne; Coventry Patmore (1905); Father and Son (1907); Life of Ibsen (1908); The Autumn Garden (1908); Collected Poems 1911; Two Visits to Denmark (1911); Portraits and Sketches (1912). In 1912 he was made a Companion of the Bath. From 1914 until his death, with the exception of his Life of Swinburne (1917), his published works, nine in number, contained collections of essays and critical portraits originally published in periodicals. These were Inter Arma (1916); Three French Moralists (1918); Some Diversions of a Man of Letters (1920); Books on the Table (1921)

Aspects and Impressions (1922); More Books on the Table (1923) Silhouettes (1925); Leaves and Fruit (1927). In 1925 in recognition of his services to letters, the honour of Knighthood was conferred upon him.

GOSSE'S MEDIUM OF CRITICAL EXPRESSION

We have said that the work by which Gosse will be most remembered by future generations is his critical essays, or as they are more frequently called, critical portraits. These essays are collected into fifteen volumes and in themselves form a substantial contribution to English literary criticism. To call them merely critical essays or critical portraits is stating only a half-truth; they belong to a class of literature which, although not exactly new in our language, has found only one or two adherents in the whole history of English criticism; what these few have contributed to this class of literature is almost infinitesimal compared to the great bulk credited to Edmund Gosse.

Let us consider for a moment this medium of critical expression which Gosse has used so extensively and with so marked effect. This form bears a singular resemblance to

that used by the French critic, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve. It is a short, unconventional treatment or criticism of a subject, or a short critical sketch blending into one integral unit biography and criticism. Since it is a short non-exhaustive treatment it belongs in literature to the essay class; it combines, however, three different types of essays - the critical essay, the biographical essay, and the familiar essay; these three types of essays coalesce into making a complete picture,- a critical portrait. Sainte-Beuve calls it a "causerie",while Goose gives it the seemingly more Anglo-Saxon nomenclature of "kit-kat." An analysis of the causerie and the kit-kat shows that there is no substantial difference between the two, and since they belong to the same genus, we can almost assure ourselves that they had a common origin. Owing to the fact that the name "causerie," because of its derivitive signification more aptly portrays what is meant and is more commonly used than is "kit-kat", we will henceforth use it to denote the class of literature under consideration. Let us not forget, however, that we regard the causerie and the kit-kat as being synonymous.

It is popularly thought that because Sainte-Beuve coined

the name for this class of literature, he was also the originator of it and hence that it had a French origin. While Gosse was of the opinion that this class of literature was "somewhat neglected in this country" (England)[1] his qualifying epithet "somewhat" implies the belief that it was not wholly neglected in English. Professor Saintsbury in his History of Criticism distinctly maintains that it had an English origin, and even goes so far as to state that"Sainte-Beuve, who knew everything, and cared not to conceal it, knew, as the general reader does not know, that the"causerie" whether in volume - or essay - form, of mingled biography and criticism, was of English, not French invention."[2] It is Professor Saintsbury's belief that the causerie originated one hundred and fifty years before those of Sainte-Beuve appeared in French literature, with the essays of Dryden. A research into the English literature previous to the time of Dryden shows us that this belief is well grounded. We must not forget that the essay itself, as a distinct literary form, dates back only to the sixteenth century, and that it was not until the reign of Charles II that Dryden intro-

(1) Critical Kit-Kats, Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London, 1896), Preface.

(2) History of Criticism, George Saintsbury, William Blackwood & Sons, 1902), Vol. 2, P. 304.

duced the critical essay into literature and in choosing his medium of expression unconsciously gave birth to the causerie. Literary criticism was of slower growth in England than in most European countries.(1) This backwardness on the part of the English is explained by the trilingual state of the language in the Anglo-Saxon period and by the variations of Old English dialect which continued to exist until the time of Chaucer. Despite the excellence and the bulk of creative literature which followed Chaucer, criticism did not come into its own in English until the 18th Century, when Joseph Addison established the school of classic or formal criticism. In this intervening period critical work had been done but only on an infinitely small scale in comparison to the wealth of creative literature; and in what criticism was produced, we search in vain, until the time of Dryden, for any trace of the causerie. In the work of the Elizabethans, Bacon, Butler, Sir Thomas Wilson, Sir John Cheke, Roger Asham, and even in the book criticism of Ben Johnson, we find no sign of the causerie. However, in the critical work of Dryden in the Seventeenth

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(1) History of Criticism, George Saintsbury, William Blackwood & Sons 1902) Vol 2. P.144.

Century, and in that of Johnson in the Eighteenth Century, there appears for the first time in English literature, the critico-biographical essay, if not the causerie itself.

In the essays of Dryden and the Lives of the Poets of Samuel Johnson we find a blend of the biographical and critical essays, but while the free and easy conversational charm of the familiar essay is not entirely lacking, it is left sadly in the background. This, perhaps, can be explained by the fact that such a style of writing would not have been considered of good taste in the classic periods of Johnson and Dryden; let us remind ourselves of the contemptuous definition of "essay" which can be found in Johnson's dictionary: "A loose sally of the mind, an irregular, undigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance", Except, then, for the formality characteristic of the writing of the day, the essays of Dryden and the Lives of the Poets of Samuel Johnson may be considered the causerie and the kit-kat in their embryonic state. Neither Addison, Steele nor Swift, nor any of the other 18th Century critics used the causerie as a medium of critical expression.

Of the early 19th Century critics, Lamb and Hazlitt

are the closest to the causerie; but neither of them could be said to have written the causerie proper, and at best their work could only be classed under the general title of critical essays. Lamb's essays are both familiar and critical, but they lack the necessary requisite for completing the picture by being also biographical. The middle of the century witnessed Matthew Arnold's rise in the critical world, and although but a small percentage of his criticism adheres to the tenets of the causerie, what he has produced of them are nearer to perfect examples than those of any of his English predecessors. Previous to the appearance of Arnold's critical essays, Sainte-Beuve in France, having long had a desire to imitate the forms of Dryden and Johnson, brought the causerie to France and perfected the form as a medium of critical expression in his own language. Sir Edmund Gosse in the last quarter of the century, influenced partly by Arnold,. and partly by Sainte-Beuve, and probably not a little by his English predecessor Johnson, perfected the causerie in English and used it as the form of his prolific output of critical work.

If there is one critic more than any other whose works resemble those of Gosse in both method and in theory that critic is none other than the greatest one of modern times - Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve; and truly it may be said that Gosse is the Sainte-Beuve of English literature. The causerie which Sainte-Bauve developed and used in French literature, is, in substance, the same medium of critical expression as the "kit-kat" or critical portrait which Gosse used and developed in English literature. The name "critical kit-kats" which has been given to all Gosse's work in this field and which, more generally, has since been widely used to designate that particular species of literary expression, was first introduced into English literature when Gosse made it the title of one of his first volumes. Gosse tells us in the preface to this volume the origin of the name and what form of expression he meant it to represent.(1) "In an age when studies multiply, and our shelves groan with books, it is not every interesting and original figure to whom the space of a full length or even a half-length portrait can

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(1) Critical Kit-Kats, Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, 1896) Preface.

be spared. For the low comfortable rooms where people dined in the last century, there was invented the shorter and still less obtrusive picture called a Kit-Kat, and some of our most skilful painters have delighted in this modest form of portraiture, which emphasises the head, yet does not quite exclude the hand of the sitter. I have ventured to borrow from the graphic art this title for my little volume, since these are condensed portraits, each less than half-length, and each accommodated to suit limited leisure and a crowded space."

But Gosse does not stop here. He proceeds to reveal the secret, the credo, the raison d'etre of the greater portion of his literary life. It is a revelation such as literary artists rarely give their readers, except in one of those unmasked moments of private comment or correspondence on their own writings, for it gives us the key to his prolific output of literary studies. "They are essays in a class of literature" he says, "which it is strange to find somewhat neglected in this country, since, if it can only be executed with tolerable skill, none should be more

directly interesting and pleasing. We are familiar with pure biography and pure criticism, but what I have here tried to produce is a combination of the two, the life illustrated by the work, the work relieved by the life. Such criticism as is here attempted is not of the polemical order; the biography excludes that. We cease to be savage and caustic when we are acquainted with the inner existance of a man, for the relentlessness of satire is only possible to those who neither sympathize nor comprehend. What is here essayed is the analytical, comparative and descriptive order; it hopes to add something to historical knowledge and something to aesthetic appreciation. It aims, in short, at presenting a little gallery of ..... kit-kats, modest in proportion, but large enough to show the head and the hand." Like Sainte-Beuve, Gosse believed that the character and the personality of an author too well inter-penetrates his productions to allow it to be forgotten in any judicious appraisal of him. Buffon conjures up what is meant when he said "Le style c'est l'homme même." A knowledge of the personality helps the artist to sketch a clearer portrait and

gives consideration to the man as he was, rather than as he would like himself thought to be, or rather than as the automaton which his writings might lead one to regard him. With the belief in the recognition that the human heart still beats in even the least human of writers, Gosse gives us that valuable observation of psychological insight which all true criticism should not abjure - "we cease to be savage and caustic when we are acquainted with the inner existence of man, for the relentlessness of satire is only possible for those who neither sympathize nor comprehend."

PERSONAL CONTACTS AND INFLUENCES

It was towards the close of the Victorian era that Gosse entered the field of English literature. Literary criticism despite the diversity of standards held by the critics, was in one of its healthiest periods. Among the most significant critics of the time are Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, Ruskin, J.A.Symonds, Leslie Stephen, Andrew Lang, Austin Dobson and Edmund Gosse; Swinburne, Rossetti and Robert Louis Stevenson were also doing valuable critical work. It might be said that of all these critics, Edmund Gosse had by far the widest range besides having the largest critical output. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Gosse was influenced by his contemporaries in his critical work. There is no doubt that he was strongly influenced by the French writer Sainte-Beuve. The fact that he was well

acquainted with French literature is evident from his many critical portraits of French writers; and perhaps more than any English writer he has striven to introduce the French writers to the English public. He was a personal friend of many of the foremost French writers, and by means of this personal contact he was able to sketch a truer critical portrait of them.

A large percentage of Gosse's critical portraits are of those with whom he was personally acquainted. He has been called "a genius in the art of friendship"[1] (truly a rare thing for a critic!) and the number of great writers among his friends or acquaintances cannot help but make one believe that he deserves the compliment . It might also be said that there was hardly a writer of any significance in England of whom he had not a personal acquaintance. His occupations during his entire life were such that he was placed in an almost unique position, whereby he was able to come in contact with the most significant writers of

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(1) Clayton Hamilton in letter quoted in The Library of Edmund Gosse, compiled by E.H.M.Cox (Dulow & Co., London, 1924, Page 259.

the day. He utilized this advantage of personal contact to the fullest extent and almost every volume that he wrote is a living record of those valuable and lasting literary friendships which immeasurably enhance the merit of all his literary work. Their influence on his life cannot be too greatly insisted upon. To them is due his unflagging interest in the personality behind the pen which wrote; to them is due the formulation of that sane critical creed which teaches that "we cease to be savage and caustic when we are acquainted with the inner existence of a man".

There are few joys in the life of any literary man comparable to that experienced by personal contact with men of his own intellectual stamina; the biographies of all literary artists bear witness to this fact. Gosse's advantages of personal contact are doubly enhanced because his fields of literary endeavour were those of biography and criticism and it is in these fields that personal contact can best find fruition. Another advantage which this "genius in the art of friendship" enjoyed was his own attractive disposition and personality which helped him not a little in accumulating friends. An illustration

of this may be drawn from his first meeting with Swinburne. After this event he was doubtful of the impression which the poet had formed of him. The next day he was put at ease on this point when he received a note from the person who had brought about the introduction which told him that Swinburne "took to you at once, as is seldom the case with him." He had corresponded with Swinburne as early as 1867, which, it will be remembered, was his first year in the British Museum. At this time, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch informs us, Swinburne "had the hearts of all young lovers of poetry at his feet", and the storm which followed the publication of Swinburne's Poems and Ballads was at its height.

Gosse eventually developed a close intimate and life-long friendship with Swinburne, and was a familiar figure at the Swinburne home. The influence which Swinburne had on Gosse is, quite naturally, more apparent in his poetry than in his prose. Gosse's biography of Swinburne has been highly commended. John Drinkwater calls it a "triumph of method";(1) and of it Quiller-Couch (himself a Swinburne enthusiast) says:- "It is always a pleasure to read a

(1) American Bookman, 1926, July.

book[1] by a man who knows how books should be written, and Mr. Gosse's eagerly awaited Life of Swinburne tells the tale vividly, tactfully, adequately, in that excellent prose which, although one takes it for granted in the author of Father and Son, still gives so much pleasure that it were ungrateful to omit the 'benedicamus'. Moreover the tale not only gives truth of fact, so far as our knowledge enables us to test this, but by nicely apportioning the whole to its subject, and its casual with its more significant and important parts, conveys an impression of truth scarcely less valuable."

To give a list of the friends and acquaintances of Edmund Gosse among the writers of the day would almost necessitate the mention of all the English writers of importance from the year 1870. A brief mention of truly immortal literary friends might be worthwhile in order to understand the influences under which Gosse was working. One can estimate how intimate a friendship he had with Robert Browning by a perusal of his book Robert Browning: Personalia which should be read if one is to get a true and intimate portrait of that poet. Gosse became acquainted with Stevenson

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(1) Studies in Literature, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y. 1918) First Series, Page 251

several years before Stevenson was known to the world as a writer; and Gosse is always at his best when speaking about the beloved "Tusitala". The regard which Stevenson had of Gosse may be seen from a letter written to him in 1881 in which he says in part, "London now chiefly means to me Colvin and Henley, Leslie Stephen and you."(1)

When Gosse first met Tennyson he was astounded to find that the great poet had not only read some of his (Gosse's) poetry, but also praised it highly. Gosse and Thomas Hardy seem to have always been intimates; in the dedicatory letter to Hardy which appears in his book Critical Kit-Kats, Gosse offers the book to Hardy with the words: "Take the little book for the sake of the comrade, not of the critic. Take it as a landmark in that friendship, to me inestimably precious, which has now lasted more than twenty years, and will continue I hope and think, unbroken till one or other of us can enter into no further earthly relations." His friendship with Hardy lasted, as he hoped it would, until the end, when Hardy died in January 1928.

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(1) Critical Kit-Kats, Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London 1896), Page 288.

Walter Pater was another literary artist whose friendship with Gosse was lasting. Gosse first met Pater in 1872, thirteen years before Marius the Epicurean appeared in print. When Joseph Conrad was in desperate financial difficulties in the early years of his literary career, and it was very unlikely that he would be able to continue writing, Edmund Gosse took the initiative and set about obtaining for Conrad a Civil List Pension. This was granted; and Conrad never forgot his indebtedness to Gosse on this account. It was an act for which Conrad is not the only one to be indebted to Gosse. Had it not been obtained English literature would probably be without more than one masterpiece. Conrad had an ardent admiration for Gosse's work and especially for his Father and Son which he read and reread several times. Conrad sent a letter to Gosse accompanying one of his own volumes in which he said: "You no doubt have forgotten, but it would have been exceedingly improper for me to forget, that it was you who gave me the two Scandinavian names that I needed for one of the stories the volume contains. And a man nominated by you to the Academy of Novelists should avoid (like Caesar's wife) even the shadow of impropriety." (1)

(1) Library of Edmund Gosse, compiled by E.H.M.Cox Dulow & Company 1924) Page 77.

In another letter to Gosse he wrote, "I've always had and shall keep to my last day a very vivid sense of your invariably generous appreciation of my work."(1) Gosse's intimacy with Henry James and the length of their friendship can be seen by a glance through the Letters of Henry James in which his correspondence with Gosse takes up a considerable portion of the two large volumes. When Henry James applied for British Naturalization, his three sponsors were Rt. Hon. Mr. Asquith, then Prime Minister of Great Britain, Sir George Prothero, the Editor of the "Quarterly Review" and Edmund Gosse.

To continue to mention in detail all the many great literary friends which Gosse had during his career, would involve an undertaking wholly beyond the scope of the present study. We have mentioned only a few of his intimates, but these few give us an idea of the circle of friends among whom he worked. It is not the good fortune of every critic to be so well acquainted personally with the greatest writers of his time. To what extent

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(1) Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters, G. Jean-Aubry, (Doubleday, Page & Co. N.Y. 1927) Vol. 11, Page 203

Gosse was indebted to these personal contacts in his literary work is a matter well nigh impossible to determine with any degree of certitude; that they must have had a profound influence on his work cannot be doubted. Most of them, however, became subjects for his critical portraits, and his knowledge of their personalities enabled him to paint a truer and more lifelike portrait.

It is difficult to estimate the parts which heredity and early environment played in the fashioning of Gosse as a writer. While his parents had each written several books, their work had been concentrated on special fields, in the one case, natural history, and in the other, religion. The principal trait which Gosse received from his father, is, doubtless that of observation. The father in his sphere studied the life and observed the characteristics of flowers and plants and sketched and described these in his works on natural history, and the son in his sphere studied the life and observed the characteristics of authors and their works and sketched and described these in his critical essays. The characters, however, of the father and the

son are as divergent as the poles, and it was this divergence which led Gosse to describe his life with his father as "a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences."(1) So widely apart were they in their ideals that "there came a time when neither spoke the same language as the other, or encompassed the same hopes, or was fortified by the same desires."(2)

While personal contacts and heredity had some influence on Gosse, nevertheless the most powerful influence that he had probably rests upon his all-devouring appetite for books. When he came to London in 1867, the British Museum opened for him the floodgates of literature; and from then until his death his reading never ceased. The breadth of his reading is almost beyond comprehension; and it has led Robert Lynd to remark, "Were it not for his humanity, we should call the extent of his reading inhuman."(3) Gosse relates with pride in his book

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(1) Father and Son, Edmund Gosse (Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1908) Prefatory Note.

(2) Ibid

(3) Sir Edmund Gosse C.B.: An Appreciation, Robert Lynd (William Heinemann, London, 1928) (brochure) P. 4.

Father and Son[1] that as a child the first word that he was known to speak with intelligibility was the word "book"; and when he passed well over the proverbial mark of three score years and ten, we find him saying, "I have forgotten who Lucas de Penna was, but I love him for saying that books were to him 'the light of the heart, the mirror of the body, the myrrh-pot of eloquence.' So they are to me, and more so the older I grow. When the infinite variety and charm of them fail to enchant me, it will be time for me to 'cease upon the midnight with no pain.'"[2]

This intense and all-consuming love of literature colored all his life and gave him that breadth of perspective which is so necessary a part of the equipment of the literary critic by which he is able to view as one great panorama the whole field of literature. George Saintsbury has said, "Only perhaps a certain degree of expertness can fully appreciate, but ordinary sense and taste must surely not fail to perceive the range of reading which is - be it

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(1) Father and Son, Page 4

(2) More Books on the Table, Preface.

again and again repeated - in all but the most extraordinary cases the 'necessarium', if not the 'unum necessarium', of the critic."[1] If there is one critic in literature equipped with this 'unum necessarium', that man is Edmund Gosse; let us repeat the remark made by Robert Lynd, "Were it not for his humanity, we should call the extent of his reading inhuman".

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(1) History of Criticism, George Saintsbury, (William Blackwood & Sons, London 1902) Vol.3. Page 328.

SURVEY OF THE GOSSE ESSAYS

To give credence to the dictum that all literature is partially autobiographical would court the disapproval of a score of sceptics whose experience with literary expression has taught them to think otherwise. Nevertheless, the conviction that most literature is autobiographical is not without a legion of adherents among the ranks of the literary artists, and the tenderness and concern with which they speak of the children of their brain is ample testimony of the tenacity of their belief. When speaking once of the books in his library, Sir Edmund Gosse said that he saw in them his own life revealed. "Each entry" in his library catalogue, he says, "is a confession". Just as his library, the collection of half a century, is a revelation of his life, so also are his own literary productions. His collected essays form almost as complete an autobiography as the world would have wished him to leave. While he recreated in them the lives of others, so

also has he recreated his own, and this is why his essays are regarded as being contributions to creative as well as to critical literature. That innate love of literature in all its forms and the insatiable curiosity about its makers, the long and invaluable literary friendships and the priceless personal contacts, the voracious reading of an unusually long life-time, all these find reflection in the pages of his work. His book Father and Son relates his life-story until the time when he took up literature, and the unbroken thread of that theme finds continuity in the graphic pages of his essays.

While all Gosse's essays are not critical portraits strictly so called, by far the greater bulk of them must be classed under that title. Everything in Gosse's life was such as to lend itself towards the fashioning of the admirable critical portraitist which he eventually became. It is the personalities in literature with which Gosse was most concerned, and secondary only to the personalities themselves, can be placed those literary compositions to which the personalities gave expression. Such is the theme of all his essays and such has been the primary interests of his life.

The fifteen volumes which comprise Gosse's studies in literature have so much in common that it would be superfluous to attempt to treat each volume individually. They are all collections of essays, any one of which can be taken as typical of the group. The method which Gosse follows in one, can be ascribed to another, and except for a few technical differences, there exists a substantial uniformity of method throughout. However, in order to facilitate the treatment of these technical differences, I have chosen to regard the volumes as belonging to three groups. To the first group belong the volumes which contain the longer type of the Gosse essay; the second group contains the collections of short essays; and the third group contains the volumes which treat exclusively the literature of foreign countries. The word "exclusively" is a necessary qualification of this third group because there are many essays in the first two groups which deal with foreign literature.

The seven volumes which constitute the first group of our classification are so spread over the entire span of Gosse's life that we cannot say that they belong to any specific period. Unlike that of most writers,as far as literary output is concerned, Gosse's life does not seem to be a matter of periods. The prose he wrote early in life can be judged as rigorously as that of his final years.

Most of the studies in these seven volumes are portraits, and the remainder are essays on some aspect of literature. Inter Arma is a collection of essays of the latter type

written during the World War and dealing with the war's effect on literature. An added feature puts Questions at Issue" in a class by itself in that it is the only volume of Gosse's essays which is intentionally controversial in tone. On account of the usual biographical treatment, polemical writing is excluded from most of Gosse's criticism. But that he had power in such writing is admirably illustrated by Questions at Issue, and one wonders why he did not utilize this asset by producing other works of the same nature. It was, however, the field of portraiture that Gosse has chosen for himself, and it is in this field that we see him at his best. A feature also is added to the volume Portraits and Sketches in that each one of the writers treated was personally known to Gosse. "These short studies" he says, "of authors whom I have known more or less intimately, and have observed with curiosity and admiration, base whatever value they may possess on their independence. They are imperfect, perhaps erroneous, but they are not second hand. Whether they are the result of a few flashing glimpses, or the patient scrutiny of many years, in either case they are my own."(1)

(1) Portraits and Sketches, Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London, 1912) Preface.

Among the more important writers treated in this volume are Swinburne, Tennyson, Whittier, Andrew Lang, and André Gide. The other volumes in this group are Critical Kit-Kats, Aspects and Impressions, Some Diversions of a Man of Letters, and Seventeenth Century Studies.

Critical Kit-Kats, a typical Gosse book, is also highly representative of the first group of our classification. It displays all the characteristic attributes of Gosse, the humor, the felicity of expression, the acute observation, the expository anecdote, the sympathetic understanding, and the personal charm of presentation which is found in any one of the fifteen volumes of collected studies in literature. The book first appeared in 1896; it might well have appeared without alteration in 1926. Gosse was one of those rare literary prodigies who learn to write well early in their career. There are no signs of a gradual development or a slow process of climbing the ladder of perfection accompanying the passing of time. Good writing and a skilful treatment of theme seem to have always been his. He has always been able to speak with the experience of an elder, yet with the enthusiasm and curiosity of a neophyte. Even his earliest books are crowded with precious

memories. Yesterday he was discussing Tennyson with Browning, today he discusses Neo-Georgian poetry with Siegfried Sassoon. One lays down a Gosse book with the paradoxical feeling that one has been listening either to the sage of the centuries or the spirit of eternal youth. Both are correct, yet the one seems incomplete without the other.

In his preface to Critical Kit-Kats Gosse says: "Of the genesis of these essays, it may be sufficient to say that several of them originated from the fact that I was able to add something to the positive knowledge of a figure suddenly made the object of increased curiosity. In several cases I have been aided by the family of the subject, or by persons in possession of facts not hitherto made public. In particular, in two instances, that eminent poet who for many years honoured me with his friendship, Robert Browning, laid upon me as a duty the publication of what I have written.....In several cases the personal impression is almost entirely my own or contributed to me from unprinted sources."(1) The twelve essays which comprise this volume are portraits of twelve literary

(1) Critical Kit-Kats. Preface

artists of varying importance, five of whom were personally known to Gosse. The book has the cosmopolitanism of all Gosse's works; America is represented by a treatment of Walt Whitman, Russia by Tolstoi, France by the academician De Hérédia, and India by the young poetess Toru Dutt. The remaining writers are English; of these eight, Stevenson, Pater, Rossetti, and Lord de Tabley were Gosse's contemporaries and personal acquaintances. Fitzgerald, who did not die until 1883; had never, strange to say, met Gosse; but then, as Gosse wrote not long after Fitzgerald's death, "few indeed among the living can boast of having enjoyed even a slight personal acquaintanship with Edward Fitzgerald," being as he was "one of the most recluse and sequestered of modern men of letters."(2) The remaining three writers treated in Critical Kit-Kats, Keats, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, belong, of course, to an earlier period than Gosse. The cosmopolitan selection of

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(2) Critical Kit-Kats. Page 65.

writers treated in this book, might be considered typical of a Gosse volume.

A Gosse essay of the long type is approximately 4,500 words. Gosse, however, never bound himself down to paint a portrait in a definite number of words, but wisely allowed his treatment to be as long as his theme demanded. For this reason some of his kit-kats far exceed in length the average which we have taken, while others fall short of it. In Portraits and Sketches the average length of the kit-kat is 4,000 words, while in Seventeenth Century Studies it exceeds 5,000 words. For general purposes, however, we might say that the Gosse essay of the longer type is in the proximity of 4,500 words.

This particular length of treatment has several advantages. In the first place it "suits limited leisure and a crowded space", and it is not too long to weary the reader. It gives the reader the opportunity to become acquainted with many men of letters without necessitating the reading of several biographies. While a short portrait of this length does not take the place of a biography, because it makes no pretence at being exhaustive, it un-

questionably supplies a demand in literature. On the other hand, this length gives the writer ample room to provide a biographical sketch, to amplify his observations, to illustrate by quotations, and to add his critical comment and estimate. In a word it is an admirably adequate length for the writer to paint a short but satisfactory portrait.

The Gosse essays of the short type are collected in five volumes,-- Silhouettes, Leaves and Fruit, Books on the Table, More Books on the Table and Gossip in a Library. All except the last-mentioned volume contain essays which belong to the last ten years of his life, and were originally published as weekly contributions to the London Sunday Times, having been considered one of the most popular features of that journal.(1) These short causeries continued to appear down to the week of Gosse's death, and despite the fact that he was almost eighty years of age, there was no falling-off in style or treatment. It is preeminently by means of these journalistic contributions that he is so well known to the present generation. The fact that he sustained his high standard of

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(1) . The Glory that was Grub Street, St.John Adcock (Musson Book Co. Toronto, 1928) Page 71.

writing is observed by a writer in the Saturday Review of Literature[1] who says: "Were it for no other reason than the lesson he gave to purely academic writers that journalism is not necessarily the enemy of literature, he should be acclaimed as patron saint of journalism."

These essays are identical in method with his longer ones and may be regarded as abbreviated portraits, or, as he names one of his volumes of them, silhouettes. They were sometimes occasioned by the recurrence of the anniversary of some literary artist of the past, and sometimes by the publication of a new book or the reissuence of an old one. They are not, and were not meant to be "reviews of such books, but are, rather, independent reflections" inspired by them.[2]

All these short essays are of almost uniform length, containing about 1,700 words. One of the five volumes contain twenty-six essays of this kind, while each of the other four contains over forty of them, making the whole collection a veritable encyclopaedia of information, anecdotes, and critical comment on almost two hundred literary artists.

(1) June 23, 1928

(2) Preface to More Books on the Table.

When one stops to consider the number of literary studies in these five volumes alone, one must realize what an intense worker Gosse must have been, and what a thorough familiarity he must have had with the whole field of literature. In any one volume there is enough variety of theme to satisfy the most fastidious taste. Both English and foreign writers gain admittance, and almost all species of literary expression are considered from burlesque verse to abstruse critiques. In a word, these volumes show, to a marked degree, the catholicity of interests and breadth of scope which should always be prerequisites of the genuine critic.

The books which deal exclusively with the literature of foreign countries are three in number, Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe also called Northern Studies, French Profiles, and Three French Moralists. While these three volumes may be used to show Gosse's qualifications as an interpretative critic, it must be remembered that his work in foreign literatures is not confined to them alone. Each of the other twelve volumes of his literary studies contain considerable work in foreign literatures, for instance, Silhouettes alone contains as many as twelve studies in foreign literature.

Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe first appeared so long ago as 1879. It, too, shows the cosmopolite in Gosse for it contains three studies in Norwegian Literature, one in Swedish, two in Danish, one in German, and three in Dutch. The other two volumes in this group, as their names indicate, deal with French literature.

The manner of presentation of the studies in these three volumes corresponds with that of the other two groups. Most of them are portraits, belonging to the long type of the Gosse essay. The only difference between these studies and those which we have already seen lies in the critical method. Gosse believed that criticism of the literature of foreign countries should not be exercised in the same manner as criticism of the literature of one's own country. "It is characteristic of native criticism that it contemplates, or should contemplate, the products of native literature from the front: that it looks at them, in other words, from a direct and complete point of view. Foreign criticism should not pretend to do this; unless it is satisfied to be a mere echo or repetition, its point of view must be incomplete and indirect, must be that of one who paints a face in profile

.....I have tried to preserve that attitude of sympathy, of general comprehension, for the lack of which some English criticism of foreign authors has been valueless, because proceeding from a point so far out of focus as it makes its whole presentation false; and yet I have remembered that it is a foreigner who takes the portrait, and that he takes it for a foreign audience and not for a native one."(1)

It was always interesting to Gosse to trace the influence of the literature of one country on that of another. Thus we have such essays in comparative literature as "The Influence of France upon English Poetry", "Rousseau in England", "Browning in France", "Lamartine and the English poets", "Vondel and Milton". In 1904 Gosse had the honour of being invited by the French critic Ferdinand Brunetiere to deliver an address before the Société des Conférences in Paris, which resulted in his study entitled "The Influence of France Upon English Poetry", a paper which was very highly thought of in French literary circles at the time.

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(1) French Profiles, Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann 1904), Preface.

CRITICAL RANGE

Gosse's critical range is extraordinarily wide, and it may well be said that he has taken all literature for his province. He has bound himself down by no limitations of time or locality; there are no boundary lines in the Gosse cosmos. Foreign writers, native writers, old writers, and new writers are found treated side by side in his collected essays. His range covered all periods of literature and all types of literature. "By dint of gazing interminably over the whole expanse of literature," he says, "I have gradually and unconsciously come to regard with equal interest all forms of passionate expression, whether grave or gay, profound or superficial."(1)

As far as mental characteristics are concerned, Gosse was essentially English, but in literary scope he may

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(1) Leaves and Fruit, Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann, London, 1927); Preface.

well be regarded as a cosmopolite. He is as entertaining and instructive when speaking about the Swedish poet Carl Snoilsky, as he is when speaking about the French poet Lamartine, or the English poet Swinburne. This broad perspective of literature resulted from the expansive range of reading with which Saintsbury said was the critic's "unum necessarium"; (1) this broad perspective of literature is what Matthew Arnold ascribes to the ideal critic as being one of his necessary requisites. In his epoch-making essay on the function of criticism, Arnold says: "By the very nature of things, as England is not all the world, much of the best that is known and thought in the world cannot be of English growth, must be foreign; by the nature of things, again, it is just this that we are least likely to know, while English thought is streaming in upon us from all sides, and takes excellent care that we have not been ignorant of its existence. The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part

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(1) History of Criticism, George Saintsbury (Wm.Blackwood and Sons, 1902), Vol. 3. Page 328.

of it, which while significant and fruitful in itself, is for any reason specially likely to escape him."[1] Perhaps the best example of this breadth of literary vision is Sainte-Beuve. Curiously enough, "it was almost grotesquely absent in Matthew Arnold,"[2] likewise Hazlitt and Lamb; while, it seems, Andrew Lang did not even desire it. A casual perusal of his critical essays is sufficient to convince the most sceptical that Gosse had, to a profound degree, this much desired breadth of vision. Indeed few critics of literature have dealt more incessantly with the products of foreign thought than he; and that he has interpreted foreign literatures correctly could have no stronger proof than the fact that he has been singularly honoured in three instances by such authoritative bodies as the French Academy, the French Government, and the Norwegian Government.

One instance of his interpretative work might not be out of order here: in 1893 the French Symbolist, Stéphane

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(1) Essays in Criticism. Matthew Arnold, 1865. (Macmillan & Co. Ltd. 1907.) First Series, Page 37

(2) Silhouettes, Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann, London, 1925) Page 215.

Mallarmé was regarded both in England and in France as the most obscure and unintelligible of poets, so much so that he was spoken of as the synonym of darkness. Gosse, after a fashion, championed the cause of Mallarmé in a critical essay wherein he stated that while there were grounds for some of the distribes against the obscurantism of Mallarmé's verse, he believed that many of the charges were unjustified. He then considers one of Mallarmé's much-disparaged poems, "L'Après Midi d'un Faune", from which, he says, he believes he obtains "as clear and as solid an impression as M. Mallarmé desires to produce".(1) He then admirably translates the verse into English prose, retaining all the intentional symbolical effect of the original, showing that this "wholly unintelligible" poem is not obscure but is as clear as daylight. "This then," he adds in a note of triumph, "is the so excessibly obscure and unintelligible 'L'Après-Midi d'un Faune'; and, accompanied as it is with a perfect suavity of language and melody of rhythm, I know not what more a poem of eight

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(1) French Profiles, Edmund Gosse, 1904, (William Heinemann, London, 1913); Page 315.

pages could be expected to give." (1) Not long after this article appeared in print, Gosse received from Mallarmé a glowing letter of appreciation to the effect that "Votre étude est un miracle de divination". (2) Gosse says in French Profiles (in which the article appeared later): "It was with not a little hesitation that I undertook to unravel a corner of the mystic web, woven of sunbeams and electrical threads, in which the poet of "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune" conceals himself from curious apprehension, There were a dozen chances of my interpretation being wrong, and scarcely one of its being right. My delight therefore may be conceived when I received a most gracious letter from the mage himself." (3) This illustrates but one of his innumerable cases of interpretation.

The number of his essays dealing with foreign literatures attests his familiarity with them, and gives us an idea of his extensive literary scope. We find him writing

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(1) French Profiles, Edmund Gosse, 1904 (William Heinemann, London, 1913); Page 316.

(2 French Profiles, Edmund Gosse, Page 373.

(3) Ibid. Page 373.

with equal ease of the writers of France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Spain, and Germany. Even the classical writers of Greece and Rome he has not forgotten. Speaking of Gosse's literary scope, the essayist Robert Lynd has said:

"He has ranged through many literatures and has brought their treasures to England with the enthusiasm of a man who has discovered gold. No other critic has sought out with more persistent and generous discrimination the best work both of foreign authors and of contemporary English authors. He has extended the courtesy of inquisitiveness to the books and personalities of the living as well as to those of the dead, though, like all great critics, he has written chiefly of the dead, he has played a conspicuous part in building up the reputations of the finest writers of his own time. It would be ridiculous to accuse him of universal tolerance, but it is surely rare to find a critic who can look on books and authors with so questioning - one might almost say so quizzical - an eye and at the same time with such an energy of appreciation. It is still rarer to find such a gift enduring undimmed through fifty years of writing." (1)

When the London Publishing Company of William Heinemann decided to publish a series entitled The International Library, it was Edmund Gosse whom they chose as its editor; and so capably did he fill that position that when the same firm, at a later date, began their series, The Literature of the World,

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(1) Sir Edmund Gosse, C.B.; An Appreciation, Robert Lynd (brochure); (William Heinemann, London, 1928) Page 4-5.

they again chose him as its editor. The name of the last-mentioned series was a happy choice when we consider the scope of its editor, for it was the literature of the world which was Gosse's province. Indeed it may truly be said that he was a literary cosmopolite.

In another sense also there are no boundary lines to the Gosse cosmos. He did not always confine himself to great writers, writers of recognized importance, or to those who have left behind them what the world is pleased to term masterpieces. Gosse pursued what he felt to be excellence in every field of writing without regard to prejudice or fashion. If a minor artist has produced that which deserves recognition, Gosse does not let him pass unnoticed, merely because he is a minor author or because he holds no brief with any one of the reigning cults; too often it is the reigning cult, the fashion or prejudice of the hour, that makes or un-makes so-called literary masterpieces. Since, as some believe, it is by the minor writers of any period that we can most clearly trace the trend of literature of that period, the minor writers should not be forgotten. It not

Infrequently happens that critics lavish all their attention on the great writers while the minor writers are almost completely overlooked or treated with but a few inadequate remarks which convey damnation through the medium of faint praise. Not so with Edmund Gosse. If he errs at all it is on the side of generosity; he has gone out of his way to survey the by-paths of literature with his characteristic ardor for research, and he finds an irresistible fascination in turning his searchlight of consideration on the inadequately treated or forgotten minor writers. If he can bring something deserving back into light, he does not think twice about doing it. He might almost be called a champion of lost causes; he might well be called an upholder of the rights of minor writers.

But it is not the minor writers per se whom he champions. It is, rather, the fact that innumerable minor writers have created, perhaps in a happy moment of poetic ecstasy, such artistry as deserves the appreciation of the multitude, if not the consideration and plaudits of posterity. To ferret out this product of the divine flame is in keeping with the true function of criticism, as Matthew Arnold defined it, for it is "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate

the best that is known and thought in the world".[1] If a spark of the divine flame of genius has burned in the breast of a writer but for one hour, and if during that hour he has produced genuine artistry, then it is the duty of the critic to acknowledge it, to propagate it, to give it whatever consideration its merit demands. It is this propagation of true artistry found among the minor writers especially, which the pen of Gosse delights in revealing. The words which he once used in a poem about Oliver Wendell Holmes can be justly ascribed to himself:

> ".....all his Gestures and his Speech proclaim
> Him great Revealer of forgotten Game."[2]

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(1) Essays in Criticism, Matthew Arnold, 1865; (Macmillan & Company, London, 1907), First Series, Page 38.

(2) Complete Poems of Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London, 1911) Page 170.

CHARACTERISTICS OF METHOD

In each of his portraits Gosse tries to re-incarnate for the reader the literary artist of whom he speaks. Of this re-creation or reincarnation of personality, Sir John Adcock says, "Gosse is essentially a literary artist whose critical gift and whose grace and charm of style are not more significant than is that rarer gift he has, in biography or criticism, of re-creating character, touching in light and shade and physical and mental attributes with such insight and such deft imaginative realism that the portrait, especially when it is of some contemporary with whom he has been familiar, grows lifelike and vital under his hand."(1) Gosse thus re-creates character by means of a dozen different devices each of which contribute something toward the sketching or coloration of the portrait. "Find a man whose words paint

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(1) Glory that was Grub Street, Musson Book Co., Toronto, 1928, Page 65.

you a likeness," said Carlyle, "and you have found a man worth something." If there was one gift which Gosse possessed more than another it was his mastery of the art of pen-portraiture. His portraits are not merely portraits or likenesses, but they are made infinitely more valuable by the added asset of being also critical. It was not only the artist which concerned Gosse, nor was it the art alone, it was the inter-relation of the artist and his work. It was to use his own words, "the life illustrated by the work, the work relieved by the life." Such was the method of Gosse, such also was the method of Sainte-Beuve. Of the latter René Doumic says: "La méthode de Sainte-Beuve consiste à faire entrer dans la critique la biographie et le portrait. Quel était le tempérament de l'écrivain? Quel était son humeur, quels sons ses caractères et ses goûts? Tous ces renseignments en faisant connaître l'homme, aident à mieux comprendre l'oeuvre."(1)

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(1) Histoire de la Litterature Francaise, Rene Doumic (Paul Mellottee, Paris 1921) Page 544.

In order to sketch his portrait to the highest degree of accuracy, Gosse makes use of information about his subject from every available source. Personal contact is one of the most valuable sources of information in this respect, and, as we have seen, Gosse did not forget it. Taste, habits, physical and mental peculiarities, besides published work, all help to sketch a clearer and more life-like portrait and are all considered before Gosse gives us his estimate. With Sainte-Beuve he may well say, "J'ai toujours aimé les correspondences, les conversations, les pensées, tous les détails du caractère, des moeurs, de la biographie en un mot des grands écrivains."(1)

Gosse's method of treatment in each one of his essays is not stereotyped. There is no prearranged scheme or formula to which all his portraits may be reduced. Out of the phantasmagoria of biography, criticism, anecdote, comparisons, quotations, influences, and estimate, the finished product of portraiture is produced. If, as is often

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(1) Histoire de la Litterature Francaise, René Dpumic, Page 545.

the case, the portrait is one which treats only of the partial output of an author, or of one period of an author's life, then the facts center around the particular books or the particular period considered. In such a case the portrait depicts the man as seen in one or more of his books, or in one period of his life. But then also, by way of background, Gosse usually gives us an idea of the whole life and the whole output. In the case of men who had not yet died the portraits are, necessarily, more or less unfinished. Very often in such cases, when the portraits were those of his earlier books, he would complete the picture in future editions by adding what was necessary after the subject had died, for, be it remembered, he outlived by many years almost all his early contemporaries.

The general scheme of his treatment may be likened to a miniature critical biography. His introduction was what Aristotle calls "a sample of the subject", usually a matter of generalizations, preparing the way for what is to follow. In rare instances, however, when the subject was one which would be immediately familiar to the reader, Gosse plunges

at once into the center of his theme. Following the general remarks, constituting the introduction, comes a biographical sketch. Included in this or immediately following it usually comes an anecdote illustrating certain traits of character of the subject and a brief mention or suggestion of literary influences. Then follows a critical consideration of his works, with a citation of passages or brief extracts exemplifying tendencies or characteristic peculiarities of thought or style. Finally the comparative method is used to give a general estimate and placing of the man in literature.

Gosse's method usually adheres to a consideration of the points mentioned, although he does not always conform to the order given. It must be remembered, especially when dealing with the short essays, that shortness of space necessitates brevity of treatment. Not infrequently in such cases the biographical sketch is reduced to the minimum and a mere mention only of the salient dates is given. It requires skill and familiarity with the subject to give an adequate treatment in a short space,

just as the short story is a more difficult form of composition than the novel, and emphasis must be laid on such points only as are characteristic or representative of the writer considered as a whole. Thus the important consideration is not a mere accumulation of facts, but a skilful manipulation of a few facts so arranged as to lend themselves to a true portrayal.

There was inherent in Gosse's nature a profound sense of curiosity and a power of acute observation. These innate characteristics were doubtless the gifts of heredity, for they are also to be seen to no small extent in his father. The father applied the microscope to nature and the son applied the microscope to art. Both felt it their duty to record their observations, in their respective spheres, for the uses of humanity. When Gosse came into personal contact with some great writer, he would, without apparent betrayal, observe every word spoken and every move made, and afterwards record his impressions in his note-book, thus preserving them for future use. When he went to Denmark in 1872 and 1874, he took copious notes of everything that

happened and of every one whom he met. This was done for his own sheer delight and not with any ideas of future publication. Yet, almost forty years afterwards, he pieced together these early impressions and observations, and there appeared in 1911, as a result, Two Visits to Denmark. To have observed and to have recorded those observations, and forty years later to turn them into a book, is indeed a triumphant manifestation of his early powers of observation. What should be noted is that they were done for his own mere instruction and pleasure. "They were written down at the time" he says, "in journals and letters, more or less roughly, with no idea of publication. In these days, such a visitor would be writing for a newspaper, or consciously preparing for a book. In 1872 we were not so sophisticated, and if I took copious notes it was with no thought that they would ever be published."(1)

It was this acute power of observation that was responsible for the many delicious descriptions of personal detail which we find in his portraits. Witness the following paragraph

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(1) Two Visits to Denmark - Preface

taken from his study of Whitman in Critical Kit-Kats :

> "Whitman sat down in the one chair with a small poker in his hand and spent much of his leisure in feeding and irritating the stove. I cleared some papers away from off a box and sat opposite to him. When he was not actively engaged upon the stove his steady attention was fixed upon his visitor, and I had a perfect opportunity of forming a mental picture of him. He sat with a very curious pose of the head thrown backward, as if resting it one vertebra lower down the spinal column than other people do, and thus tilting his face a little upwards. With his head so poised and the whole man fixed in contemplation of the interlocutor, he seemed to pass into a state of absolute passivity, waiting for remarks or incidents, the glassy eyes half closed, the large knotted hands spread out before him, So he would remain immovable for a quarter of an hour at a time, even the action of speech betraying no movement, the lips hidden under a cascade of beard. If it be true that all remarkable human beings resemble animals, then Walt Whitman was like a cat -- a great old grey Angora Tom, alert in repose, serenely blinking under his combed waves of hair, with eyes inscrutably dreaming."

It is by means of such vignettes as this that Gosse captures for us the fine flame of Whitman's personality and makes him rise out of his grave for an instant and move before us. It is by such paragraphs as this that Gosse arouses our curiosity and interest, and, subtly, paves the way for his own critical comment on Whitman's poetry. His descriptions of personal detail carry us along with such ease and

grace, and prove so entertaining in themselves, that they might well have appeared with a mere change of names in the pages of a modern novel. If such delightfully descriptive paragraphs had no other purpose in a critical portrait than to sugar-coat for us the bitter pill of criticism, they would be well worth recording. But, indeed, such is not their only use.

The following paragraph taken from the volume More Books on the Table is one of his descriptive openings:

> "While I turned the pages of Mr. Osbert Burdett's The Idea of Coventry Patmore, there rose up vividly before me the image of that marvellous man as I used to see him at Hastings forty years ago, stretching in his study chair before the fire, smoking innumerable cigarettes, smiling and blinking at his guest, as he rolled out paradox after paradox, with a crackling laugh and a sort of bark at the close of each sentence. His conversation was what that of the Sphinx might have been, if we conceive the Sphinx to have been an angel, too. In it, a dogged sort of cynicism was mingled with celestial hues of ideality; mystery was dyed with a startling tinge of common sense. At the time I speak of, when it was my privilege to be a thrilled pilgrim at the shrine, there were hardly any other worshippers; that was the dark hour of the public neglect of Patmore."

If such paragraphs reveal his power of observation, they also show us why his criticism is so readable. He depicts so skilfully that he almost lends to criticism the element of

romance. His method never allowed his theme to grow monotonous or tedious. He relieves the tension of his criticism by means of variety of presentation, thus delighting us by the operation, (to resort again to metaphors) while at the same time applying the surgical scalpel of criticism. Hence, by means of his acute observation we discern one of the secrets of his charm, and one of the reasons why dullness, a characteristic of most literary criticism, is unknown to his pages.

Another habit of the Gosse method which also makes for clarity of portrayal is the skilful manipulation of the anecdote. The anecdote, when employed in critical portraiture, is a delicate consideration. To use it properly demands both discretion and taste, to use it improperly leads to misrepresentation and distortion. Not infrequently an anecdote will enable one to capture the essential personality of a subject without resorting to an unnecessary amount of explanatory material, and "when used with judgment adds a desirable flavor to what otherwise might prove a rather tasteless dish."(1)

(1) Biography: The Literature of Personality, James C. Johnson, (Century Co., 1927) Page 74

Gosse does not employ the anecdote for the mere purpose of delighting the reader, although its popularizing effect has always been considered one of its subsidiary functions. He uses it in order to illustrate a characteristic of his subject or to portray some nuance of thought which is likely to prove elusive to formal description. "To analyse the honey is one thing", says Gosse in "Portraits and Sketches, "and to dissect the bee another; but I find a special pleasure in watching him, myself unobserved, in the act of building up and filling the cells."(1) In observing a writer in this manner he catches such glimpses of conduct and such traits of character as are likely to enable us to see him with greater perspicuity. Such glimpses of conduct form the basis of what is known as the anecdote.

In the following paragraph taken from his study of Swinburne in Portraits and Sketches, Gosse shows us how intensely Swinburne felt the music and thought of his own poems and his readiness to share the sensation with

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(1) Preface, Portraits and Sketches.

others. Gosse's power of observation is also apparent here, and his humour is not absent:

> "When he (Swinburne) came back from the country to town he was always particularly anxious to recite or read aloud his own poems. In doing this he often became very much excited, and even, in his over-whelming sense of the movement of the meter, would jump about the room in a manner somewhat embarrassing to the listener. His method of procedure was uniform. He would arrive at a friend's house with a breast-pocket obviously bursting with manuscript, but buttoned across the chest. After floating about the room and greeting his host and hostess with many little becks of the head, and affectionate smiles, and light wavings of the fingers, he would settle at last upright on a chair, or, by preference, on a sofa, and sit there in a state of rigid immobility, the toe of one foot pressed against the heel of the other. Then he would say, in an airy, detached way, as though speaking of some absent person, 'I have brought with me my Thalassius or my Wasted Garden (or whatever it might happen to be), which I have just finished.' Then he would be folded again in silence, looking at nothing. We then were to say, 'Oh, do please read it to us! Will you?' Swinburne would promptly reply, 'I had no intention in the world in boring you with it, but since you ask me ---' and out would come the MS. I do not remember that there was ever any variation in this little ceremony, which sometimes preluded many hours of recitation and reading. His delivery, especially of his own poetry, was delightful as long as he sat quietly in his seat. His voice, which was of extra-ordinary beauty, 'the pure Ashburnham voice', as his cousin explains to me, rose and fell monotonously, but with a flute-like note which was very agreeable, and the pulse of the rhythm was strongly yet delicately felt.....But sometimes in reading he lost control of

> of his emotions, the sound became a scream, and he would dance about the room, the paper fluttering from his finger tips like a pennon in a gale of wind."

It is a curious fact that Swinburne who was, as Tennyson said, "a reed through which all things blow into music", and whose poetry is among the most melodious in the language, like that of Shelley, appealing chiefly to the ear, had, outside of poetry, no musical ear whatever. Gosse illustrates this fact by the following anecdote:

> -I once witnessed a practical joke played upon him, which made me indignant at the time, but which now seems innocent enough, and not without interest. A lady, having taken the rest of her company into her confidence, told Swinburne that she would render on the piano a very ancient Florentine ritornello which had just been discovered. She then played "Three Blind Mice, and Swinburne was enchanted. He found that it reflected to perfection the cruel beauty of the Medicis -- which perhaps it does. But this exemplifies the fact that all impressions with him were intellectual, and that an appeal to his imagination would gild the most common object with romance."

To be able to illustrate a literary artist's characteristics in this manner by one's own personal contacts with him is an advantage not enjoyed by every critic. Time and again Gosse draws upon the seemingly inexhaustible fund of his

personal contacts in order to make us see with greater transparency the character whom he is depicting. But such anecdotes serve another purpose also; they stimulate our interest in the individual described, and make him more genuinely human.

GOSSE'S PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

We have seen that it was the personalities and the expression of those personalities with which Gosse was most concerned in literature. His critical essays are largely critical portraits; in them it was his endeavour to catch, as he says, "the fine flower" (1) of the writer's personality. He was concerned "with two distinct but not unrelated branches of his subject, the literary character and the literary craft." (2) He so manipulates his material that these two considerations are fused into one distinct work of art which is the critical portrait. Thus all his essays dealt with personalities and the expression of them, and therefore his work belongs to that species of critical expression known as psychological criticism. In this he follows in the footsteps of his master, Sainte-Beuve, who, as Spingarn says, "developed and

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(1) Critical Kit-Kats, Edmund Gosse, 1896. (William Heinemann, London, 1913) Preface.

(2) Some Diversions of a Man of Letters, Edmund Gosse, 1919, William Heinemann, London, 1920) Page 11.

illustrated his theory that literature is the expression of personality."[1] There is something of the impressionist in Gosse and something of the biographical critic, but whatever other species of criticism may be associated with his name, the fact must always be remembered that he is essentially a psychological critic. It is hardly necessary to mention, after what we have seen of his method, that he belongs to the Romantic and not to the Classical school.

Gosse states in his article on Criticism in the Encyclopaedia Brittanica[2] that Matthew Arnold's definition is, for general purposes, as good as any. There are those who will quarrel with it as there are those who will quarrel with the statements of Aristotle or Longinus or Goethe or Sainte-Bauve; but until all critics agree on one definition (which is unlikely) which will hold good at all times and in all places, we must be satisfied with what we already have. Criticism, says Arnold, "is a disinterested

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(1) Creative Criticism, J.E.Spingarn, (Holt & Co. N.Y. 1917.

(2) Eleventh Edition.

endeavour to know the best that is thought and known in the world."(1)

Lack of partisanship or disinterestedness is perhaps the most important item in the literary critic's code; for a critic, to be branded as being a partisan, one way or another, in his critical judgments, immediately vitiates his judgments and makes them worthless in the eyes of sound criticism. Much English criticism has been found wanting in this respect and not a few supposedly critical reviews serve not the interests of truth but that of some political party or religious sect. When politics or religion enters the field of literary criticism, disinterestedness, indeed, must needs depart.

It has always been Gosse's belief that he never allowed partisanship or prejudice to enter his critical work. In his last published volume he says that his essays are so many pieces of broken looking-glass held

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(1) Essays in Criticism, Matthew Arnold, First Series.

up to catch the figures and gestures of life as they pass by. It is for my readers to say whether the mirror is clear or tarnished; at all events I do not think it is dimmed by prejudice."(1) Again speaking about prejudice in another volume he says:

> "If we admit into our criticism any patriotic or political prejudice, we may as well cease to wrangle on the threshold of our discussion..... Patriotism is a meaningless term in literary criticism. To prefer what has been written in our own city, or state, or country, for that reason alone, is simply to drop the balance and to relinquish all claims to form a judgement. The true and reasonable lover of literature refuses to be constrained by any meaner or homelier bond than that of good writing. His brain and his taste persist in being independent of his heart, like those of the German soldier who fought through the campaign before Paris, and who was shot at last with an Alfred de Musset, thumbed and scored, in his pocket." (2)

It might truly be said that Gosse rarely allows partisanship or prejudice to enter his critical work. From what his published works reveal, he had no violent interest in politics and consequently had no occasion to vitiate his criticism in that respect; and the laxity of

(1) Leaves and Fruit, Sir Edmund Gosse, C.B., (William Heinemann 1927) Preface.

(2) Questions at Issue, Edmund Gosse. (William Heinemann, 1893) Page 74.

of his beliefs in any religious creed which was the reaction to his over-religious youth, put him out of the temptation of partisanship in matters of religion. It would be too sweeping a statement, however, to say that he had no prejudices at all. He, indeed, was quite human and as such was not perfect. But it might be stated without fear of contradiction that his essays, as a whole, reveal no violent and consistent partisanship for any party or creed. On the other hand, he often turns the fire of his own criticism on those who allow prejudice to enter their work. Thus speaking of one writer who had erred in this respect he says, "...his violent prejudice against Puritanism is a defect which I shall be glad to see excised from his writings. I am no lover of Puritanism myself, but to drag in attacks upon it on every possible (or impossible occasion) savours of a lack of historical philosophy."(1) Savours of a lack of historical philosophy -- a thrust typical of the Gosse satire: polished, urbane, delicate, without

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(1) Silhouettes, Edmund Gosse. (William Heinemann, London, (1925) Page

cynicism or ill nature,but certainly penetrating!

Gosse was the apostle of sincerity, and here, again, we find the application of his beliefs in his own work. To him sincerity was "the first gift in literature and perhaps the most uncommon"[1]. Much as he loved felicity of diction, we do not find him sacrificing his sincerity for the self-satisfying desire of startling his readers or for producing nothing more than effects. He wrote what he himself believed to be scrupulously true and did not shrink from expressing his judgment no matter who may be his subject. His best friends often occasioned his most trenchant criticism, yet their friendship was not thereby lost. Perhaps the best explanation of this rests upon their knowledge of his own stringent adherence to sincerity. Sincerity is trusted no matter how perverse may be its utterances, and if a literary critic is not trusted, if he can get no hearing, he might just as well not be laboring in vain.

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(1) Critical Kit-Kats. Edmund Gosse, 1896. Page 11.

That Gosse's judgment was trusted even by such writers as Walter Pater and George Moore, to give but two examples, is seen by letters which these writers have sent to Gosse. In 1893 after Gosse had published a critical essay on him, Pater wrote to Gosse saying that he hoped "to give good heed to your friendly advice on some points and that my next book will be 'really good'".(1) And in one of Moore's letters to Gosse in 1898, Moore asked Gosse to look over some emendations in one of his books, saying "If you, my dear critic, approve of these, I propose to give them to the public in the next edition."(2)

Again, sincerity is the greatest protective against partisanship which a critic could have. If a critic is genuinely sincere, he must necessarily be impartial in attitude, unless, of course, he is laboring under vincible ignorance or misinformation.

Gosse's sincerity and strict adherence to truth as he saw it is best seen in Father and Son wherein he puts

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(1) The Library of Edmund Gosse, Compiled by E.H.M.Cox (Dulow & Company, London 1924) Page 196.

(2) Ibid, Page 186

his own early life and the life of his father under the microscope; in the prefatory note to that volume Gosse says that his narrative "in all parts, and so far as the punctilious attention of the writer has been able to keep it so, is scrupulously true. If it were not in this strict sense, to publish it would be to trifle with those who may be induced to read it."(1) It is not the business of the critic to be discreet; he must relate the truth, and if he is limited by discretion the truth must consequently be impaired. In Portraits and Sketches Gosse says: "I have not hesitated to tell what I believe to be the truth, nor glossed over peculiarities of temperament when they help us to understand the published writings."(2)

It is usually a test of a matured critic's sincerity to watch his treatment of the younger writers. There has always been a tendency even among the best critics to underrate those who belong to a younger generation than their own. "Neither Hazlitt nor Sainte-Beuve", we are

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(1) Father and Son, Edmund Gosse, (Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1908). Prefatory Note.

(2) Portraits and Sketches, Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London, 1913) Preface.

told, "could be trusted to give as valuable a judgment on the work of a man younger than themselves as they could of any past production, be it what it might."(1) As there exist differences of taste among nations, so also there exist differences of taste among generations, and a critic whose taste has been cultivated under one generation is apt to disparage the production of another generation.

As a literary critic, Gosse's long life placed him in a unique position. He began writing when the Victorian era was still at its height, early in the period which Walter de la Mare has recently called "the feminine seventies;" he witnessed the coming and going of "the elegant eighties" which brought with them the deaths of Browning, George Eliot, and Matthew Arnold; he survived the fin-de siècle decadence of the "gay nineties"; he surveyed the ante-bellum transition period of the new century's early years and the rise of the Neo-Georgians, and he was still wielding a pen when the post-war renaissance was ten years old. To have been an active participant in, as well

(1) Questions at issue, Edmund Gosse. Page X.

as an eager spectator of, this colorful pageant which took over half a century in passing is to have enough experience of the literary art to be regarded as a veteran of literature; and if the passing of time is invariably accompanied by maturity, Gosse may unequivocally be called a mature critic. All during these years the fluctuations of taste had been going on. The number of literary creeds to which such a span of years has given birth almost defies enumeration. For a critic to have outlived so many changes in the literary fashion, places him in a somewhat peculiar position owing to the fact that the permanent element of artistic beauty, if such exists,has never been definitely located. Even today it is one of literature's most mooted questions. Almost every critic has had his own peculiar standards of criticism and has surveyed the field of literature through his own particular rose-colored glasses, or perhaps his own peculiar jaundiced eye. Late in life Gosse wrote:

> "Changes of standards in the arts are always taking place; but it is only with advancing years, perhaps,

> that we begin to be embarrassed by the recurrence of them. In early youth we fight for the new forms of art, for the new aesthetic shibboleths, and in that happy ardour of battle we have no time or inclination to regret the demi-gods whom we dispossess. But the years glide on, and, behold! one morning, we wake up to find our own predilections treated with contempt, and the objects of our idolatry consigned to the waste-paper basket. Then the matter becomes serious, and we must go on struggling for a cause inevitably lost, or we must give up the whole matter in indifference. This week I read, over the signature of a very clever and very popular literary character of our day, the remark that Wordsworth's was 'a genteel mind of the third rank'. I put down the newspaper in which this airy dictum was printed, and, for the first time I was glad that poor Mr. Matthew Arnold was no longer with us. But, of course, the evolutions of taste must go on, whether they hurt the living and the dead, or no." (1)

The objection might be advanced that despite the evolutions of taste, most critics are uniform in their opinions of literary artists of earlier periods. But it is a far more difficult matter to render judgment on a neophyte who has not yet "arrived", than it is on one whose status the world has already recognized or who belongs to an earlier period. In the one case it is like

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(1) Some Diversions of a Man of Letters, Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London, 1920) Page 3.

the man who attempts to write the history of the World War during the month immediately following the cessation of hostilities. His history might be true in details, but he is too near the scene of action to be able to survey it as a whole in perspective, in its own setting, as a complete and finished panorama. His history is valuable but it is not the history which posterity will read. The circumstances are analagous with the literary critic when treating a young contemporary; he is too near the scene of action. His criticism will be valuable; but it is improbable that it will be the same estimate which, as the saying gees, will be rendered by posterity. A classic example of the instability of contemporary criticism occurs in the early nineteenth century. The critics of today place Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Byron as the supreme poets of the early nineteenth century. Yet their contemporary critic, Jeffrey, the man who edited the Edinburgh Review and who "raised it to the very highest rank" of literary journals of that time, vigorously asserted that there would be only two poets of the early nineteenth century read by

posterity, and that these two were Rogers and Moore:

But when a critic of today deals with the literary artists of the nineteenth century or an earlier period, the ground has been cleared for him. The passing of time has gradually separated the wheat from the chaff, and the winnowing fan of a century or more of criticism has disposed of much of the superficiality by which the blind contemporary critics were led astray. Like the eager historian, the contemporary critic is laboring under a mass of difficulties which only the passing of time can remove. The final estimate of a man of letters is that of posterity, and posterity is nothing more than the opinion which the best critics give after the years have cleared the ground.

As we have seen, even the best critics sometimes are unsound when treating writers younger than themselves. What of Edmund Gosse? The fluctuations of taste have continued all during the lengthy span of Gosse's life but he has not grown callous to the young writers whose literary ideals differed from those which his own generation sponsored. For him the past alone is not deified and he

welcomed what was good in the new writers in as appreciative a strain as he had welcomed what was good in the old. "There is nothing" he once said, "in which fashion alters so rapidly as it does in poetry. I have followed every successive change in it with curiosity, and I believe with sympathy. I shall know myself to be old indeed when I can no longer vibrate to the music of the latest poets of our race, and I have not yet found that I am unable to respond to their challenge."(1)

This understanding sympathy with those of younger generations than his, he sustained to the end of his life. In the epilogue of his Collected Poems, we find his everlasting faith in literature expressed along with his confidence in the younger writers:

> Before I die, O may I see,
> Clasped in her violet girdle, Spring;
> May April breezes blow to me
> Songs that the youngest poets sing!

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(1) Collected Poems of Edmund Gosse, - Preface.

Old eyes are dull to sights unseen,
  Old ears are dull to songs unsung,
But if the heart stay warm and green,
  Perchance the senses may keep young.

Howe'er it be, I will not quail
  To tell the lapse of years like sand;
My faith in beauty shall not fail
  Because I fail to understand.

New arts, new raptures, new desires
  Will stir the new-born souls of men;
New fingers smite new-fashioned lyres, --
  And O! may I be listening then. (1)

It is with this understanding attitude that he treats the younger writers. He regarded them not as hungry generations treading him down, but as guardians to whom he passes on the sacred flame"that Homer and that Virgil won". Such writers as Rupert Brooke, Flecker, Edith Sitwell, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Nichols, Robert Graves, are but a few of the young writers whom we find treated with sympathy, criticism and encouragement in his collected essays. That he has given the young writers their due meed of praise and encouragement is an eminently healthy

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(1) Collected Poems of Edmund Gosse, - Page 357.

sign of his critical sincerity. They found in him not the censorious cynic of a generation other than their own, but a sincere and understanding guide who believed that "the relentlessness of satire is only possible for those who neither sympathize nor comprehend." Gosse has been faithful to his belief, -

My faith in beauty shall not fail
Because I fail to understand."

St. John Adcock, speaking about Gosse's adherence to truth suggests "This truth to the facts, when it happens to be unflattering, is sometimes taken for cynicism or ill-nature"; (1) and another writer has mentioned Gosse's "urbane malice". (2) Whether or not Gosse actually harbored malice in some cases is very difficult to say with any degree of assurance. When he is harsh in his criticism,he shows us that he has reason for being so. His criticism never belongs to that order which says: "I do not like you, Dr.Fell,

(1) The Glory that was Grub Street, St John Adcock, (Musson Book Co., Toronto, 1928). Page 66.

(2) Sir Edmund Gosse, Joseph Collins, (Sat.Review of Lit.Je.23, 1928.

the reason why I cannot tell," Coleridge says, "He who tells me that there are defects in a new work, tells me nothing which I should not have taken for granted without his information. But he who points out and elucidates the beauties of an original work does indeed give me interesting information, such as experience would not have authorized me in anticipating."(1) It was always Gosse's prime endeavour to point out and elucidate the beauties of a composition and this he does with an admirable facility. But when he tells us that there are defects in a composition, he does not let the matter hang in the air without showing us these defects and stating why they are defects. His sincerity demanded that he should be fair and unbiased, and when he does make use of his keen rapier of satire, he has usually good reasons for doing it. That he could be powerfully satirical and that he has been, is nothing to his discredit; it is the reasoned satire, and therefore it is justifiable. His satire

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(1) Biographia Literaria. Chap. 3.

rarely stoops to cynicism or ill-nature and is anything but coarse or blatantly impassioned. He carried his delicacy of diction even to satire and his satire is keen and penetrating without being in the least unreasonable or savage; his belief that "we cease to be savage and caustic when we are acquainted with the inner existence of a man" is not difficult to reconcile with the delicate form of satire which he used.

Unlike those of Hazlitt, Gosse's critical powers were not confined to the expression of extremes -- he was more than merely a "good hater" or an "intense lover". He never forgets that a literary composition has its good points as well as its bad; he takes both into consideration and praises where praise is due, and condemns where condemnation is demanded.

"What is here esaayed" wrote Gosse in the Preface to one of his essay collections, "is of the analytical, comparative, and descriptive order; it hopes to add something to historical knowledge and something to aesthetic appreciation."(1) This indeed expresses his critical approach to any

(1) Critical Kit-Kats. Preface.

literary production. He is an analyst and his mind is naturally an enquiring one. We have mentioned his insatiable curiosity; and if real criticism is essentially the exercise of curiosity, as Arnold said it was,(1) criticism was the right field of endeavour for Edmund Gosse. He was curious about books and about those who wrote them, curious about how they were written, why they were written, and when they were written; in fact, we venture to assert that he was over-curious about books and authors. There are times when he reveals so much about them that he becomes trivial in his statements by giving undue importance to matters of small critical significance. There are times even when such gossip adds nothing to the portrait whom he is depicting. But there is much also to say on behalf of such gossip; it is not wholly useless or without motive.Gosse's endeavour was to develop an intimacy between his subject and reader,and these little gossipy observa-

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(1) Essays in Criticism, 1st Series, Page 16

tions, though they add nothing to pure criticism, make us more intimate with the writer described and stimulate our interest in him.

Gosse is not analytical in the academic sense of the word; he does not argue ideas or anatomize them until there is nothing left. With the exception of Questions at Issue, his essay collections are almost wholly free from polemical writing, and in eliminating controversy he is one with Arnold who says: "A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack; and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them.....It is because criticism has so little kept in the pure intellectual sphere, has so little detached itself from practice, has been so directly polemical and controversial, that it has so ill accomplished, in this country, its best spiritual work."(1) By discarding polemics from

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(1) Essays in Criticism, 1st Series, Page 20

his criticism and by making it interesting even for those who have little or no idea of aesthetic appreciation, Gosse has humanized his criticism. He has put it into the hands of those who would refuse to page through a volume of technical controversy which would be of interest only for the savant. In a word, he makes his criticism readable, reaches a larger audience and consequently propagates with greater and more widespread effect "the best that is known and thought in the world."

GOSSE'S LITERARY STYLE

There is nothing formal about Gosse's essays; they are never cold and impersonal. His "charming manner of saying things" to which Walter Pater once referred, is due to his familiarity, for his essays are always familiar essays, although they are, at the same time, biographical and critical. His method of approach is conversational and informal, making the reader feel at once the warmth of personal contact. If dignity demands a distant attitude and a formal style, as some believe, then Gosse's essays are not dignified, for his attitude is never distant and his style is rarely, if ever, formal. There is nothing in him of the poseur attitude, nothing of the dogmatist. His attitude to his reader is not that of a teacher to a pupil, but that of a friend

to a friend; and his gossip and comment on this writer or that, is expressed in so amiable a manner that he wins at once the reader's confidence. Polemical writing usually aggravates the reader into antipathy or into the desire to "pick holes" in the arguments advanced, instead of winning his confidence; not improbably this was one of the reasons why Gosse never repeated his one book of controversial essays. In criticism especially, the confidence of the reader is too important a thing to sacrifice on the altar of controversy, and Gosse used everything within his power to gain and sustain it.

He manipulates the language with a seemingly effortless facility which always tends to make his prose very easy reading. He conveys the impression that writing is for him not a burden but a pleasure, and he seems to have regarded the painstaking act of composition not as the agony which many of the more creative artists considered it, but as an occupation delightful in itself.

On sending a presentation copy of one of his books to Gosse in 1893, Oscar Wilde said, "Accept it as a tribute of my admiration of your own delicate use of English;"(1) it is this delicacy and "charming manner of saying things" which immediately strikes one when reading any of Gosse's prose. The quiet conversational charm so characteristic of Stevenson is also characteristic of Gosse. He writes entertainingly at all times and dullness is foreign to his pages. In his criticism he countenances no sympathy for what he calls "the solidly dry and the dryly solid", and never allowed his own compositions to become dull or monotonous. If the precept which says that maintenance of interest is one of the cardinal points of style were given the importance which is its due by the critics, dull books would long ago have ceased to be published. Today the most damnatory criticism that a book can receive is to have the disqualifying epithet of dullness attached to it. Many believe that it is only the intellectual snob

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(1) The Library of Edmund Gosse, Compiled by E.H.M. Cox (Dulow & Company. Ltd., London, 1924) pp. 290.

or the poor technician who needs must clothe his thoughts in the language of pedantry or of dullness, and the psychologists seem to support this contention by saying that no man thinks dully or monotonously, why then should they write dully or monotonously? (This refers, of course, to strictly literary compositions, not to scientific.) Gosse believed that literary compositions should be made interesting however deep or colorless may be their theme. "I ask of books" he says, "only that they should be amusing, that is to say, competently enough executed to arrest an intelligent observer." (1) In believing this, Gosse suited the action to the word by making his own literary productions conform to his ideals. He humanized his criticism by making it readable, and he made it readable by making it interesting. After reading one of Gosse's critical essays about a prominent man of letters, Henry James wrote to Gosse, saying "You have been lively about him -- but about whom wouldn't you be lively? I think that you'd be lively about me!" (2) It might be interesting to note that Gosse

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(1) Leaves and Fruit, Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann, London, 1927); Preface.

(2) Letters of Henry James, Edited by Percy Lubbock, (Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1920)

did, eventually, write about Henry James, and his portrait of him in Aspects and Impressions is not the least lively one in that volume.

Gosse's diction is in keeping with his familiar style and is not composed of the "sesquipedalian verbiage" of "learned length and thundering sound"; his vocabulary has all the simplicity of conversation, the unaffectedness of a matured style, and serves with consistent good taste all the uses to which he puts it. He abounds in short, pointed sentences and possesses the happy faculty of being able to capture a man's whole personality in a few words. In his short essays brevity of treatment necessarily hounded his pen, and he developed the ability to sketch his portrait in a remarkably small number of strokes. To be able to reduce a personality to paper in less than two thousand words, as Gosse does in his short essays, is a feat which is praiseworthy in itself, since condensation is so apt to leave a distorted impression on the mind of the reader. Gosse always attempts to leave a clear and distinct impression of the writer whom he treats. His method was

not the encyclopaedic one of flooding his treatment with a plethora of disconnected facts; he relies only upon a few facts, and by so arranging, and expatiating upon these, he leaves a distinct impression. Perhaps, as he himself suggests, his final portrait may not convey the whole of the personality whom he is treating, it may not even be a wholly true portrayal, but that he has utilized the facts to produce a clear and distinct impression, if not a true one, cannot be doubted. His portraits may frequently be little more than outlines or silhouettes, they may be the result of but a few strokes of his pencil, but they are never blurred outlines, never indistinct silhouettes, for clarity, with Gosse, is always a major consideration.

C O N C L U S I O N

A few days before his death in May, 1928, Gosse wrote a few significant lines which cannot but touch the heart of those who are mindful of all that his earthly pilgrimage has meant. "All my life long," he says, "I have been wandering in the garden of Armida, never rejecting the rose because it was not jasmine, and never denying the beauty of orchids because they were not daisies. So much will I dare to say in my own defence now, in the twilight of my career, - I have been consistent in the pursuit of what I felt to be excellence in every field of writing, without regard to prejudice or fashion. Let me claim for this catholicity what credit it deserves."(1) When he wrote this, Gosse was almost eighty years of age; and during sixty of those

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(1) Selected Essays (First Series), Sir Edmund Gosse, (William Heinemann, London,1928) Preface.

years he had poured out upon the sea of English letters a flood of erudition unparalleled in quantity by any other English critic of his time.. During those years he had been in constant contact with literature and its makers, and could almost have said of himself what his French contemporary and friend, Emile Faguet, has said, "I have never stopped reading except to write, nor writing except to read."(1)

But Gosse did find time for other pursuits than those of reading and writing, and his precious literary contacts tell us of this fact and how his leisure hours were spent; we find him at a table in a Parisian Café conversing over his wine with the French poet Paul Verlaine; we find him playing chess on the coverlet of the sick-bed with the emaciated and immortal Stevenson; we find him in America listening while the Quaker poet Whitter relates, with much animation and spirit, some exciting reminiscences of the Concord riots; we find him in Norway jotting down in his notebook Ibsen's opinion of Tolstoi as the great dramatist uttered it; and we find him at the side of

(1) Aspects and Impressions, Edmund Gosse (Cassell & Co., 1922) Page 227.

Robert Browning listening while the great poet unfolds for the first time his own life story. Even those hours which were not devoted to reading and writing were devoted in one way or another to literature. His intense curiosity about literature is the predominant characteristic of his life; the fire of that passion began early in his career and remained with him in undiminished vigour until the end. "The man who satisfies a ceaseless intellectual curiosity," he once said, "probably squeezes more out of life in the long run than any one else:"(1) and the diversity of interests and catholicity of taste which we see in his essays are revelatory of how much he himself has squeezed out of life.

To those who will ask whether Gosse's name will live in English literature, we need only to point to those immortal luminaries with whom his name is linked. He believed in the value of first hand information, in personal contacts, when they could be had, of those about whom he wrote; and

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(1) Books on the Table, Edmund Gosse (William Heinemann, London, 1921) Page 170.

his portraits of the greatest literary artists of his time, besides being an enduring monument to the men whom they portray, are also a monument to the portraitist. If for no other reason than his first hand information of the personalities of his literary contemporaries, Gosse's name will live. Speaking of this in the London Sunday Times, Desmond MacCarthy says: "We still read the diaries of such perfunctory observers as Crabb, Robinson, or Rogers, for the sake of catching glimpses of their famous contemporaries. Carlyle's sketches of Coleridge talking on Highgate Hill or of Wordsworth, rocklike amid the swirling babble of the dinner-table, are already more precious to us than his rhetoric on heroes.. Such preferences forestall what posterity's debt will be to Edmund Gosse." (1)

But there is even a greater debt than that of punctilious observation which literature owes to Gosse: while his portraits are a significant contribution to literary criticism, they are also a significant contribution to the humanization

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(1) Edmund Gosse Dead: Will He Live?, Literary Digest, June 23rd, 1928.

of literary criticism; everything connected with his method points towards this fact. The causerie or kit-kat form which he chose as the medium for his critical expression is an important factor in his literary work and for his purpose he could have found no better form; that it had been but infrequently used in English before, is all the more credit to him. We have seen his method in painting the critical portrait; how he dealt with the inter-relation of the literary character and the literary craft. We have seen how his critical portrait was woven out of the fabric of biography, criticism, anecdote, comparisons, quotations, influences and estimate, and that all these considerations coalesced into one unified work of art.

The high esteem by which he was held in the contemporary world of letters is manifested by the fact that he was made chief literary advisor of the 10th and 11th editions of the Encyclopedia Brittanica, that he was honoured by the French Academy, that he was made an Officer of the Legion of Honour by the French Government, that he received the highest honour within the power of the Norwegian Government, and

that his own government, also for his service to letters, made him a Companion of the Bath, and finally conferred on him the signal honour of knighthood.

It must be remembered that Sir Edmund Gosse's contribution to literature is not confined to the sphere of criticism; he is also a biographer, a poet, and a literary historian, but to have treated his work in these spheres would have involved an undertaking wholly beyond the scope of an academic thesis. It is generally admitted, however, that Sir Edmund Gosse was, above all, a literary critic and that his field in literary criticism was that of critical portraiture; it is as a literary critic that he always speaks of himself, and it is as a literary critic that his name will go down in the annals of English literature. Let us conclude by quoting an encomium by that eminent English scholar and statesman, Lord Balfour, who has said: "Higher praise cannot be given to the literary critic than to say that he interprets

lovingly and wisely the literature of the past; that he judges those of his own age with an understanding sympathy and greets the younger generation in a spirit of hopeful expectation. All this can be said of Edmund Gosse." (1)

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(1) Sir Edmund Gosse C.B.: An Appreciation, Robert Lynd, (William Heinemann, 1928) (Brochure) Page 8.

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