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To Harry de Forest Smith - June 3, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Maine,
June 3 – 1894.

My dear Smith,

I naturally expected something of a remonstrance against what I said concerning your "drawing away" and I have nothing particular to say in my defense except to tell you that my words were true to my feelings. I fancy I said six months instead of three years because I have ~~been~~ lately been in a mind to notice and magnify things that would not occur to me when I was in a different frame of mind. My failure thus far to accomplish anything or to be anybody in the world, rather than my separation from the one who is and always will be a part of my daily life, is the cause of all this. Until I feel that I am independent—"a man among men"—I shall not have much peace. My pride is almost unnatural and sometimes I wonder if it is not killing me by inches. This is enough, and now let me make ~~and~~ an end of this lugubrious confidence which, undoubtedly, has long since tired you and compromised my worth in your estimation. When you come home you will not find me a broken down wreck or anything of the kind. On the contrary, I think you will find me surprisingly good-natured. There is but one thing that can make me disagreeable and gloomy. What that thing is, I shall tell you in person.

-2-

I have lately been reading Herbert Spencer's "Education".¹ I suppose you know it thoroughly so you will not need any of my comment. However, I must say that the idea of throwing aside the languages in favor of the sciences would make elementary education a terribly dry scald for me. I suppose, upon the whole, it would be a boon to humanity, but God help the poor devils who are constructed like me. His general theory of instruction is all right, though in no wise original. His English is rather hard and his affected use of big words is not always pleasing. But then, the book is one we all should read as it is crammed with good things and filled with an obviously honest enthusiasm. If such a thing should be that you have not read [it], you will do well to do so this summer.

Yesterday I got my "McClure's" and read Kiplings^a animal story "Kaa's Hunting."^{2b} It is a queer thing, well done,

^a WA has "Kipling's".

^b WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

of course, but I do not think I care for another like it. The author tried to do something new and succeeded; but I infinitely prefer Mulvaney and his comrades to snakes and monkeys. I tried to find an allegory in the stuff, but the effort was unsatisfactory. Perhaps you will have better luck. There are two or three fine touches in the piece such as "he (the python) seemed to pour himself along the ground."^c My taste in this direction corresponds with my indifference to the doings of trained animals. I prefer men and women who live, breath, talk, fight, make love, or go to the devil after the manner of human beings. Art is only valuable to me when it reflects humanity or at least human emotions.

-3-

^dI do not think you will be surprised or offended at my preference for Cambridge to Brunswick during Class Day week. If I went to Brunswick it would be to meet strangers, while by going to Cambridge—I shall meet old friends. I should have just about as much interest in attending the Bowdoin ~~celebration~~ festivities at that time as you would have in going to Harvard when your own college was having general "high-jinks" in your absence. So it does not look now as if we should meet until the first of July. Well, we must make the most of the time we have, and try to feel that we have accomplished something when the time comes for you to go away again.

me

If you wish ^ to get anything for you while I am in Boston it would be a pleasure for me to do so. Of course there is no need of my saying this, but it may be the means of your thinking of something that you would not otherwise. I am always^e happy when I feel that I am doing something for somebody else besides myself, so I rather hope you will think of something—even if it be rum.

I have written 225 lines of "The Night Before", and am getting rather enthusiastic over the thing. The story is pretty good and the writing of it is the most difficult thing that I have ever undertaken. These two facts serve as incentives. Fifteen lines an hour is good work and I feel much better after I have done them. The story is unpleasant, founded upon my system of "opposites" that is, creating a fictitious life in direct opposition to a real life which I know. My recent mental disturbances have rendered some kind of more or less literary expression

^c WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

^d I am following WA here in starting a new paragraph, but there is no visible indent in the holograph.

^e WA transcribes the "s".

an ~~absolutely necessary~~ absolute necessity; and this story, which by

-4-

the way, comes dangerously near to being what the world calls "hot stuff" is doing me a good service in working off my general discontent. It reflects, in ~~an~~ a measure, my present mood in the narration of things of which I know nothing except by instinctive fancy. There is battle (of the worst kind), murder and sudden death in it, together with other things equally interesting were they put in the hands of a competent writer. As it is, I think you may enjoy it, but I must ask you not to expect too much, and to make a strong effort not to laugh at the attempted intensity of my murderer's confession. The success of the poem will depend wholly upon the success of this intensity, which ought to increase from the start and end with a grand smash. At any rate, you will think well of me for trying to do something a little above the ordinary, whether I succeed or not. Here is a little observation that will come in towards the end:

"I tell you, Domine,
There are times in the lives of us poor devils
When heaven and hell get mixed."

The main purpose of the thing is to show that men and women are individuals; and there is a minor injunction running through it not to thump a man too hard when he is down. This, however, is hidden, and would probably not be noticed by one reader in a hundred. If the poem is a little fatalistic, you must excuse me. I write it because I cannot help it, and this is also true of the way in which I do it. —I have just finished reading your "God's Fool"³ aloud to Mother. I liked it immensely. Butler tells me that he is disappointed in "Marcella"⁴ and has gone back to "On the Heights" (Auerbach)⁵ of which he never tires. This [is] another of my disconnected letters. Shall try to do better next time.

Sincerely,
E.AR.^f

HCL US, 159-162.

NOTES

1. English philosopher (1820-1903). *Education*, 1861. {See also letter to Latham, March 31, 1894, and note 6 for that letter.}
2. *McClure's Magazine*, June 1894. Also collected in *The Jungle Book* (1894). (SL)

^f WA has "E.A.R."

- 3.[§] By Maarten Maartens, 1892.
4. By Mrs. Humphry Ward, 1894.
5. By Berthold Auerbach, 1865.

[§] This and the next two notes are WA's notes 2, 3 and 4 respectively.