Sir Edmund Gosse as a Critic of Literature

by

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In making a study of Sir Edmund Gosse as a critic of literature it is not at all my intention to make anything but a tentative outline of his activities and estimate of his abilities. Presumably the bulk of the work of this man of letters has been done; yet it would be foolish and presumptuous to think that a living, active writer can be permanently catalogued and evaluated. In other words, a funeral is out of the question until we have a suitable subject for the grave. It is, however, possible to separate the critical work of Mr. Gosse from his historical, biographical, editorial, and creative work, and from this critical activity to catch some sort of reflection of the nature and value of one phase of his multiform activity. The preparation of this study has been hindered and what temporary value it claims made less sure by the impossibility under rush of time of securing copies of two of the volumes of criticism and of a number of magazine articles. Some of the essays in the two missing volumes, "Inter Arma" and "Silhouettes", have, however, been read in the periodicals in which they first appeared. With these excuses I submit this as an attempt to
fill an obvious need in contemporary English criticism.

To the Faculty of the Department of English under whose direction this thesis has been prepared my obligations are many. To Professor S. L. Whitcomb and to Professor W. S. Johnson I am particularly grateful for stimulating suggestions, criticism and advice. The former suggested my subject and to the latter fell the brunt of going over the manuscript with me. It is also a pleasure to express my indebtedness to Professor R. D. O'Leary for his most valuable help in the way of comments upon Gosse and his work. My thanks are due to many others for more indirect help and in particular to Professor Sara C. Laird for advice and encouragement.

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SIR EDMUND GOSSE
AS A CRITIC OF LITERATURE

Chapter I
FOUNDATIONS OF THE LITERARY LIFE OF SIR EDMUND GOSSE

It seems desirable, if not imperative, that a comprehensive treatment of Sir Edmund Gosse as a critic of literature should be introduced by a few biographical notes. Keeping always in mind our ultimate goal, which is to understand and to evaluate what Gosse has done and is doing in the way of criticism, let us glance not only at the historical facts that help us to visualize him as a man of letters but particularly at whatever influences of circumstance or inheritance seem to have been important in the development of his critical attitude. The absence of a complete biography, of course, makes our glance necessarily hasty and superficial, but it is hoped, not necessarily un instructive.

Edmund William Gosse was born in London September 21, 1849, the only son of the zoologist, Philip Henry Gosse, and his wife, Emily Bowes Gosse. Both parents were
middle-aged at the time of their son's birth and had become quite completely and immovably fixed in matters of religion as extreme Calvinists of the Plymouth Brethren sect. In fact, the father was a minister of the "Brethren" and the mother a writer of religious verse and popular religious tracts. She was as well a zealous worker for souls among the unconverted with whom she came in contact.

Thus, it was in a family that not only believed but practised literally a most narrow and stern creed that the boy Edmund Gosse received his first impressions. It was a family that sought no pleasure but in daily discussions of the Word of God. Supremely confident of the guidance of the Divine Will and adhering rigidly in word and action to a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, the parents surrounded the child with a severe puritanical atmosphere, deeply religious but blindly and bitterly intolerant of any loitering along the high road of salvation. As a result, chiefly, of this Calvinistic atmosphere Edmund Gosse had practically no childhood. Destined for the ministry from his earliest years, he was reared with the duties and the dignity of that vocation ever in the minds of his parents, in whose open the child was transformed into a man. He was allowed few of the pastimes and normal occupations of childhood. A unfortunate prejudice of both parents against all imaginative fiction, or rather a belief in its inherent sinfulness, prevented the normal growth of the
lighter and pleasanter side, at least, of his imaginative faculty. In his own word, "... not a single fiction was read or told to me during my infancy ... never in all my childhood did anyone address to me the affecting preamble, 'Once upon a time.' I was told about missionaries but never about pirates; I was familiar with humming birds, but I had never heard of fairies. Jack the Giant-Killer, Hum-pelstiltskin, and Robin Hood were not of my acquaintance, and although I understood about wolves, Little Red Riding Hood was a stranger even by name."

To what extent this mental starvation injured the boy is hard to say, for there were other reasons for the abnormality of his boyhood. One of these was the fact that he had no playmates at home and was not allowed to "run the streets", where he might have found physical health and pleasures to compensate for the limitations in his reading.

Another blight was the long illness ending in the death of his mother when Edmund was about seven years old. At the time the family was in very reduced circumstances and the mother was obliged to take lodgings near her doctor in Pic-lico with no other companion than seven-year-old Edmund. In his own words, "I was now my Mother's sole and ceaseless companion; the silent witness of her suffering, of her patience.

of her vain and delusive attempts to obtain alleviation of her anguish. For nearly three months I breathed the atmosphere of pain, saw no other sight, heard no other sounds, thought no other thoughts, than those which accompany physical suffering and weariness." Each day the boy read to his mother from the Bible, from a book of "incommunicable dreariness" called "Thoughts on the Apocalypse" by Newton, and from the "Horae Apocalypticae" of Elliott. These readings were sometimes varied by singing hymns.

The death of his mother left Edmund to a still more lonely and more rigorous life than he had experienced before. The natural results of this unhealthy life on the mind and body of the boy may readily be conjectured. At about the age of five he had become very delicate in health and proud and sensitive in temperament. For a half-dozen years he was so nervous and highly imaginative that any severe strain on his nerves would drive him into hysterics and torture his sleeping hours with nightmares. However, in Edmund's eleventh year his father remarried, and the step-mother, contrary to the supposed rule, initiated for him a regime of health and normal activity.

This is a sketch thus far of only the abnormal side of the boyhood of Edmund Gosse. In glancing at it one can easily see why his step-mother's relatives predicted that her first duty would be to bury "that poor child". The only wonder is that he ever grew up to normal manhood.
To complete the picture of his intellectual development we must see what education he received, what books influenced him most, what tastes and abilities he developed, and finally, what led him to become a lover and critic of literature.

Young Edmund learned to read about the beginning of his fourth year, a rather uncommon achievement. His father taught him his letters, the simple rules of arithmetic, a little natural history, the elements of drawing, and a great deal of geography, but failed somewhat in his attempt to force the memorization of a number of hymns, psalms, and chapters of Scripture. At a very early age the boy began to enjoy reading, but his menu, as we have seen, was restricted by the exclusion of all story books. He read natural history, books of travel—mostly of a scientific nature with some of discovery in the South Seas—, some geography and astronomy, and much theology. Often he was required to read aloud to his parents from a dismal writer on Prophecy by the name of Jukes. A little later the boy began to devour daily the penny cyclopaedia.

In his seventh year young Edmund's sense of romance seems to have been awakened by reading "The Cameronian's Dream" by James Hyslop. Gosse in later life calls this story of the murder of the Scottish "Saints", "a piece of verse which exercised a lasting effect on my taste". His taste for good literature was probably even more deeply
influenced by hearing his father read aloud from the "Epistle to the Hebrews" and other parts of the New Testament.

After his mother's death time must have passed slowly for the young boy, who spent hours in his father's study watching and sometimes helping that scientist in his task of observing and recording the habits of the tiny sea creatures that filled his aquaria. For a time the father's only care in education young Edmund seems to have been to make sure that the latter mastered Calvinistic hymns and theology and learned to hate properly everything savoring of "Popery". Yet, notwithstanding the restrictions in the education of the boy and his unusually lonely and cheerless environment, it is probable that his childhood was much happier in reality than it seemed to have been, years afterward, to the author of "Father and Son". Although recording but a single trip to a theater, he recalls his delight in a Punch show and his interest in some striking characters of London. Among them were a toy peddler, an onion peddler, and a crazed ex-sailor, who daily walked the streets of Islington exhorting the inhabitants to

"Wa-a-atch and pray-hay!
Night and day-hay!"

He records, too, living a wholesome and happy life with an aunt and cousins at Clifton while his father was on a lecture tour. At the age of eight he moved with his father from London to St. Marychurch in Devonshire. This was near the sea, which seems to have had a powerful appeal to the extravagant fancy of the sensitive young boy.
About this time Edmund's education was entrusted to a private tutor, an elderly lady, who was apparently more well-meaning than competent. Between the limitations imposed by the religious zeal of the father and the incompetency of the tutor, young Edmund for some time studied only zoology, botany, astronomy, and geography—this last through copying maps and reading books of travel. Perceiving some of the deficiencies in this sort of a curriculum, the father made an attempt to supply them by giving Latin lessons. It was as an outgrowth of these lessons that the father chanced one evening to recite some Latin verses from Virgil. Their beauty caught the attention of the boy, and for a long time, he tells us, one of the lines kept running through his mind:

"Formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas."

At the age of ten the boy began to lead a more normal life. For the first time he had a playmate of his own age. For the first time the pages of imaginative fiction were opened to him in "Tom Cringle's Log", a highly colored romance of the South Seas by Michael Scott. For the first time he attended school, where, indeed, he attracted no friends and no attention save by his exceptional knowledge of geography. For the first time he heard the name of Shakespeare and formed some slight acquaintance with "The Merchant of Venice".

It is interesting to note that he owed this last experience to no less a personage than the aged James Sheridan Knowles. Under the guidance of his sensible step-mother Edmund's health improved steadily, aided by fresh air and outdoor exercise.
About this time the intense religious fervor which the father had painstakingly cultivated began to cool. At the exceptional age of ten years young Gosse had been baptized as an adult into the Communion of the Saints because of his piety and accurate knowledge of Scripture. As Percy F. Bicknell remarks, "Cut off from the world of boyish sports and games, from the world of literature and art, and from almost everything necessary for a boy's healthy development, this lonely child was taught to regard himself as marked out for peculiar services in the Vineyard of the Lord and as an early recipient of extraordinary favors from on high." The decrease in his religious enthusiasm may be accounted for partly, as he later believed, by the neglect of the imaginative faculty in his education and partly by the natural reaction of his widening range of interests on a condition so abnormal in one of his age. One of these various interests was a taste for literature, now vastly stimulated through the agency of his stepmother, by Scott's "Lady of the Lake" and the "Pickwick Papers" of Dickens. Other less appetizing, but strangely fascinating, food for the boy was a small library of melancholy poetry including Dr. Young's "The Last Day", Blair's "Grave", "Death" by Bishop Beilby Porteus, and "The Deity" by Samuel Boyse. An interesting experience in this

period was a trip with his father to see Holman Hunt's painting, "The Finding of Christ in the Temple", which was being carried on an exhibition tour. At the age of thirteen Edmund first saw pictures of the Greek gods, and so strongly did they appeal to his aesthetic sense that he secretly refused to believe that they were as vicious and infamous as his father painted them.

In his fourteenth year Edmund Gosse was sent to a nearby boarding school where he spent two years, returning home each week-end, however. It was in these two years that his budding taste for literature began to flower. The keenness of his linguistic appetite may be judged from the fact that he spent hours in the fascinated study of such a work as Bailey's Etymological Dictionary. At fifteen Gosse returned to Shakespeare and read "The Tempest", "Much Ado About Nothing", "The Merchant of Venice", "Cymbeline", and "Julius Caesar". Although he disliked Southey's poetry and Shelley's "Queen Mab", he was charmed by the poetry of Coleridge and intoxicated by the "Hero and Leander" of Marlowe. He became familiar with some of Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth and with all of the "Golden Treasury". With the reading of these and other stimulating works the taste for literature of Edmund Gosse flowered rapidly. At the age of sixteen his opportunities were still further widened by his going down to London to school. There he wrote a tragedy in imitation of Shakespeare and odes in imitation of those in
"Prometheus Unbound". With this beginning at creative work, the foundations for a literary life were almost laid. Its pursuit was assured within a year or so after going to London when the young man found himself entirely out of sympathy with his father's religion and rebelled against entering the ministry. Endowed by nature with those qualities of mind essential for a literary career and reared in an intellectual home, Gosse seemed not to have been hindered in any noticeable degree by the lack of literary training in his early years. In fact, it is quite probable that the added curiosity aroused by the prohibition against fiction more than offset the effects of his retardation.

To sketch the life of Mr. Gosse from that day to this is but to trace the steady, consecutive steps by which he has risen from an intelligent but abnormally educated youth to his present reputation as a poet, essayist, biographer, critic, and dilettante. In 1867, at the age of eighteen, Mr. Gosse was appointed an assistant librarian in the department of printed books of the British Museum, a position which he held until 1875. This position enabled him to gratify somewhat an insatiable appetite for reading and to travel and to write. Before he had reached the age of twenty, he was attracting attention by the poems and papers that he contributed to the London periodicals. In 1870 with J. A. Blaikie he brought out "Madrigals, Songs, and Sonnets", his first book of verse, which was well received and won praise
from Tennyson. This was followed in 1873 by "On Viol and Flute" and in 1875 by a prose work, "The Ethical Condition of the Early Scandinavian Peoples". The latter was one of the fruits of his travels in Scandinavia and Holland in 1872 and 1874. These trips were made on special leave from the British Museum for the purpose of reporting on the condition of contemporary literature in those countries. In 1875 Gosse became a translator to the Board of Trade, which position he held until he became librarian to the House of Lords in 1904.

During practically the whole of his long life the literary labours of Mr. Gosse have continued unabated, beginning with his first attempts as a tyro in the late sixties and continuing to the present year of 1927. He early made a specialty of English literary history prior to the nineteenth century and particularly of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this field the following are his most important works: "Seventeenth Century Studies" (1883), "From Shakespeare to Pope" (1885), "A History of Eighteenth Century Literature" (1889), "The Jacobean Poets" (1894), and "Critical Kit-Kats" (1896). These studies arc among his most important work. In fact, the "History of Eighteenth Century Literature" is probably his most widely read book. Certainly it is no slight tribute to its value to find it today, thirty-seven years after its publication, used as a text at the University of Kansas.

In 1882 Gosse published a life of Gray which impressed
Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold so favorably that in 1884, a year after the appearance of "Seventeenth Century Studies", they secured his election to the Clark Lectureship in English literature at Trinity College, Cambridge. However, his next book, "From Shakespeare to Pope", which was the first series of his lectures, nearly lost his place for him in 1886 because of the bitter attack it excited from Churton Collins in the Quarterly Review. Collins seems to have been quite in the right as far as the errors he pointed out are concerned, but the fierceness of his charge of ignorance and incompetence was so far overdone as to arouse general sympathy for Gosse. The latter defended himself skillfully and in good taste, and although he felt it best to turn in his resignation, it was refused by the Trinity authorities, who, in fact, exerted themselves somewhat to defend him. As the result Gosse remained Clark Lecturer until 1890.

In the first year of his Clark Lectureship he visited America, lecturing at Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, and other colleges. The following year he received an honorary M. A. from Trinity College, Cambridge, the first of the long series of honors that he has received during the last half-century in recognition of his services to literature.

So varied and profuse have been those literary labors, indeed, that the task of limiting this review to the most important is not at all easy. To mention individual works

would overtax our space, and to consider the types in detail would cause much difficulty. The foundations of Mr. Gosse's enviable reputation as a biographer were set in 1882 by his life of Gray in the English Men of Letters series, and to trace his work as a biographer mentioning only such volumes as those on Raleigh, Congreve, Philip Henry, Gosse, John Donne, Jeremy Taylor, Coventry Patmore, Sir Thomas Browne, Ibsen, and A. C. Swinburne would be to follow the course of his whole life. Thus such a method of surveying his works would involve endless repetition. An exception, however, is his poetical work, which may be called the work of his youth; inasmuch as his volumes of the seventies: "On Viol and Flute" and "New Poems", represent adequately all the poetry of Mr. Gosse as well as the work of his most prolific period. Yet, so active has Mr. Gosse remained even in this field where he has been most at a standstill, that one would be obliged to search the current numbers of the literary magazines to find his latest verse.

Throughout his life one of the greatest services that Gosse has done for English Literature has been to bring into it some of the choice values of foreign letters. Apparently he has not attempted to become a through student of comparative literature, but rather he has concentrated his attention on a few literatures, principally Scandinavian and French. In this connection it must be noted that he owes much of his place in the history of poetry to the fact
that he adapted such French forms as the triolet, the rondel, and the chant royal to English prosody. Of his extensive work in interpreting and popularizing French and Scandinavian writers more will be said later, since that represents an important side of his critical work.

As a historian of English literature Mr. Gosse has already been named and praised in connection with his seventeenth and eighteenth century studies. His historical books are not limited to that field, however. In 1897 he wrote "A Short History of Modern English Literature" for the Literatures of the World series, which he was editing. In 1903 and 1904 were published the four volumes of "English Literature: an Illustrated Record" by Garnett and Gosse. Part of volume II and volumes III and IV were by Gosse. Besides these compendious works he has done no little historical research in connection with his critical and biographical studies of English, French, and Scandinavian men of letters.

It is as the author of nearly a dozen volumes of short essays, mostly of a biographical-critical nature, that Edmund Gosse is probably best liked to-day. Most of these essays were first contributed to the English periodicals and later collected and issued in book form by the author. Among the magazines to which he has frequently contributed are the Athenæum, The Living Age, The Critic, The Edinburgh Review, The Fortnightly Review, The Saturday Review, The Academy, and in America, Harpers Monthly and The Atlantic
Monthly. The five volumes of essays reprinted in the "Collected Essays" of 1912 are the "Seventeenth Century Studies" (1883), "Gossip in a Library" (1891), "Critical Kit-Kats" (1896), "French Profiles" (1904), and "Portraits and Sketches" (1912). While these five volumes probably include the most important of Gosse's literary essays, he has also the following volumes to his credit: "Northern Studies" (1890), "Questions at Issue" (1893), "The Jacobean Poets" (1894), "Inter Arma" (1916), "Some Diversions of a Man of Letters" (1919), "Books on the Table" (1921), "Aspects and Impressions" (1922), "More Books on the Table" (1923), and "Silhouettes" (1925).

In this brief attempt to survey the most important phases of the work that has occupied the long life of Mr. Gosse, mention has been made of his work as a poet, as a historian, as a biographer, as a lecturer, as a spokesman for French and Scandinavian literature, and as a critic. It is not to be assumed, however, that this runs the gamut of his literary activities. Of no little consequence is his work as an editor. Gosse has edited Heinemann's series of Literatures of the World and his International Library, as well as the English translations of several foreign works, including the novels of Björnson, and such other works as "Selections from Swinburne", "The Oxford Book of Scandinavian Verse", and "English Odes". The prefaces of Gosse are not infrequently found in English translations of con-
tinental books. As the translator of two plays of Ibsen, he deserves mention. He has been a contributor to the Dictionary of National Biography and to the Encyclopedia Britannica, and he was the chief literary advisor in the preparation of the tenth and the eleventh editions of the latter. Some of Mr. Gosse's other activities are indicated by his holding of positions as trustee of the National Portrait Gallery, as Chairman of the Board of Scandinavian Studies, University College, London, (1917), and as President of the English Association (1921). Mr. Gosse has spent no little time traveling in France, and he has made trips to other European countries and to America. He has utilized in his essays much valuable material gained by these travels. From his acquaintance with France he seems to have caught an ardent love for the people of that nation. This feeling and his hatred for the German people are reflected in the magazine articles he wrote during the World War. Mr. Gosse's employment as an assistant-librarian in the British Museum, as a translator to the Board of Trade, and as librarian to the House of Lords, is not so unrelated to his literary work that it deserved to be passed over in silence. Very likely it was the opportunity for research that these positions allowed him that made Gosse the authority on literature that he is. In the field of autobiography he made an impressive start with "Father and Son" (1907), which was crowned by the French Academy in 1913.
Consequently, it will be a matter for serious regret if he does not leave us a complete autobiography.

The activities that have been mentioned and others for which there is no space have won for Mr. Gosse steadily increased recognition both at home and abroad. Among the honors which have come to him have been honorary degrees and decorations in England and on the continent. In addition to his M.A. from Trinity in 1885, he received an Honorary LL.D. from St. Andrews in 1889, an Honorary Litt. D. from Cambridge in 1920, an Honorary Dr. from Strasburg in 1920, an Honorary Dr. from Gothenburg, and an Honorary Dr. from the Sorbonne in 1925. He has other less academic honors. In 1901 he was made Knight of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olaf (first class); in 1908, Knight of the Royal Swedish Order of the Polar Star; and in 1912, Knight of the Royal Danish Order of the Dannebrog. In 1913 he became an officer of the Legion of Honor and in 1925 Commander. The British Government awarded Mr. Gosse a C. B. in 1912 and a knighthood in 1925.

To this sketchy outline of Mr. Gosse's labors and rewards a few notes of a more personal nature may be added. Edmund Gosse is a man with a wide circle of friends and but few enemies. In literary circles he knows everyone. In early life he was one of the many young men of letters who felt the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. In particular he was dominated for a time by an intense admiration of Swinburne. Since those early years he has probably known nearly every important litterateur in England, not to mention
his acquaintances in France, Scandinavia, and the United States. The tinge that his personal recollections of these men give to his criticism of their work is one of the most attractive features of his critical writing. In naming at random but a few of his well-known friends and associates, the following come first to mind: Browning, Tennyson, Swinburne, Andrew Lang, Henry James, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Walter Pater, D.G. Rossetti, George Saintsbury, John Addington Symonds, André Gide, Walt Whitman, Whittier, N.L. S., Hans Christian Andersen, George Moore, James Fitzmaurice-Kelly, Richard Garnett, Edward Dowden, John Drinkwater, Alfred Noyes, Austin Dobson, William Archer, and Leslie Stephen.

In "These Many Years" Brander Matthews speaks of the Sunday afternoon receptions of the Gosses. He mentions, too, the Saville Club, which is one of the four to which Gosse belongs. The others are the Marlborough, National, and Grillions. Except for his trips abroad and for the time that his professional duties required him to spend at Cambridge and Oxford, Gosse has lived his mature life in London. There he married Ellen Epps, and there his son and two daughters grew to maturity.

Although Mr. Gosse relinquished his position as Librarian of the House of Lords in 1914, he certainly has not retired from the public life. It seems rather that he is more active than ever. Today Edmund Gosse may be said to be England's chief literary ambassador to Europe, and especially
to France, where he has long been highly esteemed. As early as 1905 he had the signal honor of being entertained in Paris by leading French litterateurs. In February of the preceding year he had delivered an address, "The Influence of France upon English Poetry", before the Société des Conferences at Paris. During and since the World War he has certainly made a valiant effort to deserve the favors that France is continually bestowing on him by the heat with which he has hurried to the defense of "La belle France". To a disinterested observer, however, the narrow partisanship of such articles as "The Unity of France", "The Desecration of French Monuments", "The Splendor of France " and "France and the British Effort " is in rather poor taste. That France is grateful is evident from the doctor's degrees conferred since the war by Strasburg and the Sorbonne and by his election in 1925 as Commander of the Legion of Honor.

The literary activity of Mr. Gosse in late years is astonishing for a man who passed his seventieth birthday in 1919. He has collected and published five volumes from his critical contributions to the Sunday Times and various periodicals in the six years, 1919 to 1925 inclusive. As another instance of his activity let it be noted that he delivered the Taylordan Lecture at Oxford in 1920. In fact, he is quite agreeably refusing to grow old. Let no one think that in this discussion of Sir Edmund Gosse as a
critic we shall presume to attempt the impossible feat of burying him! May the day be far distant when he will no longer contribute to the field of letters!

From these fragmentary notes, which have attempted to show Sir Edmund Gosse in his proper perspective as a man of letters, we turn to our subject proper - his work as a critic of literature.
Chapter II

THE SCOPE AND CHARACTER OF THE CRITICISM OF GOSSE

In trying to realize at a glance the scope of Gosse's criticism it is essential to remember that he is primarily a man of letters and only secondarily a critic. He points out the enjoyable things that he has found in his reading; he likes to discuss his experiences with famous contemporaries; he refrains from harsh criticism unless the occasion is forced upon him; but he almost never attempts a dissertation in the field of abstract theory. Many critics have gone to considerable length in expounding theories of literature and philosophies of criticism, but a diligent search is needed to reveal in the works of Gosse a few such titles as "On Fluctuations of Taste", "The Future of English Poetry", "The Censorship of Books", and "The Ethics of Biography". The bulk of Gosse's work and the best of it is in the form of short, sympathetic, interpretative, concrete studies. From whatever fields his love of good literature has taken him to, he likes to select a hidden or forgotten writer to be the subject of
an essay which uncovers for us some quaint charm, a touch
of genius, or an unsuspected beauty. Of course, Mr. Gosse
does not avoid the more conspicuous figures of literature,
but his treatment of them is often limited to his own per-
sonal recollections or to some phase of their work hither-
to neglected. The following are representative titles
chosen at random from the critical essays of Gosse: "Orion'
Horne", "Lady Winchelsea's Poems", "Amasia", "A First
Sight of Tennyson", "A Visit to Whittier", "Carl Snolisky",
and "The Irony of H. Anatole France". The last two of these
titles, besides illustrating the kind of subjects that Gosse
liked, show his interest in Scandinavian and French liter-
ature.

The most important fields of Gosse's critical efforts
may be very loosely designated as (1) foreign literature,
(2) contemporary English literature, and (3) the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries. His main interests in foreign
literature, listed in the order of importance, are found in
France, Scandinavia, and America. However, he occasionally
ventures into Russian, Belgian, German, and Bulgarian. Ade-
quate illustrations of his work in these two groups, in
respective order, are "French Profiles", "Northern Studies",
the essays on Poe and Whitman, "Count Lyof Tolstoi", "Fairy-
land and a Belgian Ariosto", "Goethe", and the preface to
Vazoff's "Under the Yoke". As befits a magazine contrib-
butor, he finds much in contemporary English literature to
comment upon. If it be the verdict of Time that any of his critical essays deserve to survive, the fortunate ones will undoubtedly be his half biographical studies of important contemporaries like Swinburne, Hardy, Meredith, Henry James, Arnold, Browning, Walter Pater, and perhaps Austin Dobson and Stephen Phillips. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were for Gosse a veritable goldfield in which he was forever uncovering some bit of precious metal. His books on those two centuries are "Seventeenth Century Studies", "The Jacobean Poets", "From Shakespeare to Pope", "A History of Eighteenth Century Literature", "Gossip in a Library", and biographies of Jeremy Taylor, Gray, Raleigh, Congreve, John Donne, and Sir Thomas Browne. In addition, Gosse has many essays such as those on Samuel Butler and Catherine Trotter for which he has gone to these centuries.

The critical work of Gosse may be classified, although somewhat arbitrarily, into four divisions. In the first group are his purely critical essays, not so numerous as one might imagine, which include such titles as "Rostand's Plays", "The Art of Parody", "Mr. Bridge's Poems", "The Ethics of Biography", "The Future of English Poetry", and "The Limits of Realism in Fiction". In the second group are such happy blendings of biography and criticism as "Walter Pater", "Christina Rossetti", "A First Sight of Tennyson", and "The Prince of Critics". This is the type
that Gosse handles best, and fortunately, the majority of
the essays in his collections are of this type. In fact,
the title "Critical Kit-Kats" is used specifically to call
attention to the nature of this second type. However, the
essays in the volume, "Aspects and Impressions" are as re-
presentative of the type as any. The third group contains
his historical-critical studies of literature. These are
"The Jacobean Poets", "Seventeenth Century Studies", "From
Shakespeare to Pope", "Modern English Literature", and "A
History of Eighteenth Century Literature". Into these
histories Gosse has worked his own theories and interpreta-
tions so that they are no unimportant part of his critical
work. The fourth group contains all the miscellaneous bits
of opinion that are scattered through the prefaces, intro-
ductions, notes, etc., of Gosse. For instance, his collection
of English Sonnets is prefaced by an essay on the development
of the sonnet in England.

The above classification will, perhaps, be better fixed
in mind, and certainly the nature of Gosse's criticism will
be more clearly seen, by an analytical glance at a few re-
presentative studies. The essay on Rostand's plays in "More
Books on the Table" is probably as fair an example as any
of the first type, the ordinary, purely critical essay. This
essay represents the interest of the critic in contemporary
French literature as well as a considerable interest in the
drama. Incidentally, Gosse has written at one time or an-
other on practically every type of literature. On the whole, poetry is more stimulating to him than prose, and the novel in particular seldom arouses his sympathy. "Rostand’s Plays" is a short essay of scarcely more than two thousand words written for the Sunday Times when Mrs. Norman published her translation of six plays of Rostand. Of the seven pages less than two pretend to be concerned with the merit of Mrs. Norman’s work. In the first paragraph Gosse expresses his admiration for such a monumental achievement as that of translating the six plays out of French alexandrines into English heroic couplets with such faithful adherence to the meaning of the original. Then, after commending Mrs. Norman’s spirit of ecstatic enthusiasm for the work of Rostand in spite of the fact that it had led her to overestimate him, he turns to Rostand. By way of introduction, the next two pages sketch the historical circumstances of the production of the plays. He likens the career of Rostand as a dramatist to a comet blazing for ten years and no more. This success he attributes in part at least to the romantic simplicity of his work in an age of complex symbolism. After speaking of Rostand’s immense popular success and his election to the French Academy at an earlier age than any other modern candidate, Gosse continues, "But there was a speck in the fruit and a Mordecai at the gate". In passing, we may note the fondness for metaphor which is a distinguishing characteristic of the Gosse style. Some times every-
thing that he sees seems to suggest a parallel! The "spock" or the "Mordecai" was the fact that contemporary French literary authorities, such as Gourmont and the Mercure de France group, refused to recognize any merit in his work. This coldness on the part of his contemporaries Cosse attributes to jealousy as in the parallel case of Stephen Phillips, who succeeded by opposing contemporary conventions also. He concedes, however, that Rostand does not deserve "the highest honors of poetical creation", and hints of "a slightly bad taste" left by "the six flamboyant dramas". The inevitable parallel is "the old tale of the lunatic, who said that the feasts in the asylum were magnificent and delicious, worthy of Belshazzar, but that, he could not tell why, all the dishes had a damnable smack of water-gruel". In taking up the plays individually, however, the critic fails to stress the "smack of water-gruel". In fact, he has little but superlative praise for "Cyrano de Bergerac" and "L'Aiglon"; although he damn the other four somewhat by the faintness of his praise. The six plays are taken in their chronological order. Of the first, "Les Romantiques", which he calls a sort of burlesque of "Romeo and Juliet" with touches of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", he says: "The play sparkled with gaiety and absurdity; the comic element was carefully sustained on a high literary level, with allusions to moonlight among the honey-suckle-bowers of Stratford-on-Avon. The action was rather childish, but very merry and senti-
mentai, and the couplets were rhymed with astonishing richness". "Princess Faraway" he calls "all delicious but too sweet". "The Woman of Samaria" seems to him "a little too brightly colored - like a Neapolitan ice", but "picturesque, lively, skillful, charming, melodious, tender, and evangelical". "Cyrano de Bergerac" he calls "an accomplished poem ... a masterpiece of heroic buffoonery, adorned and supported by the art of a masterly metrical artificer". Although praising "L'Aiglon" less as a play, he believes it a higher type of drama, and he judges the scene with Mutternich at the mirror, "melodramatic perhaps, but of the very essence of genuine dramatic poetry." The last play, "Chanticleer", he avers, adds nothing to the glory of Rostand even though it is "diabolically clever". In discussing three of these plays he implies that the acting of Madame Sarah Bernhardt contributed to their stage success. Gosse ends his study by trying to answer the question of what essential element Rostand lacked in these words: "May it not have been the humility of a contrite spirit in the face of Nature?"  

From this concluding sentence in the essay on the plays of Rostand some prominent characteristics of Gosse as a critic may be deduced. In the first place, his conclusion is put forward rather as a suggestion than as a dogmatic and irrevocable judgment. That attitude is typical of Gosse.

It is impossible to imagine him emotionally aroused enough to be so disagreeably positive in his statements as, for instance, John Churton Collins tends to be. In more colloquial terms, Gosse never swings the bludgeon or the meat-ax. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to draw definite conclusions. To return to the above quotation, another characteristic of his style is evident. He is prone to make, occasionally, rather imposing and fine-sounding statements which are so vague as to mean almost anything. In short, he values distinction and elegance in diction rather more than scholarly precision; and a learned, literary style more than a simple, clear one. A final, and more complimentary, observation may be made in regard to the construction of the essay. The whole study is given point and coherence by the use of the final suggestion. That suggestion, even though it is vague, tops the structure, so to speak, and marks the essay as a serious attempt at doing something with the subject.

Let us turn to the essay on Walter Pater in "Critical Kit-Kats" for an illustration of the biographical-critical type. This portrait, as he terms it, is three times the length of the study of Rostand's plays and is divided into four parts. There is also a short prefatory note explaining the need for a study of Pater and the circumstances of its composition. The first of the four parts is a biograph-
ical sketch in some detail of the first thirty years of Pater's life, with considerable comment on the incidents and experiences of boyhood that were commonly supposed to be reflected in his writings. In addition, this part traces the steps by which he won fame as a critic and names the men by whom his criticism was influenced. The second part of the essay continues the record of his literary work and completes the biographical sketch. During the last twenty years of the life of Pater he and Gosse were close friends; so into this second part crept some excellent touches of characterization. For instance, in describing Pater's attitude toward foreigners and foreign languages Gosse gives Pater's own words: "Between you and me and the post, I hate a foreigner." Another charming bit is introduced in telling of Pater's relations with the Rector of Lincoln: "Pattison is charming," he used to murmur, "when he's good. Shall we go over and see if he is good this afternoon?"

In part three are recorded the details of the painstaking and elaborate system of composition by which Pater achieved his remarkable prose style. The results, both good and bad, of this "labor limae" are briefly estimated. Part four is a character sketch, in which there is much delightful anecdotal material. In conclusion, Gosse admits, "Not easily or surely shall we divine the workings of a brain and conscience scarcely less complex, less fantastic, less enigmatical, than the face of Mona Lisa herself," but asserts
that Pater is one "who will be remembered among the writers of this age when all but a few are forgotten". ¹

As an illustration of the work of Gosse the essay on Walter Pater tells little that might not be guessed from the shorter study of Rostand's plays. Of course, the subject is taken from a different field of literature and the treatment is avowedly more biographical. In connection with this personal element it can be observed that our critic delights in bringing out subtle, exquisitely human characteristics of which he knows from personal contact. It may be noted, too, that his hand never touches heavily anything "shady" or unpleasant. On the whole, the best quality of this type, the biographical-critical essay, is the charming way in which the subject is vivified by the personal reminiscences of the critic-friend. Often, too, in these studies there is much information of importance to the history of literature, information nowhere else available. Too often, probably, the critic in Gosse is hampered by the friend. One sometimes suspects in reading these biographical-critical sketches that he is quite interested in having posterity see his friend in a favorable light.

To treat the histories of literature, which constitute

the third division of the work of Gosse, in any detail is beside our present purpose; yet a few observations must be made. His "History of Eighteenth Century Literature" is perhaps the best of his historical studies. As a one volume history of this period it is a convenient textbook; in fact, there is practically none other in the field. The excellencies of this history may be inferred from the attitude and ability of its author. Gosse is always fair and open-minded; he avoids making too many arbitrary statements; and his style of elevated writing, enriched and illumined by figures of speech and literary reference, is effective. In the preface he modestly acknowledges the chance of mistakes in dates. Probably the worst defect of the book is his carelessness with dates. In making generalizations in the chapter on the poets of the decadence he has apparently forgotten several pertinent facts. He seems, too, to have erred through overestimating the importance of evolution in literature. In particular this leads him to underestimate Goldsmith as a poet because his poetry "marks no progress in the art of poetry". The inaccuracies and carelessness of this history, however, do not exceed those vices in other similar works; so that as histories of literature go this is a good one.

| In this paragraph the remarks of Professor R.D. O'Leary are closely followed. |
Next in importance is probably his "Modern English Literature", written for the "Literatures of the World" series, which he himself edited. This book differs from most outlines of English literature in that it begins with Chaucer instead of with the Anglo-Saxon literature. In the preface Gosse announces that his principal aim is to show the movement of English literature. The best and the worst parts of the book may be traced to this aim. The best feature is that the narrative flows along easily and agreeably under the stimulus of the numerous generalizations. In fact, the elevated style of Gosse is scarcely restrained from its best and freest expression. The almost inevitable consequence of stressing movements, namely a tendency to jump at conclusions and to be careless of facts, has left this history open to attack on the score of unscholarly work. In his "Ephemerera Critica" Churton Collins asserts that there is not a chapter in the book that does not teem with errors and that "about the propriety of his epithets and statements, so long as the sound well, he (Gosse) never troubles himself;..." The general truth of these charges cannot be denied. Their importance, however, may be somewhat minimized by reflecting that in an outline of this nature the large impressions are more important than facts or particular critical judgments. Still, for his carelessness and vagueness

in generalization no apology can be offered. The other historical works of Gosse, excepting "English History: An Illustrated Record", are concerned with short periods. In them his style and the merits of his work are the same except as modified by the necessity of a more intensive study. "English History: An Illustrated Record" is remarkable only for its wealth of well-chosen illustrations.

To the fourth division of miscellaneous criticism we need but briefly glance. In some cases the prefaces that are classed here might fittingly be classed as purely critical essays. In others, they have little value if considered apart from the works to which they introduce us. The volume of "English Odes" selected by Gosse is prefaced by a very good essay on the origin and development of the ode. In this essay Gosse defines the modern ode as "any strain of enthusiastic and exalted lyric verse, directed to a fixed purpose, and dealing progressively with one dignified theme". He traces its development from its Lydian and Dor- ian sources down through Pindar, Horace, and the modern English writers, fixing as definitely as seems possible the writers responsible for each step in its development. In addition, he gives a respectable amount of criticism to the following English writers of the ode: Cowley, Congreve, Dryden, Milton, Gray, Akenside, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Patmore, and Swinburne. In the introduction to his edition of "Some Fruits of Solitude" by William Penn Gosse
writes a much less imposing study. After reviewing the evidences of authorship at considerable length, he remarks on the influence of La Rochefoucauld as a model of all sententious and oracular aphorisms and discusses the personality and philosophy of Penn. At the present time Gosse is contributing an introduction to every volume of the new series, "The Broadway Library of Eighteenth Century French Literature". "Unfortunately", says Leonard Woolf, "the introductions are always the same and, it must be confessed, a little perfunctory." In particular, Gosse says nothing about the defects of the eighteenth century, and he uses the old truism about perspective. On the other hand, as we have already seen, many of his prefaces are interesting and instructive critical essays.

In the essays selected above to show the scope of his criticism, several general characteristics of the critical spirit of Gosse are indicated. In the first place, he prefers to propose his conclusions as suggestions rather than as dogmatic assertions. Often his opinions are quite definite, but he is seldom inconsiderate or disagreeably positive in his statement of them. Rather he is modest and discreet, and above all, open minded. He seems to conceive of his duty as that of a sympathetic guide who should point out and explain the beautiful sights with enthusiasm and pass over the ugly ones with as few words as possible. At

1. Woolf, Leonard. In the Nation and Athenaeum. Apr. 9, 1927
least, he spends very little time in denouncing the enemies of good literature. Instead, he likes to interpret a work in the light of the personality of its author, and leave the heavy burden of judgment to the reader if he cares to assume it. Without doubt the best essays of Gosse are his biographical-critical studies, in which his criticism is vivified and illuminated by bits of subtle characterization of the author. Although his biographical sketches are often very full, he never dwells long on unpleasant or "shady" incidents. His fault, if it be one, is in being carried away by his sympathy to the hurt of his criticism. In his historical work he places emphasis upon movements and is a little careless with dates. His elevated and elegant style, rich in figures of speech, is an effective auxiliary and vehicle for his criticism. It is true, however, that occasionally a very fine-sounding sentence is really rather vague and unenlightening. These points indicate only in the broad outlines the characteristics of Gosse's criticism; yet perhaps they will serve as a starting point for an analysis of his critical methods and theories.
Chapter III

THE CRITICAL METHODS AND THEORIES OF GOSSE

Having now a general idea of the scope and the characteristics of the criticism of Gosse, with perhaps a few of its best and worst features in mind, we are ready for an analysis of his methods and theories of criticism. Here we are handicapped by the surprising fact that he has never attempted to explain his philosophy of criticism. Why he has never done so can only be conjectured; yet it seems probable that he has had neither the inclination nor the proper turn of mind. Whatever be the reason for it, this unusual reticence makes it necessary to formulate his theory from his practice. To a large extent all the materials necessary for this analysis will be found in the five volumes of "Collected Essays", but it will sometimes be necessary to range freely throughout his work.

The criticism of Gosse is, without the slightest doubt, motivated by a sincere love of letters. His essays are indisputably the work of a man who finds his greatest joy in books, particularly in those of the now forgotten minor gen-
uses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Two volumes of his essays, "Seventeenth Century Studies" and "Gossip in a Library", are entirely devoted to an attempt to show modern readers how to understand and appreciate the neglected beauties of those two centuries. Apparently he is actuated by the desire to share with other readers the enjoyment and profit that his own wide reading has brought him. Probably, too, he feels an urge to bestow what immortality is within his power to give upon the books themselves. Something of his attitude can be seen in the following sentences gathered from divers of his essays: "If ever a man needed re-suscitation in our antiquarian times it was George Wither."1 "The Diary of a Lover of Literature' ... deserves to be re-called to memory,..."2 "To lovers of odd books, 'John Bun-cie' will always have a genuine attraction."3 "No one can afford to be entirely indifferent to the author (Christopher Smart) of verses which one of the greatest of modern writers has declared to be unequalled of their kind between Milton and Keats."4 In more recent literature he likes to write about somebody who, he feels, is being in some way neglected or misunderstood. Of course, Gosse has felt the stimulus of other and more material motives. Probably he has never lost sight of the rewards in fame and fortune which success

2. Ibid., p. 239.
3. Ibid., p. 213.
4. Ibid., p. 183.
as a critic would bring. It is but natural, too, that at
the beginning of his career he should look to his pen to
supplement his income from the British Museum. No doubt,
the mere exercise of his own taste and ability has given him
a certain satisfaction. These, then, as far as can be de-
termined, are the motives that animated the criticism of
Gosse. It is in vain that we look for any symptoms of a
gospel or of a system of philosophy that he would expound
to the English people. With what people believe he is not
much concerned; rather he would make sure that they are able
to understand and appreciate the enjoyable and beautiful el-
ements of literature.

As a critic Gosse believes in moderation and in a sym-
pathetic openmindedness. In every way modern-minded, he is
yet too much a student of the past to entertain very radical
or sensational views on any subject. He never rages, and he
seldom remains long in an ecstasy of admiration. His essays
are a combination of judicial and impressionistic criticism.
In the main he deserves the appellation "conservative"; yet
he uses a great deal of impressionism and much of the fa-
miliar style of the informal essayist. His viewpoint is mid-
way between that of the scholar and that of the casual read-
er. His essays are popular enough to make good magazine
articles; yet few but the most careful scholars are able to
find grounds for adverse criticism. Apparently he feels
that it is better to recognize the established tastes of
the public than to try to dictate arbitrarily what it should
like. Ordinarily, if his judgments err, it is rather in the
direction of leniency than in that of severity. He is especially sympathetic toward young and unknown writers. Although some of his budding geniuses have failed to bloom, his praise has won the gratitude of many who are now prominent in the field of letters. It is, perhaps, a good indication of an ability to put himself in the place of a writer that he can be sympathetic with such opposite types as Mallarmé and Browning, Victor Hugo and Christina Rossetti, Ibsen and Newman. Their faults he sees, to be sure, but rather as an apologist than as an impartial judge. It is, perhaps, only an excess of this admirable quality that leads one sometimes to suspect that Gosse is reserving his hard words as a matter of policy, lest he make enemies instead of friends. When a younger man the charge of logrolling was even preferred against him. Possibly he had not sinned very seriously in that way, but assuredly it is hardly discreet for poets who are close friends to write magazine articles in which they do nothing but praise each other. Although in the main sympathy and fairmindedness are his best virtues, Gosse hardly possesses the impersonal detachment and the philosophical viewpoint of the best critics.

The prose style of Gosse appears to have been consciously developed to suit his critical work. In particular, his style is rich and graceful. It is highly enriched by a ver-

itable stream of figures of speech; yet so fittingly are they chosen and so felicitous is his phrasing that there is no lack of animation. Nearly everything that he sees suggests a parallel. In the essay on Walt Whitman it is interesting to note how many comparisons are used in describing that poet. Whitman was "sand-white with spotlessness, like a deal table that has grown old under the scrubbing brush."

"Walt Whitman was a cat - a great old grey Angora Tom, alert in repose, serenely blinking under his combed waves of hair, with eyes inscrutably dreaming." "...so, I imagine, an Oriental sage would talk." "...those were the two burdens under which he crouched, like Issachar." "And he winked away in silence while I thought of the Indian poet Valmiki, when, in a trance of voluptuous abstraction, he sat under the fig-tree and was slowly eaten of ants."1

What little theory Gosse has ventured to propose is always reasonable, and progressive, though never radically so. In general, his ideas are those that any active man of letters would pick up. As his practice indicates, his ideas are, in nearly every respect, intelligent and commendable but quite moderate. In a paper on fluctuations of taste he concludes that in spite of those fluctuations "there does exist, out of sight, unattained and unattainable, a positive norm of poetic beauty". In discussing the ethics of biography he advocates revealing the whole truth unless it will injure

friends or relatives of the man whose biography is being written, in which case a compromise is necessary. Writing on the censorship of books, he says that "to be prevented from reaching, through a belt of error, up to higher and broader manifestations of the unconjectured truth is something worse than the liability to violate moral standards." Gosse stresses the importance of the evolution of literary forms in his histories of literature, and has a clear perception of the continuity of literature. He explains, however, that "the advance in literature is not progressive and cumulative, but illusive. Every generation strives after improvement, but its progress is not upon a ladder but upon a wheel." Each new movement, he feels, achieves but a temporary freshness of expression. As a preface to his essay on the French writer, Pierre Loti, he remarks that one of the advantages of foreign criticism is that it can stand a little aloof from the movement of a literature and is not obliged to take into consideration the political or social accidents which may affect the reputation of an author at home. These representative ideas are intelligent and stimulating bits, but they can not pretend to be organized critical theory.

Since his contribution to critical theory is so negligible, we must turn again to his practice to discover what he believes to be the function of criticism and by what

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methods he fulfills it. In the first place, Gosse is a man of letters and a dilettante, not a critic primarily. Led, however, to the field of criticism by his study of literature, he seems to have consciously set about becoming a successful critic. To do that he studied the best critics and adapted their methods and theories to his own needs. From Arnold, from Sainte-Beuve, from Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites, and from associates like Saintsbury, Leslie Stephen, John Morley, Lang, and Symonds, he learned the duties of a critic. Having formulated no strong ideas of his own, it was easy to adopt the methods and theories of criticism sanctioned by the best authorities and most acceptable to the public. Of course, Gosse is a man of too much intelligence and good taste to follow blindly in the footsteps of others; consequently he picked a trail to suit his needs. To a certain extent he has sacrificed scholarship for more popular qualities. As to method he decided that criticism should be principally interpretative. In addition, he saw the value of using the historical, the comparative, and the creative methods as auxiliaries. The function of judgment he relegates to a very inconspicuous position. More than the average critic he emphasizes the importance of biographical material as an aid to criticism. Many, and undoubtedly the best, of his essays are biographical-critical combinations. In his combination of critical methods the importance of each constituent varies somewhat according to the needs of the subject,
but in general, the interpretative method is given most import-
ance, followed by the historical, the comparative, and
the creative. A glance at each of these methods in turn is
probably the best means of fixing in mind the important char-
acteristics of the criticism of Gosse.

Undoubtedly, it is in his use of the interpretative meth-
od that Gosse rises to his highest level. Of course, inter-
pretation is a more fundamental element of criticism than
creation, comparison, or history. Consequently, it might be
called the most important element of all criticism, or cer-
tainly the sine qua non of criticism. Some critics, like
Mencken, tend to neglect the interpretative function of crit-
icism, usually in order to stress the creative element, but
not Gosse. Having a very catholic appreciation of literary
excellence, he is seldom unable positively to delight in an
interpretative exposition. No matter who the writer may be,
Gosse is sure to explain all his excellent qualities with
sympathetic appreciation and enjoyment. The defects he names
religiously, but to discover hidden charms or to decipher
and champion a misunderstood genius is the apex of his de-
light. An illustration of this is to be found in "French
Profiles" in the essay on Stephane Mallarmé. Mallarmé was
a French symbolist of the late nineteenth century in whom
most critics found nothing intelligible and little to praise.
Gosse correctly deciphered his secret, which he explains
thus: "The aim of Mallarmé was as much as possible to escape
from photographic exactitude. ... His desire was to use words in such harmonious combinations as will induce in the reader a mood or a condition which is not mentioned in the text, but which was, nevertheless, paramount in the poet's mind at the moment of composition." While admitting that Mallarmé was attempting the impossible and that his theories and practice provoked a display of affectation and insincerity, through a lack of comprehension on the part of his satellites, Gosse makes the reader feel that, rightly understood, the poetry of Mallarmé is distinctly worth while and enjoyable. One of the phases he uses is "a wonderful dreamer, exquisite in his intuitions and aspirations". He concludes the essay in the following words: "But when we were able to comprehend him, we perceived an exquisite fancy, great refinement of feeling and an attitude toward life which was uniformly and sensitively poetical. Is it not to be supposed that when he could no longer be understood, when we lost him in the blaze of language, he was really more delightful than ever, if only our gross senses could have followed him?" From this quotation one may perceive the fact that Gosse tends to give the best possible verdict when appraising a writer who has his sympathy. Assuredly, few critics would have found so gracious and so flattering a conclusion.

Many other examples of the excellent interpretative ability of Gosse might be cited. "The Challenge of the Brontes" in the volume "Some Diversions of a Man of Letters" is an interpretation of the work of Charlotte Bronte in the light of her experience and temperament. In the essay "The Lyrical Poetry of Thomas Hardy", which is included in the same volume, he gives an analysis of the philosophy of Hardy and of his position in literature. To quote: "He holds that, abandoned by God, treated with scorn by Nature, man lies helpless at the mercy of 'those purblind doomsters', accident, chance, and time, from whom he has had to endure injury and insult from the cradle to the grave. ...Mr. Hardy has chosen to remain local, to be the interpreter for present and future times of one rich and neglected province of the British realm. From his standpoint there he contemplates the wide aspect of life, but it seems huge and misty to him, and he broods over the tiny incidents of Wessex idiosyncrasy. His irony is audacious and even sardonic, and few poets have been less solicitous to please their weaker brethren. But no poet of modern times has been more careful to avoid the abstract and to touch upon the real." To multiply illustrations by mentioning essays dominated by the interpretative element would be easy. Such titles as "The Message of the Wartons", "The Charm of Sterne", "The Aristocrat in Literature", "The Unveiling of Tolstoi", and "Fairyland and a Belgian Ariosto" indicate

accurately the stress which Gosse puts on the interpretative element. Before leaving this aspect of his criticism, it must be noted that he vitiates his exposition by a personal interest and sympathy. In the words of Leslie Stephen, "his most marked quality is a sympathetic appreciation of what he is interested in and would have others like, putting himself in the author's place as the first step in true criticism, impressing the desire to read the books he criticizes."¹

In the critical essays of Gosse there is ample evidence that he did not undervalue the historical method of criticism. If anything he was in danger of arbitrarily overstressing the significance of movements in literature at the expense of the individual genius. Certainly he rightly understood the importance of connecting a writer with the thinking of the age in which he lived. In particularly all his general essays on the work of a particular writer he uses this method in combination with more or less of a biographical sketch as an introduction to the more purely critical part of the essay. Thus, in "The Lyrical Poetry of Thomas Hardy", from which we have quoted above in connection with the interpretative method, the first five paragraphs are mainly historical in method. Reasoning from the fact that Hardy's philosophy was at variance with mid-Victorian thinking, Gosse conjectures that it was partly the fear of an unfavorable reception that delayed

for so long the publication of his first volume of poems. After showing that the required revolution in thinking was accomplished by Swinburne and others, Gosse takes up the historic development of the peculiar characteristics of Hardy's lyric poetry. He concludes that the poet's style was fixed in the seventies, and he suggests the influence on the poet's work of various people and of events such as the Boer War and the World War. Historical discussions similar to this introduce essays on Carl Snoilsky, Swinburne, Philip James Bailey, Lady Winchelsea's Poems, and too many others to mention. The historical element becomes the dominant interest in not a few essays. Among them we may mention "Malherbe and the Classical Reaction", "The Foundation of the French Academy", "Rousseau in England in the Nineteenth Century", "The Tyranny of the Novel", and "Tennyson and After". In still others that lack any organized historical treatment there can be found incidental historical allusions. On the whole Gosse uses the historical method with good judgment and discretion.

One of the most striking features of the work of Gosse is his fondness for comparisons. Any conspicuous similarity between the work of two writers is sure to attract his attention. Whenever possible he attributes the similarity to the influence of one upon the other; as, for instance, he asserts that Boileau was the inspiration of several pieces of Pope's work, es-
especially of the "Rape of the Lock". More often, however, he merely alludes to a more or less significant parallel between two writers. A rather exaggerated example of this tendency is furnished by his essay on the lyrical poetry of Thomas Hardy. First, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Disraeli are mentioned as other novelists who have also written verse.

Next, the fact that Hardy published no verse in his youth suggests the parallel that Cowper was over fifty when his first poetry was published. In the revolt of Hardy against the optimism of the age he sees a parallel to the work of Swinburne. Different phases of Hardy's poetry are suggestive of Donne, Crabbe, Ronsard, Swinburne, Southey, Campbell, Byron, Wordsworth, Blake, Browning, Shelley, Simon Burden, Goncourt, Chateaubriand, and Leopardi. Gosse shows considerable interest in parallels between different literatures. For example, Mockel is a Belgian Ariosto, Paul Claudel somewhat of a French Coventry Patmore, and Aschenhoug the Norwegian Gladstone. A good biographer is apt to be labelled a Boswell.

Although very interesting, it would hardly repay the effort to classify all the wealth of comparisons, contrasts, and allusions in the critical essays of Gosse. Without a doubt most of them are interesting and helpful; although at times

As we have already observed, it is in the use of the interpretative, the historical, and the comparative methods, rather than in the creative, that Gosse is most at home. Apparently the creative method is not well suited to his temperament; for he is not very original and has little taste for abstract speculation. Then, too, he seems never to have valued creative criticism as highly as many modern critics. Certainly he would not agree with Mencken that all criticism should be creative. Even though the creative element in the criticism of Gosse is small, it is not insignificant. Many of his essays contain only small bits of truly creative work; yet, so skillfully is it blended with the other elements, it affects the tone of the whole essay. "Fairyland and a Belgian Ariosto" illustrates this. In this essay Gosse analyzes carefully the temperament and mental attitude requisite in an appreciative reader of fairy tales before beginning the survey of fairyland and the appreciation of M. Alvert Mouckel, the Belgian Ariosto. Usually he introduces the creative material in small bits that are hardly noticeable. For instance, in the essay on Robert Louis Stevenson as a poet, he turns from "A Child's Garden of Verses" to a short analysis of the child-mind. This is not

going far afield, perhaps; yet he goes definitely beyond Stevenson.

Probably the best way to characterize Gosse is to call him an interpretative critic. Typically his criticism seems to be the result of careful study and sympathetic appreciation rather than original genius or speculative insight. His work is characterized by tact and moderation and impartiality. Unlike most critics, he has practically nothing to say about the philosophy of criticism. Instead, he is unusually interested in biographical detail. If he can be called famous at all, it is for the happy way in which he combines biography and criticism. In very many of his essays the biographical element consists of his own personal recollections. Without doubt he has few if any compeers in the biographical-critical type of essay. Probably, too, few other Englishmen know French literature as thoroughly as Gosse. It must be admitted, however, that he has contributed very little to the theory of criticism.
Chapter IV

GOSSÉ AND FOREIGN LITERATURES

No little of the eminence of Gosse has been won through his work in introducing foreign literature to English readers. Someone has said that few Frenchmen are as well acquainted with French literature as is Mr. Gosse. So much could hardly be said of his acquaintances with Scandinavian literature; yet a Norwegian biographer has been known to apply to him for information about the friends of Ibsen in Christiania. With the Dutch, Belgian, German, Russian, Spanish, and Bulgarian literatures he has done a little but not much. With American literature he is acquainted, but not much impressed. Although he has written very appreciatively of such men as Poe and Whitman, he is quite convinced that America has never produced a poet comparable to any of the fifteen greatest English poets.¹ Doubtless many American critics feel that the accusation he makes against them when he says that they are too narrowly patriotic to compare English and American poets fairly might be reversed against himself.

At any rate, he has evinced little desire to waste time on American literature; because, apparently, he is convinced that nothing good can come from America. To the merits of the French and the Scandinavian literatures, however, he is wide awake. Few critics who are not professedly students of comparative literature can claim a similar acquaintance with two foreign literatures. His work with these literatures has won recognition in their respective countries, in France, especially, he is considered a sort of literary ambassador. Among the many marks of distinction that France has showered upon him are honorary degrees from Strasbourg and the Sorbonne and a commandership in the Legion of Honor. Likewise he is a Knight in the Royal Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish orders of St. Olaf, the Dannebrog, and the Polar Star, respectively, and an Honorary Dr. of Gothenburg. Altogether, Gosse is well-known and highly esteemed on the continent except in Germany and some of the eastern countries. Of German literature, he appears to know little and to care less.

It can almost be said of Gosse that he is more French than the Frenchmen. During the whole of his long literary career he has kept in touch with all the currents of French literature in addition to making himself acquainted with its history. When a boy scarcely out of his teens, he was introducing French verse forms into English, and his interest has continued to grow until the present day. Though in most respects Gosse is quite unemotional, he loves France almost with
During and immediately following the World War he wrote essay after essay glowing with suprative trib-
utes to the French people, the French nation, and the French literature. Over the artistic beauties of France he rose to
the clouds in worship; over the moral qualities of the French
he waxed eloquent; and over the conduct of the "Huns", as he
calls the Germans, he comes as near frothing with rage as a
man of letters may without becoming utterly ridiculous.
Nor is this attitude just the blind intoxication of wartime,
for in 1921 we find him writing of the "fool Huns" with "a
wild beast's joy in wanton destruction" and of its being only
by the mercy of God that they were prevented from destroy-
ing by one gigantic felon stroke all that the noble western civ-
ilization had built up in the centuries. 1 The French, how-
ever, are a "marvelous" race distinguished by "charm, chiv-
ality, intelligence, moral courage, and high resource", and
those qualities have made the name of France "like a torch
waved above the world". This attitude is almost unbeliev-
able in a man like Gosse, especially when love of his own
country seldom, if ever, moves his pen. Apparently he has
come to love France better than the land of his birth, and
possibly, took he wrote of "the splendor" of France with an
eye to his own popularity in that country. His violent an-
tipathy toward Germany seems entirely inconsistent with the

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disposition that he displays in his writing; yet nothing could be more probable than that he has inherited a little of his father's ability to hate blindly.

During his whole life, as we have already noted, Gosse has been a student and critic of French literature. His interest was never confined to any one department of letters; although French poetry seems to have been his favorite field. In general, he is interested in the famous poets and prose writers of the hour, but not a few of his studies go back to the seventeenth century or earlier. Some of these historical studies are "Voltaire's Letters", "The Hotel de Rambouillet", "Malherbe and the Classical Reaction", "The Foundation of the French Academy", "Pascal and the Jesuits", "Tallemant des Reaux", "A Friend of Molière", and "A Frenchman of the Fourth Century". The contemporary figures in France in whom he seems most interested are Victor Hugo, Sully-Prudhomme, André Gide, Eugène Melchior de Vogüé, Alfred de Vigny, Daudet, Verlaine, Anatole France, Paul Bourget, Pierre Loti, Mallarmé, Paul Claudel, Zola, Sainte-Beuve, Clemenceau, Jose-Marie de Heredia, René Bazin, Maurice Barrès, Henri de Regnier, Baudelaire, Rostand, Maïl Meuguet, Rémy de Gourmont, and Flaubert. This list is not all-inclusive, nor has mention been made of any of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers, like Vauvenargues or Mademoiselle Aisse, in whom Gosse was interested. As far as literary types are concerned, his study of French literature is apparently complete. In a hasty glance over his essays on French subjects we see him
writing of the criticism of Saint-Beuve, the biographical sketches of Tallemant des Reaux, the letters of Voltaire, the novels of Zola, Bourget, and France; the short stories of Maupassant, the plays of Rostand, and the poetry of such diverse artists as Hugo, Claudel, Mallarme, and Sully-Prudhomme. In truth, after reviewing the range and depth of his acquaintance with French letters one is moved by admiration to ask what more could be asked of a native litterateur.

In his relation to Scandinavian literature Gosse is a much more superficial and casual student than he is in French literature. A comparison of the bulk of his writings in each of the two literatures is overwhelmingly in favor of the latter. On Scandinavian subjects we find the following books: "The Ethical Condition of the Early Scandinavian Peoples", "Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe" (which includes all but one chapter of the later "Northern Studies"), "Two Visits to Denmark", and a biography of Ibsen. In addition, Gosse has translated, with the help of William Archer, "Hedda Gabler" and "The Master Builder" by Ibsen. This is a quite respectable number of volumes; in fact, it equals the number of exclusively French volumes. However, a survey of all his other collected essays, excepting "Silhouettes", which is not at present available, reveals twenty-nine essays on French subjects and only two on Scandinavian. Approximately the same ratio holds for a larger number of uncollected essays on the two literatures. Only a rough estimate is possible,
but it is probable that he has written at least twice as much about French as he has about Scandinavian literature. Not only in bulk but in attitude is the balance in favor of French literature. In Scandinavian literature Gosse has been interested principally in a few men like Ibsen, Bjornson, Strindberg, Snoilsky, and Hans Christian Andersen and to a much smaller extent in the races and cultures that they represent. Certainly, he never writes of the bravery, the gallantry, or the splendor of any Scandinavian country as he does of France. Nor is he so much interested in the lesser lights of the former as he is of the latter. In short, he watches Scandinavian literature for interesting things, but he is interested in everything in French literature.

Gosse undoubtedly performed a very valuable service for English letters in helping to introduce Ibsen, Bjornson, and other gifted Scandinavians to the English public. In particular, he was one of the first to recognise the genius of Ibsen and to explain his work in England. Two chapters are devoted to that writer in the "Studies in the literature of Northern Europe", and Gosse has also translated some of his plays and written his life and some essays on his work. The novels of Bjornson have been edited by Gosse with an essay on the writings of Bjornson. The interest of Gosse in nearly all the prominent contemporary writers of the Scandinavian countries has been proved by his editing their works or contributing prefaces to editions of them as well as by the crit-
icism that he has written about them. Of some of them, especially of Hans Christian Andersen, he has given very delightful reminiscences. However, he was intimately acquainted with very few of them; although he met most of them on his trips to the northern countries in the seventies. Without doubt he well deserves all the honors that he has received in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark for his pioneer work in making known to the English-speaking world some of the outstanding values of the Scandinavian literatures.

In no other literatures of the world, one believes, than in those of England, France, and the Scandinavian countries does Gosse pretend to be a literary authority. He has, however, manifested interest in some aspects of the literature of other countries. For instance, some aspects of the literature of other countries. For instance, Count Lyof Tolstoi is one of the twelve writers in the volume of Critical Kit-kats. Another of the twelve is Toru Dutt, the gifted Hindu poetess. A third is an American, Walt Whitman. In "Aspects and Impressions" there is an essay on Albert Mocskel, the Belgian writer of fairy stories. In "Books on the Table" there are two essays on Russian subjects: one on Gorki's biographical notes on Tolstoi and the other on the letters of Chekov. In the volume "More Books on the Table" there is an article on the American historian Prescott and one on the Wrenn Library at the University of Texas. This volume also includes an essay on the Lives of the Sophists. Both "Some Diversions
of a Man of Letters" and "Books on the Table" contain essays on Edgar Allan Poe. An American publisher, Wolcott Balestier, is described in "Portraits and Sketches". One of the few Irish writers with whom Gosse shows any sympathy is Aubrey de Vere, who is included in the last-named volume and to whom Gosse has addressed a poem. Other Americans about whom he has written are Henry James, W. D. Howells, Lowell, O.W. Holmes, and Whittier. In "The Intellectual Entente", an article in the Forum for May, 1921, he traces in a superficial way the relations of English and American letters. Of his relations with other literatures there is little of importance to say. For instance, his essay on Goethe, so far as the writer has been able to discover, is his sole commentary on German literature, except for incidental references to Heine and a few other writers.

Chapter V

AN ESTIMATE OF GOSSE

Any attempt to evaluate a living and working writer, as Gosse is today, must, of course, be of conditional and temporary value. In fact, it would be highly presumptuous as well as illogical to set down as final an opinion which the next book of the man under consideration may invalidate. In attempting what is here an estimate of Gosse, therefore, the writer is seeking only to catch the reflection which his critical figure casts under the light of today's opinions. Tomorrow the reflection may be radically altered, or again, it may become clearer and more sharply outlined. Only in the latter case could a premature estimate of this sort acquire any kind of permanent value. In the light, then, of a literary career launched approximately sixty years ago and still in full vigor we shall glance at the more important aspects of the critical work of Sir Edmund Gosse.

To a certain extent a critic may be judged by the nature and the size of the audience that he secures. At least, the dangers of this method are so obvious that we may trust to escape most of them. The readers of the English periodicals
like The Living Age, The Critic, The Athenaeum, The Edinburgh Review, and The Fortnightly Review, to which Gosse has been a steady contributor, are his largest audience. Although a not inconsiderable number of these readers are in America and a few in France, the bulk of them are in the British Isles. Undoubtedly this group possesses the best culture and taste to be found outside of the very small number of professional students of literature. Consequently, it may be assumed that a critic who pleases this audience has an interesting style and something worth while to say. Certainly, he must be more than a superficial student of literature. As a writer for the Sunday Times Gosse reaches a large audience of which at least a part has only a desultory interest in literature. It follows, then, that he has a strong popular appeal. As the author of more than a dozen volumes of critical essays, which, presumably, are well-known among widely-read people over the whole English-speaking world, he may assuredly claim a position of importance and respect in the field of criticism. Although it is customary to refer to Gosse as a popular critic, in America, at least, he is not well-known in comparison to other contemporary critics. From personal investigations I am sure that the average undergraduate student, even in the Department of English, at the University of Kansas knows little if anything, of the work of Gosse. From a few words with John Macy the writer concluded that the reputation of Gosse among
the best of the present-day American critics is not particularly imposing. The tentative conclusion indicated by the attitude of America toward him is that Gosse lacks any appeal powerful enough to make him popular and any scholarship sufficient to make him an undisputed authority. Let us turn, now, to his critical work itself for a more substantial basis for our conclusions.

With the quantity of the critical work of Gosse little fault can be found. He is the author of fourteen volumes of critical essays not including books like "The Jacobean Poets" or "Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe" in which there is a strong historical emphasis. In these fourteen volumes there are more than two hundred and fifty essays varying in length from 1500 to 15000 words. In each of the two volumes of "Books on the Table" there are forty short essays; while most of the other volumes, as for instance "Portraits and Sketches" and "Critical Kit-Kats", contain about a dozen. In addition to the fourteen volumes there are a few thin booklets, like "Tallement des Reaux" and "A Critical Essay on the Life and Work of George Tinworth", that contain but a single essay. Then there remains a large number of uncollected essays. Presumably, these are of lesser importance than those that have been reprinted or for some reason they are lacking in general interest. While history is not criticism, the critical element of the six historical works of Gosse must be considered in measuring the bulk of his work. Likewise,
we must not fail to mention his ten important biographies, namely the lives of Gray, Raleigh, Congreve, P. H. Gosse, John Donne, Jeremy Taylor, Coventry Patmore, Sir Thomas Browne, Ibsen, and Swinburne. In brief, it is safe to conclude that the literary criticism of Gosse is large enough in bulk to furnish a solid foundation for whatever reputation its quality merits.

In its scope the criticism of Gosse is less satisfactory. Of critical theory he has written practically nothing, as far as I have been able to determine. However well he has exemplified its practice, he has added nothing to the philosophy of criticism. Otherwise there is little of which to complain in his range. As we saw in Chapter Four, he has been widely interested in the French, Scandinavian, and American literatures as well as his own. As far as the form of the work to be criticized is concerned, Gosse distinctly prefers poetry to prose. In fact, ten out of the twelve writers included in "Critical Kit-Kats" are poets, as are ten out of the thirteen in "Portraits and Sketches". Of the five exceptions in these two volumes three are novelists, one an essayist and critic, and one a churchman. In "More Books on the Table" eighteen of the forty essays are on poets or poetry, a half-dozen on biographies, three on critics, three on novelists, one on a short story writer, one on fairy stories, one on a letter writer, one on a historian, one on a dramatist, one on a painter, and several on such miscellaneous subjects as
the Sophists, the Bible, a library, a printing press, and Queen Victoria. The eighteen essays on poetry range from the epic and ode through several varieties of lyrics down to metaphysical poetry, burlesque, and parody. In "Aspects and Impressions", one of his later books, there is no marked preference. Three of the essays are on novelists, three on critics, two on poets, two on dramatists, two on essayists, one on a writer of fairy tales, one on a soldier with literary propensities, and two on literary groups. It is safe to say that few nooks on Parnassus have escaped his investigation. In passing it might be noted that he evinced considerable interest in war poetry during the recent World War. In prose, too, there are few if any of the common literary types that he has not touched. Perhaps novelists, biographers, and critics are most popular with him. All in all, the criticism of Gosse covers every field that could be expected except that of the philosophy of criticism. In that respect he disappoints us.

It is impossible for the writer to make a very intelligent or profound analysis of the quality of the criticism of a man like Gosse. It is beyond his depth. However, there are a few facts that may be observed by even the most casual reader of his essays, and from them, presumably, some conclusion can be drawn as to his importance as a critic. In the first place, his critical method is quite satisfactory. Perhaps his criticism would be better if it were more creative, and perhaps not, but certainly he has not erred in stressing the
interpretative method and in making steady use of the historica and the comparative methods. In general, too, the taste and judgment of Gosse are conservatively normal, if not even exceptionally sound. He has few prejudices or hobbies to endanger his opinions, and his attitude is normally a model of open-mindedness. His gentlemanly reserve prevents his giving offence even when his criticism is markedly adverse. In some cases, perhaps, he indulges in an excess of sympathy that leads him to exaggerate good qualities and to minimize bad ones. Sometimes, too, he has stressed things that most other critics do not and drawn conclusions that seem hasty. On the whole, he strikes one as a careful but not especially profound critic. Of too many of his essays the best thing that can be said is that they are "interesting". His rich style is, perhaps, at times too much of an ornament; so that one wonders whether the poetic flights of rhetoric are not sometimes intended to cover the lack of anything important to say. Few, surely, would fail to find Gosse an interesting writer; for he has a varied appeal. In particular, he is an artist at adding little touches of human interest in the way of biographical reminiscences to otherwise dry essays. The phrase, more interesting than accurate, comes to mind; yet it might be misleading. The average reader, certainly, cannot notice the mistakes that seem glaring to such profound scholars as Churton Collins and Professor Cook.

These impressions, perhaps, may be clarified a bit by a
few comparisons. Gosse and Saintsbury seem to have about the
same notions of criticism. That is, neither is didactic and
both are liberal-minded. Although his work is not so impres-
sive nor perhaps so widely read, Gosse is more trustworthy and
more free from prejudices than Saintsbury. In his critical
method and in particular in his stress on the method of sym-
pathetic interpretation Gosse follows Arnold. It is, how-
ever, in comparison with a man like Arnold that the failings
of Gosse are most apparent. Arnold was a leader of thought;
Gosse is content to practice the profession that others have
mapped out. The interest of Gosse is mainly academic, while
Arnold, through the force of his ideas, is insured a much wid-
er audience. It is the consensus of opinion that Matthew Arnold
will long be studied for his critical work without regard
for the subjects upon which he wrote. Gosse, on the other hand,
is likely to be interesting only so long as people are inter-
ested in the subjects of his essays. Probably, too, the most
enduring element of his essays as well as the most interest-
ing is the biographical material, much of which cannot be du-
plicated elsewhere since it is selected from his own personal
reminiscences. Many of the "antiquarian" essays, such as those
on the minor figures of the seventeenth century in "Gossip in
a Library", are likely to long remain undisputed guides for
close students of the period; for what other critic would ever
think of writing on "Amelia", Tallemant des Reaux, or Aisse?
It is improbable, too, that other critics will soon rival the
"French Profiles", "Northern Studies", or even "Aspects and
Impressions."

As a critic, Gosse has undeniably contributed a great deal of interest, although perhaps not much of permanent interest, to English literature. None of his contemporaries, I am sure, can boast of having gleaned more of the good things of literature than he has from the French and the Scandinavian languages. Among students of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he ranks high, nobody will deny. As an interpreter of contemporary English letters, he is intelligent, fair-minded, and sympathetic. To the theory of some departments of literature he has made worthy contributions, but to the philosophy of criticism he has added nothing. In the near future, perhaps, he will remedy this deficiency.

When we assume that the future will not think the criticism of Gosse so very important, let us not forget two things. The first is that we are looking at an unfinished work with no clear perspective of time to aid our vision. The second is that Gosse is not primarily a critic. As a biographer and historian he is a considerably larger figure. Long after his critical work is forgotten his history of the eighteenth century, his biographies of Congreve, Gray, and Donne, and his autobiography, "Father and Son" will continue to be standard works in their fields.
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