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To George W. Latham - December 14, 1895

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO GEORGE W. LATHAM

My dear Latham,

I have a notion that you did not answer my last letter but that makes no difference. I am in the mood somehow for writing now and so you have got to take it. The room is too cold for me to do much at that marvelous poetry (Briggs¹ sat on me once for using the one "l" method of spelling) of mine but I think I can shake off a few pages to a friend.—As you seem to be somewhat concerned as to my Antigone affair, I will say to begin with that I do not expect to touch it again until next summer. Then if all goes well I shall finish it and begin to think seriously about putting it in type I feel rather scary about it, because the job is one as far beyond my caliber perhaps as it was beyond Plumptre's; and if that is the case, the sooner I cremate the eleven hundred lines I hav{e} written the better. I have made a sonnet to go with it and shall include it in the volume of p----s I hav threatened to publish this spring. I hav some doubt as to being able to make a go of the thing, but I am fond of trying, if only for the fun of it.

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There is one question that has been troubling me a great deal of late, and that is: am I a damned fool, or am I not? If you can tell me I shall be infinitely obliged. Ford was good (?) enough to say that he did not think that I was quite that or else he had never come all the way from Exeter to see me. But Ford is young and he may be wrong.—It was quite an event in my life to have him spend a Sunday with me and I enjoyed his company enormously. He seemed to have a fairly good time, but I fear he found me even more of a bumpkin at home than he anticipated. I suspect I am get-

ting pretty^a seedy living all by myself as I do, but then I was always a seed to a degree and do not dream of being any thing else. There are so many things in what we call society—"as I hav found it"—that I positively cannot tolerate that I am undoubtedly something of an ass in the matter. And then there is that ear of mine which makes it almost impossible for me to hear anything in a room when there is any thing going. And as for "dress" suits—they make me all but weep. Dancing—that is formal dancing—is to my mind a deliberate sacrifice of a man's native dignity. Hubbell dancing on the table after a Springfield game is quite another thing.—

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Ford has compromised himself. He has written a sonnet—to an American girl in Paris, and because she asked ~~th~~ him to. Hubbell, you know, wrote one to his mother and you—well you cann see where you are. You must write one to somebody or something^b befor^{e} long. Even Saben wrot^{e} me a poem befor^{e} he sailed away.— And this makes me think of that article you once spoke about. I mean the one on the old English novelists. Did it ever materialize, or not? If it did, I should be glad to have a copy for I know there must be some good things in it—especially if you had a grouch at the time.

I understand that Gates's preface to his Selections from Newman has made quite an impression. I hav read the Jeffrey preface but hav not seen the second book. I was very sorry to hear^c from Ford that Gates is now down with brain fever I hope the report is exaggerated but somehow I am afraid it is not. The man was always a tremendous worker I hav been told and what is still more has been compelled to let half or three quarters of his time be given too the reading of themes and blue-books. That is what instructors are for, I suppose, but Gates ought to be something else. He ought to be the Jeffrey of the great American Review—which is not.

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^a WA omits this word.

^b WA reads "You must write one someday or something".

^c WA reads "learn".

Speaking of Ford again, did you ever stop to realize what a cuss he is—in a quiet way? He has had phenomenal good luck, to be sure, but that is not all. There is something in the man which we do not often see. Of course he is human like the rest of us, but there is so much wholesome spirituality about him that I cannot but feel half ashamed of myself in his presence and it is partly for that reason that I would not have him on my desert island. No, I am not making a mess of what I once wrote to you, for I need only say that the human streak in your nature—to use the term in its best sense—is something that I have not yet found elsewhere. I may never see you again so I am not afraid to speak out as I do. It makes me shudder sometimes to think or try to think of what I might be by this time had I never gone to Harvard and met the fellows I did. And one of the most pleasant memories of all is that I was once able to keep such men as you and Tryon out of a temporary snarl by the loan of a few dollars. The only disagreeable thing about it is ~~that~~ the thought that you two may feel under a slight obligation to me—which would spoil the whole business. I wish chance had put Ford in my way when he wanted a certain XX, but it did not and so the only way for me to show my confidence in him will be to strike him sometime when I am very hard up for a little trip to Boston. But no, I shall not do that either—for reasons.

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2.^d

I think I had nearly written myself out yesterday when I was called away, but will keep on for a little while longer if only to break the surface of this paper.

This morning I worked for a couple of hours fixing up a sonnet paraphrase of Horace's ode to Leuconoë (I – xi). I printed a kiddish version of it in the Boston Journal² six or seven years ago and have always had a notion that it is {=it} was worth tinkering into some sort of shape. I find it pretty hard work to get it into the form I am after, but perhaps I can do it in time. I am of the opinion still, however, that the Antigone will be the only thing that I shall write that will be likely to make much of an impression on

^d This numeral—written by EAR—apparently means that this is the second *part* of the letter (see succeeding paragraph.)

solid people. No man hates "light writing" more than I, but sometimes I doubt if my stuff is any thing else—and perhaps not even that.

Sometimes I fall to wondering how I shall feel and what I shall be, if I ever run across you again. I can't help looking^e to fellows like you and Ford with a kind of hopeless thankfulness that you know me well enough to write letters to me If you were 26 years old and had never earned your salt, you might understand what I mean— As it is I am pretty sure that you cannot. It is when I get thinking too

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hard of this sort of thing that I feel the corners of my mouth go down Then I grin them back in a way that would scare a cam-leopard away from his tree in the school-books and try to delude myself with the idea that I am only an atom and that time will make it all right &c. But you see I take no stock at all in the human atom theory. We are all gods in spite of our actions and a human life is not a thing to play horse with. It is bound to kick.

No I am not in [on?] a grouch to-day, but I fear I shall be to-morrow unless I find the mood I am after for one of my pomes^f. (It is always "pome" with me now). The Critic printed one in the holiday number again but I shall not repeat the offense of sending copies to my friends³ That was a little too bad and I hav always been sorry for it.—The other day I received a sample copy of the Philistine (Christmas Number) which contained a reprint of Kiplings "Dipsy Chanty" which you may know for the very good thing it is.

Write me a letter from time to time,

^e WA reads "taking".

^f WA reads "poems".

if only out of charity. If there was ever

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a man who needed them I am that man. If I had someone to talk with it would be different and perhaps not so fortunate for me. My conversational powers are sorely limited. Ford's visit did me a world of good, though; and I wish that I might hav one like it from you. You hav my invitation of a year or two ago, but of course I understand it will be impossible for you to accept it—at least for the present. Perhaps we can arrange a meeting in Boston sometime.

Most sincerely
EA Robinson.

Gardiner, Maine
14 December, 1895

HCL

NOTES

1. Dean LeBaron Russell Briggs of Harvard.
2. *The Boston Journal*, April 1, 1891. Hitherto unnoted, EAR's "kiddish version" of Horace, Book I, Ode XI was published as follows:

I pray thee not, Leuconoe, to pore
Upon forbidden things—what end may be
By destiny allowed for you and me—
Nor blind Chaldea's starry page explore.
'Twere better, oh! far better, if you bore
Your lot contented: whether Jove decree
More winters yet to come, or whether he
Assign this one whose worn, wave-eaten shore
Shatters the Tyrian Sea to-day the last—
Be wise, I pray; and rack thy wine, nor fill
Thy bosom with large hopes; for while I sing
The envious close of time is narrowing:
So seize the day, be merry ere 'tis past,
And let the morrow come for what it will.

A comparison with the finished poem, published in TNB, shows Robinson's growth as a poet from 1891-1895: the archaisms and clichés are gone, the bathos has been removed, and the whole tone of the poem has been elevated and strengthened.

3. "For a Book by Thomas Hardy," *The Critic*, Vol. XXIV (November 23, 1895), p. 348.