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2-18-1894

To Harry de Forest Smith - February 18, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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Recommended Citation

Robinson, Edwin Arlington, "To Harry de Forest Smith - February 18, 1894" (1894). *Edwin Arlington Robinson Letters and Transcriptions*. 123.

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITHGardiner, Feb. 18.^a 1894^b

My dear Smith,

Boreas has been on the rampage during the past week, and the weather has~~s~~ been damnable. This morning began with a mild storm, and the present outlook is that we are going to have what our ancestors called a "soft spell"^c. With almost four feet o{f}^d snow in many places, it will be a little too soft for man's convenience, but the powers seldom stop to consider that. I have shoveled snow until my heart aches to think of such business, but I suppose there is more coming.

I was seized with another reading fit last week and took up Cherbuliez's "Meta Holdenis,"^e a queer kind of novel filled with a quiet humor and glittering with sharp sayings - characteristics of "L'Idee de Jean Tèterol"^f and "Samuel Brohl & Cie."^g .^h by the same author.¹ Have you ever read any of his books? Jean Teterol, one of the best novels in recent literatureⁱ is published in English by the Appletons. If you care to amuse yourself by reading books of that class, you cannot do better than to buy it. I feel quite safe in recommending^j it, as I have read it twice, and have

^a WA has a comma here.

^b The "4" is typed directly over a "3".

^c The both quotes are written in black ink.

^d WA transcribes the "f".

^e WA places the comma outside the quotation mark. The comma, the "H" and both quotation marks are written in black ink.

^f Both quotation marks are written in black ink. WA has "Tèterol".

^g Quotation marks are written in black ink. WA has "Cie;".

^h WA omits this period (or faded comma).

ⁱ "ure" is written in black ink.

^j The "g" is written in black ink.

felt a broadening of my humanity after each reading. The Fr^ench^k text of the book is reasonably difficult, the author being gifted, like Daudet, with an extensive vocabulary of common words for describing common things.

the^l
I see by hee^m the Journal that the Symphony Orchestra played another getⁿ
symphony by Brahms last evening - No. 2. Sometimes I feel so
discontente{d}^o

here in Gardiner that I feel almost desperate in my desire to see and

2. . .^p
hear something; but when I pause to think the matter over I realize that [I am] best off where I am in my present straightened circumstances. "To stay at home is best."^{2q} I live in the hope that a time may come when I shall have all those things near at hand, and at the same time sufficient capital in my^r pocket to take the benefits^s they offer. It is a shadowy^t hope, but for all that my courage wonderfully go^u^d,^v as I have said before. Were it not for that persistent presentiment to which I have referred once or twice in our^w conversations, I should have little concern for the future. But such things^x
I^y
are in other hands than mine, and have no better direction than that of

^k WA transcribes the "e".

^l Written in black ink.

^m WA omits this mistake.

ⁿ Written in black ink.

^o This is the last word of the previous line. WA transcribes the "d".

^p The page numbers for this letter, with their ellipses, are taken from the holograph.

^q WA omits the second quotation mark.

^r Written in black ink.

^s The "s" is written in black ink.

^t The "s" is written in black ink.

^u Written in black ink.

^v The comma is written in black ink.

^w The "r" is written in black ink.

^x The "s" is written in black ink.

^y Written in black ink.

my own reason when it tells [me] to do the best I can and wait the issue^z. It is but a matter^{aa} of a few years anyway, and then we may all laugh that we ever took life so ser{i}ously,^{bb} - for I think we all take it a little more serious{-}ly than we like to confess^{cc}.

I have been rewriting my sketch of "Lévy^{dd} Condillac". The thing has given me a deal of trouble and even now I am far from seeing my way out of it. It is not an easy task to kill a woman in childbirth with nervous prostration brought on by excessive clarinet playing on the part of an over-enthusiastic young husband without bordering on the ridiculous. This is what I have been trying to do, and I had the satisfaction of proving to myself that the thing can be done provided sufficient skill is exerted. Whether I can do it or not remains to be seen. Sometimes I fear^{ee} th{a}t^{ff} I am trying to straddle to the stars in this scheme of mine, and may be obliged to come down a little before I realize anything. That will be hard, but not impossible when I set my reason to work.

I receiv{e}d^{gg} a letter from my friend Ford³ in which he tells me

3. . .

that Rudyard Kipling is doing some fine w{o}rk^{hh} for St. Nicholas. I have heard of it before, but have never seen any of the sketches. Do you know what

^z The second "s" is written in black ink.

^{aa} The "r" is written in black ink.

^{bb} WA omits the comma and transcribes the "i".

^{cc} The second "s" and the period are written in black ink.

^{dd} The *accent aigu* is written in black ink.

^{ee} The "r" is written in black ink.

^{ff} WA transcribes the "a".

^{gg} WA transcribes the "e".

^{hh} WA transcribes the "o".

they are like? I wonder where that new novel, "The Stone Bridge,"ⁱⁱ is, and ^{jj} it will be as long in making its appearance as was "Many Inventions".^{kk} Somehow I hope it will be a little more satisfactory when it does come; the other book was in many ways a disappointment to me. There was to^{ll} much jou^{rr}nalistic^{mmm} stuffing in it. Remarks like these show how easy it is to find fault, but I am sometimes half inclined to think that fault-finding, in its various forms, is one of the great pleasures of life. Sir John Lubbock⁵ does not find a place for it in his book,⁶ but even the great are apt to occasionally overlook things. And by the way, has it ever occurred to you that that book reveals an almost superhuman familiarity with the world's literature? I do not refer so much to his list of "the hundred best books" as to his quotations and general remarks scattered throughout the book. When I try to conceive of that man's brain power, I shudder at my own ^{lit{t}l{e}}ⁿⁿ ness. That I stop shuddering and try to make myself believe that I am as great as anybody, or rather that I shall be when the final ex^amination^{oo} comes. I cannot believe that these tremendous worldly^{pp} differences are to be carried on through the second life. I cannot conceive of eternity as an |endless^{qq} panorama of "busted ambitions." That would be hell with a vengeance.^{rr}

ⁱⁱ The quotation marks are both written in black ink. WA places the comma outside the quotation mark.

^{jj} WA transcribes the "i".

^{kk} Both quotation marks are written in black ink.

^{ll} WA transcribes the second "o".

^{mmm} WA adds the "r".

ⁿⁿ This is the last word of the previous line. WA adds the second "t" and the "e".

^{oo} WA transcribes the "a".

^{pp} The "o" is written in black ink over a typed "e".

^{qq} The "a", the vertical bar, and the first "s" are written in black ink.

I cannot believe that we poor devils deserve any such punishment. Life^{ss} itself is no joke to a great percentage of us, and all things^{tt} seem to point^{uu} to an improvement of our condition when ~~things~~^{they^{vv}} are explained. I am not preaching, but I believe in immortality - I can't help it.

I am glad that you are taking lessons in music because I can come to you for points. My knowledge is merely the natural outgrowth of an enthusiasm.^{ww} 4. . . and includes practically nothing of real science. My^{xx} fondness for music is wholly of an emotional kind - I care nothing for it unless^{yy} it suggests something more than mental gymnastics on the part of the composer. Piano concertos are my worst enemies at a concert.

I understand that "The Old Folks at Home"^{zz} is no^{aaa} of the themes in^{bbb} Dvorak's latest (American) symphony. You know it is built from Negro^{ccc} and Indian airs. Does it occur to you that it is a trifle galling to have no native composer to do this kind of thing? The chief use of America in the aesthetic world seems to be to furnish material and suggestions for others to take advantage^{ddd} of. I hope that a time may come when we shall have a

^{rr} This is the last letter of the previous line. The "e" and the period are written in black ink.

^{ss} The "L" is written in black ink.

^{tt} The "t" is written in black ink.

^{uu} The "t" is written in black ink.

^{vv} Written in black ink.

^{ww} WA has a comma. Read as a comma.

^{xx} The "M" is written in black ink.

^{yy} WA transcribes the "ss".

^{zz} Both quotation marks are written in black ink.

^{aaa} WA has simply has "one".

^{bbb} These are the last words of the previous line.

^{ccc} The upper-case "N" is written in black ink above a typed lower-case "n".

romantic spirit of our own, but perhaps we are too young. This may be
 the reason that there are no spirits^{eee} in our ruins. All our romance is cen{-}
 [tered] in the traditions of the red men, and there is a sad lack of human
 interest.^{fff}

This truth is best illustrated when we try to put ourselves in sympathy
 with an Indian love story. They are different creatures from ourselves^{ggg}

Perhaps I have said enough for to-day. I feel the need of a pipe
 a{n}d^{hhh} {w}ishⁱⁱⁱ you were to keep me company.

Yours very truly
E.A.R.^{jjj}

HCL US, 128-131.
 Typewritten.

NOTES

1. Charles Victor Cherbuliez (1829-1899), French writer, noted for his portrayal of odd characters and for his psychological insight.^{kkk}
Samuel Brohl & Cie, {published 1880}. EAR borrowed this book from the Harvard College Library in 1892-93.
2. The refrain from Longfellow's "Song."
3. Joseph S. Ford. {One of EAR's Harvard friends. See WA's general note to the letter of January 24, 1894.}
4. *The Stone Bridge* ?? {This is possibly a reference to Kipling's story, "The Bridge-Builders," first published in the *Illustrated London News Christmas Number* of 1893.}
5. English writer (1834-1913) noted primarily for his studies in natural science but also respected as a literary commentator.
6. *The Pleasures of Life*, given originally as a series of lectures, was published in two parts, 1887-1889. The list of one hundred books (excluding living authors) is in Part I, Chapter IV, "The

^{ddd} The "t" is written in black ink over a typed "n".

^{eee} The "t" is written in black ink.

^{fff} This is the last word of the previous line. The first "t" is written in black ink over a typed "h". The second "t" is typed directly over the "s".

^{ggg} WA adds a period here.

^{hhh} WA transcribes the "n".

ⁱⁱⁱ WA transcribes the "w".

^{jjj} The valediction and signature are written in black ink. WA omits the underline.

^{kkk} In his yellow note page, WA also types "Meta Holdenis" and "L'Idée de Jean Teterol" on separate lines, though it is not clear what he wished to say about these novels.

Choice of Books."