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4-25-1895

## To George W. Latham - April 25, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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### Recommended Citation

Robinson, Edwin Arlington, "To George W. Latham - April 25, 1895" (1895). *Edwin Arlington Robinson Letters and Transcriptions*. 172.

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

My dear Latham,

Your letter acted upon me like a spring tonic—just as Pendennis acts, or one of Hardy's novels, You have read Tess, but hav{e} you read The Trumpet Major—The Mayor of Casterbridge—Far From the Madding Crowd—The Woodlanders & The Return of the Native. If you have not, you have something in store for you—and so have I, for that matter. Henry James says that a novel by Daudet must be given two readings in order to do the author justice. I find by experience that his words are true and I also find that they will apply equally well to Hardy—that is, as far as my perception goes. I can partly understand how certain people may read The Mayor & [=of] Casterbridge (the best of the lot in my opinion) and feel that he has read the book in the best sense—the only sense—of the words. But I cannot do that and I am glad to say that I have the whole of them to go through again—all but The Hand of Ethelberta and Two on a Tower & A Laodicean. One reading is

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quite enough for them.—And then there is Esther Waters, which I shall take up again before a long time. Whene{ver} I think of that book I think of the Atlantic Monthly, which I hold to be at once the most expeditiously conservative periodical in the world. A man living in Gardiner, Maine, can now send his manuscript to No 4 Park St, Boston and hav{e} it back again in his pocket in fewer than forty eight hours; and a man living in London, England, can write a greater novel than has been brought out by any American master since Hawthorne, and have it disposed of by the critics of that magazine{e} in half a dozen lines of faint praise, revealing not only a narrow humanity but the New England Literary Woman with her thin lips and all the rest of it. Esther Waters is a tremendous piece of work and a piece of work that is bound to be recognized some day. If

you ever read it you will, I think, full agree with me.

Did you see an article in the N.A.R. (sometimes I like to call up the relics of my German and add another R<sup>1</sup>) by Ouida on modern fiction? If you did you must have noticed among his<sup>2</sup> list of great novels one

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entitled *L'Impérieuse Bonté*. It was a mystery to me and I wrote to Ford to find out who wrote it. Soon after that he sent me the book itself saying he had no time to read it and would<sup>b</sup> give it to me if I cared for it. I accepted it and soon realized that I was not a Frenchman. It was hard reading at first but I soon got used to its style and deeply interested in the study—for that is what it is, rather than a novel. The theme is altruism and the author, J.-H. Rosny, succeeds wonderfully in showing up the brotherhood of all things.

I do not see how such a style could be translated and I doubt much it [=if] it ever will be. Every thing is sacrificed to the spiritualization of plain things and some of the figurative effects are wonderful. The author is as far as possible from being a decadent and shakes his fist in the face of all such movements. And yet, as I wrote to Ford, the effect of the impressionistic, fin de siècle, school is quite apparent in his pages. The moral tone of the book is the highest possible, but there are passages which some of us might not think just fitted for the mind of the young person.

Speaking of French novels, I have just finished Daudet's "*Le Petite Paroisse*". It is a study of jealousy, and is strangely permeated with the philosophy of compensation. The young Charlexis gets a charge of buck shot for his actions and the faithless wife shoots herself in the breast with a bull-dog revolver given her at just the right time by an American sea captain. Such

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minor incidents however do not prevent the book from being a remarkably good thing.

It has that nameless touch of the master about it which makes Daudet a great man in the literary world. The heroine, by the way, does not die but lives to be

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<sup>a</sup> Written vertically.

<sup>b</sup> WA has "wished [?] [to]".

<sup>c</sup> Written vertically.

reunited with her long suffering husband. The pathos of the tale is intense, but it is largely objective. The plot, though <,> in one sense simple, is peculiarly complicated and worked out with a skill which one seldom finds in a novel nowadays The purpose of the book, insofar as it ha{s} one, seems to be to show the effects of a person's "bringing up." The weak part, if there is one, is the sudden conversion of Mme. Fénigan in the little church. The mental revolution of Domb{e}y<sup>3</sup> is nothing compared with it, Forgive me for say[ing] so much about books. I have a fierce grouch to-day and dare not trust myself with any other subject. In a week or so I shall try to write again and since{rel}y hope that I may find someth{in}g to say that will make you think of s{o}meth{in}g else than yellow paper covers.—Let my {=me} tell you once again that your letter was a great thing for me. For some reason I am infinitely glad that you remem[b]er that little sessi{o}n with Montaigne. Since then I have learned to how to read him. It is just this: open the book wherever you may and read three or four pages. The first thing you know you are at a passage like this: "It is true that Antiquity {sic} has not much decry'd this vice [Drunkenness]<sup>d</sup>. The "writings of several philosophers speak very tenderly of it, and even amongst the "Stoicks<sup>e</sup> there be some, who advice to give themselves sometimes the liberty

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"to drink to a debauch, to recreate and  
 "refresh the soul; and even that censor and  
 "reprove of others, Cato, was reproach'd that he  
 "was a good fellow."

Yours most sincerely,  
Robinson

25 April -1895

HCL

NOTES

<sup>d</sup> The square brackets are from the holograph.

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

1. "Narr" means "fool" in German. N.A.R., i.e. *North American Review*. (SL)
2. Ouida, of course, was actually a "her". See letter to Smith of February 10, 1895.
- 3.<sup>f</sup> In Dickens' novel *Dombey and Son*.

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<sup>f</sup> This is WA's note 1.