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9-20-1895

To George W. Latham - September 20, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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Recommended Citation

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

My dear Latham,

Two or three days ago I sent you a few words in acknowledgment of the book you were good enough to give me. I have read it as much as my eyes have permitted me and I assure you that I enjoy it. I cannot understand how an Englishman with only a few weeks acquaintance with the place could have written such a book on Harvard. He “goes off” once in a while, it seems to me, but that is to be expected. As far as I have seen he has nothing to say about the fence, which is a great pity. With a fence a man could sit on and no damned Law School in the College Yard to kill half the vital essence of the Harvard atmosphere. Your alma mater (I wish I could say mine) would be a vastly different place.

My friend Smith goes to Cambridge this fall for a year's course in the graduate school. He has your favorite subjects (if you have any), Greek and Latin. Smith is a splendid fellow but has had a queer bringing-up, and that shows itself in many ways—sometimes, I am sor-

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ry to say, to his disadvantage. But his good points so over balance his defects that I am sure you would take him home if you ever chanced to fall in with him—as I hope you may some time. He is married, and so can never be to me—that is, I can never be to him him {sic}—(here is a sentence I can't get out of, but you see the meaning).

In my note I told you that I was going to send you a copy of *Une Vie*. I wonder if you want it, after all? It is a strange book and a sad one, and has in it that same mixture of truth and lie that one finds in The Kreutzer Sonata.¹ In

fact, I think Tolstoy took his theme from it and went Maupassant one better in the way of heartlessness. The Sonata is a book that could never, it seems to me, do any thing but damage in the world, but I cannot say the same of Une Vie, which is a plain sketch of a plain life, worked out with a relentless sincerity of purpose and a terrible frankness of detail. It is not, from the point of view of honest common sense, a “smutty” book, but it

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is one that must be kept strictly away from the jeune personne.^{2b} I don't imagine it would hurt her any, but it might set her thinking, like “Degeneration”, of things that were better out of her mind. By “her” I mean any body who is feminine and not sophisticated. “Esther Waters,” on the contrary, I recommend to all the damozels of my acquaintance for the sake of asking them what they think of it. A fairly intelligent girl's opinions of Esther Waters, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Children of the Zodiac³ and Chinese Fadden [?] may take one a long way into her inner chambers. I might include the Anglomaniacs⁴ and the Princess Aline,⁵ but I won't, for reasons of my own. The Ladies Home Journal (my favorite magazine) tells me that a girl should brush her hair ten minutes every night but it says nothing about how little [?] she shall read Mrs Harrison and Harding Davis—very good people in the {ir} way, no doubt, but very frothy. I must except Davis howev{er}, when I recall His Bad Angel,⁶ which is really a fine thing and for that reason not much talked of.—Have you ever read any thing by George Gissing?⁷ I am sorry to say that I hav{e} not, and am afraid that I shall not be able to for a time to come. The most of his books are published, I think, in Appleton's “Town

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and Country Library. He is getting high praise from a narrow circle (the kind that counts) and there [are?] many things to make me think that he is coming forward with the big fellows. I have

^a Written vertically.

^b WA reads “jeune personae”.

^c Written vertically.

Zangwill's "The Master"⁸ at hand, but I shall not be able to get through it. I must quit much read{in}g now for a long time and go back to my own work. When I finish my first draft of *Antigone*, and perhaps before then I am going to Cambridge for a week or two for an intellectual airing and then buckle down to it for the winter. As far as production goes, my book is no longer a dream; and that is more than you can possibly understand.

To return to *Une Vie*, let me say that the book is an artistic marvel. The first chapter, for instance, is a masterpiece of simple narrative and filled, like all the others, with stray^d touches that show the author's insight. The smallest trifle counts, and whatever is mentioned once is likely to come back to the proper time—even "the melancholy owl." The story must be read carefully and with a persistent attention to details. A dozen pages will be enough to reveal to you Maupassant's almost superhuman power of concentration. You shall have the volume in a day or two. Thanking you once more for "Harvard by an Oxonian" I remain,

Yours most sincerely,
E.A. Robinson.

Gardiner Maine
20 Sept. 1895.

HCL

NOTES

1. See EAR's letter to Smith, September 27, 1890.
2. Young person. (SL)
3. "The Children of the Zodiac", a story by Kipling, in *Many Inventions* {1893}.
4. By Constance Cary Harrison (1834-1920), American novelist and essayist, 1890.
5. By Richard Harding Davis, 1896.
6. A story by Richard Harding Davis, published in *Harper's Magazine* in August 1893. (SL)
7. George Gissing (1857-1903), English novelist known for his studies of poverty, notably *New Grub Street*, 1891.
8. By Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), Zionist leader, novelist, and playwright, 1895.

^d WA reads "strong" but suggests "stray" also in brackets.