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" 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, 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] 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 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 revere. If Merchant A and Barrister B are put here as "enamples to mortals," I am afraid that that I shall always stand in the shadow as one of Omar's broken pots.
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 phantoms 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 to console myself with:

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

For I am going to strive, and strive hard this winter. My eyes are 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 mean is all, if not more than I can stand. I can work ten hours [=hours] with my arms and legs if 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 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 influenced 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 the 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 my ignorance 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, 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.

[Enclosure]

SUPREMACY

There is a drear and lonely tract of hell
From all the common gloom removed afar:
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.

E. A. Robinson