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To Harry de Forest Smith - March 10, 1891

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, March 10 – 1891

My Dear Smith;

Atwood¹ told me yesterday that you had been over Sunday. If I had known it at the time I should most surely have taken a constitutional in the direction of your domicile and held some converse with you on certain matters of a literary and educational nature. I am reading Carlyle's Sartor Resartus² and am completely soaked with its fiery philosophy. It is just the book for you to read, as, in the midst of your philosophical and psychological moonings you will find it a most welcome guest. There is a certain half diabolical humor running through that renders it all the more readable. The general tone is cynical, but never morbid. Here is an extract from Book II—Chap. IX: "Now consider . . . what a fund of self-conceit there is in each of us,--do you wonder that the balance should so often dip the wrong way, and many a Blockhead cry: 'See there, what a payment; was ever a ~~gentlement~~ gentleman so ill-used!'³--I tell thee, Blockhead, it all comes of thy vanity . . . Fancy that thou deservest to be hanged (as is most likely) thou wilt feel it happiness to be only shot; fancy that thou deservest to be hanged in a hair halter, it will be luxury to die in hemp.--So true is it, what I then said, that the Fraction of Life can be increased in value not so much by increasing your numerator as by lessening your denominator. Nay, unless my Algebra deceive me

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Unity itself divided by Zero will give Infinity. Make thy claim of wages a zero, then; thou hast the world under thy feet."

I am not sure that I quite see the meaning of the talk about hanging and shooting, but I think I have some idea of what he is driving at; I have given the book and chapter so you can read the passage yourself to a better advantage by procuring the book. I am willing to confess that there are many passages that I entirely fail to understand; but in the main it is intelligible and entertaining,--instructing, and I think upon the whole, elevating. The introduction states that he had a most doleful experience in finding a publisher; this seems to be the case with nearly all great literary efforts.

There is an article in the last "Arena" by Albert Ross,⁴ entitled "What is Immoral in Literature".⁵ I have not read it but probably you have. It seems to me that, from a common sense standpoint, there can be no possible defense for that gentleman's fiction (or perhaps we had better say, truth). It is the simplest thing in the world for a person with the gift of writing to concoct a slimy tale after the fashion of "Sappho",⁶ "The Pace that Kills",⁷ "Thou Shalt Not, etc" and conclude it with what it pleases

so

the author to call a moral, but ^ doing does not detract from the books filthiness or pernicious influence. The first two books named above do not make the rather ghastly moral pretensions of the latter, but I consider them quite as pardonable^a. Do not think that I am setting myself up for a Saint Anthony (Comstock)⁸ for I am not; but I will say that the recent deluge of literary nastiness that has poured

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for the past two or three years from the soul-sewers of six or eight half-penny writers without any special literary excellence to aid them in their \oep obviously mercenary mission has been a disgrace to American letters. Neither Ross nor Saltus⁹ are literary artists, and their books are only bought by an itching gullible public whose mind is too shallow to realize its shallowness. Perhaps though I am a little too hard with Saltus, for some of his essays are said to be, in a way, fine. In a recent criticism the "Atlantic" remarked that his philosophy "showed some insight into his subject, but the light thrown upon the manner is chiefly a cigarette light."¹⁰ This is enough to prove that there is something in them worth reading [the essays]^b; but I was only speaking of his novels. If a man must have something essentially filthy, why can he not satisfy himself with the work of the ancient and venerable Moses? Verily, man's demand for the foul is insatiable! Here is the book—or Book—which we are all told to peruse, and in it lies enough offal to choke the throats of millions; and still they must have fresh carrion or literature will be a dead issue except to a select and torpid few who know no better than to read Thackeray & Carlyle. If all worldly creatures could realize that there is enough rottenness in their several systems already without enhancing it by the means of scrofulous novels the reading public would be wondrously elevated. But why dream of such a

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condition of things? The sooner I break from this strain, the better.

Let us talk of other things; let us go to college and be learned. If my little plan should work and I should find myself in Harvard next September I wonder if I should make a fool of myself—if I should only waste good time and money? I cannot think so; and yet, when a fellow sees no definite object in view it is natural that he should hesitate. But there is one thing that is unquestionable: throw aside the subject of books & education (that is education in the popular sense), ~~and~~ the experience of a year among new forms and faces would do me

^a WA suggests "un?pardonable?"

^b The square brackets here are EAR's.

a world of good in more ways than one. I am a little rusty, naturally, as I have spent all my days in Gardiner and never shone as a society star or "one of the boys". I have no desire to shine as either, but there is a place about midway between the two toward which what little common-sense I have seems to lean.

By the way I went to the library the other day and took out Omar Khayyam. It is a rather grim philosophy but rather attractive. As you say some of the tetrastichs are "quite pleasing": the following for instance:

"Why," said another, "Some there are who tell
Of one who threatens he will toss to Hell
The luckless Pots he marred in making—Pish!
He's a Good Fellow, and 'twill all be well."

Considerable thought in that, it seems to me. Write when you get a chance and let me know what you are driving at. Yours etc

EA Robinson

HCL Previously published in US, pp. 12-15.

NOTES

1. Willis P. Atwood, high school classmate of EAR. Atwood delivered the salutatory address in Latin at the graduation exercises.
2. *Sartor Resartus, the Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, first published in 1833-34. An important influence in the development of EAR's philosophical idealism, as expressed particularly in "Octaves" and in "Captain Craig." The passage quoted is from the chapter entitled "The Everlasting Yea." See also EAR's letters to Smith dated November 6, 1896 and November 22, 1896.
3. EAR misquoted here. Carlyle wrote "was ever a gentleman so used!"
4. Pseudonym of Linn Boyd Porter (1851-1916), a popular novelist of the time. In a September 6, 1890 article of *The Illustrated American* ("Passionate Pot Boilers," Volume 3, 423-426) devoted to the questions of morality and censorship in literature, and surveying with guarded favor a group of contemporary writers "roughly classed together by the public as the 'Erotic School' of fiction" (425), Albert Ross is singled out as a very inferior "disciple" of this school's "prominent apostles," one of the "improper gentlemen who deserve to be singled out for particular reprehension": "Of all the erotic writers who deal only in eroticism, he is the worst. He paints vice in the most alluring colors. When his heroes are wicked, they live in an impossible paradise of delights; when they reform, their troubles begin" (426). (SL)
5. See *The Arena*, Volume 3, pp. 438-445 (EAR left out the question mark in the title). (SL)
6. Most likely a reference to French author Alphonse Daudet's 1884 novel, *Sappho*, which he dedicated to his sons--"when they are twenty years old." (SL)
7. By Edgar Saltus (see note 9 below), published in 1889. (SL)
8. Anthony Comstock (1844-1915), United States Postal Inspector who was famous (or infamous) for his censorship of literature that conflicted with his strict Victorian views of what

constituted good morality. (SL)

9. Edgar Saltus (1855-1921) was a prolific and popular writer in his time. In the article from *The Illustrated American* referenced in Note 4, he is listed as one of the "leaders" (along with Amélie Rives) of "the so-called Erotic School" of literature, for which the anonymous author shows a carefully qualified favor. This author writes that Saltus, in comparison with Rives, "has a wider acquaintance with the world, and especially the world of men. The humbug and hypocrisy of the average Anglo-Saxon Philistine amused and irritated him. Almost a Frenchman in his mode of thinking and of writing, he took the French view of art, and was rather glad, perhaps, that it offended what he looked upon as the absurd conventionalism of his countrymen. . . . His books are not for boys or virgins; they cannot contaminate the adult and intelligent reader. The last of them, "The Pace that Kills," seems to us the most questionable. Yet its immorality is not directly apparent on the surface" (426). (SL)

10. See the February, 1891 issue of the *Atlantic* (Volume 67, p. 277), where a short review of Saltus' *Love and Lore* is given: "There is an alertness of movement and occasionally a penetration of life which interest one, but the light cast on the subject is mainly a cigarette light." (SL)