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To Harry de Forest Smith - February 10, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Does this read any easier than my past letters? It is written with something quite new to me—a glass pen. I suppose you know all about such things.

Gardiner, Maine
Feb 10 – 1894 [=1895]

My dear Smith,

You must not expect much of a letter from me to-day as I was taken with a bad grouch immediately upon finishing my reincarnation story yesterday afternoon. I do not know why I was taken with it but for some reason I have [been] woefully in the dumps for the past twenty four hours. If I am not better in the morning I shall be tempted to ~~shovel~~ shovel the snow all out of the yard. Once I was foolish enough to think that I had outgrown such things, but now I see my mistake. I expect to have grouches all my life just as some old ladies have neuralgia. And I even go so far sometimes as to think that I am the better off for having had them: I seem to gain something and come out with new

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ideas for future work.

I find that I am slowly accustoming myself to a longer period of brain-racking than I was capable of a year ago, but I also find that I am seldom good for more than 300 words an hour. Of course I have spurts but not very often. Inspiration will never do much for me. If I am to produce any thing I must work for it and then do it three or four time{s}, in the majority of cases. As I said in my last letter I have worked all this past week on the last section of "A Recognition"—less than 2000 words but wholly without dialogue. That is the stuff that fills paper and the pockets of popular writers, and is, as a rule the "ruination" of a short story. Apropos of that subject let me copy a few lines from Ouidas¹ article in the last N.A. Review² (from Fords letter):

"The short story as opposed to the long romance

is as the miniature to the fresco, They are entirely opposed to each other. I consider the short story much the more perfect as pure art. It is more concentrated, more delicate, more ideal; that is, when it is excellently well done, like Boule de Suif,³ like Deux Rivaies, like Yvette,⁴ like

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the short stories of Paul Heyse of those of Edmondo de Amicis^b. But the short story is only adapted to pathos [this is what I have always lacked the courage to say] when humorous it is ~~œd~~ odious; and it never could replace the long romance of {=if} intricate events, complicated characters [?]^c or if^d the portraiture of contemporary society is to be undertaken. . . . I repeat, I consider the short story the most exquisite form of fiction, as the sonnet is of poetry; but the Iliad the Inferno the Orlando of the Tempest could never be put into a sonnet, and no more could Gil Blas⁶ or Waverly, Adam Bede or L'Impérieuse Bonté⁷ be put into a short story." All of which is very good sense to me but somehow L'Impérieuse Bonté is not in my list. In other words, I never heard of it before. If you know any thing of it, kindly tell me in your next letter.

Ouidas words are all true but not for the American people. The short story as a work of art has never taken a great hold in this country as the standard set in the leading magazines will easily show. If the reading public ever comes to learn that the New England ~~misuse~~ misuse of the English language is not a dialect there

will be some hope for American fiction—perhaps. Are we getting such a flood of it now because it is the thing to write or because it was all written and accepted years ago? And there is something still worse than that,—the small society talk that monopolizes the other half of nearly all the stories now written in this glorious republic. But dont mind this—I have a grouch. Also excuse the Ego^e in this letter, It always crops out when I am not feeling well—and often, I fear, when I am. Yesterday I read Book I of The Excursion.⁸ Whenev{er} you take a notion to do the sam{e} thing you will

ex-
perience a revelation The fact that you can read Cowper is enough to excuse my saying this—just now I have a great desire to read Bourgets Un Saint⁹ & Daudets Fromont Jeune & Risler Aïne,¹⁰ Think I shall have to buy

^a Written vertically.

^b WA has "Amici's".

^c These are EAR's square brackets, along with the question mark.

^d The original article does not contain this "if".

^e Double-underlined and printed, for emphasis.

them as text books

Most sincerely.

E.A.R.

HCL US, 205-206.

EAR misdated this letter, postmarked 1895.

NOTES

1. Ouida, the pseudonym of English novelist and critic Maria Louise Ramé (1839-1908). (SL)
- 2.^f "Literature and the English Book Trade," *The North American Review*, CLX, No. 459 (February 1895), 160. There are slight variations from the printed text. The brackets, presumably, are Ford's.
3. By Guy de Maupassant, published in 1880. (SL)
4. Novella by de Maupassant, published in 1884. (SL)
5. Italian novelist, poet and short-story writer (1846-1908). (SL)
6. *L'Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, French picaresque novel by Alain-René Lesage, published 1715-35. (SL)
7. A French novel of 1894 by the brothers who wrote under the pseudonym of J.-H. (Joseph Henry) Rosny. (SL)
- 8.^g Wordsworth's long philosophical poem, 1814.
9. A novella by the French author Paul Bourget, published in 1894. (SL)
10. Daudet's novel of 1874. (SL)

^f This is WA's note 1.

^g This is WA's note 2.