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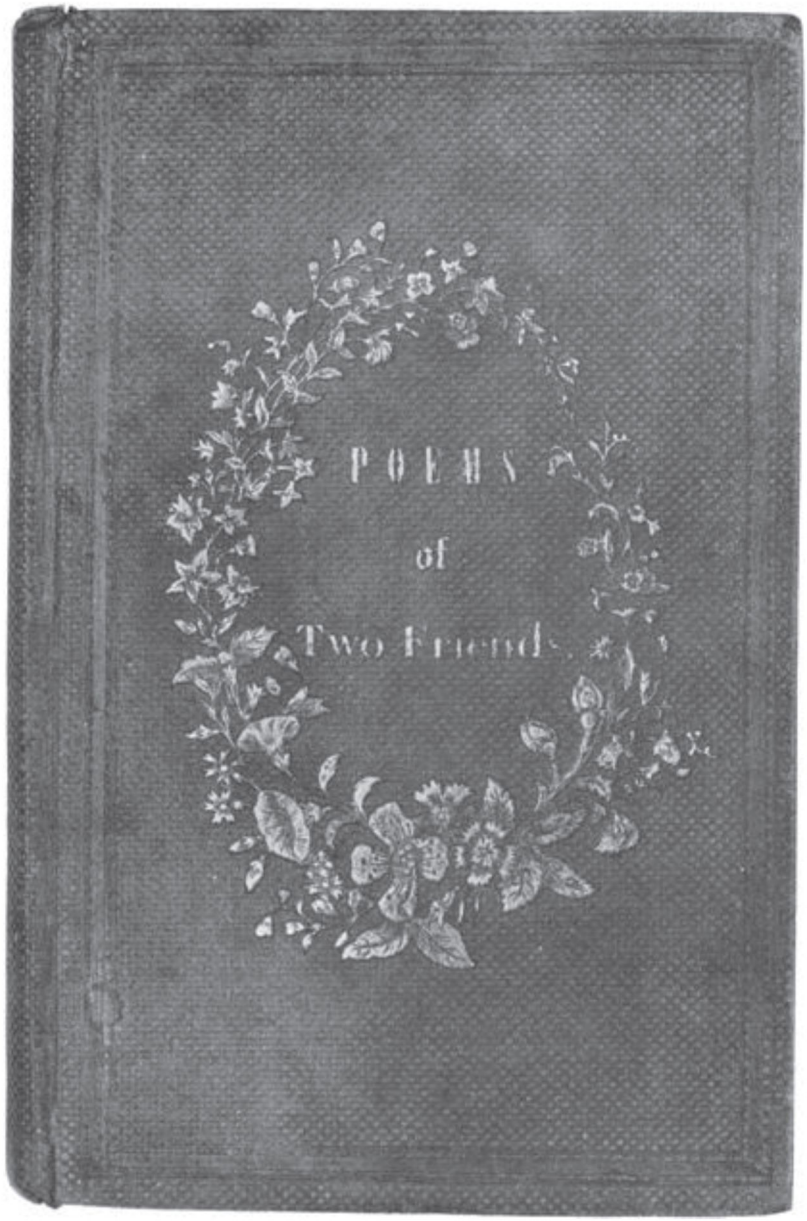
"POEMS OF TWO FRIENDS"

By RUDOLF *and* CLARA KIRK

William Dean Howells, whose name is now generally associated with the beginnings of critical realism in American fiction, was, toward the end of the last century, something like a cleansing breeze in the stagnant atmosphere of decayed romanticism. The story here told, however, of the genesis of his first published work, a rare little volume of poetry which has been acquired by the Rutgers Library, reveals something of his romantic youth. The two letters by Howells are printed for the first time with the kind permission of Miss Mildred Howells.

ON JANUARY 1, 1860, John James Piatt, a young Ohio journalist, gave to his grandmother a little volume entitled *Poems of Two Friends*, of which he was co-author with another young man named William Dean Howells. Neither youth was known to fame at that time, and both were rather self-conscious over the great venture of publishing a book of verse. In the three-sentence "Preface," written by Howells, their state of mind is revealed: "It may be that the Tenderness which cannot leave these poor Children of the Heart to generous Oblivion, is not wise. There is the Doubt." They then appeal to the public: "Gracious Reader! (approached with the reverent Affection due to the Reader of a first Book), solve us the Doubt." Thus a small book of verse, printed on tinted paper and charmingly bound, went out into the literary world with the intention of testing whether or not its authors were true poets. Bearing the copyright date 1859 and the imprint 1860, the little book was printed by Follett, Foster and Company, of Columbus, Ohio, before Christmas, 1859, and sold for fifty cents. Today copies are rarities which bring fairly high


POEMS
of
Two Friends

prices, when they come on the market at all. The Rutgers University Library was fortunate enough recently to acquire the very copy that Piatt "Affectionately" presented to "Grandma" eighty-one years ago.

This presentation copy has particular interest in that forty-odd years after it was printed it was inscribed by both authors. A letter written by Piatt, December 22, 1903, to a James Carleton Young, of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is slipped into an envelope which is pasted in the front of the book. From it we learn that Young had bought the volume from Piatt—who no doubt had reclaimed it after the death of his grandmother—with a special inscription added by Piatt from his home in North Bend, Ohio, December 4, 1903. On the blank page opposite Piatt's first poem, with which the book begins, Piatt—now a man of almost seventy—wrote eight lines from his youthful poem, "The Church Path":

> Vanished years: and every one
> Walked with me in shade and sun,
> Under clouds, through rainbows bright,
> Nights made day, and days made night.
> Joys that leafed my heart with May
> Rustle round my lonely way;—
> Fallen leaves my footsteps start:
> Their bright trees grew in my heart.

Then follow Piatt's signature and the dates "1859–1903"; finally, the line from Horace, "Eheu! . . . labuntur anni."

Piatt said in his letter to Young, "I fancy Mr. Howells would gladly write in the . . . volume if you should think it worth while to send it to him," and he added, "But the inserts of verses and letter in his autograph may render this unnecessary." Though the "inserts of verses and letter" did not come with the book to the Rutgers Library, Young did follow Piatt's suggestion, and more than a year later persuaded Howells also to inscribe the volume. Undoubtedly it was at this time that Howells wrote "W. D. H." after the Preface, and thus acknowledged himself the author. On the half-title before his section of the book, Howells wrote for Young two lines from one of the poems in this book, the "Prelude"—lines which are significantly characteristic of the agnosticism which he still felt as an aging man:

I sing in March brief
blue bird lays
And hope a May, and
do not know.

Howells' inscription is signed "W. D. Howells," and is dated "Columbus, Ohio, 1860. Kittery Point, Me., 1905."

In order to understand the story behind this little brown volume, prettily adorned with a wreath of gilt flowers, we must go back to the earliest references to the life-long friendship between Piatt and Howells, set down by Howells in his reminiscences. As fellow-apprentices in the printing room of the *Ohio State Journal*—the same paper on which they were later to work together as young reporters—they set type, and indulged in "boyish escapades in the long leisure of the spring afternoons of 1850," never suspecting their common interest in poetry.[1] Many years later Howells recalled a "tremendous combat with wet sponges" which he saw in the printing office once, between Piatt and another apprentice. "I admired his vigor as a combatant," remarked Howells, "but I never spoke to him at that time, and I never dreamed that he, too, was effervescing with verse, probably as fiercely as myself."[2] Howells soon came to know Piatt, and joined in the "romps and scuffles," and in *Years of My Youth* he again lingers over those printing-room scenes:

I can see Piatt now, his blue eyes laughing to tears in our romps and scuffles, and I can hear the trickling mirth of his reluctant chuckle, distinct across the days of the years that have brought us so far. He was setting up House Bills and Senate Bills too, with whatever subjective effect, in the intervals of our frolic, but his head must have been involved in the sunny mists that wrapt mine round.[3]

We hear nothing more of the friendship of the two apprentices until 1859, when the idea of publishing a book together is first suggested. Piatt's reference to the undertaking, written inside the flyleaf of the Rutgers copy of *Poems of Two Friends* as part of the inscription for Young, gives us a brief account of the whole affair.

I was living at Louisville, Ky in Summer of 1859—in correspondence with W. D. H. then an Editor of the Ohio *State Journal* at Columbus, Ohio,

[1] William Dean Howells, *Years of My Youth*, 1916, p. 79.
[2] *My Literary Passions*, 1891, p. 45.
[3] *Years of My Youth*, p. 79.

—when a proposal was made by the publishers to issue a Volume of my verse. This was communicated to me through Mr. Howells, and I afterwards suggested that it should be a joint volume. The result was this volume, published just before Christmas 1859.

J. J. P.

North Bend, Ohio
Dec^{r}, 4, 1903.

Piatt had accepted for that summer a temporary position as secretary to George D. Prentice of the Louisville *Journal*, a paper to which he had contributed many poems. He and Howells evidently exchanged a number of letters at that time, for in the letter to Young referred to above, Piatt remarked that he had just then, in December of 1903, opened a box of papers closed for twenty years, and in it he had found a pile of letters written to him by Howells in 1859.

Two of these letters, hitherto unpublished, recently came into the possession of the Rutgers Library. Tucked away in the fifth paragraph of Howells' account of his latest poetic enthusiasms is probably the first hint Howells throws out that he and Piatt might collaborate on a book—not of poetry but of "prose sketches"—that they "might sleep together under the same cover."

Columbus, Sept. 19, 1859.

My dear Piatt—

Excuse the shabbiness of this paper and the conveniency of pencil. You know—and if you don't, it is time you learned—that I am lazy.

I have a new sensation. I have Uhland—der süsste [*sic*] der deutschen Dichtern [*sic*].

I am boring every body to death about him, and I must mention him to you. I was afraid, when I had finished Heine, that "now the wine of life is drawn," but I was mistaken. Uhland pleases me quite as well—perhaps better. He is purer, and dreamier. You of course have read him Longfellowed; but the honey of his poetry has not the genuine taste, even when strained through the silver net of *our* poet's thought.—I really don't know what I shall do! If I go on admiring Uhland at this rate, and swelling with unexpressed sentiments, I am afraid I shall *burst*.

Here is something, I wrote the other evening. It is not for publication, but for you to laugh at, if you find it sufficiently unjust—:

The Poet's Friends.

The Robin sings in the elm—
The Cattle stand beneath,

Sedate and grave, with great brown eyes,
And fragrant meadow-breath.

They listen to the flattered bird,—
The wise looking, stupid things!
And they never understand a word
Of all the Robin sings![4]

What do you think?, "Strictly private and confidential."

I think you are right about Coates Kinney; there is but *one* poet in the west, and the first letter of his name is Piatt.—While I am on the subject of *you*—I had a talk with Foster the other day. I am going to get him up a holyday book—Selections from Percy's Reliques, with an essay on ballad poetry. He will print the book in beautiful style—green and gold—and will issue your poems uniform with it, if you feel like publishing. I think it would pay you.—You are known and popular throughout the west. You have friends at Cincinnati, Louisville, and Columbus—and I would spread myself on a review of you for the "Saturday Press." (They published some notices of Aldrich I made,—the first thing under their editorial head.) Or you and I might make up a book of prose sketches and sleep together under the same covers.

Write about it.

The note I got from the *Atlantic* was printed, and signed "The Editors."

I suppose we shall all be put in Mr. Coggeshall's book. A prodigious man, with a fine faculty for feeding the public on sawdust.

Now I am ashamed to write you that your "Ada" was printed in our paper that contained Lincoln's speech and every copy was sold before I could send any to you. I will have it published in the weekly, and mail you copies. Thank you for remembering the *Journal.* Several persons have already spoken in compliment of "Ada". *Who* is it? *Any*one?

Yours ever
Will D. Howells

P.S. Where is she? *Any*where?

The portion of this letter which probably stirred Piatt more than the poem on robins and cattle was that in which Howells referred to his conversation with Foster, the publisher and printer of the *Ohio State Journal*, and casually threw out a feeler as to the book they might publish together. Undoubtedly Piatt did "write about it" to Howells, and himself proposed, as he tells us in his inscription to Young, that they should collaborate on a volume of verse. Evidently the poems were promptly assembled and given to the press, for in less than three weeks Howells wrote the following letter to Piatt, in which he referred to "Our Publisher!—Think, O dear Heaven!"

[4] This poem appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1860, p. 185.

—by the side of which Piatt, either then or years later, wrote and underlined an emphatic "N. B." (Other NB's occur at frequent intervals. Both letters are noted, "Sent to me at Louisville, Ky., JJP.")

Columbus, Oct. 5, 1859.

My dear Piatt—

The little things you sent me are *very* pretty—"Living and Dead," and "In Autumn" are *wunderschön*. The latter I am going to print, *te volente* or not. Indeed you are a poetical brick of the very first burning. By the way, here is something of my own—a mere conceit, that I thought nice when it came into my head first.

"From dainty rose-bud lips in pout,
Lo kiss the perfect flower out."

You see I insist upon making two syllables of "flower," in spite of you. Why *did* you criticise my rough translation at all? You know I told you it was the first draft merely. Remember the saw, of which the teeth never grow dull.—The other day, looking over the Journals, I came upon a stanza I had quoted from a poem of yours, in which occurred the lines:

"They have left the *ghosts of their silence*
Walking in my brain."

The verses are beautiful, but it made me shudder to read them; for I had justice [*sic*] written, a week or two before, the following, with which I was greatly in humor:

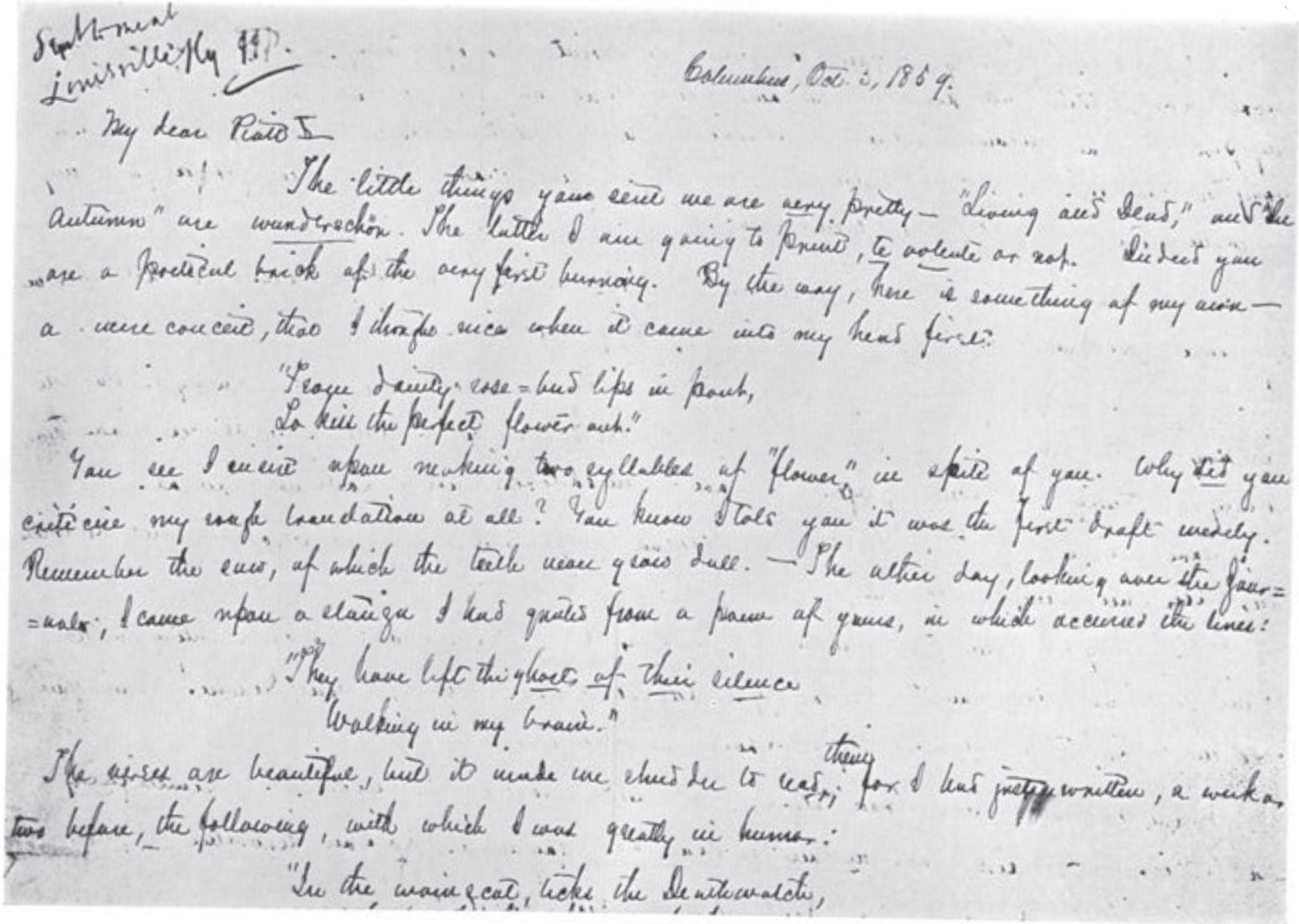
"In the wainscot, ticks the Deathwatch,
Chirps the Cricket in the floor,
In the distance dogs are barking,
Feet go by outside my door.

"From her window's honeysuckle,
Stealing in upon the gloom,
Spice and sweets embalm the Silence
Dead within the lonesome room.

"And the *ghost of that dead Silence*,
Haunts me ever, thin and chill,
In the pauses of the Deathwatch,
When the Crickets cry is still."[5]

Isn't there a fearful similarity of phantoms here? And can there be any doubt that I stole your ghost? Believe me, that I carried it away in the mouth of my sack, as innocently as any Benjamin. Take it again, O Joseph. But look you! Don't you attempt to claim the embalming process. Keep your *fresh* silence ghost; but remember that the pickled article is mine. Yours will soon spoil; mine wont.

[5] This poem appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1860, p. 469.


Sentimental
Louisville Ky J.J.P.

Columbus, Oct. 5, 1859.

My dear Piatt:—

The little things you sent me are very pretty—"Living and Dead," and "the Autumn" are wunderschön. The latter I am going to print, to volente or not. Indeed you were a poetical trick of the very first burning. By the way, here is something of my own—a mere conceit, that I thought nice when it came into my head first:

"Your dainty rose-bud lips in pout,
To kiss the perfect flower out."

You see I insist upon making two syllables of "flower" in spite of you. Why did you criticise my rough translation at all? You know I told you it was the first draft merely. Remember the ens, of which the teeth were grown dull.—The other day, looking over the Jour=nal, I came upon a stanza I had quoted from a poem of yours, in which occurred the lines:

"They have left the ghosts of their silence
Walking in my brain."

The verses are beautiful, but it made me shudder to read them; for I had pretty written, a week or two before, the following, with which I was greatly in humor:

"In the wainscot, ticks the Deathwatch,

William Dean Howells to John James Piatt, October 5, 1859

I take it very kindly of you to damn our printers so effectually. If you have got any more indignation on hand at the same price, you may let me have the whole lot. For my part, I have become so used to having my best intentions stabbed to death, that I rather enjoy the slaughter. For you, however, I am sorry. What would you? Our forman passes my expostulations by as the idle wind, which he regards not.

I suppose you do not see my occasionalities in the Saturday Press? I do not observe a diseased eagerness in the part of editors to copy them. Ah, me!

The John Smith of your affectionate inquiry is a spectacled person, who abides chiefly in the State Library, and as a contributor, has the gift of continuance in a remarkable degree. Was there really anything in "Lines of Life"? I gave it an editorial, not a poetical perusal.

I have commenced to take lessons in German composition, of a professor who diets on onions and beer, and smells accordingly.[6]

It is really no dream that you are to publish, for I had a waking conversation with your publisher about you this morning. (Our Publisher! Think, O dear Heaven!) Can't you see me before three weeks? My "suffering is intolerable."

Have you ever read a translation of Uhland's "Love of the Singers"? Beautifully sad it is.—Heine's old mother is dead at Hamburgh. Do you remember—

"Denk ich an Deutschland in der Nacht?"

Your budget of poetry came safely to hand, and was eagerly read. Wouldn't it be a good plan for you to print something at the east?—say in the N. Y. Post, the National Era, and Boston Courier, the Century, etc. When "the book comes out" the editors would be sure to mention you as a contributor.

There is nothing more for me to write except that I am.

Ever yours
Will. D. Howells.

These two letters make it evident that Howells was the moving spirit in their publishing venture. His generous praise of Piatt's poetry, which he always insisted was superior to his own, must have been a real encouragement to the diffident young Piatt. In any case, after the exchange of these letters in 1859, Piatt returned to Columbus, where he and Howells, as two reporters on the *Ohio State Journal*, saw their book through the press. Though this was their first book, their poems had appeared in the *Saturday Press*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and in other periodicals. While writing their political reports for the *Ohio State Journal*, in order to pay for food and rent, they were eagerly looking forward to literary careers as poets.

[6] Compare the character of Lindau in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

"This was the winter," wrote Howells a generation later, "when my friend Piatt and I made our first literary venture together in those *Poems of Two Friends*, which hardly passed the circle of our amity; and it was altogether a time of high literary exaltation with me."[7] That this "high literary exaltation" was the source of some amusement to Howells' fellow editors one gathers from the following sentences:

> I walked the streets of the friendly little city by day and by night with my head so full of rhymes and poetic phrases that it seemed as if their buzzing might have been heard several yards away; and I do not yet see quite how I contrived to keep their music out of my newspaper paragraphs. Out of the newspaper I could not keep it, and from time to time I broke into verse in its columns, to the great amusement of the leading editor. . . . He wanted to print a burlesque review he wrote of the *Poems of Two Friends* in our paper, but I would not suffer it. I must allow that it was very funny. . . .[8]

Piatt and Howells were themselves so full of enthusiasm for their little book of poems that they packed up a large box of the flower-bedecked volumes and sent them to a New York publisher, to sell in his shop, and then promptly forgot that they had done so. In 1865, after Howells' return from his consulship in Venice, he found himself a stranger in New York and without a job. He made repeated calls at newspaper offices in search of work, but nobody seemed eager for the services of this young ex-consul. He had hardly a dollar left when it suddenly occurred to him while strolling on Broadway that he had never heard from the publisher on whom he and Piatt had bestowed the packing-box full of *Poems of Two Friends*. Thinking that he might now profit by the sale of his poems, he hastened to the bookseller, only to discover that he had never heard of the book, nor had he any recollection of ever having received a box from Columbus. Howells finally persuaded him to allow him to search the cellar with the help of one of the clerks, and the unopened box was found in the storage room.[9]

Soon after this low point in Howells' career, he became an editor of *The Nation*, and then of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Many years later as a successful man of letters, he was able to glance back at this poetic venture of his youth with ironic detachment. The little book, he tells us, "became instantly and lastingly unknown to fame; the West waited, as it always does, to hear

[7] *My Literary Passions*, p. 143. [8] *Ibid.*
[9] Lida R. McCabe, "One Never Can Tell," *Outlook*, May 14, 1898, pp. 131–2.

what the East should say; the East said nothing, and two-thirds of the small edition of five hundred came back upon the publisher's hands." He adds, "I imagine these copies were 'ground up' in the manner of worthless stock, for I saw a single example of the book quoted the other day in a book-seller's catalogue at ten dollars, and I infer that it is so rare as to be prized at least for its rarity."[10] So rare did the book become, indeed, that when Howells was asked many years later to deposit his complete works in the State Library of Ohio, he was unable to comply because he did not possess a copy of the *Two Friends*.[11]

Howells was not entirely correct, however, when he wrote that *Poems of Two Friends* at once became unknown, for it was promptly reviewed by the *Saturday Press*, the Cincinnati *Dial*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the New York *Evening Post*. Five or six of the lyrics assembled by Howells for this volume had previously appeared in the *Saturday Press*, a weekly journal of which Howells later wrote: "It is not too much to say that it was very nearly as well for one to be accepted by the *Press* as to be accepted by the *Atlantic*, and for the time there was no other literary comparison."[12] The reviewer for this periodical, probably the editor, Henry Clapp, Jr., was tremendously taken with Howells' share of the little book, though he did not care for that of Piatt. "Mr. Howells," he declared, "is a man of genius. We do him justice; we do not pay him a compliment. His genius is not, indeed, of the highest order; but it is genius, nevertheless." Warming to his subject, the reviewer concluded:

> We lay no claim to the gift of prophecy, having no particular interest in the future. But . . . we see no difficulty in the way of predicting for Mr. Howells what Shakespeare, or somebody, calls a "brilliant future." He is —in the memorable words of our British friend—"on the threshold of a splendid career." We can but wish him the marble halls of fame, and illustrious repose in palace chambers.[13]

Moncure D. Conway, writing in the March, 1860, number of the Cincinnati *Dial*, to which Howells contributed four poems later in that same year, saw in Howells' portion of this

[10] *My Literary Passions*, p. 45. Piatt, in his letter to Young referred to above, also mentions the fact that the current price of the volume at that time was $10. [11] McCabe, p. 132.
[12] *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, N. Y., 1900, p. 70. [13] *New York Saturday Press*, Jan. 28, 1860.

book of verse a promise of better things and regretted "a certain fear of himself" which he discerned in the poems.

> Mr. Howells has intellect and culture, graced by an almost Heinesque familiarity with high things; and if it were not for a certain fear of himself, we should hope that this work was but a prelude to his sonata. As it is, we are not sure that it would not be well to take the anti-publication pledge for a year or so, the time to be devoted to amputation of all classics and models who incline him to prefer a luxurious sedan to honest limbs given by nature.

Though Howells had already dedicated himself to realism, it is not surprising that one so steeped in the poetry of the eighteenth century should have allowed some of its artificiality to attach itself to his youthful verses, but one is glad that Conway so promptly objected to the "classics and models" that sometimes marred very good poetry.

James Russell Lowell, in the *Atlantic* of April, 1860, praised the book. "The volume is a very agreeable one," he said, "with little of the crudeness so generally characteristic of first ventures,—not more than enough to augur richer maturity hereafter." Though not wishing to distinguish invidiously between the two authors, Lowell did believe "that Mr. Piatt shows greater originality in the choice of subjects, and Mr. Howells more instinctive felicity of phrase in the treatment of them." He was pleased with "a thorough Western flavor in some of the poems," and concluded:

> We welcome cordially a volume in which we recognize a fresh and authentic power, and expect confidently of the writers a yet higher achievement ere long.

The New York *Evening Post,* of November 7, 1860, reviewed the poetry of several young poets, under the title, "The Bardlings." Piatt saw the article, and wrote on November 15, to Howells, "Oh, did you see the article 'Bardlings' in the *Evening Post* a week ago. It damned us respectively—'with faint praise.' You have written one poem. I think that should take the 'ling' from your poet-hood: yes, several, and I'm a critic, 'by God' (to quote the Italian painters) as you'll have to admit."[14] As a matter of fact, the *Evening Post* dealt fairly enough with Piatt and Howells. "The 'two friends' write always intelligently, and sometimes with true poetic fervor," the

[14] Harvard Library MS Am. 800. 20. This letter is here quoted by the kind permission of Mr. Keyes D. Metcalf, Librarian of the Harvard College Library.

editor wrote, and he then quoted freely the occasional "felicitous expression or stanza" which he found in their poetry.[15]

In this same year, 1860, William T. Coggeshall edited *The Poets and Poetry of the West: with Biographical and Critical Notices*. This large volume was published in Columbus, and it was but natural that it should include brief sections on both Piatt and Howells, two of "the only four poets west of the Alleghanies," as Howells tells us in *Years of My Youth*, "who had yet been accepted by the Atlantic."[16] Coggeshall ended his biographical sketch of Howells by reproducing from the *Saturday Press* the encomium which has been already quoted in this article. He then reprinted two lyrics—"The Movers" and "Dead"—from *Poems of Two Friends* and four other poems which had appeared in the *Atlantic*. From Piatt's section of the book he reprinted five poems and two others from elsewhere.

Though *Poems of Two Friends* brought to the two youthful journalists mild acclaim from the reviewers of the time, it did not impress unduly their young literary friends of Columbus, Ohio. The volume itself "was so pretty," wrote Howells many years later, "that I am afraid some readers liked it for its looks; one young lady said that I at least could have no trouble choosing what Christmas presents I should make my friends." Howells endured the teasing of this young friend, "who easily bore the palm for beauty in Columbus" with proud reserve.

> I gave my book to no one, he wrote, in my haughty aversion from even the shadow of advertising, and most of my friends had their revenge, I suppose, in not buying it.[17]

In 1917 a few weeks after the death of his friend, Howells himself made perhaps the most discerning comment on Piatt's poetry to be found—and he offered at the same time a suggestion as to why his poetry was no longer read.

> ... when he sang of the prairie fire and the old cabin and the pioneer chimney, he touched the hearts of those who remembered them from their early days, but not the fancy of the young who turned impatiently from them and were perhaps tired of hearing of them from their elders.
>
> The spirit of his poetry was the first voluntary expression of the Western life in the love of the Western earth and sky, and when most young Ameri-

[15] *The Evening Post*, New York, Nov. 7, 1860, p. 1, col. 1. [16] p. 162.
[17] *Years of My Youth*, p. 162.

can poets were trying to write Tennyson, Piatt was trying to write himself, and in spite of the ruling ideals, doing it.[18]

Certainly Piatt's most authentic poems are those which deal with "The Western Pioneer," "The Forgotten Well," "The Harvest Spring," rather than those in which he wistfully describes "The Yellow Leaf in the Poet's Book," or a "Sabbath Evening after a Shower." Though Piatt did not free himself from the tradition of Cowper and Tennyson, he nevertheless felt the romance of the pioneer.

> Into the prairies' boundless blossom,
> Into the Wide West's sunburnt bosom,
> The earliest emigrants came.

Howells, too, is moved by the pioneers whose mark was still to be traced on the Ohio countryside. Though he was too close to Longfellow to discover his own rhythm—

> Up the long hill-side the white-tented wagon moved slowly,
> Bearing the mother and children, while onward before them the father
> Trudged with his gun on his arm—

he does at least occasionally put into verse the scenes suggested by the country around him.

But most of the poems in this little collection show the "bardlings" chiefly concerned with their own moods. Howells made a confession, to which they could both subscribe:

> In my rhyme I fable anguish,
> Feigning that my love is dead,
> Playing at a game of sadness,
> Singing hope forever fled,—

For, as he pointed out,

> I must make believe at sorrow,
> Lest I perish, over-glad.

Perhaps Howells' appreciation of Piatt, written when he himself was an old man, sprang, as he said, from "a fondness —or call it a weakness—for a first volume called *Poems of Two Friends*, where he dared publicity with another boyish rhymer of his time and place." It is in this same reminiscent mood that the reader to-day thumbs through this brown and gilt volume of eighty-one years ago, and pieces together the story behind its publication.

[18] *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1917, p. 292. See also *My Literary Passions*, p. 46.