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To Harry de Forest Smith - May 26, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

My dear Smith,

I have a feeling that I ought not to write to you to-day, because I am wholly out of the mood and strangely destitute of ideas; but I have a feeling of pride on the other hand which tells me that I shall feel better for the writing, even if it be at your expense. Were I a little more courageous I might write with a deliberate intention of destroying the sheet as soon as it was covered, but I'm damned if I do that to-day, even for you. I purpose to keep right on in just this style until I arrive at the bottom of page 4, when I shall fold the matter up, seal it, and let it go. I shall not take the trouble to read it over (I seldom do that for any body) but shall trust to your own ingenuity in filling blanks and deciphering hieroglyphics, in the making of which I own no master.

I am in a peculiarly reminiscent mood to-day, and I think the cause of it lies in the fact that I shall hear no more of Reeces Band, which, as you know, has been with us all the week. At the end of the closing concert last night they all show up and played Auld Lang Syne in a way that sent seven distinct kinds of crinkles up my spine and through my hair. When I stopped and the men began to put up the instruments I felt as if an epoch in my life were over. You don't like lives with epochs in them, you [but] you must grant me one this time.

Last evening's programme was particularly fine from the Tannhauser\(^1\) overture to the Miserere in Il Trovatore\(^2\) which I played (?) you that evening you ate eggplant. It was taken by a trombone and a cornet with a subdued accompaniment by the band, which kept up
the anguish and the tension of the score in a way that was almost beyond belief. I have heard the opera, but the spirit of the piece was not brought out by the human voice as it was last night by wind instruments. But then, instrumental music was always more to me than vocal,

and I have no doubt that it always will be. This band had the greatest clarinet arrangement I ever saw—seven of them, with bassoon, in a band of 25 pieces is a pretty good showing.

Renans Vie de Jesus has arrived and looks like most attractive reading. My New Testament work is going on well and I must say that I enjoy it. That, with five or six French novels, will constitute most of my reading for many weeks to come. It would be a good thing for me, I think, if I could cultivate your interest in posters, or something of that kind, but it is an absolute impossibility for me to do it. There is not place in my brain for collections now, though when I was a kid I used to be collecting everything from bugs to buttons. The only things that I could possibly collect now with any ardor would be first editions of recent books. But they all cost money. And money is a substance which I designate with a very small "x". There was a man and he had nought. And robber came to rob him. I am that man without the robbers. They all know better.

In The Story of an African Farm the chickens were wiser than human beings: and I wonder now if my six hens are wiser than I am. They are saying something down there behind the barn that I cannot understand, and for some reason they are making me think of the whole scheme of life and of its final outcome. A man is more than a hen, but a hen knows some things of which a man knows nothing. I'll bet they know more about the weather than all men, and women in the world. Sometimes I think instinct is only another name for divine knowledge and some times I don't think much about it any way. Today my thoughts are all mixed up and the smell of wet lilac blossoms coming through my window makes me a little sick. I wonder if Pierre Loti could stomach them in his study?

Yours most sincerely,

Robinson

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a Written vertically.
b Written vertically.
26 May – 1895,

I shall see you at the and of the week—saw your father & mother this afternoon.

HCL US, 227-229.

NOTES

1. Tannhäuser, an 1845 opera by Richard Wagner. (SL)
2. Il trovatore, an opera by Giuseppe Verdi. It premiered in 1853. (SL)
3. EAR’s ability here to be so moved by a humble local band’s rendition of operatic masterpieces is later reflected, humorously, in Captain Craig, where the Captain insists that "The brass-band will be indispensable" at his funeral. Sure enough, when that occasion takes place, his friends honor his eccentric wish, and "all along that road the Tilbury Band/ Blared indiscreetly the Dead March in Saul." (SL)
4. By Olive Schreiner, 1883, published under the pen name of Ralph Iron.
5. Pierre Loti (1850-1923), a French novelist. (SL)

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This is WA's note 1.