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To Harry de Forest Smith - October 1, 1893

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, October 1, 1893.

My dear Smith,

You are probably getting a little impatient by this time, but I have made a "big brace" a at last and am going to write you a letter, or something that will take the place of one. My room is too cold for a free flow of thought, b and I may get discouraged at the end of the first page; but my inclinations are all right, and with a little effort of imagination you will be able to fill in as many more pages as you like.

I have nothing in particular to say except that it is rather lonesome here without you, and on dark, dull Sundays like this I find it hard c to be cheerful and optimistic, and everything else that a useful man should be in order to fill his place in nature to the satisfaction of himself and his dear friends who feel so much for his welfare. I am half afraid d that my "dear friends" here in Gardiner will be disappointed in me if I do not do something before long, but somehow I don't care half as much about the matter as I ought. One of my greatest misfortunes is the total inability to admire the so-called successful men who are pointed out to poor devils like me as examples for me to follow and

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a These quotations marks are written in black ink.
b This comma is written in black ink.
c WA omits this mistake. In the holograph, the "a" was typed directly over the "h".
d WA omits this mistake. In the holograph the "f" was typed directly over the "a", and there is a diagonal line struck through the pair.
e This "x" is written in black ink, over an illegible deleted letter.
revere. If Merchant A and Barrister B are put here as "ensamples to
mortsals," I am afraid that that {sic} I shall always stand in the shadow as one
of Omar's broken pots.¹ I suspect that I am pretty much what I am, and
that I am pretty much a damned fool in many ways; but I further suspect
that I am not altogether an ass, whatever my neighbors may say. I may
live to see this egotistic idea exploded, but until that time comes I am
to hug my own particular phantoms² and think as I like. If I turn out a
failure after all, and go hopelessly to the devil, I shall have Aldrich's
lines h to console myself with:

"Then if at last thine airy structure fall
Dissolve;² and vanish, take thyself no blame:
They fail, and they alone, who have not striven."³

For I am going to strive, and strive hard this winter. My eyes are
are {sic} a little better, and I am pretty well convinced that I shall be
able to work three or four hours a day without injuring them any. I know
from experience that five hours of the kind of work I mena k {=mean} is all, if
not more than I can stand. I can work ten houra [=hours] with my arms and
legs if⁶
the occasion requires it, but not with my fancy- I will not yet presume
to give it the title of imagination. Fancy and imagination brings to
my mind the "hell" sonnet that you wanted me to copy. I will enclose it

¹ The closing quotation mark is written in black ink.
² This and all page numbers in this letter, as well as the elipses, are reproduced from the holograph.
³ The "s" is written in black ink.
⁴ The comma is written in black ink. WA omits it.
⁵ The "r" is written in black ink.
⁶ EAR drew an arc in black ink between the "e" and the "a" by way of correction.
⁷ These are the last two words of the previous line.
with this letter if I do not forget it. My fancy gets a little lively in those fourteen lines, I have never been quite able to know what to make of them. They may be nothing but rot - they surely are if the reader can make nothing of them- but I have always cherished the idea that there is a thought mixed up in them that is worth the trouble of the thinking. Saben’s over-friendly statement that the thing is a "great poem" doesn’t affect my opinions much, as his enthusiasm is liable to run away with him when it has a chance - especially in matters where his friends are concerned. He is a magnificent fellow with all his peculiarities, but not just the one I should go to for an impartial criticism. I do not think it possible for a friend to criticise another’s work, without being influence in his favor to some extent. I hate self-praise, or much of it, but it really seems to me that I have brought out the idea of the occasional realization of the questionable supremacy of ourselves over those we most despise in a moderately new way. If there is a little poetry in it, then all is better. There is poetry in all types of humanity - even in lawyers and horse-jockeys - if we are willing to search it out; and I have tried to find a little for the poor fellows in my hell, which is an exceedingly worldly and transitory one, before they soar above me in myig-

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\(^m\) WA omits this mistake.
\(^n\) The "o" and "n" are typed over letters that I am unable to make out with certainty. The "r" may be a faded "n".
\(^o\) The "o" is typed over an "e" by way of correction.
\(^p\) The "t" appears to have been typed over an "e".
\(^q\) WA has the "the".
\(^r\) The "e" is written in black ink.
norance of what is, to sing in the sun - not in triumph over me, but in the glad truth that destiny has worked out for them. I will state here that the verses in question must be taken as rather vague generalities: they will not bear, and I never intended them to bear, any definite analysis. To me they suggest a single and quite clear thought; if they do as much to you and to any other person who has seen them [=them], I am satisfied.

   Excuse this flourish of trumpets. and let me have a smoke. I wish you were to have it with me; but as you are not, I shall try to make the best of it as it is. You may smell the tobacco from where you are: it is bad, but it burns.

   Yours truly,
   E.A.R.

I called at your house some time ago—about a week. Your father and mother were hardly reconciled to your absence and the place seemed strange. When you come home again we will have sessions.

   R.

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5 The comma is written in black ink.
1 WA separates these two words.
2 The "e" is written in black ink.
3 The "t" here is typed directly over an aborted "h", and EAR has written a black ink "t" above the pair, by way of indicating his intended reading.
4 WA omits this mark, which seems to be a period by is faded in the holograph.
5 EAR typed an "r" directly over a first "n", and also wrote an "r" above the line in black ink.
6 The signature and postscript are written in black ink. WA omits the underline.
7 WA has a period here.
[Enclosure]

SUPREMACY.\textsuperscript{aa}

There is a drear and lonely tract of hell
   From all the common gloom removed afar:\textsuperscript{bb}
   A flat sad land where only shadows are,
Whose lorn estate no word of mine can tell.
I walked among the shades, and knew them well -
   Men I had scorned upon life's little star
   For churls and sluggards, - and I knew the scar
Upon their brows of woe ineffable.

But, as I moved triumphant on my way,
   Into the dark they vanished, one by one;
Then came an awful light – a blinding ray -
   As if a new creation were begun:
And with a swift importunate dismay
   I heard the dead men singing in the sun.\textsuperscript{4}

E.A. Robinson\textsuperscript{cc}

   \{Typewritten.\}

1. See quote from Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam in the letter to Smith from March 10, 1891. (SL)
2.\textsuperscript{dd} An echo of Bryant's "Thanatopsis": "and each one as before will chase / His favorite phantom."
4. First published in \textit{The Harvard Advocate}, LIII, No. 8 (June 16, 1892), 122. Included, with considerable modification, in TNB.

\textsuperscript{aa} WA omits the period.
\textsuperscript{bb} The "r" is typed over a semicolon.
\textsuperscript{cc} The signature is written in black ink.
\textsuperscript{dd} This and the next two notes are WA's notes 1, 2 and 3, respectively.