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5-5-1895

## To George W. Latham - May 5, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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### Recommended Citation

Robinson, Edwin Arlington, "To George W. Latham - May 5, 1895" (1895). *Edwin Arlington Robinson Letters and Transcriptions*. 174.

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

Gardiner.

My dear Latham,

Some days ago I wrote you [a] lot of my dröol about some of the books that I have read lately and told you near the end of it that I should try to write something about myself in a week or so. Well, this is a good time for me to fulfil my promise but I wonder if any of my thoughts or actions are worth the time it will take for you to read about them? I doubt it very much, but then, a letter is a good thing to get, even if there isn't much in it; so I will go on and say in the first place that I am digging away at my prose experiment, with a little verse sandwiched in now and then, & that my one great trouble is that of loneliness. I do not think, for all you write in something the same tone—that you have much of an idea of what I mean by that word; at any rate, I hope you do not for your own sake. And another thing which seems to me in your favor is the glorious fact that you are not so narrow in your tastes as I am. You can read the Nation, and that one fact "connotes" a liking for, or at least a tolerance ~~for~~ of many things of a more solid nature than

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are most of my hobbies—if I hav{e} more than two—prose & verse. Words—except my own—are living things to me. They hav{e} a value in themselves apa{r}t from "the story" and so I hold that little{e} paragraph about the music of the reeds in "An Inland Voyage" to be worth mor{e} than "The Man in Black," for instance, which is to me worth nothing at all. Speaking of Stevenson, do you know his sketch of Villon, "A Lodging for the Night?" It is a splendid piece of works {sic} and shows what a master can make of a very thin story indeed. In fact the story is nothing --it is all in the way the thing is written; and if you—who used to say such unconsciously good things about the nonsense of literature as an art, without believing a word of what you said—will take the trouble to read that little thing I know you

will agree with me.

Your judgment of The Critic is just, I think, but I cannot share with you in your admiration for the Dial. I took it for a year, but there is something in it that does not appeal to me, The Critic is too often puerile and frothy, but it is never so consciously pedantic as its western contemporary. But here I am again—you can read the Nation; and the man who can read the Nation can read The Dial for sport.

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The truth of the whole matter is, I fancy, that I hav{e} next to no interest in public affairs—even to the extent to which they are treated in an ordinarily {sic} intelligent review<sup>b</sup>. Both the papers hav{e} too decided a leaning toward long reviews or books about ancient Japanese architecture, and History 13, and things of that sort to suit me. In other words, the trouble is with me, and not with them.

I hav{e} just finished Wordsworths Excursion, and hope that you wil{l} see fit, if you hav{e} not don{e} so already, to take it up this coming summer. There is a quiet, thoroughly wholesome greatness about it that will commend itself to you at once. As you know, it is not "like Shelly" and the rest of the fiery fellows you do not care for. Of course you know more or less about it, even if you hav{e} not read it, and I do not mea{n} to treat you as if you were an ass as regards such matters, although I fear my words may be misleading when read in dead ink.

It is wonderful what a little accent will do sometimes.

It does me good to know that you are changing your attitude towards fiction; and I feel pretty sure that you wil{l} make time to read more or less of it through the remainder of your life. Whe{n} a p man puts by fiction and poetry—especially poetry—he is unconsciously brutalizing himself. This may sound a bit strong, but I believe it. If I am too much the other way myself, I am at least good for a warning; but I would rather take my chance where I am than with your ordinary practical man, who, in turn, is a warning at the other end.

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<sup>a</sup> Written vertically.

<sup>b</sup> WA reads "mind".

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In the last Chap-Book, there is a good article by Maurice Thompson on Montaigne,<sup>1</sup> being by all odds the best thing that has appeared in that rather sloppy little fortnightly since our friend Gates's excellent review of "Lord Ormont"--, or as he had it, "Mr Meredith and his Aminta."<sup>2</sup> You must read Montaigne and find for yourself that old nutty flavor of which Thomp{so}n has so much to say. This is a dull gray day and as slow as a Sund{a}y can be—and that is saying a great deal whe{n} it comes from a fellow who cannot see the greatness of country parsons nor think of one friend whom he can go to see and feel free to talk of the subjects that are first on his mind. The privilege to write to a man like you or Ford is all that saves me—though I fear sometimes that the cost at the other end—if I but knew it—is out of all proportion. Tryon has grown so serious that I hav{e} lost him; Butler has written me but one letter since his father's failure—but I hav{e} no fear of losing him; and Ford is in a way to follow Tryon, unless he looks out for himself. But of course that is talk. His letters hav{e} been pretty regular this winter—I wish I could say as much of yours!—and I am begin{n}ing to realize what a particularly fine fellow he is; but for some reason you are the man whom I should select for a years' companion on a desert island, though I must confess that such a mark of esteem would be a little hard on you. There is someth{in}g in your past life that makes you less a mystery to me tha{n} to most of the fellow{s} you practised upon. Excuse me for saying this so bluntly, and make the most of my assurance that I kept my thoughts regarding that "practice"—whether they were right or wrong—quite to myself. I

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could see that you were in trouble and positively ~~refued~~ refused to believe in your apparent indifference to all higher things. Still I did not feel that I had the right to tell my friends what I thought Of you as that was none of my business. After this it is only fair for me to say

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<sup>c</sup> Written vertically.

again that you had a tremendous influence over me and that influence—whether I ever amount to anything or not—was always for the best. There was a latent something in you that made me think of a volcano gifted with the power to "hold itself in" If I exaggerate the mental intensity of your college life I do it with all sincerity. Sometimes I am inclined to over estimate the tragedy of common things --possibly that is why I put Daudet's "Jack" among the world's great novels.

A letter from you now and then is worth a great deal to me and I trust you will not discontinue your habit (?) of writing them—at least while I am here in exile.

Yours most sincerely,

E.A. Robinson.

You may care to know that the Critic has just taken my sonnet entitled "For a Book by Thomas Hardy." I may have mentioned it in my last letter. If I did, excuse me, as I am always forgetting what I write to my friends

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5 May – 1895

E.A.R.

HCL

NOTES

1. "Nuts from Perigord," *The Chap-Book* (May 1, 1895), 473-478.
2. "Mr. Meredith and his Aminta," by Lewis E. Gates. See *The Chap-Book* II (Nov. 15, 1894-May 1, 1895), 13-24. (SL)