

W. D. HOWELLS

Selected Literary Criticism

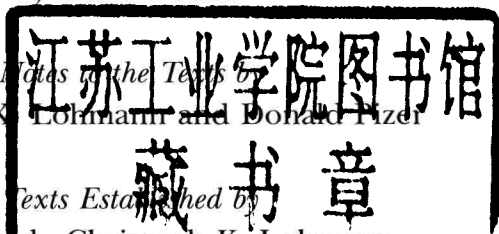
Volume II: 1886-1897

Text Selection and Introduction

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Introduction

THE bankruptcy of William Dean Howells' publisher, James R. Osgood, in the spring of 1885 had an immediate effect on Howells' income and prospects. One of Howells' responses to the threat posed by Osgood's failure was to propose to Harper and Brothers that they establish a new magazine devoted entirely to fiction. It would be edited by Howells and would presumably also be an outlet for the serialization of his novels. The Harpers replied with a counter-offer based on their desire to change the nature and format of the editorial columns in *Harper's Monthly*. Henry M. Alden, the editor of the *Monthly*, wrote Howells on 9 September 1885:

We propose to discontinue our *Editor's Literary Record* & to substitute therefor a purely literary department—one that shall have a relation to the current literary movement (in America & Europe) corresponding to that which the *Editor's Easy Chair* has to the current social movement. . . .

The change proposed is an important one. It excludes the consideration of all books that belong entirely to the literature of information, i.e. those which have no distinctively literary value. It excludes the *formal* review of any book, i.e. as a book sent for notice. As in the *Easy Chair*, subjects are treated rather than books; though a book may have such significance as to make it a subject. The scope of the treatment is enlarged, leaving you free to treat any subject of current literary interest. . . . In a word, instead of a descriptive review of books there would be an analysis of literary traits & tendencies.¹

Howells at first resisted this invitation because he believed that a regular department would interfere with his writing of fiction. But his dealings with the Harpers soon broadened to include an agreement that the firm would make the then very considerable annual payment of \$10,000 for the rights to one novel each year. And when Joseph W. Harper, the head of the firm, entreated Howells in person, Howells "gave way":² a contract was prepared

¹ Alden to WDH, 9 September 1885 (Harvard). See also WDH to J. R. Osgood, 11 August 1885, *W. D. Howells: Selected Letters*, volume 3, ed. Robert C. Leitz *et al.* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), pp. 127–128 (note 1).

² Howells' untitled memoir of his association with Harper and Brothers, in J. Henry Harper, *The House of Harper* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), p. 321.

that provided for an additional \$3,000 a year for the column,³ which was launched under its permanent title of the "Editor's Study" with the January 1886 issue of *Harper's Monthly*.

"I was reluctant to undertake the 'Study' in the first instance," Howells recalled in 1891, but "became very much interested in it . . . as I went on. . . . [I]t was the finest opportunity ever afforded a man to say what he wanted to say. . . ."⁴ Howells' interest in a regular forum for voicing his literary beliefs is of course related to his ever-deepening convictions about the nature and purpose of literature during the early 1880s. It also stemmed at least in part, however, from the specific stimulus given his polemic bent by his essay on Henry James in the *Century* magazine of November 1882.⁵ His statement that James was a better novelist than Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens—because of James's greater commitment to a truthful depiction of human motives—had caused a sensation. The opportunity afforded by the "Editor's Study" to explore the issues inherent in his preference for James over the Victorian masters—to analyze "literary traits & tendencies" according to his own taste and judgment—could therefore scarcely be resisted once Howells began his column. Indeed, he could sense in the increasingly hostile critical reaction to his own fiction that he was engaged both as a novelist and as a critic in this new battle of the books. Thus a tone of personal mission, as well as an identification of his own fiction with the issues underlying the critical remarks in his column, characterizes Howells' comments on the "Editor's Study" in his letters of the period.

As to the things you see about me in the papers [he wrote his father early in 1887], I hope you'll not let them worry you. They are inevitable, because I'm now something of a "shining mark," and because in fiction I've identified myself with truth and humanity, which you know people always hate.⁶

A similar note is struck in a letter to John W. De Forest just a few months later.

It's not easy to get texts for the Study sermons. And my congregation does an amount of kicking unknown to other sanctuaries. It isn't altogether pleasant to be regularly misunderstood and unfailingly misrepresented, but I keep on with the hope that I may at last let a little light into the general darkness concerning literature and the principles on which it's to be judged.⁷

The "Editor's Study" appeared in *Harper's Monthly* through March 1892. Howells' preparation of the column usually took about a week because of the

³The contract, dated 6 October 1885, is in the Harvard College Library.

⁴Spencer H. Coon, "Mr. Howells Talks," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 26 December 1891; republished in Ulrich Halfmann, ed., *Interviews with William Dean Howells* (Arlington, Texas: University of Texas, 1973), p. 14.

⁵See *Selected Criticism*, vol. 1, item 71.

⁶WDH to William C. Howells, 27 February 1887, *Selected Letters*, 3:184.

⁷WDH to John W. De Forest, 2 September 1887, *Selected Letters*, 3:195.

need to select and read the books he was to discuss as well as to write and revise his copy.⁸ At the insistence of the publishers, Howells observed the magazine's convention of editorial anonymity (hence the use of the editorial "we"), but it was probably the rare reader who was unaware of his authorship. Although most columns were devoted to several authors or books, Howells always tried to unify his material, usually by gathering books in a similar subject or literary form and structuring an essay in which specific comments on each book were linked by a general observation. Transitions between books (signalled by a new section number) were deftly threaded by brief linking remarks either just before or immediately following the section break. Occasionally an "Editor's Study" produces the effect of the critic grinding his mill with an unyielding and ill-chosen grist, but for the most part Howells manipulated his raw material with grace and dexterity.

Neither the pose of anonymity nor the frequently playful tone of the "Editor's Study" could disguise Howells' use of the column to examine the rival claims upon the contemporary reading public of two conflicting modes of apprehending life. On the one hand, Howells argued, British criticism and popular neoromantic fiction were allied in believing that the ends of literary art were best achieved by a fiction which was divorced from the mundane in matter and manner and which cultivated an appreciation of the "ideal" in character and behavior. On the other hand, he contended, many Continental novelists and a few English and American writers of fiction were seeking to write simply and naturally about life as they found it in order that life may be understood and its conditions bettered. This conflict often seemed to resolve itself in Howells' critical imagination into a symbolic opposition between Thackeray and Tolstoy. To Howells, it was not merely that the English novelist was primitive in the form of an art which had continued to evolve. Thackeray's more significant limitations were social, political, and above all ethical in that he had failed to accept two basic truths: that most human beings are weak and all men suffer. His idolization (along with Scott and Dickens) by the leading Tory journals confirmed in Howells' mind the dulled ethical sensibility of contemporary British criticism. Tolstoy—above all the Tolstoy of *What to Do?* and *My Religion* whom Howells encountered in the mid-1880s—was always the touchstone of the writer who placed truth and humanity above mere striving for "effect." "Which brings us, as usual, to Tolstoi," Howells wrote in one of his "Editor's Study" columns.⁹ He was only half-facetious, for Tolstoy's ethical obsessions had become his own preoccupations.

Yet to describe the "Editor's Study" as though it were an ethical tract is to miss the charm and rich substantiality of the column. Howells' tone was more that of the genial commentator on the foolishness of the world than that of the polemical satirist or misanthrope. Well aware that the literary

⁸So Howells told an interviewer: "Novelist Howells," *Buffalo Times*, 17 December 1890; republished in Halfmann, *Interviews with William Dean Howells*, p. 13.

⁹"Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly*, LXXVI (May 1888), 966.

critic writing for a magazine aimed at a middle-class audience could not at the same time offend and instruct, Howells sought to convert by “sermons” which delighted rather than enraged. And with a few notable exceptions, such as the famous fable of the real and artificial grasshopper,¹⁰ he seldom dealt theoretically with the values and assumptions underlying his discussion of current literature. He was writing about the books of the day and, indeed, writing well enough to make many lasting contributions to our understanding of that literature. Nevertheless, regular and astute readers of the “Editor’s Study” soon became aware of a coherent critical position that ran like an undercurrent through the essays of the column. Maurice Thompson, for example, noted Howells’ advice to Sidney Luska to “evolve his plot from his personages, rather than involve them in it.” He then commented: “We know what Mr. Howells is thinking when he writes a paragraph like that. He is thinking of ‘Ivanhoe’ and ‘Silas Lapham’ with a clear preference for the latter.”¹¹

Thompson’s remark, though snidely *ad hominem*, does have an element of emerging truth in its positing of a vital connection between Howells’ critical beliefs and his fiction during this period. The late 1880s and early 1890s were years of personal tragedy and intellectual turmoil for Howells. The death of his daughter Winifred and the invalidism of his wife, the discovery of Tolstoy and the American socialist movement, the shock of the legal murder of the Haymarket anarchists—all led Howells to explore in his novels themes of personal happiness in relation to social responsibility; these concerns placed his fiction at the other extreme of Scott’s celebration of the feudal past in *Ivanhoe*. Howells’ work of his “Editor’s Study” period is thus all of a piece with both his fiction and his criticism, revealing the effect of what Edwin Cady has called “that last, magnificent burst of growth in his mind and personality.”¹²

The “Editor’s Study” received support from a number of Howells’ contemporaries. Such figures as Mark Twain, Henry James, Thomas Sergeant Perry, Hamlin Garland, H. H. Boyesen, and Brander Matthews endorsed his attempt to create a new critical sensibility in America. But established critical opinion, as represented by T. B. Aldrich, Horace Scudder, Charles Eliot Norton, E. C. Stedman, and William Roscoe Thayer, viewed his efforts with increasing hostility. Their edginess about the propriety of Howells’ interests and values was to a disturbing extent shared by Henry Alden. Although he was at first enthusiastic about the column, Alden became increasingly concerned about the effect of Howells’ views upon the reputation of *Harper’s Monthly* and of the house of Harper as a whole. As Howells recalled in his memoir on his association with the Harpers, his agreement with the firm was

¹⁰ See item 15, below.

¹¹ Maurice Thompson, “The Analysts Analyzed,” *Critic*, VI (10 July 1886), 22.

¹² *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885–1920 of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1958), pp. 14–15.

that he could deal with almost any subject in any way; if he trespassed beyond what one was permitted to say in a Harper periodical, the firm would “ring a little bell.”¹³ Although Howells intimates in his memoir that the bell seldom tinkled, his correspondence with Alden reveals a number of instances in which the firm remonstrated with him about material in his column. The first such instance, one which appears to have put Alden on his guard, arose in March 1888 from Howells’ comments on Zola’s *La Terre*. The column caused a furor in the American press, not because Howells praised the work but because he discussed it without damning it. Alden’s strategy and tone at this point were still tentative. He enclosed two newspaper clippings which viciously attacked Howells and then inquired,

Don’t you think we have been a little daring (& I literally mean “we”—the editorial “we”) in printing a notice of Zola’s “La Terre” in our magazine? . . . Perhaps it will be well to draw the line a little this side of such absolutely disgusting books as “La Terre.”¹⁴

After a number of analogous incidents,¹⁵ Alden finally resorted to outright censorship of Howells’ column in February 1891. He cut from Howells’ review of Nicolay and Hay’s biography of Lincoln several unfavorable remarks about General McClellan and Salmon Chase, and he omitted entirely Howells’ negative review of Andrew Lang’s *The World’s Desire* because “Mr. Lang has been from the first so good a friend of the magazine in England.”¹⁶

This blatant example of editorial intervention was followed in less than a month by Howells’ notice to Alden that he wished to discontinue the “Editor’s Study” when his contract expired at the close of 1891.¹⁷ Despite considerable effort by the firm to have Howells reconsider, he held to his decision, though in the end he achieved his purpose by the device of not refusing outright but rather by asking more than he knew the Harpers were willing to pay him. Of course, Howells had other reasons for giving up the “Study”: he found that the effort entailed in preparing a monthly column had indeed limited his ability to write as much fiction as he wished; and, as he told Hamlin Garland in an interview, he felt that “the principle of literary progress had been stated, so far as he was personally concerned, and that the

¹³ *The House of Harper*, p. 321.

¹⁴ Alden to WDH, 10 March 1888 (Harvard).

¹⁵ These include Alden’s trepidation over Howells’ review of Mrs. Humphry Ward’s *Robert Elsmere* because of its agnosticism (Alden to WDH, 31 August 1888); his concern about Howells’ sympathy for the Haymarket anarchists (Alden to WDH, 13 November 1888); and his fear that Howells’ satiric Christmas allegory on international copyright was too polemical (Alden to WDH, 26 August 1890). All letters at Harvard.

¹⁶ Alden to WDH, 8 January 1891 (Harvard). For Howells’ response of 9 January—in which he raises the key question: “do you think . . . that it is best to regard the Study as speaking editorially?”—see *Selected Letters*, 3:300–301.

¹⁷ Alden to WDH, 2 February 1891 (Harvard).

work should be done and would be better done by other and younger writers."¹⁸

Perhaps one reason for Howells' belief that to continue would be repetitious was that a distillation of his "Editor's Study" views had appeared in the spring of 1891 under the title *Criticism and Fiction*. Howells had not planned to collect his column; indeed, he had remarked in the August 1886 "Study": "Who can endure to read old reviews?"¹⁹ He was at least in part prompted, however, by a desire to aid his old friend and former publisher Osgood, who had established a publishing business in England.²⁰ In order to gain the English rights to a new Howells publication, Osgood had suggested to the Harpers in the autumn of 1890 that Howells prepare a book derived from his column, to be issued by Osgood in England. The Harpers and Howells agreed, Howells very quickly did the necessary editorial work, and the book appeared in early May 1891.

The publication of *Criticism and Fiction* permitted reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic to examine Howells' critical beliefs at length. Many availed themselves of the opportunity, but few raised their commentary above the level of misunderstanding, misstatement, and personal abuse which had characterized discussion of the "Editor's Study" itself. In the years since its publication, Howells' small volume of less than 30,000 words has continued to attract controversy, though in recent decades the dispute has centered primarily on the question whether the book reflects either Howells' critical intelligence or his views. The issue is a major one, since many readers know Howells as a critic almost entirely through *Criticism and Fiction*. There is no doubt that because of its brevity it fails to suggest the wide range of interest and the genial but tough-minded good sense which are so characteristic of the "Editor's Study" as a whole. Moreover, since the work contains no columns after mid-1890, it disproportionately reflects the more socially complacent Howells of the 1880s (the Howells of the "smiling aspects of life" remark of 1886)²¹ and does not do justice to the socialist Howells of the early 1890s (the Howells who wrote that the "life of toil" for 99 out of 100 workmen is "hopeless").²² Yet despite these limitations in scope and balance, *Criticism and Fiction* does express Howells' central beliefs about the nature of fiction and the role of criticism. In order to represent in this edition of Howells criticism both the richness of the "Editor's Study" and the historical significance of *Criticism and Fiction*, and yet to stress the secondary importance of the latter in reaching a just estimate of Howells as a critic, the "Editor's Study" has been selected as the principal text of Howells' criticism

¹⁸ Hamlin Garland, "Mr. Howells's Plans," Boston *Evening Transcript*, 1 January 1892; republished in Halfmann, *Interviews with William Dean Howells*, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Harper's Monthly*, LXXIII (August 1886), 476.

²⁰ Osgood to WDH, 22 November 1890 (Harvard). For a more detailed discussion of this background, see the Editor's Introduction to *Criticism and Fiction*, below.

²¹ "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly*, LXXIII (September 1886), 641; see item 7, below.

²² "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly*, LXXXIII (November 1891), 966; see item 40, below.

of 1886–1892, and *Criticism and Fiction* has been included as Part Four, in a text that simply reprints the 1891 edition unedited.

The seventy-five columns of the “Editor’s Study” comprise about 375,000 words, of which somewhat less than one third was chosen for inclusion in the first part of this volume—material which at once expresses Howells’ basic values and varied interests as a critic. However, a significant commentary on a major figure was usually given preference over an equally penetrating comment about a minor author or work. Initially it seemed desirable to use only complete columns, but since this practice would result in the inclusion of some comparatively thin material at the expense of some important writing, the decision was made to reprint parts of columns as well as full columns.

Even before the last “Editor’s Study” appeared, Howells had agreed to become editor of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* under its new owner, John Brisben Walker, whose views on the role of a magazine seemed to coincide with his own. Events, however, proved otherwise, and Howells left the editorship of *Cosmopolitan* in mid-1892. By the fall he had committed himself to the preparation of two lengthy series of autobiographical articles. The first, which was published irregularly in *Harper’s Monthly* during 1894–1896 and was collected (with two additional articles) as *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), deals with Howells’ association with the leading literary figures of Boston and New York from the late 1850s to the 1880s. The second, *My Literary Passions*, is a reminiscence of Howells’ youth and young manhood with emphasis on the growth of his mind and spirit through reading books. Howells wrote it during the winter of 1892–1893; it appeared in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* from December 1893 to March 1895; and it was issued in book form by Harper and Brothers in June 1895. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Howells called *My Literary Passions* “a mixture of autobiography and criticism”;²³ and so it is, with our interest today more in its revelations of Howells’ early years than in its relaxed representation of critical attitudes expressed elsewhere in more insightful form. Two essays from this series—on Thackeray and on Tolstoy—have been selected and appear, together with other miscellaneous pieces, in the third part of the present volume.

Given both Howells’ reluctance to undertake the “Editor’s Study” and his comment to Norton in 1892 (when the Harpers were pressing him to write another monthly column) that “I dread a department,”²⁴ it is surprising to find him in early 1895 again contemplating a regular column. In a letter to his sister Aurelia he noted that he was writing a paper for *Harper’s Weekly*:

It is in the way of an experiment, which may lead to my writing a department there. I have proposed trying three or four articles before committing myself to the work, which I thought I might undertake, in order to put in those intervals

²³ WDH to Norton, 26 February 1893, in *W. D. Howells: Selected Letters*, volume 4, ed. Thomas Wortham *et al.* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 39.

²⁴ WDH to Norton, 16 October 1892, in *Selected Letters*, 4:25.

of time, when I am considering what turn I shall give a story. It would have the advantage of giving me a stated income, and a close alliance with the Harper periodicals, but on the other hand it would bind me down to a certain time and a certain quantity, and if I could always sail ahead with a story, I should not think of doing it.²⁵

On 14 April Howells wrote Aurelia, stating, "it is settled now that I am to do a department in Harper's Weekly,"²⁶ and a week later he turned once again to an explanation of his motives:

I have begun my department in Harper's Weekly, and I think I shall really enjoy doing it. I find that as I grow older, I am anxious to have a foothold somewhere, and hereafter I shall try to confine my writing to the Harper periodicals. It has been trying for me of late to place my work, and though I shall now have to do more work, I shall be less anxious.²⁷

Howells' *Harper's Weekly* columns began with the issue of 30 March 1895. The first four were individually titled, but with the *Weekly* of 4 May 1895 the department was called "Life and Letters." In all, Howells wrote ninety-three columns between 30 March 1895 and 26 February 1898, the date of the last one; eleven of these make up the second part of the present volume. Unlike the "Editor's Study," "Life and Letters" was not published regularly (it appeared sporadically during the summer of 1896 while Howells was abroad and infrequently during 1897), and it was usually devoted to only one subject or book. The title of the department was perhaps meant to suggest Howells' belief that life and literature were inseparable, but more obviously it indicated that some columns were devoted to literary subjects and some to a variety of other topics. It was a number of these more general essays which Howells later collected in *Literature and Life* (1902); he did not republish any of the more specifically literary columns.

On the whole, the columns devoted to literature in the "Life and Letters" series reveal a Howells less inclined to explore new critical issues than to apply his established values to current literature. Perhaps the most significant among them are those in which he sought to reconcile his convictions about the impropriety of sexual themes in fiction and the growing importance of sexuality in the work of some of the writers he admired, such as Thomas Hardy, George Moore, and Hamlin Garland.

Much of Howells' miscellaneous literary criticism of the period 1886–1898—several examples of which are presented in the third part of the present volume—arose from his desire to champion new and vital American and Continental writers in reviews and introductions when an outlet in one of the magazine departments was not available. But as the nineties pro-

²⁵WDH to Aurelia Howells, 16 March 1895 (Harvard).

²⁶WDH to Aurelia Howells, 14 April 1895 (Harvard).

²⁷WDH to Aurelia Howells, 21 April 1895, in *Selected Letters*, 4:103.

gressed and the literary scene was flooded with pastiche romance and historical novels of the *Graustark* and *The Prisoner of Zenda* variety—the very kind of fiction Howells had so vigorously attacked in the “Editor’s Study”—a note of resignation entered his attitude toward the struggle for a better literature. As he recalled in 1912, with the passing of the years he had begun to realize that it had been “a losing fight.”²⁸ Nevertheless, he maintained his faith and continued to write encouragingly about books which seemed to run counter to the “drool and drivel”²⁹ of popular taste. His critical values had moved during the 1880s from a broadly based preference for a fiction centered in the actualities of contemporary life to a more sharply focused aesthetic which asked each writer to wrestle with the ethical and social questions that Howells now asked himself. When he encountered a writer who appeared to seek answers to these questions, the flame was again lit and Howells’ critical imagination again burned brightly.

D. P.

²⁸ *The House of Harper*, p. 323.

²⁹ The phrase is George E. De Mille’s in his “The Infallible Dean: A Study of W. D. Howells as a Prophet of Realism,” *Sewanee Review*, XXXVI (April 1928), 149.

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PART ONE

Essays from the “Editor’s Study”
1886–1892