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LETTERS TO AN "ENCHANTED GUEST":

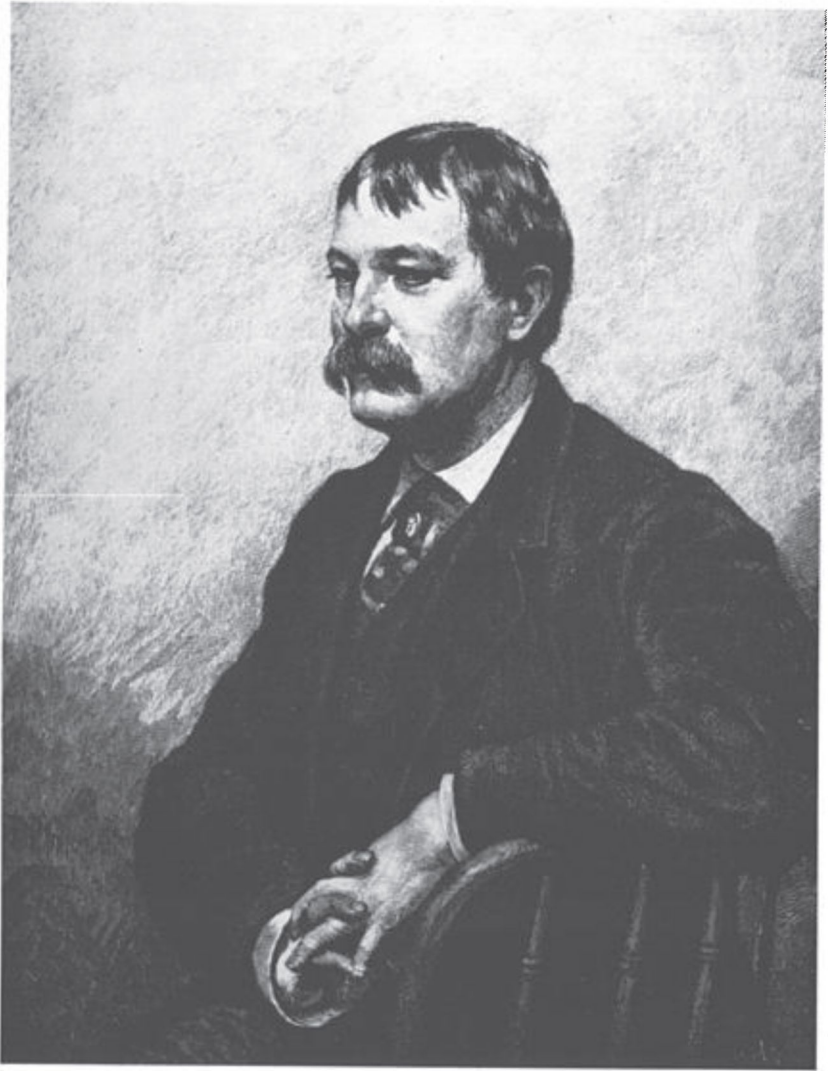
W. D. HOWELLS TO EDMUND GOSSE

BY CLARA AND RUDOLF KIRK

We take pleasure in expressing our appreciation to Professor W. W. Howells of Harvard University for permission to print the letters by his grandfather, W. D. Howells, in the Rutgers University Library. They may not be reprinted without the written permission of Professor Howells.

We also wish to thank Dr. Philip Gosse for allowing us to reprint a letter from his father, Sir Edmund Gosse, and some excerpts from the Gosse letters now in the Houghton Library, Harvard. Dr. Gosse obtained for us a copy of a portrait of his father owned by the Brotherton Library, Leeds University, Leeds, England.

IN a collection of manuscripts recently purchased by the Rutgers Library are four holograph letters of William Dean Howells to Edmund Gosse that are here reproduced for the first time. Two of these letters were written on September 9, 1883, and on January 2, 1884, from Howells' Boston home to his friend in London, a few months after his return from a year abroad. These letters, touching on a variety of subjects, are important to those who may be interested in the many-sided friendship of Howells and Gosse. The other two letters, dated April 14 and 15, 1904, from Howells to Gosse, are merely hastily written notes concerning a luncheon engagement in London. Howells, his wife, and his daughter Mildred had arrived in England to attend the ceremony at Oxford in June at which Howells was to receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. A fifth hitherto unpublished letter from Howells to Gosse is reproduced from a typed copy in the Symington Collection, at Rutgers. It is dated November 7, 1886, and helps to fill out the story of the Gosse-Howells relationship.



William Dean Howells

From an engraving printed in *Century Magazine*, March 1882, and taken from a painting done by F. P. Vinton in 1881.

I

In March, 1882, Howells had resigned from the editorship of the *Atlantic*, after fifteen years of editing, reviewing, and novel writing. He was then a man of forty-five, author of seven or eight successful novels, as widely read in England as in this country, and of many books of poetry, plays, and essays that were the subject of literary talk in newspapers and magazines, drawing rooms, and clubs. He had come abroad not only to recover his health, but also to see through the British press several of his novels—*Their Wedding Journey*, *A Foregone Conclusion*, and *The Lady of the Aroostook*, among others—which were being issued by David Douglas of Edinburgh. He also looked forward to enjoying a pleasant association with his many American friends, who would certainly lose no time in introducing him to their English connections. Henry James was there, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, James R. Osgood, John Hay, and many more.

James, in fact, secured for the Howellses, before their arrival in London, on August 1, "a very charming lodging" at 18 Pelham Crescent, South Kensington, to which they at once repaired.¹ Awaiting Howells at his new apartment was a letter from Edmund Gosse, dated July 26, 1882, who wrote that "My friend, Mr. R. W. Gilder, of the 'Century' (of which I am the English representative) has encouraged, and indeed urged me to thrust myself upon you, and take the liberty of an old acquaintance."² In reply to a note from Howells, Gosse wrote a second letter, dated August 2, 1882, in which he invited the American visitors to spend an afternoon and evening at his home, 29 Delamere Terrace, on a quiet street overlooking the Regent's Canal. "Our friend Henry James tells me that you dislike, as I heartily do, Society with a capital S," wrote Gosse, as an introduction to the Gosses' drawing room. "But we shall probably be alone, except that we may have Alma-Tadema and his wife with us, and that I am just writing to ask the much-engaged James himself if he will not come."³ People were beginning to leave town by early August; in the season one might encounter Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Benson, du Maurier, William Archer, John Singer Sargent, the Alma-Tademas, Swinburne, the Rossettis, and many other dis-

¹ *The Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, edited by Mildred Howells (1928), I, 315.

² Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, Harvard.

³ Manuscript letter, August 2, 1882, in the Houghton Library. Lawrence Alma-Tadema was a well-known London painter. His wife was Gosse's sister-in-law.

tinguished men and women. "Mr. and Mrs. W. D. Howells and Miss Howells" attended the Gosse "Parties" on August 6 and August 20, 1882, as we know by consulting *The Gosse Book*,⁴ where the names of guests were recorded by Gosse after their departure. Gosse, looking back to the beginning of this friendship in the 1880's, wrote in 1920, immediately after the death of Howells, "A close friendship, infinitely precious to me, sprang up at once."⁵

Twelve years younger than Howells, Gosse was already known, in London at least, for his poetry, as well as for his reviews in the *Spectator*, the *Academy*, and other periodicals, while he was still a cataloguer at the British Museum. With a knowledge of French, German, Italian, and Swedish, he had, in 1875, accepted an appointment as translator to the Board of Trade—a position from which he was now eager to escape by means of his growing reputation as a literary man. Having already made himself an authority on Scandinavian culture through his essays on Ibsen and his *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe* (1879), he was, at the time of Howells' visit, embarking on a series of books dealing with seventeenth and eighteenth-century English literature. The first of these studies, *The Life of Gray*, had recently been published (1882).

Howells' latest, and, up to that time, most important novel, *A Modern Instance*, then appearing serially in *Century*,⁶ was causing enough stir in London circles to make the author a welcome addition to the Gosse group. Gosse, like other Londoners, was reading *A Modern Instance* month by month, and he took the trouble to write an appreciative letter to Howells when the novel reached its con-

⁴ University Library, Cambridge, England, Ms. Add. —7034. We are indebted to Paul F. Mattheisen for an opportunity to study *The Gosse Book* in microfilm. Gosse's niece, Laurence Alma-Tadema, recalled these afternoons and evenings at the Gosse home as "informal and charming." She wrote:

A few of the afternoon's guests were encouraged to outstay the others and were presently bidden to the dining-room, where the cold Sunday joint, a salad, sweets and fruits stood ready at the table. The Master of the house carved at the head of the table: at the window end its Mistress dispensed the sweets. The guests squeezed around the table and a delightful atmosphere of wit and ease prevailed.

"An Early Portrait of Edmund Gosse," *Cornhill Magazine*, LXVII (December 1929), 750-67. These Sunday night suppers to which many Americans "of the literary, art and dramatic world" had received "a cordial welcome" are referred to in the *Boston Evening Transcript* of November 20, 1884, p. 6.

⁵ "The Passing of William Dean Howells," *The London Sunday Times* (1920). We have not been able to find *The London Sunday Times* (1920) in this country. Reprinted in *The Living Age*, CCCVI (July 10, 1920), 98.

⁶ December, 1881, to October, 1882.

clusion. "The end of *A Modern Instance* is superb," he wrote. He then discussed the character of the Judge, Ben, and Marcia, in turn, summarizing his remarks by asserting that "A M.I. is altogether the greatest work of fiction that America has given us since the death of Hawthorne. I am quite sure of that." Gosse closed his letter with a pleasant flourish: "Any scrap of your writing will be welcome to yours very cordially, Edmund W. Gosse." No wonder Howells wrote to Mark Twain the day after he had received Gosse's letter, "We have seen lots of nice people, and have been most pleasantly made of."⁷ In his 1920 essay on Howells, from which we have already quoted, Gosse gives us a charming portrait of Howells in the London of 1882. Not only were his novels being read and discussed, but also his old friend, James Russell Lowell, was Minister to the Court of Saint James:

Howells at that time was, what he always remained, affable, gentle, and exquisitely responsive; but he possessed what those who have known him only in later years may not be so ready to recognize—an æry playfulness, a sort of roguishness which faded from him in years of anxiety and grief. The success of his bouquet of little novels made him something of a lion in London that autumn, and he enjoyed his literary fame with the most unaffected pleasure. I remember his saying about himself that reality always seemed to him 'more iridescent and beautiful' than anticipation, and doubtless this came from his peculiarly sensitive and apprehensive nature. Hence, in that season of 1882—having dreaded London, and feared its unseen inhabitants—we seemed to him to be a sort of angels moving in a golden glory because we were, as who could help being, enthusiastic and responsive. He was a Queen of Sheba to Lowell's Solomon. In process of time, perhaps, the beauty faded; but nothing could tarnish it in 1882, and the shine of it made him a happy man.

Before the end of September, 1882, the Howellses were off to the Continent, fleeing from the sociability of London. Howells wished to complete the new novel, *A Woman's Reason*, which had remained locked in his bag while he and Mrs. Howells lunched and dined with their many friends. Apparently, while still in London, Howells had discussed with Gosse the literary problem of transporting for a few months the hero of this novel to mysterious Hong Kong. Since Howells was totally unfamiliar with the Orient, Gosse eagerly offered to send after him material on China accessible to Gosse as translator to the Board of Trade. In a letter dated

⁷ Manuscript letter (date August 30, 1882) in the Houghton Library.

⁸ *Life in Letters*, I, 318.

"12.10.82," Gosse wrote, "Your angel-visit was so bright and brief that I hardly know whether it really took place." He assured his older friend that this was but "an epistolary run-away knock" which he need not "trouble to answer"—"unless I can get you any books about reefs or coolies, or send you anything you want for yr novel."

If you are really writing much about Hong Kong, you had better let me send you some blue-books lately published here, on the atrocious tyrannies of the local police, quite a Zolaesque study of the life in the low quarter of the town. But perhaps your hero is careful not to get into bad company, and keeps his ethics gilt-edged till he is thrown up upon the atoll. I want to read it very much.⁹

As a matter of fact, Howells was not "really writing much about Hong Kong," and probably never intended to do so, since it was not his practice as a realist to introduce scenes into his novels with which he himself was not personally familiar. Gosse's helpfulness was that of a younger man cultivating the friendship of one whose power in the literary world at that period he did not overrate.¹⁰ "We are all talking about you," he wrote in the course of this letter.

Immediately after the appearance of Howells' essay, "Mr. Henry James, Jr.," in the *Century*, November, 1882, in which he launched his attack on the traditional English novel, Gosse wrote again genially chiding him for his words on Dickens and Thackeray: "So you have demolished poor old Dickens and Thackeray, have you? Well, I'm glad I was born in the good old times when they were thought good enough for week-day reading." Gosse closed his letter with a "Motto for the American Critic." This "Doggerel by a candid friend" indicates the Englishman's ironic view of the literary battle

⁹ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library. For a full account of the episode, see *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse*, edited by Evan Charteris (1931), pp. 154-55.

¹⁰ In a manuscript letter of November 8, 1882, in the Houghton Library (Charteris, pp. 154-55), Gosse wrote, "I sent you a perfect library of loathsome brochures. I hope you enjoyed them." See also Gosse's essay, "The Passing of William Dean Howells," *op.cit.*, in which we are told Howells had lamented to Gosse that he had had some difficulty in "realizing" the Chinese manner of life. Gosse then mentioned "a report on the night-side of Hong-Kong, full of details," which had recently been "officially, but not publicly" printed. When Gosse sent "this scabrous treasure" out to his friend in Florence, Howells gave no sign of having received it. On his return to London for a few weeks in June, 1883, Gosse pressed Howells on the subject and, according to Gosse, drew forth the admission that the packet had arrived "but that it had horrified and disturbed him so much that he had burned it, and had put away all thought of writing about Hong-Kong." Howells solved his problem by confining to his ship in Hong Kong harbor the ill hero of *A Woman's Reason*. Probably Gosse wrote the unsigned review of this novel which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Dec. 3, 1883, to which he was a regular contributor.

stirred up by Howells' acclaim of James and his attack on the English novelists.

Ho! the old school! Thackeray, Dickens!
 Throw them out to feed the chickens.—
 Ho! the new school! James and . . .
 Lay the flattery on with trowels.¹¹

On his return to London the following June, Howells found time—though he was “almost consumed with engagements”—to write Gosse a letter of introduction to the American Minister. Howells himself was something of a social lion, as Gosse pointed out; however his connection with James Russell Lowell certainly enhanced his standing in London society. Howells described the latest London dinner party in a letter to his father and added, somewhat wearily,

The night before, Lowell took me to Gladstone's reception and next week he dines me to meet swells, who it seems wish to see me. Of all vanities these are the hollowest, . . . thank goodness we sail the 5th of July!¹²

On the ship home Howells wrote a brief note to Lowell, which he mailed in Menville on July 6, when the steamer paused to take on passengers in Ireland:

I gave Gosse a note of introduction to you, mindful of the kindly feeling you expressed for him, and of his advantage. In this I hope I did not presume

¹¹ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, November 8, 1882. Gosse continued his discussion of the literary argument stirred up by Howells' essay on James. In a manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, dated 14.11.82, he wrote: “The newspapers have been discussing your arraignment of Dickens and Thackeray very warmly, though in almost every case in a very courteous spirit toward yourself. I think, to speak of the matter quite soberly, that it is our tendency to overrate these writers from national partiality, just as it is your tendency to underrate them for the same reason. If we can remove this prejudice from each of our minds, I think we shall agree about Dickens to a great degree. He is already antiquated, no doubt. With regard to Thackeray, I do think you are in error. This confidential air, surely, is not that quality in him which is not modern. This attitude of an author towards his audience is neither old nor new: it is a personal idiosyncrasy which is always cropping up in literature. I think I shall always do battle with you on your favorite literary stand-point, that the intellectual product of a democracy must be finer than that of a monarchy. I am sure the inmost reason of your dislike of Dickens and Thackeray is that they flourished in a corrupt and pestilent royalty. But I really think the muses care very little about the divine right of the masses, and are likely for a long time yet to feel more at home among the old civilization than in the new. This, I suppose, is just the one theme on which we shall always be content to differ.” Apparently, as the English representative of *Century*, Gosse warned R. W. Gilder of the English reaction to Howells' essay, for Gilder wrote to Howells on December 16, 1882, “Gosse was frightened at first by the James essay.”

¹² *Life in Letters*, I, 345.

too far, and that I am not wrong in asking you to remember him in connection with the Lowell Lectures.

But if I were capable of shame I should blush to ask anything of you after all your unasked kindness.¹³

Lowell accepted Howells' suggestion at once. Because of the difficulty of arranging matters with the manager of the Lowell Lectures in this country, however, the Gosses did not arrive here until November 30, 1884.

II

The first of the two letters recently added to the Symington Collection of the Rutgers University Library, shows that Howells continued to push the interests of Gosse with his customary zeal. The Howellses had rested several nights at Memphremagog House, Newport, Vermont, on their way from Quebec to Boston, and here Howells had written a brief note to Gosse. By the middle of August they had moved into their new home at 4 Louisburg Square, Boston, and it is from here that Howells wrote Gosse the following account of his efforts in his behalf:

4 Louisburg Square
Boston, Sept. 9, 1883

My dear Gosse:

You must have been thinking all sorts of savage things of me; but I assure you I am not guilty, as this letter from the manager of the Lowell Lectures¹⁴ will partly prove. Three times I went to see him, during his brief visit to town this August, and the third time he made me wait so long, without seeing him, while my heart was getting hot, and my dinner at home getting cold, that I got up to go away, and had a moment with him in an ante-room, where I said that I had perhaps written all that was necessary in the letter I had sent him about you, and that I would not bother him by coming again, but would hope to hear from him. The fact of which he seems conscious will, I think, operate favorably for us, and I shall be able to write you that the Lectures for the winter of '84-'85 have been secured for you.

We were a long time getting into a house, and had a tragical season of hotels and boarding-houses, but now we have a roof over us at last, and if we had you and Mrs. Gosse under it with us, we should be perfectly happy. There are several good fellows over here who would be exceedingly glad to see you; and if we should be able to arrange for your visit a year from now I can promise you a friendly welcome.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹⁴ Dr. Benjamin E. Cotting, Manager of the Lowell Lectures from 1842 to 1897. See Harriette Knight Smith, *History of the Lowell Institute* (1898).

I sent you a short note from Memphremagog House the day after I arrived in Quebec. I wonder if you ever got it? I got your line about Bertini,¹⁵ and was greatly relieved that I had not burdened you with a load of alien adversity. How good you are! How kind you were to us in London! When we think over the mingled sweetness of Mrs. Gosse and yourself, it seems too precious ever to have been poured into such earthen cups as we are.

With the whole family's love

Yours ever

W. D. Howells.

Gosse was soon able to reciprocate the kindness of Howells. In a letter dated December 20, 1883, Gosse mailed his review of *A Little Girl Among the Old Masters* (1883) on the same day it appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. This was a charming volume, reproducing the drawings of the ten-year-old Mildred Howells, known to her family and friends as "Pilla." The parents' joy at Gosse's review, reprinted in "a Boston paper," fills the first paragraph of the letter which follows. Delighted to the point of ecstasy as the fond father was over Gosse's "kind words," he nevertheless slipped in a few facts as to the sale of the book which, as far as we know, are here recorded for the first time. Howells' appreciation of Gosse's review was quickly translated into a desire to help Gosse to publish in the United States his *Seventeenth Century Studies*, which had just appeared in England.

4 Louisburg Square,
Boston, Jan. 2, 1883 [*sic*]¹⁶

My dear Gosse:

Your letter came day before yesterday, and this morning came your notice of Pilla's book in the *Pall Mall*.¹⁷ In the first place I didn't dream of your writing of it at all, and then for you to write of it in *that* way—it toucht her mother's heart and mine more than I can tell you. The review was copied entire into a Boston paper¹⁸ which I don't see and all our friends had read it before we had; imagine our astonishment at finding one of the little drawings actually reproduced in your review! We *yelled* with joy when we saw it. And your kind words—*basta!* I am *used* to being treated better than I deserve!—Since you have taken an interest in this little book, it seems due to

¹⁵ Domenico Bertini (1829-1890), an Italian musician of note. Bertini's name appears several times in *The Gosse Book* in the '80's.

¹⁶ Howells miswrote the date, as the context of the letter proves. The year was 1884.

¹⁷ The *Pall Mall Gazette*, December 20, 1883, pp. 4-5. Gosse was then Art Editor of this publication, and was sufficiently interested in Mildred Howells' drawings to reproduce one of them in the *Gazette*.

¹⁸ "A Tiny Artist," The *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 1, 1884, p. 4. The drawings were not reproduced in the *Advertiser*, though the review was reproduced in its entirety.

you to say that if we had not known the child's unspoilableness we should not have ventured upon it. I don't think any one could be less conscious of it than she. At first she was very proud of having made a book—as a book, merely; but she never was in the least “set up” with any one's praise of it, nor vain of her little skill, which we ourselves feel is probably an efflorescence of her childish spirit, with no sort of future before it. If it should come to anything it will not be through any prompting or petting of ours. The book has been quite successful: 2000 were sold here, fifty copies being sent to Trübner's in London. It has earned her \$1000 which shall be for her *dot*, or for her schooling if ever she wishes to study art.

I wish you *had* told me about your American edition of the Seventeenth Century poets! Can't you still be served in regard to it?¹⁹ I thought Osgood was to publish it?

You may be aware that I for one American was ashamed of our silly and impertinent interference with justice in O'Donnell's case.²⁰ I think no man should be hung; but that man was a cruel and pitiless assassin, and rightly suffered under the law. If he had been a man of any other nationality Congress would not have dreamt of interfering; how then can I explain that this Irish forcing of our national action appeared merely grotesque to us? Congress is “Democratic”: by seeming to befriend O'Donnell it could capture Irish votes for its party; and by making a Republican president its instrument it could foist any disagreeable consequences upon us.

It is all part of our “jokes”; come over and try to understand it. The joke is not such a bad one in the long run.—I don't despair yet of the Lowell

¹⁹ *Seventeenth Century Studies* (1883). Howells commented on this book in “The Editor's Study,” *Harper's*, LXXII (March 1886), 648-649. Gosse wrote to Howells on December 20, 1883, that his “17th Century book” had been well received in England. “But,” he added, “I got into a regular mess about the American edition.” Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library.

²⁰ Howells was here referring to a paragraph of a letter he had received from Gosse, written on December 20, 1883. It reads:

I have seen a good deal of Henry James, who has been in low spirits. He seems to be (if you are dark purple) sooty black or lurid blue towards the new American crimson.

I hope America is not going to sink into greater Ireland. We have been worried over here at your government's weak interference about the murderer O'Donnell.

Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library.

No doubt Gosse had been following accounts of the trial and execution of O'Donnell in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of Dec. 1, 3, and 17, 1883. Three days before Gosse wrote this letter, Patrick O'Donnell, the Irish Sein Feiner, had been hanged at Newgate, for the shooting of James Carey, at Port Elizabeth, South Africa, on July 29, 1883. (*New York Tribune*, December 18, 1883). A group of Sein Feiners had murdered Lord Frederick Cavendish and Mr. Burke, Under Secretary for Ireland, in Phoenix Park, May 6, 1882. James Carey, one of the conspirators, later turned state's evidence, and was responsible for the hanging of five men. (*New York Tribune*, July 31, 1883, p. 1.) Irish sympathizers in Congress urged that the United States intervene to prevent the execution of O'Donnell. The part of Congress in this affair is related in *Congressional Record* . . . House, Forty-eighth Congress, First Session, pp. 71, 80-1, 197, 223, 477, 1431. See also the special report: U.S. Congress, House of Representatives 48:1: Trial and Execution of Patrick O'Donnell. Letter from the Secretary of State Relative to the Trial and Execution of Patrick O'Donnell (Executive Document, No. 33).

Lectures: when they are secured, I will get Congress to instruct the President to ask the British Government *why* my friend Gosse cannot have three months' leave.

We had a stand-up lunch party this afternoon to entertain Stillman,²¹ an old friend of ours who dined us last winter in Florence. It makes the round world seem no thicker than a map to meet at this rate on both sides of it.

Our good and delightful Henschel²² is going back to London in the spring. Perhaps he will carry with him the libretto of an opera by me, for which he wishes to make the music.

I amuse myself, in my new story,²³ with the figure of a New England hill-country minister who has gone out to Florence, to spend his last days. His Unitarianism had frayed out into a sort of benevolent agnosticism before he left home, and in a furlined coat, over a scaldino, he shudders at all he left behind in Haddam East Village. He had deliberately proposed to die as far away from the lingering puritanism and winter of his native hills as he can; and he thinks that Savonarola made a great mistake in trying to kill the Carnival.

—Mrs. Howells and I are going up into the hills²⁴ tomorrow, for a little change and a great deal of snow. Before we go we join in love to Mrs. Gosse and you.

Yours ever

W. D. Howells.

Love to the Tademas²⁵ too.

Not only did Howells "not despair of the Lowell Lectures," as his joking words in the letter above suggest, but he was busily pulling all other possible strings to extend Gosse's lecture program that the whole undertaking might be financially profitable to him. On February 15, 1884, Howells addressed a letter bearing on the

²¹ William James Stillman, 1828-1901, who was U.S. consul to Rome while Howells was consul to Venice, 1861-1865.

²² Sir George Henschel, first conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1881-84). He had asked Howells to write the words for an Operetta to be set to music. Howells complied, with "A Sea Change, or, Love's Stowaway." The story of this collaboration is told in *The New York Daily Tribune*, Sunday, June 22, 1884, p. 14. The operetta was published for the first time in England and later in *Harper's Weekly*, XXXII (July 14, 1888), 505, sup. 521-24. It was not produced until 1930, when it was on a program of the British Broadcasting Company. *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (5th ed., 1955), edited by Eric Bloom, IV, 242.

²³ As far as is known, Howells never wrote this "new story." However, in *Indian Summer*, a rather disillusioned journalist—not a minister—went out to Florence. Instead of "spending his last" days in the city he had known and loved years earlier, he renewed an old romance. "A Difficult Case" (*Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXVI, July-August 1900, 24-36, 205-217, reprinted in *A Pair of Patient Lovers*, 1901, pp. 145-220), more nearly reflects the psychological study Howells seems to have had in mind when he wrote to Gosse.

²⁴ Auburndale, Mass.

²⁵ See note 3.

project to Mrs. James T. Fields, the wife of the publisher, who had evidently offered her aid. Howells wrote:

Thank you all the same. I have written to Dr. Gilman at Baltimore, hoping to get Gosse the Johns Hopkins course also.

I wish something might be done for him at Cornell! The six Lowell Lectures only give him \$750, and that would be too little to come so far on.²⁶

The arrival of a letter from Gosse, dated February 29, 1884,²⁷ made it clear that all of Howells' efforts were now combining to bring about the wished-for project. "My dear, my very dear Howells," Gosse began. Howells' letter and the invitation from Mr. Augustus Lowell, trustee of the Lowell Institute, had arrived in a later post. Several pages of practical questions as to his remuneration and the possibility of including Cornell and the Johns Hopkins ended in "the loving acceptance" of the proffered hospitality of the Howellses. For the next few months frequent letters arrived from the English lecturer, as Gosse completed the arrangements with Howells, "a most dear angel of the bon Dieu." Daniel Coit Gilman, President of Johns Hopkins, accepted Howells' suggestion, as Gosse's letter of July 8, 1884, indicates:

I wish to explain to you that only this minute has the Johns Hopkins University completed its arrangements with me. I am to lecture there during the first two weeks of January, which is very convenient, as I am very anxious to get back before the month of February begins.

Gosse then thanked Howells for "the lovely little book you have sent my wife."²⁸

It is all new to me, except, of course, your English child, the Lexington. The style all through is so delicate, so pure, so appropriate, that it awakes my envy. No, my sympathetic admiration. I think it wonderful that you, and the few that write well when they have attained your eminence, should be able to do so. A person like myself, still hanging by my eyelids to the outer cliff of fame, is nerved and stimulated to write well, or sink into oblivion amid the titters of exasperated relatives . . . you are an artist down to the tips of your toes.²⁹

If Gosse thought of himself as "hanging by his eyelids to the outer cliff of fame" before he arrived in this country on November

²⁶ *Life in Letters*, I, 360.

²⁷ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library.

²⁸ *Three Villages* (1884). The first essay is entitled "Lexington." Gosse's letter suggests that Howells wrote this essay while in England, and showed it to Gosse.

²⁹ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library (Charteris, pp. 164-65).

30, 1884, he certainly must soon have felt that he had scaled the heights. An envelope of newspaper clippings from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, is in the Symington Collection of the Rutgers Library. The first one, dated November 20, 1884, is from the Boston *Evening Transcript*; ³⁰ it announced in a leading article of more than a column that "Mr. Edmund W. Gosse, the London poet and critic, will sail from Liverpool tomorrow on the Germanic, and will be due in New York on Nov. 30." "Mr. Howells," the correspondent continued, "was mainly instrumental in arranging for the course at the Lowell Institute, which is to consist of six addresses to be given on Tuesdays and Fridays in the first three weeks of December."

We learn from the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette* that the Gosses did arrive in New York on the day announced, exhausted after a rough passage, and that they were "the guests of Mr. Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century*, at his house in Eighteenth Street." Before he had been here an hour, Gosse was interviewed by a reporter from the New York *Herald*, and asked how he liked America. Gosse's breathless letter, written to a friend in England from the Howells home in Boston, gives the reader a sense of the whirlwind reception of the English guest.

We have been three days in this country, and it seems like three weeks. We arrived at New York on Saturday afternoon, and came on here last night. Our reception has been something I never dreamed of. But I have no time to tell you all. ³¹

Nor have we time to pause to describe, in Gosse's words, the Sunday afternoon in the New York studio of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the train trip up to Boston, the state of the weather, and the temperature of American houses. It is enough to say that on the following Wednesday, December 4, 1884, the Howellses presented the visitors at a reception, duly reported in the Boston and New York papers. Many of the distinguished lecture-goers of Boston assembled at the Howells home, 302 Beacon Street, on December 4, two days after Gosse's opening lecture. The following news story was telegraphed to the New York *Daily Tribune* from Boston on the day of the reception:

³⁰ Sent from New York on November 19, 1884, by the "Regular Correspondence [*sic*] of The Tribune."

³¹ Charteris, p. 166.

A RECEPTION TO MR. AND MRS. GOSSE.

*The Literary People of Boston Greet Them at
the House of Mr. Howells.*

(By Telegraph to the Tribune.)

BOSTON, Dec. 4.—Mr. and Mrs. Howells gave a reception this afternoon at their house, in Beacon st., to Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Gosse. A large number of the best known people of Boston and Cambridge were present. Among them the Rev. E. E. Hale and Miss Susan Hale, the Rev. and Mrs. Brooke Herford, Professor and Mrs. Goodwin, the Rev. Samuel Longfellow and Miss Alice Longfellow, Mrs. Kate Gannett Wells, Mr. Mackaye, John Fiske, Francis Parkman, Henry Cabot Lodge, Mr. and Mrs. H. M. Ticknor, Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton, Arlo Bates, Mr. Gaugengigl, Colonel T. W. Higginson, Mrs. Ole Bull, General F. A. Walker and Professor John Trowbridge.

Mrs. Gosse, who resembles her sister, Mrs. Alma-Tadema, wore a fawn colored satin dress, brocaded with red with puffed sleeves. Her profuse blonde hair was gathered in a simple heavy mass on the top of her head. Mrs. Howells wore dark blue and Miss Howells dark red. Many of the same persons were in attendance upon Mr. Gosse's first lecture before the Lowell Institute when also the Rev. Phillips Brooks and Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes were in the audience. In the evening Mr. and Mrs. Gosse and Mr. and Mrs. Howells attended Booth's performance of 'Shylock,' occupying one private box, while T. B. Aldrich and party were present in another.

The *Boston Gazette*, for Friday evening, December 13, hailed "the first appearance of Mr. Edmund W. Gosse, the London poet and critic," as "the event" of the previous week, on the evening of December 2. Though his subject was the rise and development of the classical school of English poetry from Shakespeare to Pope, "literary Boston" was "on the *qui vive* regarding this visitor" and was "promising itself a good time" in attending to all he had to say on "a by no means unfamiliar subject." This column-and-a-half article, entitled "*Edmund W. Gosse*. How Boston Goes to Lectures," philosophized on the "fearfully literary and improving" lectures Bostonians were willing to snooze through in order "to save the gas and fire at home" on winter evenings; on the origin and nature of the Lowell Institute, "a peculiar Boston institution," founded "ages ago" (1839) by John Lowell, with the provision that all tickets should be free; on the state of the weather the day of the first Gosse lecture (it rained "not only cats and dogs but guns"), and on the response of the large audience which gathered

in the evening to hear the British lecturer. Mr. Edmund Gosse, the reporter noted,

is of slight build, with light-brown hair, a slight yellow moustache, keen, brilliant dark eyes scarcely concealed by spectacles—

The speaker was listened to “with respect and interest” and applauded at the end of his discourse, during which only the hardened lecture-goers slept. As to the burden of the talk, “I will not bore you by repeating it in substance, and I may console you for not being present by adding that it contained nothing new!” The remainder of the article is concerned with the social stir which accompanied the Gosses’ three-weeks’ stay in Boston, where they were “overwhelmed with social attentions.”

“Spokes From the Hub,” a small item in the New York *Daily Tribune*, gives us something of an impression of the “social attentions” which overwhelmed not only the Gosses but the Howells and many other “personages of distinction” in the “University circle.”

SPOKES FROM THE HUB

BOSTON, Dec. 20.—Mr. and Mrs. Gosse are being extensively ‘lionized’ by the best society people. Last Wednesday Mr. Augustus Lowell gave a dinner in their honor at his residence on Commonwealth ave., at which were Mr. and Mrs. W. D. Howells and others, and on Tuesday Mr. Horace Scudder, the author, and Mrs. Scudder gave a luncheon for them at Cambridge, which was followed by a brilliant afternoon reception, at which the University circle was fully represented. Mrs. Gosse, by the way, is a clever artist, and two of her charming landscapes in oil are now on exhibition at Chase’s gallery.³²

III

From the Boston *Evening Transcript* of November 20, which first announced the projected visit, we had already learned that Gosse had, a month earlier, made his first appearance as the successor of Leslie Stephen in the Clark Lectureship in English Literature at Cambridge University, to which he had been appointed in May. Rumors of Gosse’s success³³ had travelled to this country, for

³² Sunday New York *Daily Tribune*, December 21, 1884, p. 6.

³³ An idea of how successful Gosse’s lecture tour was is to be found in the letter to Howells, written from Baltimore, January 7, 1885, describing the notables he met in Philadelphia (Charteris, pp. 173-74). A manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, dated February 15, 1885, reports on the financial success of the trip:

You took so complete an interest in my American affairs that I think you will let me tell you that the total result of my lectures was far more important than you had

there was "some talk" of proffering him the English literature professorship at Yale even before his arrival. At the termination in January of his successful lecture tour of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, he was offered a similar appointment at Harvard and at the Johns Hopkins. When he returned to England, Gosse repeated at Trinity College, Cambridge, the lectures which he had delivered in America; in the same year, 1885, they were published in a book, well known to students of English literature, entitled *English Literature from Shakespeare to Pope*.

These essays were soon to involve Gosse in a barrage of criticism, led by John Churton Collins. According to his biographer, Evan Charteris, Gosse never fully recovered from this attack. The first letter to Howells, after his return to England, presages the storm to come. "Since I came back to England," he wrote Howells on the 15th of February, 1885, "I have been ill, tired, bothered and over-worked, the proper penalty for having enjoyed myself too much."³⁴ Another letter, written on the 28th of December in the same year, is a groan from 29 Delamere Terrace, with a wistful reference to the "lovely time" he had had in Boston. "My dear Howells," Gosse wrote, "I really thought you were going to allow me to go down to Oblivion on the arm of Obloquy. When one has a friend who writes the very best letters in the world, one is apt to be exacting." Then Gosse came to the source of his distress:

I am in a mournful frame of mind, for I have come in for a veritable vendetta of criticism,—the storm has long been brooding,—and my new books this winter have caught it from the crawling things of criticism.

"I suppose, in a sort of negative way, these things show the result of success," Gosse reflected. "But they are nasty, my dear, and they embitter existence. Enough of this."

It is just a year since the dearest of friends and the refreshingest of gigglers made Boston more than a city of palm-trees to us. What a lovely time! But it has made all the rest of life seem rather flat since.³⁵

Howells, who, in January, 1886, had taken over "The Editor's Study" of *Harper's*, hastened to review *From Shakespeare to Pope*,

suggested it would be in your first and most sanguine idea. Altogether I made £4.90 in America. The New York drawing-room lectures were very lucrative, they were crowded, and tickets were \$5 for the course. If I could have stopped another two months, I could have been busy all the time, for invitations kept flowing in upon me to the very last (Charteris, p. 179).

³⁴ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library (Charteris, p. 178).

³⁵ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library (Charteris, pp. 184-85).

in the March issue of the magazine, pronouncing it a "delightful book," referring, in the same paragraph, to Gosse's *Life of Gray* (1882) and his *Seventeenth Century Studies* (1883), in which Gosse, he said, displayed the art of rendering "enchanted" otherwise "barren fields."³⁶

Soothing as Howells' brief review might have been to Gosse, it must have been forgotten in the light of John Churton Collins' essay, in the *Quarterly Review*, October, 1886, entitled "English Literature at the Universities." Collins, a genuine scholar, and a former friend of the Gosses, found it his "painful duty" to point out the numerous inaccuracies of Gosse's little book, *From Shakespeare to Pope*, which had, so recently, pleased not only literary Boston, but literary New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore as well.³⁷ "The general public," Collins pointed out, are "the willing dupes of puffers," eager to purchase the "spurious wares of literary charlatans." Though Gosse attempted to defend himself in the *Athenaeum*, and though his friends rallied to his side (Tennyson dubbed Collins, "A louse on the locks of literature"³⁸), it was generally conceded that Collins was, for the most part, correct in his accusations, in spite of the charm and taste of Gosse as a critic.

The following letter from Howells to Gosse³⁹ refers to these harsh exchanges between Collins and his unfortunate victim. Howells had only heard the reverberations through his friends, Thomas Sergeant Perry, himself a critic and lecturer, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, then editor of the *Atlantic*. In his effort to help his suffering friend, Howells had written for the December issue of *Harper's*, a laudatory review of his study of *Sir Walter Raleigh*.⁴⁰

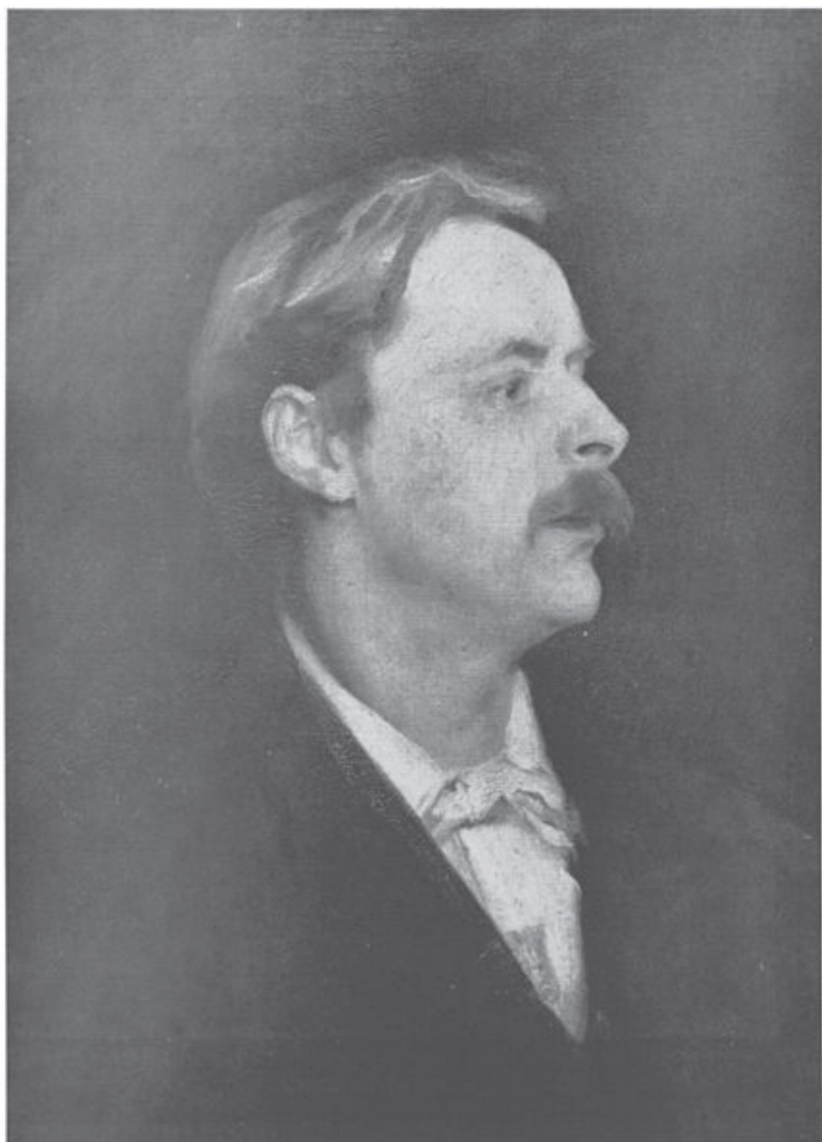
³⁶ "The Editor's Study," *Harper's*, LXXII (March 1886), 648-49. Gosse thanked Howells for his "too indulgent and most charming reviews," in a letter dated March 10, 1886, in the Houghton Library.

³⁷ For a statement of the relationship of Gosse's *Six Lectures to be delivered before the Lowell Institute in December, 1884* (Privately printed in an impression of only four copies in London, 1884) and *From Shakespeare to Pope* (1885), see Charteris, pp. 512-13. A copy of *Six Lectures* is in the Houghton Library. As a frontispiece to this book, Gosse's poem "To W. D. Howells, the 'onlie begetter' of these ensuing lectures" is reproduced in holograph. The poem is printed in *From Shakespeare to Pope* where the heading reads merely "To W. D. Howells."

³⁸ Gosse's reply to the *Athenaeum* (October 19, 1886) was reprinted in the *Critic*, n.s., VI (November 6, 1886), 227-28. For Tennyson's remark, see *Alfred Tennyson*, by his grandson, Charles Tennyson (1949), p. 490.

³⁹ A typed copy of this manuscript letter is in the Symington Collection in the Rutgers University Library.

⁴⁰ "The Editor's Study," *Harper's*, LXXIV (December 1886), 158-59.



BROTHERTON LIBRARY

Edmund Gosse

From a portrait painted by John Singer Sargent in 1885.

302, Beacon Street,
Boston.
Nov. 7th, 1886.

My dear Gosse,

Thank you for sending me your defence against the Quarterly.⁴¹ You needed none with this family, but we all thought your answer to the brutal assault which we've not yet read, admirable. I know the assault from hearsay, Perry having told me how foolish and dishonest it was. The feeling here is all one way. Aldrich says the close of your reply—the last two paragraphs—is most masterly, and I think so, too.

You will see in the December "Harper" how much I like your Raleigh, but I must tell you personally that I found it only less delightful than the Gray: that remains inapproachable. Last night I met the Creightons,⁴² from your Cambridge, at Norton's,⁴³ and Mrs. C. tried to make me jealous by pretending that you giggled with her husband as much as you did with me. I was furious but I was too polite to show it. The M. . . 's⁴⁴ are here, and we are to give a large lunch for them on Thursday.—The Hawthorne-Lowell interview has been a great sensation here; and there's no doubt but it was a most cruel betrayal. It oughtn't to be regarded in England as representative of Lowell at all.—The family joins me in love to Mrs. Gosse and yourself.

Yours ever,
W D Howells.

The "Hawthorne-Lowell interview," to which Howells refers, was a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic. Julian Hawthorne, the son of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the literary editor of the New York *World*, had called on Lowell at his home near Southborough, Massachusetts, and encouraged him to give his views on English affairs and English personalities. When the signed interview with

⁴¹ The *Quarterly Review* (October 1886). Gosse's reply is cited in footnote 38.

⁴² Mr. Creighton was referred to by Gosse in a letter to Howells of November 19, 1886, as "one of our most rising churchmen, with a bishop's mitre in his pocket." The Rt. Rev. Mandell Creighton (1843-1901), was Bishop successively of Peterborough (1891) and London (1897).

⁴³ Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908). Professor of Art at Harvard, 1873-97. Caroline Ticknor reports that Howells took Gosse to call on Norton at the time of his lecture tour in 1884. Norton, in commenting on the recent deterioration of London society, remarked, "—and there is Alma-Tadema, who has married one of the daughters of Epps, the Cocoa man!" Norton continued, reflecting on the famous advertisement of Epps Cocoa, "I really do not know which one he married, "Grateful" or "Comforting." Then the bomb was exploded, and before Howells could quickly change the subject, Gosse had replied: 'He married "Grateful." I married "Comforting" myself!' " (*Glimpses of Authors*, 1922, pp. 172-173). See also "Mrs. Gosse and Mrs. Tadema," *The Tribune*, Dec. 10, 1884, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Probably the Larkin Meads. Larkin G. Mead, Jr., was the brother of Mrs. Howells. He was a sculptor and spent most of his time in Florence.

the recently-retired Minister appeared in the October 24, 1886, issue of the *World*, readers in London and New York were both fascinated and shocked. Since Lowell, many years before he had become Minister to the Court of Saint James, had shown in several of his essays a distinctly anti-British bias, and since his successful five years as Minister had healed these wounds, the interview seemed to Lowell and his friends particularly unfortunate—or, to quote Lowell's own words, "it is like a dead rat in the wall—an awful stink and no cure."⁴⁵

In the Boston *Advertiser* of October 25, 1886, Lowell repudiated the interview, claiming that the views expressed were not his own, and that, in any case, he had supposed that he was merely chatting informally with the son of an old friend. Hawthorne published a brief and polite answer to Lowell in the *World* for October 26, and Lowell then wrote a still more emphatic repudiation of the interview for the Boston *Herald*.⁴⁶ Hawthorne replied to Lowell personally in a long letter of October 31, 1886, in which he reviewed the whole situation, reminding Lowell that, as literary editor, he had invited him to write a series of articles for the *World*. Lowell had refused "for lack of time," and Hawthorne had then been sent to Southborough, Massachusetts, by Joseph Pulitzer, editor of the *World*, to gather Lowell's opinions "through conversation." Hawthorne's letter was withheld from publication until November 11, 1886, in the hope that Lowell would reply. Since no answer was received, the *World* reproduced the two-column letter and an editorial stating that, "We have in our possession letters and telegrams from Lowell, which are not to be published because they are personal, which show conclusively that Mr. Lowell must have understood the purely journalistic basis upon which he was approached by Mr. Hawthorne."⁴⁷

Neither Howells nor Gosse could have seen Hawthorne's reply in the *World*, nor the accompanying editorial, when they exchanged their views on the controversy; both men were probably aware of Lowell's repeated repudiations in the Boston papers. Gosse wrote:

⁴⁵ Horace E. Scudder, *James Russell Lowell, A Biography* (1901), pp. 338-39.

⁴⁶ Reprinted in *The Critic*, n.s., VI (November 6, 1886), 226-27.

⁴⁷ The New York *World*, November 11, 1886. See the editorial, entitled "The Hawthorne-Lowell Question" and the letter from Hawthorne to Lowell dated October 31, 1886, but not published in the *World* until November 11. See also "The Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's*, LXXIV (January 1887), 318-320.

Board of Trade, S.W.
Nov. 19, 1886.

My dear Howells—

I was exceedingly glad this morning to receive your delightful letter, and I seize a very large sheet to tell you so. The storm roused by the *Quarterly* continues to rumble away in quarters like the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *World*, and *Truth*, but the rest of the public is thoroughly tired of it, I think. I do not suppose that it has done me much harm: everybody has to run the gauntlet some time or other. . . .

It is very good of you to like my Raleigh. You can't think how nice a little praise is after 5 weeks' unlimited abuse! I shall look forward to December's *Harper*, and your public praise will do me public good, by cheering up my friends, who feel my persecution, I think, more than I do.

People here were frightfully grieved at the Lowell outrage; sympathy, I think, is all with him. There is one point which I should like to clear up, if possible. Thomas Hardy, our greatest novelist over here, as I think, was very much wounded by what Lowell was reported to have said about him. There are circumstances in the case which would make the sneer at Hardy's personal appearance singularly cruel: I cannot myself believe that Lowell said all that—it is quite in the Julian Hawthorne vein. Hardy, who has always been a great supporter and admirer of Lowell, is wretched at this supposed snub. I wonder if you happen to see Lowell whether you could not get from him a verbal assurance that he did not say all this? You may, of course feel it too delicate a mission. The article is decidedly a serious blow to Lowell's position here; he ought, I think, to have repudiated it all more thoroughly, much more thoroughly.

With our love

Ever yours very sincerely,
Edmund Gosse.⁴⁸

As we have seen, Lowell repudiated the Hawthorne interview as thoroughly as he could in two letters to Boston papers. In the light of the letter from Hawthorne and the accompanying editorial, which had appeared in the *World* of November 11, 1886, nothing remained to be said. After this issue of the paper Lowell's friends and biographers tacitly agreed to let time take care of the "dead rat in the wall."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library (Charteris, pp. 201-02). The passage about Hardy from the *World*, October 24, 1886, reads:

Of English literature Mr. Lowell said: 'I have not followed it. I had been told that Mr. Thomas Hardy was very good, and I took up one of his books—"Two in a Tower"—but I did not get on with it. Afterwards I met him; he is small and unassuming in appearance—does not look like the genius of tradition.'

⁴⁹ See letter of Lowell to Norton, October 26, 1886, *Letters of James Russell Lowell* (1894), II, 319. See also Scudder's treatment of the incident in his *Biography* of Lowell,

Concerned as Gosse was over the Lowell-Hawthorne quarrel, he was still more disturbed over the Collins-Gosse affair which was pronounced by the *Critic* "the scandal of the year."⁵⁰ On the 30th of November, 1886, as soon as Gosse had had an opportunity to read Howells' review of his book in *Harper's*, he again wrote to his friend in Boston:

It is very kind, and very generous: I hope it may not lay you open to any mean attacks. The degree to which I am still made the victim here of pails of journalistic slops is really extraordinary. . . . It would be childish to pretend that it is not a blow. . . . I have been too easily successful, I suppose. . . .⁵¹

IV

In a certain sense, Gosse continued to be "too easily successful" for the remainder of his life. Though his lectureship at Cambridge terminated in 1890, a succession of books on literary subjects continued to appear—*The Life of William Congreve* (1888), *A History of the 18th Century* (1889), *The Life and Letters of Dr. John Donne* (1899), and *The Life of Jeremy Taylor* (1904), to mention only a portion of his enormous output. None of these books was reviewed by Howells; instead, Howells chose to comment, rather ironically, on one essay of his friend written in 1889 for the *Forum*.⁵² This was a review of Stedman's *Anthology of American Poetry* and bore the title, "Has America Produced a Poet?" "Mr. Gosse," Howells pointed out, expresses himself "with all the grace and gentleness inseparable from his literature." Gosse, in answering his own query negatively—and who could doubt that his answer would be negative?—"confines himself to poets no longer alive, and so no longer susceptible to hurts of pride or vanity." But Howells' pride and vanity were pricked; he did not accept Gosse's reasons for excluding American poets from his "baker's dozen" of great poets—"charming," "respectful," "courteous," "even reverential reasons" for doing so though his reasons were, they carry conviction to no "contrary mind." Howells proudly noted:

cited in footnote 45. For contemporary comment in the New York *Tribune* and the New York *Times*, see Carl J. Weber, "Lowell's 'Dead Rat in the Wall,'" *New England Quarterly*, IX (Sept. 1936), 468-72.

⁵⁰ "The Collins-Gosse affair is, so far, the scandal of the year," "London Letter" *Critic*, n.s., VI (November 20, 1886), 251.

⁵¹ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library; Charteris, pp. 204-05.

⁵² VI (1888), 76-86.

as true Americans, and as the most provincial people on the planet in certain respects, we could not leave the case as it was. One of the literary newspapers invited a symposium of American authors to sit upon Mr. Gosse and his reasons, and they all, or nearly all, declared that Emerson was worthy to be the baker's dozenth; there might be doubts about Longfellow, or there might be doubts about Bryant, but there could not be any doubt about Emerson.⁵³

Such tempered expressions of Howells' "contrary mind" in no way interfered with the exchange of letters between Gosse and Howells—nor was Gosse's appreciation of Howells' writing dimmed by their critical disagreements. Later in the same year, Gosse wrote, he took with him into the country at Christmas time only one book, Howells' *Indian Summer*, which he had somehow failed to read when it first appeared in 1886:

I feel forced to write and tell you how much it has charmed me, what a quintessence of delicate wit and tenderness and matured wisdom I find in it. A most beautiful book, indeed, combining the freshness of youth with the strength of maturity.⁵⁴

Gosse included his review of Stedman's *Anthology* in a collection of essays published in 1893, entitled *Questions at Issue*, which appeared two years after Howells' provocative little volume, *Criticism and Fiction*. Here such headings as "the Tyranny of the Novel," "The Limits of Realism in Fiction," "The Influence of Democracy" introduce us to the "issues" which must have been discussed by Howells and Gosse during the London and the Boston visits. Howells is, in fact, briefly referred to more than once in this book, and not always sympathetically. For Gosse was an Englishman, and therefore disturbed by Howells' attack on the romanticism of English fiction, especially as expressed in the works of Dickens and Thackeray. "For a writer with the temperament of Mr. Howells," he conceded sadly,

there is nothing left but the careful portraiture of a small portion of the limitless field of ordinary humdrum existence.

Howells' scorn of the romantic tendency of English novelists in *Criticism and Fiction* served only as an introduction to his more important and positive belief in the democratic basis of contem-

⁵³ "The Editor's Study," *Harper's*, LXXVIII (February 1889), 488-92. Gosse wrote, January 30, 1889, "I took your good, gracious and kindly words in February's *Harper's* as a personal greeting." Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library. For the "Symposium," see the *Critic*, X (1888), 173, 251, 277, 304.

⁵⁴ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, January 8, 1890.

porary American writers dedicated to realism. Gosse, in "The Influence of Democracy," clearly expressed his doubts of the new spirit in literature. He cited Howells, however, as an example of a writer who seemed to thrive in a democratic atmosphere to the bewilderment of the English reader:

One great novelist our race has however produced, who seems not only to write under the influence of democracy, but to be absolutely inspired by the democratic spirit. This is Mr. W. D. Howells, and it is only by admitting this isolation of his, I think, that we can arrive at any just comprehension of his place in contemporary literature. It is the secret of his extreme popularity in America, except in a certain Europeanised clique; it is the secret of the instinctive dislike of him, amounting to a blind hereditary prejudice, which is so widely felt in this country. Mr. Howells is the most exotic, perhaps the only true exotic writer of great distinction whom America has produced. . . . England, with its aristocratic traditions and codes, does not seem to weigh with Mr. Howells. His books suggest no rebellion against, nor subjection to, what simply does not exist for him or for his readers. He is superficially irritated at European pretensions, but essentially, and when he becomes absorbed in his work as a creative artist, he ignores everything but that vast level of middle-class of American society out of which he sprang, which he faithfully represents, and which adores him. To English readers, the novels of Mr. Howells must always be something of a puzzle, even if they partly like them, and as a rule they hate them.⁵⁵

Gosse himself was the English reader to whom Howells was "always something of a puzzle"; in spite of his protestations, Gosse only "partly liked" Howells' novels. He, too, sprang from a middle-class family, but, unlike Howells, he venerated the "aristocratic traditions and codes" of England. Gosse's visit with Howells in Boston in 1884 no doubt helped him to understand Howells' "extreme popularity in America, except in a certain Europeanized clique"; years after his return to England, Gosse was still attempting to discover the "secret" of this national prejudice in favor of a democratic writer who questioned the English romantic-aristocratic tradition in fiction.⁵⁶

The unshakeable suavity of these two literary gentlemen is well illustrated by two little notes written by Howells to Gosse in the spring of 1904. Gosse, now Librarian to the House of Lords, evidently attempted to arrange a luncheon engagement with Howells. Howells replied:

⁵⁵ *Questions at Issue* (1893), p. 16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

81 Eaton Terrace,
April 14, 1904

My dear Gosse:

We had planned for a little absence from town after the 26th, and though our plans may change, I don't feel safe in accepting for the 27th. That is frankly, if rather stupidly, the case. I'm promising myself the greatest kind of pleasure from seeing you all Sunday, and I shall be glad to meet Mr. Barrie again. We were sorry to miss you yesterday.

Yours ever

W. D. Howells.

The old Sunday afternoon and evening gatherings still convened at 29 Delamere Terrace, and Howells continued to enjoy them. The name of "Mr. W. D. Howells" is duly inscribed in *The Gosse Book* for April 19, 1904. Gosse apparently invited Howells to join him for lunch the next Monday as well. Howells' note is a genial reminder of the old days in Boston:

81 Eaton Terrace,
April 15, 1904.

Dearest Gosse:

I am engaged to a lunch Monday, which after I've eaten it will have eaten nigh the whole afternoon. That is *one* Way of the World, confound it. I couldn't have hoped to repeat with you our youthful experience at the Boston Museum when we rejoiced together that we had not written *The Merchant of Venice*; but we might have come near it.

Yours ever

W. D. Howells.

In the years which followed, Gosse's cordial letters continued to cross the Atlantic, expressing not only his warm personal regards, but also his appreciation of Howells' books as they appeared. ("The Kentons' and 'Questionable Shapes' have arrived in the wake of your most kind letter.")⁵⁷ On July 26, 1910, Gosse wrote to Howells to tell him that, "quite by accident," he had come upon *In After Days*; seven of the nine essays by various writers, included in this collection, Gosse considered "quite babbling and ineffectual." But the other two, one by Henry James and one by Howells, seemed to him "most remarkable." "James' essay is the perfect quintessence of his laborious candour, so dense that one's mind sticks upright in it like a spoon in molasses."

But yours, my dear Howells, your 'Counsel of Consolation' how am I to tell you with what tender glow of appreciation I read it? Every word in it is

⁵⁷ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, dated July 14, 1910.

instinct with wisdom and sweetness and beauty. I cannot say how it moved me, even to tears, which were not tears of pain, but of joy and hope and immense sympathy. This is a very lovely essay of yours.⁵⁸

The following March, Gosse communicated with Howells as President of the American Academy, on "the great subject" of "how the Nobel Prize (of 37,000 dollars) can be secured" for Henry James—or 'dear old Uncle Henry' as the children call him at Rye."⁵⁹ Howells, of course, warmly supported the idea, which seemed to Gosse "extremely generous and like yourself." Apparently, Gosse felt a certain embarrassment that it was James' name and not Howells' he was proposing for the Nobel Prize, for, on May 24, 1911, he wrote:

Let me say, in crudity and frankness, that I do not take the line of pushing *your* name, because of the simple fact that H. J. is mortified and subdued by a poverty which makes us disregard all the civilities in other cases. I think it is most unselfish and like-yourself that you join in this, since you are so manifestly the Leader of American Literature.⁶⁰

Immediately after Howells' death in 1920, Gosse, then writing for the London *Sunday Times*, summarized his impressions of the author whose "enchanted guest" he had been in 1884. In "The Passing of William Dean Howells,"⁶¹ he wrote that he would not try to define Howells' place in literature at a time when "my memory broods over the incidents of a friendship which blossomed long ago." After a few judiciously complimentary paragraphs, Gosse did, however, attempt to "place" Howells. He observed that, in the 1880's, a "kind of paralyzing modesty took hold of Howells, an unwillingness to probe beneath the surface of human nature," which explained "the failure of much of his later work in fiction." This Gosse illustrated by describing a walk in 1884 with Howells "in the dingier part of Boston." According to Gosse, Howells looked up at a small house and said, "'How happy I should be if I could see everything that is done and hear everything that is said in such a house as that for a week!'" Gosse made "a rude suggestion" as to what might be happening behind "those dull windows," at which Howells did not smile. Instead, he lifted his hand, "as if to ward off a blow," and cried, "'Oh! don't say that! I couldn't bear it; I

⁵⁸ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library.

⁵⁹ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library, March 22, 1911.

⁶⁰ Manuscript letter in the Houghton Library.

⁶¹ *Living Age*, *loc.cit.*

couldn't write a line if I thought such things were happening!' ”

Five years after Howells' death, Gosse reprinted in *Silhouettes* a “little sermon” from “the pulpit of the *Sunday Times*,” entitled “W. D. Howells,” and here Gosse expressed his judgment of Howells' final claim to fame in terms characteristic of that decade. Gosse admitted that,

during the thirty years which separated the passing of Lowell and his own decease, Howells was the most active and representative American man of letters [and, further, that] By his own lights, which were not quite our lights today, he guided critical taste, and supplied pure narrative entertainment through nearly half a century.

He then returned to the argument he had held with Howells many years ago. Gosse attacked Howells on two counts: first, “he sacrificed everything to a theory of realism,” and, second, “he subordinated all principles of taste to an almost provincial anxiety to praise anything American *because* it was American.” In the light of these two flaws, Gosse observed, “it has regretfully to be said that Howells was a very bad critic, one of the worst.” After listing “a cluster of heresies” in which Howells “indulged,” Gosse wound up his paragraph with the conclusion that “the anti-romantic error” was “the rock on which the barque of Howells struck”; “he was pitiless to Scott and Thackeray, and, indeed, to all English novelists.”⁶²

The “question at issue” between Edmund Gosse and W. D. Howells was that of romanticism as opposed to realism in fiction; behind that question lurked the further “issue” of the aristocratic values as against the democratic. Since Gosse was born an Englishman and Howells an American, it is not surprising that the issues were never resolved, though the “enchanted guest” of the 1880's never lost his affection for his Boston host.

⁶² Edmund Gosse, *Silhouettes* (1925), pp. 193-99.