

Edmund Gosse Entertains: Gossip in a Library (1891)

Kathy Rees

Known chiefly today for his autobiography of childhood, *Father and Son* (1907), Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) exerted great influence as a man of letters in the literary world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His work encompassed various roles as essayist, editor, biographer, reviewer, anthologizer, and bibliophile. Osbert Sitwell recalled how in later life, Gosse would hold court “like a king,” and “at a good word from him – and at this time from him alone – the sales of a young author’s books, even of a poet’s, mounted higher” (1950, 39). Such stature is, however, surprising given the débâcle early in his career when Gosse earned himself a reputation for exaggeration, inaccuracy, and error. Gosse’s history of seventeenth-century literature, *From Shakespeare to Pope: An Enquiry into the Causes and Phenomena of the Rise of Classical Poetry in England* (1885), based on his lectures while he was Clark Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge, was famously vilified in *The Quarterly Review* in 1886 by John Churton Collins, who claimed that its pages “swarmed with errors and absurdities” (300) and with “incredibly reckless assertions” (303). Collins’ article was part of a wider campaign demanding that English be accepted as a subject for serious study in the universities, and Gosse’s shoddy scholarship provided ammunition for Collins’ attack on dilettantism. Indeed, Gosse’s name became proverbial for the act of misrepresenting one’s sources, so that in the 1880s it was “a stock saying for anyone who had made a ‘howler’ that ‘he had made a Gosse of himself’” (Charteris 194). This article focuses

on Gosse's period of recovery after that literary scandal, exploring the characteristics in Gosse's writing that led to his becoming "*the* pre-eminent, prolific, established and influential late-Victorian man of letters" (Lee 104).

During the five-year period from 1887 to 1891, Gosse wrote a number of literary essays for periodical publication, which were later re-printed as a volume entitled *Gossip in a Library* (1891).¹ After the 1886 débâcle, editors of British periodicals were rather wary of Gosse (Thwaite 298), and it was an American editor, John Eliot Bowen, who rescued Gosse by offering him a regular column in the *Independent* of New York. Bowen's idea was that

the book-collector was to deliver ten-minute sermons on his books to a select audience, gathered, in imagination, within the room in which those books were kept. The cases were to be thrown open at random, a volume taken out here or there, and passed from hand to hand, while the owner chatted familiarly about its personal character and adventures. (Gosse 1891, vii-viii)

It was an ideal solution to Gosse's predicament: he could bypass the exigencies of scholarship and claim a more nebulous expertise as a bibliophile. Gosse's reputation in America had not been seriously damaged by the 1886 scandal; in fact, Henry E. Shepherd, President of the College of Charleston in South Carolina, had reviewed *From Shakespeare to Pope* in 1885, well before Churton Collins' intervention, and although Shepherd felt that the handling of the subject was superficial, he praised Gosse's lucid style and "its judicious introduction of biographical sketches and entertaining reminiscences" (149). Indeed, those were the very qualities in Gosse's writing that were so inappropriate for scholarship, but which enhanced his popular journalism. America, then, was the place where Gosse could begin his rehabilitation. The essays in *Gossip* illustrate the strategies he employed to win back the confidence of editors and peers, regenerate the affection of readers, and restore some of his crushed self-esteem. In the first part of this article, I discuss the reception and context

of Gosse's criticism; thereafter, I examine recurring themes and stylistic traits in the *Gossip* essays, considering their impact on subsequent criticism, and on Gosse's reputation.

As a literary critic, Gosse has had both opponents and advocates. To R.L. Stevenson, Gosse was "'Purcel' unbending into a strain of graceful gossip, singing like a fireside kettle" (1898:166-67). However, to W.E. Henley, Gosse was the unscrupulous Becky Sharp (Atkinson 126), while for Virginia Woolf, he was the model for Sir Nicholas Greene, the archetypal literary parasite in *Orlando* (1928).² After his death, Gosse's essays tended to be dismissed as "oversimplistic [...] wild appraisals" (Temple 199-200), as "surprisingly bland and uninformative" (Orel 194), and as "more sociable than rigorous" (Cohen 53). Praise there was, but it was inevitably qualified: Leon Edel remarked that despite "scholarly slips, he nevertheless had a way of cutting through to essence" (20), while Valentine Cunningham observes that in the Reading Room of Oxford's Radcliffe Camera, Gosse's infamous text, *From Shakespeare to Pope*, "was simply read to bits [...] so that it had to be withdrawn to the stacks" (86). Cunningham attributes this to its "sheer readability – frequently purchased, to be sure, at a cost of slight and slighting summations, of fat texts being skimmed rapidly for some slick mot, of compressed histories, rubbishy phrases and traducing biography – [but] a blessed readability" (86). It is this "readability," a way of making literature comfortable and entertaining, that characterizes *Gossip in a Library*.

"We shall have," Gosse says in his Introduction, "a little criticism, a little anecdote, a little bibliography" (10). This emphasis on the diminutive prepares us for Gosse's subjective free-form book-chat. Gosse's title would later attract Osbert Sitwell's ridicule in *Triple Fugue* (1924), where Gosse was caricatured as Professor James Crisscross, "the beloved author of *From a Library-Stool* and a million critical articles" (293), but it actually harked back to such works as Sainte-Beuve's *Causeries du Lundi*, fifteen volumes of "Monday Chats" (1851-1862), and Leslie Stephen's three volumes of collected essays, *Hours in a*

Library (1874-79). Indeed, by 1891, literary causerie had become a dominant feature in critical discourse (Tye 23). In *Conditions of Criticism* (1991), Ian Small argues that between 1865 and 1890 the form of criticism underwent profound changes: distinctive academic disciplines were emerging, and specialist journals like the *English Historical Review* and its counterparts were attracting academic writers, leaving the more popular journals like *The Saturday Review* or *St James's Gazette* to the traditional belletrists. Of this period, Evan Charteris remarked: "The criticism which touches lightly through the medium of analogy and allusion, which gossips and becomes confidential, and aims at accelerating enjoyment, was beginning, and Gosse was already one of its accredited spokesmen" (94). The use of the word "gossip" permits an interest in the trivial, the scandalous, and the intriguing: Gosse lets loose "the souls imprisoned in the ancient books" of his library (5). A contemporary reviewer in *The Critic* described Gosse as "a lively exhumers [...] in the catacombs of forgotten and buried literary life" ("Mr Gosse's 'Gossip'" 286); he enlivens, animates and dramatizes the contents of his "little brown volumes" (4).

By tracing the original publishing data for each of the twenty-four essays, it is possible to speculate on Gosse's pattern and mode of periodical contributions. The majority were published in *The Independent* of New York, where Gosse woos and flatters his American readers. In "The Shaving of Shagpat," for example, he praises American critical perspicuity in appreciating George Meredith, De Quincey, and W.M. Praed "before we knew the value of such men" (324). Similarly in "The Fancy," an essay about the sport of pugilism, Gosse declares himself uncertain "that the virtuous American conscience knows what that means" (272). In Britain, Gosse's main periodical outlet was *Black and White*, one of "the illustrated folios, physical giants – neither review, magazine, nor newspaper" that dominated the British marketplace in the 1880s and 1890s (Tye 19). It was low-priced (six pence) and contained copious black and white illustrations; it targeted the working- and middle-class mass audience; Charles Johanningsmeier estimates its circulation in 1892 as around 300,000 (77).

Kathy Rees, "Edmund Gosse Entertains: Gossip in a Library (1891)"

Source and date of publication of essays collected in <i>Gossip in a Library</i> (1891).			
Title of Essay	Chapter Number In Book	Author of text described, date of publication	Periodical
Camden's Britannia	1	William Camden 1610	<i>Independent</i> : 27 January 1887
A Poet in Prison	3	George Wither 1615	<i>Independent</i> : 24 February 1887
Ionica	23	William Johnson 1858	<i>Independent</i> : 24 March 1887
Love and Business	11	George Farquhar 1702	<i>Independent</i> : 28 April 1887
Gerard's Herbal	5	John Gerard 1633	<i>Independent</i> : 26 May 1887
Smart's Poems	14	Christopher Smart 1752	<i>Independent</i> : 28 July 1887
Death's Duel	4	John Donne 1632	<i>Independent</i> : 10 November 1887
The Shaving of Shagpat	24	George Meredith 1856	<i>Independent</i> : 2 February 1888
The Fancy	20	Peter Corcoran [J.H. Reynolds] 1820	<i>Independent</i> : 5 April 1888
The Duke of Rutland's Poems	22	Lord John Manners 1841	<i>Independent</i> : 10 May 1888
A Volume of Old Plays	7	W. Joyner 1671; E. Howard 1668; T. Porter 1664; Duke of Newcastle 1677; J. Bancroft 1679	<i>Independent</i> : 2 August 1888
Beau Nash	17	Oliver Goldsmith 1762	<i>Independent</i> : 17 January 1889
Pharamond	6	La Calprenède 1662	<i>Independent</i> : 7 March 1889

Nineteenth-Century Prose, Vol. 43, Nos. 1/2: Spring/Fall 2016

Ultra-Crepidarius	21	Leigh Hunt 1823	<i>Saturday Review</i> : 30 August 1890
What Ann Lang Read	12	Eliza Haywood 1723 - 24	<i>St James's Gazette</i> : 4 December 1890
Pompey the Little	15	Francis Coventry 1751	<i>Black and White</i> : 11 April 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 16 April 1891
Peter Bell and His Tormentors	19	William Wordsworth 1819	<i>Black and White</i> : 2 May 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 7 May 1891
Amasia	10	John Hopkins 1700	<i>Black and White</i> : 23 May 1891
Cats	13	Paradis de Moncrief 1728	<i>Black and White</i> : 13 June 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 25 June 1891
A Censor of Poets	8	William Winstanley 1687	<i>Black and White</i> : 4 July 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 16 July 1891
The Diary of a Lover of Literature	18	Thomas Green 1810	<i>Black and White</i> : 25 July 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 6 August 1891
A Mirror for Magistrates	2	George Ferrers 1610	<i>Black and White</i> : 15 August 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 20 August 1891
The Life of John Bunce	16	Thomas Amory 1756	<i>Black and White</i> : 5 September 1891 <i>Independent</i> : 10 September 1891
Lady Winchilsea's Poems	9	Anne Finch 1696	<i>Black and White</i> : 31 October 1891

In the first year, Gosse establishes "Gossip in a Library" as a regular feature in the *Independent*, initially "playing safe" by presenting the lives and work of little-known authors, about whom rival critics would lack expertise, but gradually becoming sufficiently emboldened to address an obscure piece by John Donne and a contemporary work by George Meredith. Contributions tail off in 1888 and 1889, but in 1891 Gosse maximizes his financial return by simultaneously publishing identical articles on both sides of the Atlantic, usually only a week apart. Given the lack of American censure over the 1886 débâcle, Gosse could capitalize on his status as Clark Lecturer at Trinity College by signing the essays in the New York *Independent* as "Edmund Gosse, Cambridge University, England," while for the same essay in *Black and White* his location reads "London, England," perhaps revealing his desire to play down any unfortunate associations with Cambridge. These 1891 essays were not linked with each other by the series title, "Gossip in a Library," but stood as independent articles.

Gosse was clearly in a hurry to publish his volume of the essays: his Preface is dated October 1891, which is the same month that he published the essay "Lady Winchilsea's Poems" in *Black and White*. Gosse published the English edition with Heinemann and the American edition with Lovell, Coryell and Co; both were dedicated to Charles B. Foote, the New York stockbroker and book collector,³ suggesting a prioritizing of the American audience. The re-printing of the essays in a hard-cover edition enhanced Gosse's reputation, since it afforded the articles more enduring status, rather than their simply being forgotten as ephemeral journalism. Its popularity may also be measured by the publication of new impressions in 1892 and 1893, and of a new edition in 1901 (by Dodd, Mead and Company of New York). In 1913, Heinemann (followed by Scribner's in 1914) published another edition with two additional essays.⁴ In every edition, the essays are organized in order of the date of the book being described; in the 1891 edition under discussion, there are ten works from the seventeenth century, nine from the eighteenth century, and seven from the nineteenth century. The subject matter includes mainly poetry,

romances, and histories, but also less obvious genres such as the sermon, the herbal, and the diary. The disparate nature of the material is mitigated by the romantic fiction that readers are sitting in Gosse's private library, and his enthusiastic chat emanates from his bibliophilic adventures, what Gosse calls his "sheer collectaneomania" (96). Gosse's audience included professional collectors; as Percy Muir of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association later observed, Gosse's essays "brought a new light to bear not only on contemporaries but on authors of earlier dates whose importance in the scheme of literary history, while familiar to professors and students of literature, would not occur to the collector without guidance from an expert *vulgarisateur* like Gosse" (10).

The essays in *Gossip* share a common structure, borrowed from Sainte-Beuve's causeries. Gosse opens with a description of the book, often the circumstances of its acquisition, and then provides a biography of the author and a summary of the age, before discussing specific aspects of the work. Gosse narrates the encounters with his antiquarian books in a way that brings together the materiality of the historical object and the modern experience of scrutinizing it. This is exemplified by George Wither's *The Shepherd's Hunting* (1615), a book romanticized by having been written in the Marshalsea, which is "very tiny and pretty, with a sort of leafy trellis-work at the top and bottom of every page, almost suggesting a little posy of wild-flowers thrown through the iron bars of the poet's cage, and pressed between the pages of his manuscript" (44). This exotic image encapsulates both the poet's situation in the past, and the appearance of the pages in the present. The elision of history and modernity is evident also in Gosse's discussion of George Farquhar's *Love and Business* (1702): "Wherever we dip into its pages we may use it as a telephone, and hear a young Englishman, of the year 1700, talking to himself and to his friends in the most unaffected accents" (148). The figure of the telephone, at that time still a rather exotic instrument in British and American society, dramatically highlights the notion of accessing the past. Gosse regards books as essential to the understanding of history: "If a wave of the rod made everything around [the ordinary private person]

disappear that did not exist a century ago, he would suddenly find himself with one or two sticks of furniture, perhaps, but otherwise alone with his books" (4). By this powerful image, he also aggrandizes the role of the bibliophile.

Gosse conveys the "rarity" of his books by dashing superlatives: his choices include "the noblest" (70), "the most elegant" (174), "the scarcest" (286), "the finest" (322), and "the oddest and most entertaining" (173) of books. Readers are being offered glimpses into literary curiosities, traditionally the preserve of the élite. Gosse enjoys extremes: Donne is one of the "most eccentric" (58) the "most ingenious," the "most subtle" (61), and the "most inscrutable" of writers (64), while George Wither was "the greatest bore in Christendom" (42). At the same time, he emphasizes the evidence for his assertions, making repeated reference to "the great volume before us" (70) or "the handsome quarto before us" (192), or with great specificity to "a story which finally appears at p. 276 of the edition before us" (31). This may be Gosse's refutation of Collins' bitter complaint in the *Quarterly Review* that "Mr Gosse appears to be incapable of transcribing a date correctly, even when it must have been before his very eyes" (299). Gosse is now quietly asserting his trustworthiness.

Two of the essays read like thinly veiled attacks on Churton Collins. William Camden, creator of *Britannia* (1610), a chorographical description of the counties of Britain, suffered at the hands of a friend-turned-critic, who "cruelly impeached" Camden's accuracy (17), convicting him of "many gross mistakings" (19). *Britannia* however "lay high out of reach of fatal pedantic attack," and "this little cloud over the reputation of the book passed entirely away" (20). Into this description of Camden's betrayal, it is not difficult to read Gosse's lingering resentment against *his* former friend, Churton Collins, and to imagine Gosse's longing that *his* "little cloud" had also "passed entirely away." Likewise, invective against the *Quarterly Review* is also the theme of Gosse's essay about Leigh Hunt's poetical pamphlet, "Ultra Crepidarius: A Satire on William Gifford" (1823), which targets the editor of that journal, who was believed to have written the infamous review of Keats's "Endymion." Probably

regarded as too pointed and specific for American readers, Gosse reserved this essay for readers of *The Saturday Review*, a magazine which from 1887 onwards was losing its strong reputation among the London weekly newspapers (Bevington 325), and possibly, therefore, was more accommodating of the beleaguered Gosse.

Three other articles, included in the hard-back volume but not released to an American audience as periodical essays, are distinctive by their focus on female subjects: characters, writers, and readers. The first of these is "Amasia." Gosse ridicules the stereotypical feminine antics of the eponymous "mysterious lady who animates the volumes" of John Hopkins – drawing, singing, sticking pins in a pin-cushion, and even tickling a gentleman (139-41) – while Hopkins himself is judged unmanly and effeminate: "the frou-frou of fine ladies' petticoats is heard in all his verses" (142). The second of the three essays concerns the poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, known as "Ardelia," and it serves chiefly to illustrate Gosse's bibliophilic acuity in securing the manuscript of her work, and his gallantry in promoting it:

If there is any person in the two hemispheres who has so fair a claim upon the ghost of Ardelia, let that man stand forth. Ardelia was uncultivated and unsung when I constituted myself, years ago, her champion. With the exception of a noble fragment of laudation from Wordsworth, no discriminating praise from any modern critic had stirred the ashes of her name. (121)

Two years later, the American scholar William Phelps dismissed most of this essay as "the words of a charmingly inaccurate writer" which "have every symptom of the fatal enthusiasm of discovery" (28).

The third essay of this group presents Eliza Haywood, who merits none of Gosse's gallantry, being "the Ouida of the period" (162) and a writer of "pompous and lascivious pages" (169). When Gosse describes his acquisition of some novels by Haywood as "cheap," the word seems to imply their literary value as much as his financial outlay. The purchase stimulates a fantasy about the owner of the novels, "Ann Lang," whom

Gosse supposes to be "a milliner's apprentice or a servant-girl" (161). Gosse muses that, "When a lady in Eliza Haywood's novels receives a note from a gentleman, 'all her Limbs forget their Function, and she sinks fainting on the Bank' [...] I am positive that Ann Lang practised this series of attitudes in the solitude of her garret" (165). Christine Blouch avers that "Haywood's literary posturing, so to speak, is reified in Ann Lang's physical postures" (303), while Kathryn King bemoans the long-lasting negative effect of Gosse's essay: "In Haywood criticism Ann Lang is nearly inescapable. It is scarcely an exaggeration, in fact, to say that the story of Haywood's role in the making of the novel has been largely a story of Ann Lang" (262). As I shall show later, this instance of Gosse exerting negative influence on the tenor and approach of later criticism is not unique.

For his American readers, Gosse aims to be open and playful. He writes entertainingly about "one of the most 'creepy' fragments of theological literature," Donne's final sermon (59). He describes the frontispiece of the book, a reproduction of the dying Donne, wrapped in a winding-sheet, standing on his coffin-urn. That this eccentric poet-churchman commissioned his portrait thus was, Gosse insists, "one of the grimmest freaks that ever entered into a pious mind" (56). With the dramatic immediacy of the present tense, Gosse describes both the image – "the eyes are shut, the mouth is drawn, and nothing was ever seen more ghastly" – and our response to the sermon – "our blood seems to turn chilly in our veins as we listen" (60). Gosse describes Donne's elaborate style in a sentence that is correspondingly complex:

In long, stern sentences of sonorous magnificence, adorned with fine similes and gorgeous words, as the funeral trappings of a king might be with gold lace, the dying poet shrinks from no physical horror, and no ghastly terror of the great crisis that he was himself to be the first to pass through. (59-60)

While the sinister aspect of the sermon is reiterated by Gosse's sibilant phrases, the simile of royal funeral trapping is arresting since it is so inappropriately material for so ascetic a divine.

In his essay about Christopher Smart, Gosse rashly makes the claim that his information about the college life of the poet was “entirely new” (187). However, as Charles Abbott wrote in 1930, “the beauty and urbanity of Gosse’s appreciation of Smart was utterly misleading: these misconceptions and misinterpretations of the facts [...] served as the basis for nearly all subsequent accounts” (1014).

The charge resounds with Churton Collins’ characterization of Gosse as Mr. Pecksniff, who had “the habit of using any word that occurred to him as having a fine sound, and rounding his sentence well, without much care for its meaning,” and this “he did so boldly and in such an imposing manner, that he would sometimes stagger the wisest people [...] This is precisely Mr. Gosse’s method” (309). Certainly, Gosse’s criticism has a “fine sound.” With clever wordplay, he explains his literary preferences: “for of all my weaknesses the weakest is that weakness of mine for Restoration plays” (95). Equally witty is his musing on the differences between aristocratic England and republican America, illustrated by the ennoblement of Lord John Manners as the Duke of Rutland: “these little romantic surprises are denied to Americans, who do not find that old friends get new names, which are very old names, in the course of a night” (295). Such neat oppositions feature regularly: Donne’s sermon is “this tiny quarto with the enormous title” (55), while the particular edition of *Britannia* (that “we have before us at this moment”) is the “first English edition” that conveys “Camden’s last thoughts” (13, 15). Discussing the sixteen writers who contributed to *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1610), Gosse notes that “the youngest of them was not born when the eldest of them died” (28), while of the seventeenth-century playwright William Joyner we learn that “the stage was too rough a field for the gentle Oxford scholar” (98). One senses, however, that accuracy is sometimes compromised in the cause of the *bon mot*.

While the act of alluding to other literary works aggrandizes Gosse’s role as a man of letters, he employs the device gently in these essays. Occasionally, his allusions echo the form, if not the absurdity, of Dickensian Wellerisms. Of Farquhar’s outspokenness, Gosse observes

that he means no harm, "as Hodgson once said of certain curious remarks of Byron's" (154); although the reader might not know about Byron's friendship with Francis Hodgson, the Provost of Eton, they would recognize Byron's notorious penchant for idealistic and cynical frankness. Similarly, when in Howard's play, *The Usurper* (1668), a character known as the Parasite is hanged, Gosse suggests that the reader "murmurs, in the words of R.L. Stevenson, 'There's an end of that'" (99), alluding to the final line of Stevenson's popular 1887 poem, "A Portrait" (*Poems* 91). Many of Gosse's allusions are to famous literary characters, and therefore accessible to the common reader. *The Life of John Bunce* by Thomas Amory (1756) tells the story of seven successive betrothals by its eponymous hero, and "its learning" comments Gosse, "would have dazzled Dr. Primrose" (226); this is a witty gloss on the comments about matrimony (Goldsmith 12) in Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). Discussing an earlier book by Goldsmith, *The Life of Beau Nash* (1762), Gosse explains that its quality was compromised by the author having been paid a commission of fourteen guineas before having even started the work: "to receive your lucre one minute before it is due, is to tempt Providence to make a Micawber of you" (231). Another Dickensian allusion is applied to George Wither, whom "the Age of Anne persistently called Withers, a name, I believe, only possessed really by one distinguished person, Cleopatra Skewton's page boy" (41). Here Gosse plays on Dickens' satire in *Dombey and Son* (1848) of giving Mrs. Skewton (who tries to hide her "withered" face beneath a cosmetic mask) the Shakespearean Christian name of Cleopatra, whom "age could not wither," and a "wan" page-boy (Dickens 284) named Withers. Gosse forges an alliance with the knowing reader, sharing his delight in these literary puns.

As highlighted above in relation to Christopher Smart, Gosse's attempts to outshine the scholars, to claim "new discoveries" by his "retrospective reviews" (9) often proved to be erroneous. William Winstanley (?1628-1698) was, Gosse claims, never forgiven for his "atrocious phrase" (111) in *Lives of the English Poets* (1686) about

Milton's fame having "gone out like a candle in a snuff, so that his memory will always stink" (Winstanley 195). Gosse notices that although the date on the title-page of his edition is 1687, Winstanley does not mention a single poem or play published later than 1675. Gosse "builds a theory" that Winstanley "died soon after 1675," and suggests that the infamous sentence about Milton was "foisted into a posthumous volume" by a later hand (115). Triumphant, Gosse libels the seventeenth-century publisher Samuel Manship as an "obsequious rogue" (115). However, *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) confirms that Winstanley remained alive and well until 1698, and that his "atrocious phrase" had "nothing to do with his beliefs regarding the quality of Milton's poetry, but expresses his detestation of Milton's republican politics" (Burns 2005). Poor Winstanley did not lie long in the "blameless tomb" Gosse had built for him (115).

Gosse's essay on the mischievous parodies of Wordsworth's poem "Peter Bell" (written in 1798, published in 1819) was still exasperating critics thirty years after Gosse's death. John Jordan took exception to Gosse's comment that Wordsworth's "inherent innocence [...] is afforded by the artless struggles which he makes to paint a very wicked man" (264-65), commenting that "instead of being 'artless,' [Wordsworth] is rather artful in his web of allusions, psychological applications and literary references" (82). Similarly, Melvin Watson observes that, "Though Edmund Gosse was perceptive enough to recognise that here 'Wordsworth's theories are pushed to their furthest extremity,' still he insisted that the narrative is clumsy in the extreme, and the attempts at wit and sarcasm ludicrous," charges essentially repeated by G.M. Harper and A.E.H. Swaen" (519). Harper was writing in 1916, and Swaen in 1923. Gosse's powerful presence on the literary scene helped to perpetuate many of his opinions. Indeed, many misleading pronouncements, similar to those exemplified in the pages of *Gossip*, were taken up and reiterated by others; such was the weight of Gosse's authority on literary matters. When Leslie Stephen, for example, wrote the entry on Thomas Gray for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he followed Gosse's biography of Gray

(1881) so closely that he admitted having "felt like a thief" (Brake 735); however, when a revision was called for in 1949, the distinguished Gray scholar Leonard Whibley was quoted in the *Times Literary Supplement* as saying that the entry was "not susceptible of correction; every sentence in it was incorrect or inadequate or misleading" (819).

Serendipity seems, however, to have combined with Gosse's vaunted charm throughout his life. As early as 1877, in his *Cornhill* essay on French fixed forms of poetry, Gosse dated the French villanelle to the sixteenth-century, without realizing that it had originated in England in 1844. "Since Gosse," Amanda French observes, "the treatises on versification have almost all lined up in single file to assert the same" (258). Ironically, without Gosse's mistake, the villanelle would never have achieved such popularity among Victorian poets. Similarly, although much of Gosse's biography of Donne (1899) was quickly discredited as conjecture and falsification, Clement Wyke (818-19), and later Raoul Granqvist (538), argue that it stimulated a whole new aesthetic evaluation of Donne's poetry. Even Ezra Pound, who attacked Gosse in 1918 as "a silly and pompous man" (323), was indebted to Gosse's *From Shakespeare to Pope* because it contained the only printed version of Waller's "Go Lovely Rose," which Pound pastiched in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1919). Sarah Davison suggests, furthermore, that Gosse's characterization of Waller as an exiled hero in that notorious text provided a model for Pound's own literary ambitions (792-93). It seems that Gosse's influence often proved fruitful by default rather than by design.

When Gosse first published *Gossip in a Library*, his friend Andrew Lang commented: "I read your book last night, and you will think me very ungracious, and critical, but I'd *rather* you had written on *di majoram gentium*. Two hundred years hence it won't be about Robert Buchanan and your servant and that rank of scrawlers people will write" (qtd. in Demoor 502). Gosse clearly ignored Lang's advice, going on to produce twelve more volumes of essays, creating his own minor canon of literary "also-rans," collected under such titles as *Critical Kit-Kats* (1896), *Some Diversions of a Man of Letters* (1919), or *More Books on the Table* (1923). From March 1919 until his death in 1928, Gosse delivered his "ten-minute sermons" in

his weekly column called “The World of Books” in the *Sunday Times*: “He quickly caught the ear of the public, and week by week was listened to with delighted attention” (Charteris 433). Gosse’s most important contribution to Victorian literary criticism was, then, to be a passionate reader, to enlarge the canon by reviving long-forgotten writers, to appreciate their eccentricity, and to communicate the sheer pleasure of discovering them. *Gossip in a Library* thus marked the beginning of his role as “a literary man-of-the-world,” one who according to Robert Morss Lovett, writing in 1920, “pays his calls here and there down the centuries, and returns to his club in Victoria Street to chat with his intimates.” Gosse was, Lovett insists, “a Major Pendennis of Literature [who] plays an important part in the world which he has so long cultivated. He diffuses knowledge of it, brings the right people together, promotes, in short, its sociability” (777-78).

Anglia Ruskin University

Notes

¹ In this article, all quotations from *Gossip in a Library* refer to the 1891 edition.

² The resemblance of Nick Green to Gosse was recognized immediately by Vita Sackville-West (Glendinning 202). Quentin Bell also thought Woolf’s character was “certainly a Gosse-like figure [...] though it was for his pose rather than his features” (138).

³ The friendship between Foote and Gosse was built on books, about which they corresponded, and of which they exchanged copies. They were later linked during the investigation into T.J. Wise’s forgeries in 1934. Wise claimed that Gosse had sold Foote a spurious copy of the Reading Sonnets in 1893 (Todd 52-54).

⁴ The additional essays are “The Romance of a Dictionary,” about Antoine Furetière’s publication of a French dictionary in 1688, originally Gosse’s first essay for the *Independent* on 6 January 1887, and “The Natural History of Selbourne,” about Gilbert White’s publication of that title in 1789, an essay that Gosse published in the *Independent* on 1 October 1891, and in *Black and White* on 3 October 1891.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Charles. "Christopher Smart's Madness." *PMLA* 45.4 (1930): 1014-22.
- Atkinson, Damien, ed. *The Selected Letters of W.E. Henley*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
- Bell, Quentin. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. London: Hogarth, 1972.
- Bevington, Merle. *The Saturday Review, 1855-1868: Representative Educated Opinion in Victorian England*. New York: Columbia UP, 1941.
- Blouch, Christine. "'What Ann Lang Read': Eliza Haywood and Her Readers." *The Passionate Fictions of Eliza Haywood: Essays on her Life and Work*. Ed. Kirsten Saxton and Rebecca Bocchicchio. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2000. 300-25.
- Brake, Laurel. "Problems in Victorian Biography: The DNB and the DNB 'Walter Pater.'" *Modern Language Review*: 70.4 (1975):731-42.
- Burns, William. "Winstanley, William (d. 1698)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford UP. Web. May 2005. Accessed 9 April 2015.
- Charteris, Evan. *The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse*. London: Heinemann, 1931.
- Cohen, Rachel. "The Very Bad Review." *The New Yorker* 6 October 2003: 52-67.
- Collins, John Churton. "English Literature at the Universities." *Quarterly Review* 163 (1886): 289-329.
- Cunningham, Valentine. "Darke Conceits: Churton Collins, Edmund Gosse, and the Professions of Criticism." *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower: Literary Journalism and Literary Scholarship from Fielding to the Internet*. Ed. Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998. 72-90.
- Davison, Sarah. "Ezra Pound's Esteem for Edmund Waller: A New Source for Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." *Review of English Studies* 60:247 (2009); 785-800.
- Demoor, Marysa. "Andrew Lang's Letters to Edmund Gosse: The Record

- of a Fruitful Collaboration as Poets, Critics, and Biographers.” *Review of English Studies*, New Series 38:152 (1987): 492-509.
- Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. London: Dent, 1997.
- Edel, Leon. *Henry James: The Middle Years 1884-1894*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963.
- French, Amanda. “Edmund Gosse and the Stubborn Villanelle Blunder.” *Victorian Poetry* 48 (2010): 243-266.
- Glendinning, Victoria. *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Gosse, Edmund. *From Shakespeare to Pope: An Enquiry into the Causes and Phenomena of the Rise of Classical Poetry in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1885.
- . *Gossip in a Library*. London: Heinemann, 1891.
- . *Gossip in a Library*. New York: Lovell, Coryell, 1891.
- Granqvist, Raoul. “The Reception of Edmund Gosse’s *Life of John Donne* (1899).” *English Studies (The Netherlands)* 67 (1986): 525-38.
- Johanningsmeier, Charles. “How Real American Readers Originally Experienced James’s ‘The Real Thing.’” *Henry James Review* 27:1 (2006): 75-100.
- Jordan, John. “Wordsworth’s Humour.” *PMLA* 73:1 (1958): 81-93.
- King, Kathryn. “New Contexts for Early Novels by Women.” *A Companion to the Eighteenth Century English Novel and Culture*. Ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia. Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 261-74.
- Lee, Hermione. *Body Parts: Essays on Life Writing*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2005.
- Lovett, Robert Morss. “Mr Gosse Grows Old Gracefully.” *The Dial* 68 (1920): 777-80.
- “Mr Gosse’s ‘Gossip in a Library.’” *The Critic: a Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts* 21 May 1892: 286.
- Muir, Percy. “The Nature and Scope of Book-Collecting.” *Talks on Book-Collecting*, Ed. Percy Muir. London: Cassell, 1952: 1-23.

Kathy Rees, "Edmund Gosse Entertains: Gossip in a Library (1891)"

- Orel, Harold. *Victorian Literary Critics: George Henry Lewes, Walter Bagehot, Richard Holt Hutton, Leslie Stephen, Andrew Lang, George Saintsbury and Edmund Gosse*. London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Phelps, William. *The Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement: A Study in Eighteenth Century Literature*. Boston: Ginn, 1893.
- Pound, Ezra. "Swinburne versus Biographers." *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 11 (1918): 322-29.
- Shepherd, Henry. "A Review of Edmund Gosse's *From Shakespeare to Pope*." *Transactions of the Modern Language Association of America* 1 (1884-1885): 149-155.
- Sitwell, Osbert. *Noble Essences; or, Courteous Revelations: Being a Book of Characters and the Fifth and Last Volume of Left hand, Right hand!; An Autobiography*. London: Macmillan, 1950.
- . *Triple Fugue*. London: Grant Richards, 1924.
- Small, Ian. *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Memories and Portraits*. New York: Scribner, 1898.
- . *Poems*. London: Heinemann, 1923.
- Temple, Ruth. *The Critic's Alchemy: A Study of the Introduction of French Symbolism into England*. New York: Twayne, 1953.
- Thwaite, Ann. *Edmund Gosse: A Literary Landscape 1849-1928*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Todd, William, ed. *Thomas J. Wise: Centenary Studies*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1959.
- Tye, Reginald. "The Periodicals of the 1890s." *Victorian Periodicals: A Guide to Research, Vol. II*. Ed. J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. Van Arsdell. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989. 13-31.
- Watson Melvin. "The Redemption of Peter Bell." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 4:4 (1964): 519-530.
- Winstanley, William. *The Lives of the Most Famous English Poets*. Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1963. Facsimile Repro.

“Worthies of Empire.” *Times Literary Supplement* 16 December 1949: 819.

Wyke, Clement. “Edmund Gosse as Biographer and Critic of Donne: His Fallible Role in the Poet’s Rediscovery.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 17 (1976): 805-819.

