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To Harry de Forest Smith - September 27, 1890

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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Recommended Citation

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner Sept 27—1890--

De Smith,--

I believe I told you that I would write you something when you left Gardiner¹ so here goes: I have read your (or rather Henry De Long's) "Kreutzer Sonata"² and I have come to the conclusion that Wannamaker³ did about right in suppressing the same. There is altogether too much low-necked truth in it to be circulated among the young idea; it would have a tendency to "teach them how to shoot" without taking a fair aim. But then, taken as a picture of humanity as a whole, I cannot help thinking that it is open to considerable criticism. We are not all rakes, and there is such a thing in the world as a good woman, excluding those angular spinsters who preach about woman suffrage and diseased ballots until they rope in honest men's wives and teach them to desert their families^{++++a} and husbands until the poor devils get drunk out of sheer disgust. (God never intended man and woman both to wear pants.) And yet taking the sentiment expressed in the "Sonata" as the natural outburst of the individual telling the story the book is quite another thing: the question is, did Tolstoi intend it to be applied to the whole human nest or did he simply essay to show the condition to which

-2-

b

-3-

a man may bring himself by his ungodly actions? In this book the wife would have been a very decent sort of a woman if her husband ~~m~~ had not "married" so promiscuously in his younger days and so been led to believe that they were all alike. I understand that Tolstoi has written another book in conjunction with a Russian peasant, elaborating the same ideas. That seems to me unnecessary.

For the past week I have been following Danforth, the engineer, with an axe and an armful of stakes together with a leveling rod and a corn-cob pipe. By this work I was enabled to join the River Survey gang and will go to work to-morrow mor-

^a It is unclear what these marks are. WA omits them.

^bThis page is blank except for "HDF Smith Bowdoin '91" in large cursive letters, written diagonally, with the name placed above the college and number. This seems to be EAR's handwriting, although its purpose here is unknown. "'91" is ostensibly a reference to Smith's graduation year (see letter to Smith for March 22, 1891). WA does not indicate this page, but continues the text of the letter without break.

ning. There will be about a month of it. I must confess that I would rather smoke the pipe under a tree in August and read Virgil, but the trouble is ~~that~~ the Roman gentleman pays such ~~devilish~~ devilish slim wages that before you know it you have no tobacco for your pipe. Dollars are convenient things to have De Smith, but this diabolical, dirty race that men are running after them disgusts me. I shall probably outgrow this idea, but until I do I shall labor quite contented under the delusion that [there] is something to life outside of "business." Business be damned. Write when you get a chance.

Yours—E.A Robinson

HCL US, pp. 3-4.

Harry de Forest Smith, close friend throughout EAR's boyhood and youth, with whom EAR carried on an extensive correspondence, especially important during EAR's formative years as a poet.^c

NOTES

1. To go back to Bowdoin College.
2. Tolstoy's controversial novel of sex and marriage, published in 1889. {It was banned in Russia and its transport by mail was forbidden by the U.S. Post Office. However, according to *The New York Times* for September 25, 1890, on September 24 Judge Martin Russell Thayer struck down the Post Office's censorship, declaring, "There is nothing in this book which can by any possibility be said to commend licentiousness, or to make it in any respect attractive, or to tempt any one to its commission." He further said, regarding the Russian and U.S. Post Office officials' censorship of the novel: "Without disparaging in any degree the respect due to these high officials within their respective spheres, I can only say that neither of them has ever been recognized in this country as a binding authority in questions of either law or literature" ("Count Tolstoi not Obscene: The 'Kreutzer Sonata' Cannot Legally be Suppressed").}
3. John Wanamaker, the noted merchant, was appointed Postmaster General by President Harrison in 1889.

^c WA adds "For further details, see p.", without adding the title of any text. However, Donaldson has a good deal of info about Smith and his relationship with EAR, and the interested reader is invited to consult the index of that volume for further details.