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Edwin Arlington Robinson on Higher Education

Cecil D. Eby, Jr.

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any abridgement of the rights of American citizens in any respect," Wilson finally secured the defeat of these resolutions in March 1916. Dated: February 14, 1916 (ironically, St. Valentine's Day). Signed: *Woodrow Wilson*.



EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON ON HIGHER
EDUCATION

By CECIL D. EBY, JR.

IN his biographical study of Edwin Arlington Robinson, Hermann Hagedorn records a conversation between the poet and Barrett Wendell, the distinguished professor of English composition at Harvard. Wendell, an admirer of Robinson's poetry, asked him where he had obtained his education. To Robinson's reply, "Right here, such as it was. I had to leave after two years," Wendell retorted, "You're damn lucky."¹ Unfortunately Mr. Hagedorn does not provide us with the source from which he drew this dialogue, but he dates it during Robinson's sojourn in Cambridge between 1897 and 1898. However, unless a newly-discovered Robinson letter be wrong, Wendell did not disparage college education in general but only English composition in particular.

In 1920 Waitman Barbe, then professor of English at West Virginia University, inquired of Robinson why it seemed that American universities failed to produce outstanding writers. In his reply to Barbe, Robinson professed his inability to answer the question, but he did record his conversation with Barrett Wendell twenty years before. As a teacher of composition Wendell was doubtlessly skeptical about the importance of formal instruction in English for the creative writer, but he did not depreciate the value of higher education. Robinson's unpublished letter to Waitman Barbe is printed in full.

¹ Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 138.

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810 Washington Avenue
Brooklyn, April 29, 1920

My dear Mr. Barbe,

I may as well be honest at the outset and tell you that your question as to why American colleges do not produce more poets and novelists is one that I cannot answer. Barrett Wendell once asked me if I had taken the regular course in English composition at Harvard, and when I told him that I had taken only one year of it, he said, "You're damned lucky." This was more than twenty years ago; and since then, so far as one can see, no overpowering literary geniuses have emerged from Harvard, or from anywhere else. I'm afraid the only answer is that they don't happen very often—though let us hope that a few may be growing somewhere on earth. I believe in colleges, but I doubt if they have much to do with the genesis of literature, except in indirect ways.

Yours sincerely,

E. A. Robinson²

² This letter is among the Waitman Barbe papers in the West Virginia University Library. It is used with the permission of that library and the poet's niece, Mrs. Ruth Nivison.



INDEX BENEFACTORUM

DAUNTLESS investigation of space yields daily triumphs to un-pent cosmologists, who have now succeeded in photographing galaxies six billion light years away. The space problems of a diffident, earthbound editor touch no such terrifying proportions, but they have a certain discomfort of their own—there are only so many pages per issue per annum in which to cram everything that needs to be said and must so often be excised. More than occasionally we sigh in envy of the infinitude into which moon-haunted scientists can launch their ideas.

Frequent victim of our procrustean space allowance is a detailed account of gifts received from our loyal, farflung constituency. How we love to dwell upon the excellencies, the minute and seductive points of the numerous books and manuscripts that come to us in welcome flood. And how ruefully