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To Harry de Forest Smith - February 3, 1892

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

717 Cambridge St.,

Cambridge, Feb^a 3 – 1891. [=1892]

My dear Smith,--

My memory has played me a little trick this week that almost startles me. To come to the point I cannot remember whether I wrote you a letter last Sunday or not; my impression, however, is that I did not, and taking it for granted will "let 'er go" now for a few minutes. And I will say to begin with that I have about as much business writing you (or anyone else) a letter now as I have painting my belly yellow. My midyear examination comes to-morrow, and I am just about half prepared to meet it. The subject is Shakspeare¹ (pardon my English spelling of the word—I prefer it) and you cannot possibly have an idea of the confounded mess that it will be. Prof. Child is a demon for details and has an unpleasant penchant for odd usages of words—prolepses, adjective-adverbs, etc.--and takes delight in setting a bewildering row of them before the student's eye to be explained and illustrated by examples. This, with interpretation of hard passages and historical points relative to Shakspeare and his works, I think will constitute the greater portion of the paper.

My experience of last Monday evening and Tuesday

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morning has kept me within doors to-night. You see Geo. Barstow is in Boston and I went in to see him. There was a season of about three hours in the "Old Elm" and of course there were innumerable pipes and frequent beers. The man who is bloody fool enough to do that kind of business the night before a mid-year in Eng. Rhet. & Comp. deserves no sympathy, I suppose, but sympathy or no sympathy, I felt like a lamb being led to the slaughter the next morning. Whether I drank too much beer or whether the consciousness that I was doing unwisely rendered my nerves unsteady, I cannot tell, but for a ~~time~~ time it seemed impossible for me to sit at a desk for three mortal hours in a hot room in the upper story of University Hall. I did, though,

^a WA adds a period here.

but I cannot tell the result. It will come in about three weeks. I believe I prophecied a B or a B- in one of my letters, but I am afraid I flew too high. A "C" will be quite up to my expectations.

After Shakspeare comes Eng^b 9 (Friday); then there will be a rest for a week before French. That week means hard work for me but I do not anticipate any great difficulty. Have about given up the idea of getting "fired."^c You may think that my talk on that subject was all chaff, but I can assure you that it was not.

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There were three-hundred and seventy odd students who took the midyear in Eng. A. last year and out of this number ~~nint~~ ninety-five were dropped. So you see that a good mark is a very comfortable thing to have. Without intending to blow my own horn in the least, I think that the "B" I rec'd on the hour-exam in that course together with my written work in Eng^d 9, which for some reason seems to have been a little above the average, may help me out on the mid-years and make partial amends for the bad head I had Tuesday morning. I hope you will not infer from this that I was in any way "full"—that would grieve me and blast my character.

I read your last letter riding into town Monday afternoon and felt thankful that I had the pleasure of so doing. I think you squelched me forever as a correspondent but I enjoyed it none the less for that. It is a pleasure to receive a letter from a friend who can write of something [except?] the old stereotyped topics and who can appreciate the natural variance of human nature. I know I have said this half a dozen times in past letters, but it is a matter worthy of considerable notice. Every day that I live I realize more and more the existence of several elements or characteristics in my make-up that, unless they are put down, will be of decided disadvantage

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to me in the future. In the first place, I am and always was too much of a dreamer: I have no sym-

^b WA adds a period here.

^c WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

^d WA adds a period here.

pathy with the cold matter-of-fact^e, contriving nature that has made the fortunes enjoyed by multitudes all around us (by fortunes, I mean the the possession of enough to make a man and his family comfortable and happy) and

is

this ^ a dangerous state to be in. I used to think that I was a kind of pessimist, but I have outgrown that idea.

The world as a whole is surely growing better and better, but there is yet an enormous field for improvement.

Another thing that troubles me is the knowledge that I am lacking to a considerable extent in self-confidence:--not exactly that, either—perhaps I had better say that sight of awakens a feeling

success ^ painfully approaching envy, and I am inclined too much to look upon its achievement as a kind of destiny. But

I am glad to say that I think that this is leaving me gradually, and I [=in] time I hope to have a fair chance of growing sensible. Whether the accepted theory of life and success is the true one or not, it is at present the practical one, and biting off ones^f nose will not help the matter in the least.

Well, I will say good-night now, and look for a second edition of your last letter on Tuesday next.

Sincerely,

Robinson^g

HCL US, 51-54.

EAR misdated this letter 1891.

NOTES

1. EAR bought a copy of Edward Dowden's *Shakspeare* (New York: D. Appleton Company, 1889) for use in the course. Later he gave it to Boris Todorin.

^e WA has "matter-of-fact".

^f WA has "one's".

^g WA omits the underline.