Questions at issue

Gosse Edmund
QUESTIONS AT ISSUE
Other Works by Mr. EDMUND GOSSE

IN VERSE

On Viol and Flute. New edition. 1890

Firdausi in Exile, and other Poems. Second edition. 1887

IN PROSE

Northern Studies. 1879. Popular edition. 1890

Life of Gray. 1882. Revised edition. 1889

Seventeenth Century Studies. 1883. Second edition. 1885

Life of Congreve. 1888


Life of Philip Henry Gosse, F.R.S. 1890

Gossip in a Library. 1891. Second edition. 1892

The Secret of Narcisse. A Romance. 1892
TO

JOSEPH HENRY SHORTHOUSE

This Volume is Dedicated

BY

HIS AFFECTIONATE FRIEND

THE AUTHOR
Preface

To the essays which are here collected I have given a name which at once, I hope, describes them accurately and distinguishes them from criticism of a more positive order. When a writer speaks to us of the works of the dead masters, of the literary life of the past, we demand from him the authoritative attitude. That Homer is a great poet, and that the verse of Milton is exquisite, are not Questions at Issue. In dealing with such subjects the critic must persuade himself that he is capable of forming an opinion, and must then give us his opinion definitely. But in the continent of literary criticism, where all else is imperial, there is a province which is still republican, and that is the analysis of contemporary literature, the frank examination of the literary life of to-day.

In speaking of what is proceeding around us no one can be trusted to be authoritative. The wisest, clearest, and most experienced of critics have notoriously been wrong about the phenomena of their own day. Ben Jonson selected the moment when Hamlet and Othello had just been performed to talk of raising “the despised head of poetry again, and
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stripping her of those rotten and base rags wherewith the times have adulterated her form.” Neither Hazlitt nor Sainte Beuve could be trusted to give as valuable a judgment on the work of a man younger than themselves as they could of any past production, be it what it might. To map the ground around his feet is a task that the most skilful geographer is not certain to carry out with success.

The insecurity of contemporary criticism is no reason, however, why it should not be seriously and sincerely attempted. On the contrary, the critic who has been accustomed to follow paths where the laws and criteria of literature are paramount, may be glad to slip away sometimes to a freer country, where the art he tries to practise is more instinctive, more emotional, and more controversial. In the schools of antiquity, when the set discourse was over, the lecturer mingled with his audience under the portico of the Museum, and then, I suppose, it was not any longer of the ancients that they talked, but of the poet of last night, and of the rhetorician of to-morrow.

The critic may enjoy the sense of having abandoned the lecturing desk or the tribune, and of mingling in easy conversation with men who are not bound to preserve any decorum in listening to his opinions. In the criticism of the floating literature of the day an opportunity is offered for sensibility, for the personal note, even for a certain indulgence in levity or irony. The questions of our own age are not yet settled by