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1-25-1891

## To Harry de Forest Smith - January 25, 1891

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Jan 25 - 1890 [=1891]

My Dear Smith

I received your letter a few days (or rather about two weeks) ago and will now take up your literary vein and advise you to read "John Halifax"<sup>1</sup> if you have not already done so. It is a novel after the old school but yet there is more of the modern realism in it than you generally find in books written forty or fifty years ago. It will show you the difference between great and small writing in a most impressive manner.

Outside of this I have not done much reading since I saw you: in fact I have read nothing save a book of Bret Harte's short stories and about half of Rudyard Kipling's "The Light that Failed." I think upon the whole the former is the greater writer, although there is a certain "queerness", as you say, about the latter's work that is rather attractive. I think Kipling's poetry is better than his prose. Are Rossiter Johnson's series of Little Classics in the Bowdoin Library? If they are take out the one on Exile and read Harte's "Outcasts of Poker Flat"; in some ways I think it is the best short story in the English language. This may sound a little loud, but read it yourself and write me what you think of it.

I am still dragging along in the same old rut, and occasionally

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someone says "Well now, Robinson, what do you intend to do?" This makes me mad. I cannot tell what I shall do. I have said that I thought I might go to Harvard in the fall for a year or two but as I am not sure of it I do not say so when these pleasant people question me, so you see all I have to do is to tell them that I do not know, which is about like pulling teeth. I suppose it does look a little queer to see me practically doing nothing at my age,<sup>2</sup> but at present there is no getting out of it. Someone must be at home to run the place. I am not getting rich but I try to console myself with Blackmore's lines:

"The more we have in hand to count

The less we have to hope for."<sup>3</sup>

There is a good deal in that if you will stop to moralize a little; but the devil of it is, while we are moralizing someone else gets what we hope for. This is a sad world, Smith, where the under-dog gets his neck chewed. Sometimes I think I shall go into the missionary business and teach the chattering Hindoos how to read the Police Gazette & Town Topics. They never would take the trouble to barbecue me, my bones are too large.

Speaking of the books I have read I omitted Charles Dudley War{}

ner's "My Summer in a Garden."<sup>4</sup> It is a good thing, and contains

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9-  
 8 Nó lóngér with ~~with~~ féelings óf áwe,  
 12 Gó Í tó thé nável óf eárrh, únáppróacháble,  
 8 Nórr tó thé témplé óf Ábáe  
 8 Nórr cónsúlt Ólýmpían Zéuss  
 6 Únléss thése thínghs, hánd shówn,  
 7 Tó áll mórtáls, áre ín túne—  
 9 Bút Ó Míghtý, íf ríghtlý héaríng,  
  
 7 Ó Zéus, Kíng óf áll bélów  
 7 Lét thís éscápé thée nótt  
 7 Nórr thý évér lívíngh rúle.  
 8 Fór álréadý thý sét ásíde  
 8 Thé wáníngh órácléss {of} Láíáu {Laius}  
 6 Whích thé Gód séndss Pýthía  
 11 Ánd nó lóngér ís Ápólló ín hónór  
 7 Át léást ín thé síghht óf mén,  
 7 Bút Góds wórd spréadss slów ánd súde.

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much valuable information. Here is an extract from the "third week":--"The striped bug has come, the saddest of the year. He is a moral double ender, iron clad at that. He is unpleasant in two ways. He burrows under the ground so that you cannot find him, and he flies away so that you cannot catch him. . . . The best way to deal with the striped bug is to sit down by the hills and patiently watch for him. If you are spry you can annoy him. This however takes time. It takes all day and part of the night. For he flieth in darkness and wasteth at noonday".

I suppose I shall have another garden to make in the spring and a general spell of "clearing up." I think after that, a trip to Harvard ~~be~~ would be a glorious contrast.

I trust that this letter will be a warning to you never to use a stub pen. I have used one for three or four years and this is the effect of changing over. Perhaps you will be able to read it and perhaps you will not. It is enough to make a

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<sup>a</sup> WA omits and makes no mention of the contents of this page, which in the holograph appear mysteriously on the back of the second sheet of loose leaf paper comprising this letter, and which are written vertically in relation to the rest of the letter. Rather, he simply continues without break the sentence begun on the previous page, which in the holograph continues on page 4. (For more on this matter, see note 5.)

man weep. I think I shall have to go back to the stub  
 with my hand tipped over upon one side. Then writing is no great  
 hardship to me; but to write this way after so many months  
 is hell itself. Keep away from the stubb. Yours &c  
E.A. Robinson

HCL Previously published in *US*, pp. 8-10.  
 EAR misdated the letter 1890.

#### NOTES

1. *John Halifax, Gentleman*, by Dinah Mulock, published in 1857.
2. EAR was 21 on December 22, 1890.
3. From "Buscombe; or A Michaelmas Goose," by R.D. Blackmore. Published in the December, 1889 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, where the second line quoted by EAR reads "The less *remains* to hope for." (SL—italics mine)
4. Published in 1870. Warner is perhaps most famous today as co-author, with Mark Twain, of *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873).
5. This is a segment of a metrical translation from the third stasimon of Sophocles' *Ædipus Rex*. EAR makes no reference to it anywhere in the letter. Of course, later on, in 1894, EAR and Smith were to embark on a project of jointly translating the *Antigone*. Lewis E. Weeks, Jr., in "Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Antigone*," implies that the translation here was part of an earlier attempt to render the Greek dramatist into English poetry: "Four years before the *Antigone* scheme was put into effect, when Smith was a senior at Bowdoin and Robinson had been out of high school but two years, there was apparently an early Sophoclean experiment. Whether it was part of a larger whole, what its antecedents were, or whether there were subsequent results remains a mystery" (138). (For Weeks, Jr.'s transcription of the translation, see his article, p. 138.) (SL)