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To Harry de Forest Smith - April 22, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Maine,
April 22, 1894.

My dear Smith,

I have just read your letter, and must confess that I envy you for the books you have been reading. I neglected Lang's Old Friends¹ for two years, thinking it to be a volume^a of compilations. If I had what it really was we should both have had the benefit of it long before this. Well, that is my way - continually missing ~~g~~^b good things when they are right under my nose. If I keep on doing this, and I probably shall, I shall feel pretty thoroughly dissatisfied with myself by the time I am eighty.^c

It positively frightens me when I think^d of the opportunities, small and great, which I lost while in Cambridge; but then, I am thankful for what little I got, and feel that my life is infinitely larger for my going there. I have said all this a dozen times before, but [you] will excuse me, as you must know what those two years were to me, who had lived like a snail for twenty years before. It was not in the nature of things that I should reap all the XX^e good things offered me; I was not educated for it; I could only pick here and there, and, of course^f, miss much of the very best. I could appreciate those things now, but - woe is me! - I am not there, and cannot get there - not even for a week in June to see Ford and Tryon take their exits. This is^g the one minor thing that galls me now above all others. If I could take that week with anything like a clean conscience, I think I could jump for joy, though God knows what a figure I should cut in such a performance. Can you imagine me jumping for joy - or for anything else, unless it be a hornets'^h nest?

Excepting "The Task,"ⁱ I have read little during the past week. I wonder why it is that I like Cowper as I do? Something tells me that he is not, and never will be, one

^a The "e" is only barely visible in the holograph.

^b WA omits this typo.

^c The "y" and the period are written in black ink.

^d The "k" is written in black ink. WA omits the hyphen typo.

^e These "x"s are typed over an aborted "g" and "o". WA omits them.

^f The "e" is typed over an "h".

^g The "s" is written in black ink.

^h WA has "hornet's".

ⁱ Both quotation marks are written in black ink. The first "T" is written in black ink over a lower-case typed "t".

of the really great poets, although in occasional passage[s] he is well nigh unsurpassable. There is much of the sandy desert in his work, but still it is comfortable travelling. The green and glorious places that come every little while are all the brighter for the comparative barrenness around them. His religion is akin to mawkish to a man of my doubts, but I readily overlook that in the consideration of his temperament and his surroundings. He is popularly and justly, I suppose, called feminine; but human nature has a word to say regarding such matters, and a little sympathy is not likely to be wasted upon this poet. His timidity was a disease, and^j the making of verse and rabbit-hutches, together with gardening, was his oc-

-2-

cupation. He was a strange man; and this strangeness, with his almost pathetic sincerity, go take {sic} to make up the reason for my fondness for his poetry. He stands between Thomson and Wordsworth, and for some reason, he seems^k to stand upon pretty firm ground. I do not think another half-century will disturb him to any great extent. His description of the wood-cutter and his dog cannot die as ~~XX~~ while^l long as^m men and women care for true art in homely things.²

I have written a queer poem, but I haven't the nerve to send it to you yet. It needs a little revision before [being] subjected to even the most friendly criticism, and (excuse slip)ⁿ it is in this little revision that my difficulty lies. The whole thing - forty lines - was written between twelve and one o'clock while I was waiting for my dinner, and has an air of unsatisfactory completeness about it which I am at a loss to overcome. When I fix it,

2^o

I shall send you a copy - yes^p I will send you ~~one~~ stanzas^q now while I am talking about it:

Yes, this is the end of life, I suppose -
To do what we can for ourselves and others;

^j The "n" is written in black ink.

^k The "m" and the "s" are written in black ink.

^l Written in black ink.

^m The "x"s are typed over "so". WA transcribes the latter but not the former.

ⁿ This parenthetical remark is written in black ink.

^o Written in black ink.

^p WA adds a comma here.

^q The "s" is written in black ink.

But men who find tragedy writ in a rose
 May forget sometimes there are sons and
 mothers -^r

Fathers and daughters of love and hate,
 Scattered like hell-spawn down from Heaven,
 To teach mankind to struggle and wait
 Till life be over and death forgiven.

I call the thing "Doubts". The stanzas quoted are the fifth and sixth out of ten. I think that there is at least a straightforwardness - what a devil of a word that is! - about the poem,^s which you will like. There is nothing artificial, and, I fear, little intelligible; but for all that I rather think you will like it better than the "House on the Hill". As for myself, I think I prefer the villanelle. I have a weakness for the suggestiveness of those artificial forms - that is, when they treat of some thing besides bride-roses and ball-rooms. Vers de société^t pure and simple, has little charm for me. Austin Dobson might be twice the man he is if he were - somebody else, I suppose; but it does seem that he might have used his talents to a little better advantage. "Don Quixote"^u shows what is in him; if it could be let out, England would be the richer by another poet.³ Vale,

E.A. Robinson^v

HCL US, 144-146.
 Typewritten.

NOTES

1. Andrew Lang (1844-1912). *Old Friends, Essays in Epistolary Parody*, 1890; 1892.
2. *The Task*, V, 41-57.
3. Austin Dobson (1840-1921) was one of the many English poets who got caught up in the revival of old French forms toward the end of the nineteenth century. His "Don Quixote" appeared in *At the Sign of the Lyre*, 1885.

^r This line is broken thus in the holograph.

^s The comma is written in black ink.

^t The accent are written in black ink.

^u The quotation marks are written in black ink.

^v The signature is written in black ink. WA omits the underline.

