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3-31-1894

To George W. Latham - March 31, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

Gardiner, Maine,
March 31 - 1894.

My dear Latham,

I am doing all I can to improve my handwriting, but I am afraid that I shall never be successful enough to make you or anyone else read it without an effort. Hubbell in the last letter he wrote to me (which was many weeks ago, by the way) told me that it was bad and others have told me the same thing. I think you hinted something of the kind not long ago. If my writing is altogether too bad, be good enough to tell me so, and I will do my work on a typewriter hereafter—though I have a foolish prejudice against a machine in friendly correspondence. I envy you your free hand and many other things, for that matter, but mostly your strong eyes. I do not mean by this that I would have you lose them, if I could have them transferred to me,—I only mean that I would like to have a pair like them.

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So you have been homesick for Cambridge. Well, I know what that means, although there is something in the atmosphere of the place—the physical atmosphere, I mean—that does not agree with me. If I could have felt as well during my two years at Harvard as I am feeling now, the life would have been a far different thing from what it was. But I do not complain. Those two years were the only years of my life that I look back upon with any pleasure to speak of—but I can[']t help imagining what they might have been had I not been continually "out of sorts", as we Yankees say.—Do you know that I am glad I am a Yankee? God made me long and awkward, but for all that I thank him for the Maine influence. It is a rough state in many ways—the majority of its inhabitants lack the ease and polish of you New Yorkers; but there is a strength in the air that can only be appreciated by the more or less sentimental natives. My idea acme [?] {course?} of American life is from Maine to Boston until a man's character is settled (if it ever is) and then wherever fate may lead him. I know I could never stand the west; I doubt if I could

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be contented in your own glorious state of New York, albeit Peters never tired of telling me that it was the only state fit to live in. And by the way, do you hear any{-} thing from our friend nowadays? I wonder if I could get the money he owes me by writing to his progenitor? I hate to resort to such methods, but I also hate to be made a guy of. I will say in his favor, however, that I do not think he borrowed my money with the intention of "skinning" me; I think his rapid friends were a little too much for him and he fell into loose ways. Your word, "lousy" would fit well to some of his associates. But then, Cambridge was always a little slow for Peters and he has much of my sympathy. He ought to read the "Cliff-Dwellers" about five times and try to draw a lesson from it.

Perhaps you would like to know what I have been reading since I last y wrote you. I fear I have been using my eyes a little too much, but somehow I cannot keep away from the book-shelves in my room. You may judge for yourself whether this list is too ~~ma~~ long for a man with my infirmity: Daudet: Jack, Tartarin de Tarascon; De Musset: Pierre et Camille, Croisilles, On ne saurait^a penser de tout, and some of his poems;¹ Prévost: Manon Lescaut;² Milton: Samson Agonistes; Swinburne: Atalanta in Calydon;³ Cowper: The Task, Book I. These

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are the principal things, and you may supply for yourself a moderate amount of shorter pieces.

I mentioned "Jack" in my belated note. I wish you could find time to read it, as I am sure that it would impress you as forcibly as it did me. Most people do not like it because it has a "bad ending", but you are above such foolish criticisms as that. Read it when you get a chance and also Tartarin. I have two more volumes concerning the prodigious adventures of that illustrious man, but have not read them yet. I will not burden you with any further remarks except to say that I am a little disappointed in Musset's prose and not altogether hypnotized by Manon Lescaut; the last named is one of those wonderful books that could not have been written out of France. Three hundred pages of red hot love get a

^a WA reads "sauvait", but the French is as I have transcribed it, and EAR's handwriting is ambiguous at best.

little tiresome in spite of the author's genius. Swinburne's Atalanta is hollow compared with Samson. I have read somewhere that one can get a clearer idea of the Greek tragedy by reading Samson than in any other way, and now I think it is true.—You may be interested to know that I purpose to translate the Antigone of Sophocles into English verse. My friend Smith is to give me as good a prose version as he is able and I hope that my part of the work may be completed sometime within a year. If it proves in any way satisfactory, I we shall probably have a

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small edition printed for private circulation. It is unnecessary to add that you will be one of the first to receive a copy should such a thing come to pass. I think the work would be a good thing for me ^a^b in many ways, though of course the possible question of wasting time is to be considered. I am beginning to think that I must have some of the Grecian spirit in me, though the rugged side seems to be lacking. My childishness interferes with my Hellenism;—this may sound a little paradoxical, but you will understand what I mean.

You tell me that you do not know much about the fellows who used to hang around my room. Well, perhaps I can enlighten you a little and make you feel, at least for a few moments, that you are not so far from your old haunts as you think. Butler is in Europe—where I cannot say, as he has never written to me since he left America. He sent me an illuminated photograph (Hadrian's Tomb and St^c Peters) from Rome about a month ago—that is all I know of his whereabouts. I suppose he will come back sometime and give an account of himself. He told me that he would come ~~an~~ to see me this summer as he did last and I rather think he will if he returns in time. He seems to be my friend, though he has a queer way of neglecting little courtesies and saying rather sharp things.

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I really think that Saben is going to surprise us this spring and fulfil his plans. He tells me that he is to sail for Oxford in May. He intends to spend his

^b WA transcribes "in" with a question mark in square brackets. In the margin he suggests, "an?"

^c WA adds a period here.

summer on the continent. This is all right if his money holds out. It makes me shudder to think of that man alone in a strange land with an empty pocket-book. He writes he [=me] a letter of anywhere from twelve to twenty pages about once in a fortnight, and seems, upon the whole, to be in rather good spirits. Not long ago he told me of a champagne supper which he enjoyed with Dr. Abbott.³ I suppose that when he gets across the water he will be holding literary high-jinks with Goldwin Smith⁴ and Herbert Spencer,⁵ though he may be a little disappointed to learn that the author of Synthetic Philosophy is incurably fond of comic opera. I have also read that he smokes cigarettes and plays billiards—all of which is very bad for a man of his calibre.

There was a time when Tryon wrote me letters but that time is past. Once in a great while I get a meagre note from [him] telling me that he is grinding so hard that he cannot find time to write any more. Industry has become chronic with him now, and I doubt if he ever gets over it. I told him last winter that he was in danger of narrowing his soul while he

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was broadening his mind, but I do not think that he found time to think the matter over. It will be a great pity if such a magnificent fellow as Tryon breaks down in his work. There is danger of such a thing, as I fancy he will keep up pretty much the same strain all through his life.

becam{e}^d acquainted with
 During my Harvard experience I ~~met~~ ^{^e} two men who interested me more than all the others I met—not excluding Saben with all his unique humanity. Tryon was one of them.

I have written one or two letters to Ford and received one from him. He has not seen fit to answer my last, so I cannot tell you much about him, more than to say that he is one of the bright men I know and [one] of the men whom I shall always look upon as an example of clean American manhood^f There is much in him that I never discovered until my trip to Boston last November^g

^d WA transcribes the "e".

^e The caret is below "met" in the holograph.

^f WA adds a period here.

^g WA adds a period here.

I hate to say anything more about my isolation, but you do not know what you say when you tell me that you are worse off in that way than I. You have an occupation, you are making a living. I have no occupation excepting my own uncertain desk-work and am living upon my mother's income which is none too large for her alone. To be sure I make my expenses as small as possible, but to a man with my sensibilities such a life is galling and painfully unsatisfactory. The people of Gardiner are good people enough but they are not companions [?] {confreres?} for me more

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than I for them. We have nothing in common as regards personal tastes and ideals. I do not know a man or woman in this place whom I should feel wholly free to call upon with the purpose of reading—say Matthew Arnold's Poems. This is a small matter however. A man can live without friends as long as he has hopes; but sometimes I lose hope and laugh at myself for writing when I ought to be earning bread and butter. I cannot help thinking that I can do something if I keep at it, but the doubt and frequent discouragement is hard to bear.

I suppose I am too hopelessly out of your way ~~to~~ for you to come and see me for a few days this summer. I shall extend the invitation, anyway, which you always consider as good. I found a grim humor in your question "What magazine has been printing etc?" When a magazine prints anything from my pen, you will know it. There is an "E.A. Robinson" who writes for the New York Ledger, I think, but I am not he.—Sometimes I get tired of listening to the brook which is eternally running below my window. It has been running there for ever since I can remember anything and has run through a good many changes. It has changed itself about as much as my prosperity. I wonder if I shall always keep on in this way—full of ambition, but accomplishing so little that I feel ashamed of myself wherever I go—that is, as much as my pleasure-destroying fatalism will permit?

Most sincerely,
E.A.R.

HCL

1. Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) was an important French poet, novelist and dramatist, as well

as a lover of George Sand. "Pierre and Camille" (1844) and "Croisilles" (1839) are novellas. *On ne saurait penser à tout* (EAR slightly alters the title) is a play of 1849. (SL)

2. Abbé Prévost (1697-1763), the French author of the highly controversial, though also highly popular novel *L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, published in 1731. (SL)

3. Swinburne's verse drama of 1865. (SL)

4. Possibly Austin Abbott, LL.D. (1831-1896), the lawyer, author and novelist of Boston. (SL)

5. Goldwin Smith (1823-1910), the British academic and historian known for his wide-ranging activism on behalf of a variety of social, political and economic causes. (SL)

6. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the popular English philosopher and champion of the application of the principles of evolution to society. His "Synthetic Philosophy" was appealing to many in his day, appearing as it did to offer a systematic, positivistic "alternative" to religious faith. (SL)