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To Harry de Forest Smith - March 23, 1892

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

1691 Cambridge St^a,

**Harvard University,
Cambridge**

May 23 - '92

My dear Smith,

At last I have settled myself and will try to write you a letter. Yesterday I could not get a chance. Since 7.30 this evening I have attended a lecture on "Sir Gawain & the Green Knight" by Prof. Kittredge,¹ read some of "Middlemarch" and smoked a pipe. The lecture was particularly interesting—much more so than the subject would lead one to think. He first read a translation (his own) of the more prominent portions of the poem and concluded with comments, historical & critical. In his translation he endeavored to keep the tone and flavor of the original as far as possible and, as far as I am able to judge, succeeded admirably. If you have every [=ever] read

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any of "Piers Plowman" you can have some idea of the alliterative swing of the story. It is supposed to have been written somewhere in the latter half of the fourteenth century, but the author is unknown.

There was something fascinating in the Prof's version of it. He clung to Saxon words almost exclusively and some of the lines were to say the least, unique. Here is one in particular that I remember:

"'Twas the cursedest kirk he ever had entered."
The only unsatisfactory feature of the affair was the small audience. Sever 11 seats about five hundred people and I should not think there could have been over fifty or sixty there at the most.

As to "Middlemarch", I regret to say that I am unable to appreciate the transcendent beauties of Geo. Eliot's character analysis.

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To me, she makes more of human character than life itself warrants. Thackeray is to me the ideal student of human nature. To be sure his creatures are to some extent types but not in the sense that those of Dickens are. Dickens deals almost exclusively in exaggerated characteristics; Thackeray with definitely drawn and coherent characters; while Geo. Eliot's works are a study of formative influences and psychological (I know how to spell it) results. In my opinion she stands below Jane Austen though she deals less with complex destiny. It may reveal my uneducated taste in making this confession of my opinions, but a fellow may as well tell the truth.

A rather interesting thing happened in my room this afternoon. Two friends of mine happened to call upon me who are at swords' points, so to speak. I watched them pretty closely and could see

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that they both felt rather uncomfortable and look[ed] very foolish at times. After a time the course of the conversation compelled them to speak to each other occasionally, and at 1.30 I left them together and went out to a French recitation. When I came back they were still in my room as good friends as they were before the difficulty. They saw me grin as I entered, and one of them immediately had an engagement.

This little incident made me think how foolish more than half of the enmities in the world are, after all. The fact is, life is too short to nourish such things profitably and a few words at the right time and in the right place might destroy hundreds of petty "spats" every day. I am not setting myself up for a professional peace-maker, but I honestly think that in this case I was the indirect means of bringing two people together who might

have otherwise hated each other to the end of their lives. I was glad to see the thing take place but I must confess that I felt a kind of unchristian pleasure in watching them.

The other day my friend Latham,² of New York, was in my room and after a silence of some minutes he made a statement that startled me a little. From the lips of some fellows I should not have thought much of it but I would have as soon thought of Walter Swanton's³ addressing me

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in such a manner, as his doing so.

"Robinson", he said, I can't see what this life of ours amounts too, anyway. What is the object of it? What are we here for?" I could not give him a very ~~different~~ definite answer, so I blew a stream of Bull Durham smoke into the air and shook my head. I guess we talked for an hour on the subject and then went to dinner. It is not such a foolish question to ask, after all, when we think it over. If we throw aside the gilded Paradise theory, it is a question what life really amounts to for more than three quarters of the world. I am very sure that what I have had thus far would not warrant my living it over again if I had the chance. Of ~~the~~ course

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there are portions of it that I shall always remember with pleasure, but when I consider what a small part of they [=the] whole they compose, I am quite willing to let things stand as they are.

Sometimes I get rather blue in thinking over the fact that I should ~~h~~ now be a much different person from what I am, had I come to Harvard three years ago as a Freshman. I might have done it, if I had

laid my plans. With no offense to the smaller colleges I do not think that they have much in common with the elective privileges {=privileges}^b open to students here. I am just beginning to discover what kind of a place Harvard is, and what a ~~consummate~~ consummate ass I made of myself in my choice of courses this year. I am satisfied

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with two of them; the others have been practically a waste of time.

Next year I shall do better, but that will be the end of it.

Sincerely,
Robinson.

If you are not able to read this you can say to yourself that your friend has been getting off four pages of his guff with the best of intentions, and throw the stuff into the fire. By the way I wish you would tell

R. me honestly whether you can read my writing or not. Compared with yours, it seems a kind of imposition.

HCL US, 64-66.

NOTES

1. George Lyman Kittredge (1860-1941), professor of English literature at Harvard and an important early 20th century literary scholar. (SL)
- 2.^c George W. Latham, another member of the Corn Cob Club.^d
3. A Gardiner boyhood friend and devout Swedenborgian.

^a WA adds a period before the comma.

^b WA does not read this as a spelling error, and has "privileges."

^c This and the following note are WA's notes 1 and 2, respectively.

^d WA adds, "For further details, see p." However, since he did not mention any text, and since it is not clear to me what he was inviting the reader to seek "further details" about (Latham, the incident, or the Corn Cob Club), I would suggest that the interested reader consult the index of Donaldson's biography for more information about these.