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10-10-1894

## To George W. Latham - October 10, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

Gardiner, Maine,  
Oct<sup>a</sup> 10 – 1894.

My dear Latham,

I received your letter with check for twenty-two dollars last Monday and was very grateful for both. The money came at a good time and of course a letter from you is good at any time. Situated as you are with at least a certain amount of intellectual activity around you, you cannot appreciate my feelings when I get a letter from one of the few people in the world I care for. You know my sentimental weaknesses, however, and there is no need of my dilating on them any more. As to your "shamefacedness" let me say that no man knows better than I that a man cannot pay his debts until he [illegible word crossed out] is able to. I think it was understood that you were not to pay me that money until you were quite "good and ready" as we say in Maine, ~~I~~ and I believe that you were confident that I did not worry about it. Your long silence did not puzzle me so much as you very likely thought, for you see I made a kind of

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recreative study of you during our two years in Cambridge. You will not think any less of ~~my~~ me for confessing this as it is a part of my nature to do such things. There is only now and then a man that interests  
him

me sufficiently to make me care to study ~~them~~, but I found a gold mine in you—so much of one that I am going to tell you what I think of your present educational difficulties and run the risk of branding myself an idiot in your eyes forever.

You have always shown me and told me that your interests lack concentration. Let<sup>b</sup> me take for a starting  
the fact

point ^ that you like the Greek Drama, Matthew Arnold's poems, and the "Nation", and give you my opinions as to the probable success of a studious attempt on your part to devote your time—your leisure, at first—to a few chosen subjects. If I know anything about

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<sup>a</sup> WA has "Octo."

<sup>b</sup> WA has "Le".

you you are far more alive to the aesthetic side of things than you are willing to confess, even to yourself; you also have a practical power of absorbing living questions, and considering them from a purely intellectual point of view. These two things taken together lead me to think that Athens is really more to you than New York, and true human nature more than common

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politics. It would be useless and unwise, however, for you to attempt to disassociate yourself from the present, but you are a little prone to forget that the present is a part of all time, and that all time is a part of the present. Sometimes I am almost inclined to believe that you have affected a reverence for the commonplace until you a[re] something in doubt as to the true state of things in that direction; perhaps this is going too far;--if it is, you will kindly excuse me on the ground of good intentions.

You are very fond of giving your opinions and I must confess that you have a way of doing it with good effect; but I am afraid that you do not always stop to ask yourself how near or how far from the truth are the thoughts that you express. You have a slight leaning for the eccentric and should be glad for it; but don't lose your truer and higher self in the fear of bewildering your inferiors. You so played the devil with Sabens<sup>c</sup> pathetic credulity that I am afraid you are now something of a Judas in his eyes. There is a big joke in all the C.C.C.<sup>1</sup> business but it did not go quite far enough to make Saben realize what slime ~~that~~ he was wallowing in. Johnson's<sup>d</sup> letter &<sup>e</sup> Winston's reply were pure tragedy to him, and my grinning

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indifference has routed me forever from the high place I once held in his estimation. Saben told Butler as much before he sailed for God knows where and Butler told it to me. Do not think from what I have said that Saben has said hard things against you—

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<sup>c</sup> WA has "Saben's".

<sup>d</sup> WA transcribes the "'s".

<sup>e</sup> WA has "and".

nothing of the kind; he has only hinted that he regrets your winking at certain iniquities which you might have destroyed, or helped to destroy at least. I am afraid that Saben has lost some of his altruism; I surely hope so. Virtue in excess may become something else.

But I am wandering. To return to your real interest in the higher things and your problem of concentration, you are a fellow of the nineteenth century adrift <sup>f</sup> that much hackneyed "sea of life" with a compass that points half a dozen ways at once. I am pretty sure that the first solid ground that you set foot on will be Attica; and then you can get another compass that will do better service. To come down from the figurative business, I think that Greek literature is the best possible foundation for you. That, with English poetry (of all kind[s] and all times) and more political history together with a good reading knowledge of French & German (which you must almost have ~~now~~ now) is the field for you. You will be surprised to see how soon the poetry will become a necessity to your daily life, even if you hav<sup>e</sup> to submit yourself to a study of metre and gen-

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eral poetic expression, as I think that almost everyone does who really enjoy<sup>s</sup><sup>h</sup> poetry for its own sake. I am sure that I did. Hardly any poet that I know demands more of this than Kipling in such things as *The East & West*, *The Bolivar*, & *L'Envoy*<sup>i</sup> (to the later *Barrack Room Ballads*)—"There's<sup>j</sup> a whisper down the field, etc." Everybody must like these poems but only a man who sees the art in the *Idylls of the King* can fully appreciate them. Their 'roughness'<sup>k</sup> has nothing to do with their poetic merit. When the "seven men" on the "*Bolivar*" saw "some damned liner's lights go by like a grand hotel" they were all poets; they were the same when they were "rolling down the Ratcliffe Road, drunk & raising Cain"<sup>l</sup> But the finest place in Kipling

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<sup>f</sup> The "o" is written directly over the "i". WA transcribes "<in> on".

<sup>g</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>h</sup> WA transcribes the "s".

<sup>i</sup> WA has "L'Envoy".

<sup>j</sup> WA has "There's".

<sup>k</sup> WA has a double quotation mark at the beginning of the word, which was doubtless EAR's intention.

<sup>l</sup> WA adds a period here.

to me is where the time expired [? {illegible word}] sails up from  
under the somber skies and sees "the old lost stars  
wheel back, dear lass, that blaze in the velvet blue—

They are all old friends on the old trail, our  
own trail, the out trail,

They are Gods<sup>m</sup> own guides on the long trail,  
the trail that is always new."<sup>2</sup>

To find out what poetry is, one must read such lines  
as these<sup>n</sup>, or such as these from Twelfth Night.:

"O fellow, come, the song we had last night:--

Mark it, Caesario; it is old and plain;

The spinsters & the knitters in the sun

And the free maids that weave their thread with bones

Do use to chant it. It is silly sooth &c.<sup>o</sup>"

Sing (?)<sup>3p</sup>

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I hope you will do me the kindness not to take  
this too seriously and laugh at me for my pains.  
Of course I do not dream of your following what I  
hav{e}<sup>q</sup> suggested; I only hope that you may perhaps  
find one ~~the~~ sentence or so which you will care  
to read twice. It may suggest something directly  
opposed to what it advocates, but I hope it may  
suggest something. I have only my thoughts to help  
people with now and if I could believe that any  
words of mine could help you to any extent in  
feeling better acquainted with yourself, the belief<sup>r</sup> would  
give me a great pleasure.

I have not seen Gates's "Jeffrey,"<sup>4s</sup> but have read  
of it in the Dial. I suppose you know that Johnson's  
"Billy" Phelps<sup>5</sup> has gone into the book making business,  
also, The Beginning of the Romantic ~~R~~ Movement, and some  
editions of standard authors.

Thus far I have caged about 320 lines of  
Antigone. It begins to look as if the thing would be  
a reality. Write a ~~lef~~ letter once in a while—{or} a<sup>t</sup>

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<sup>m</sup> WA has "God's".

<sup>n</sup> WA has "this".

<sup>o</sup> WA has "etc."

<sup>p</sup> WA adds a short dash (-) here.

<sup>q</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>r</sup> WA has "believe".

<sup>s</sup> WA places the comma outside the quotation mark.

<sup>t</sup> WA has "or [a]".

little oftener, if you care to, I would not have  
Harvard turn wholly to "ghosts."

Sincerely.<sup>u</sup>

E.A. Robinson<sup>v</sup>

HCL

#### NOTES

1. Corn Cob Club.
2. "L'Envoi," *Barrack-Room Ballads*. See EAR's letter to Smith, November 21, 1892.
3. Act II, scene iv.
4. Lewis E. Gates (1860-1924). *Selections from Jeffrey*, 1894.
5. William Lyon Phelps (1865-1943). *The Beginnings of the English Romantic Movement*, 1893.

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<sup>u</sup> WA has a comma here, instead.

<sup>v</sup> WA omits the underline.