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To Harry de Forest Smith - January 25, 1891

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Jan 25 - 1890 [=1891]

My Dear Smith

I received your letter a few days (or rather about
two weeks) ago and will now take up your literary vein and
advise you to read "John Halifax"¹ if you have not already
done so. It is a novel after the old school but yet there is more
of the modern realism in it than you generally find in books writ-
ten forty or fifty years ago. It will show you the difference
between great and small writing in a most impressive manner.

Outside of this I have not done much reading since I saw
you: in fact I have read nothing save a book of Bret Harte's short
stories and about half of Rudyard Kipling's "The Light that Failed."
I think upon the whole the former is the greater writer, although there
is a certain "queerness", as you say, about the latter's work that is
rather attractive. I think Kipling's poetry is better than his prose.
Are Rossiter Johnson's series of Little Classics in the Bowdoin Library?
If they are take out the one on Exile and read Harte's "Outcasts
of Poker Flat"; in some ways I think it is the best short story
in the English language. This may sound a little loud, but
read it yourself and write me what you think of it.

I am still dragging along in the same old rut, and occasionally

someone says "Well now, Robinson, what do you intend to do?"
This makes me mad. I cannot tell what I shall do. I have
said that I thought I might go to Harvard in the fall for a year or two
but as I am not sure of it I do not say so when these pleasant
people question me, so you see all I have to do is to tell them
that I do not know, which is about like pulling teeth. I suppose
it does look a little queer to see me practically doing nothing at
my age,² but at present there is no getting out of it. Someone must
be at home to run the place. I am not getting rich but I try
to console myself with Blackmore's lines:

"The more we have in hand to count
  The less we have to hope for."³

There is a good deal in that if you will stop to moralize a little;
but the devil of it is, while we are moralizing someone else gets
what we hope for. This is a sad world, Smith, where the under-
dog gets his neck chewed. Sometimes I think I shall go into the
missionary business and teach the chattering Hindoos how to read
the Police Gazette & Town Topics. They never would take the trouble
to barbecue me, my bones are too large.

Speaking of the books I have read I omitted Charles Dudley War{--}
ner’s "My Summer in a Garden." It is a good thing, and contains

much valuable information. Here is an extract from the "third week":

"The striped bug has come, the saddest of the year.
He is a moral double ender, iron clad at that. He is unpleasant in two ways. He burrows under the ground so that you cannot find him, and he flies away so that you cannot catch him. . . . .
The best way to deal with the striped bug is to sit down by the hills and patiently watch for him. If you are spry you can annoy him. This however takes time. It takes all day and part of the night. For he flieth in darkness and wasteth at noonday".

I suppose I shall have another garden to make in the spring and a general spell of "clearing up." I think after that, a trip to Harvard be would be a glorious contrast.

I trust that this letter will be a warning to you never to use a stub pen. I have used one for three or four years and this is the effect of changing over. Perhaps you will be able to read it and perhaps you will not. It is enough to make a

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9. Nó lóngér with feelings of awe,
10 Gó Í to thé návél of éarth, ánáppróacháble,
8 Nór to thé témplé of Ábáe
8 Nór cónsúlt Oýmpian Zéuss
6 Unléss thése things, hánd shówn,
7 Tó áll mórtáls, áre in túne—
9 Bút Ó Mighty, if rightly hêaring,

7 Ó Zéus, King of all bélow
7 Lét this éscápe thée nót
7 Nór thý évér living rúle.
8 Fór alréadý thëy sët áside
8 Thé wáníng óráclés {of} Láiáu {Laius}
6 Which thë Gód sënds Pýthía
11 Ánd nó lóngér is Ápólló in hónór
7 Át léast in thë sight óf mén,
7 Bút Góds wórd spréads slów ánd sûre.

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WA omits and makes no mention of the contents of this page, which in the holograph appear mysteriously on the back of the second sheet of loose leaf paper comprising this letter, and which are written vertically in relation to the rest of the letter. Rather, he simply continues without break the sentence begun on the previous page, which in the holograph continues on page 4. (For more on this matter, see note 5.)
man weep. I think I shall have to go back to the stub with my hand tipped over upon one side. Then writing is no great hardship to me; but to write this way after so many months is hell itself. Keep away from the stubb. Yours &c

E.A. Robinson

HCL Previously published in US, pp. 8-10.
EAR misdated the letter 1890.

NOTES

2. EAR was 21 on December 22, 1890.
3. From "Buscombe; or A Michaelmas Goose," by R.D. Blackmore. Published in the December, 1889 issue of Harper's Magazine, where the second line quoted by EAR reads "The less remains to hope for." (SL—italics mine)
4. Published in 1870. Warner is perhaps most famous today as co-author, with Mark Twain, of The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today (1873).
5. This is a segment of a metrical translation from the third stasimon of Sophocles' Œdipus Rex. EAR makes no reference to it anywhere in the letter. Of course, later on, in 1894, EAR and Smith were to embark on a project of jointly translating the Antigone. Lewis E. Weeks, Jr., in "Edwin Arlington Robinson's Antigone," implies that the translation here was part of an earlier attempt to render the Greek dramatist into English poetry: "Four years before the Antigone scheme was put into effect, when Smith was a senior at Bowdoin and Robinson had been out of high school but two years, there was apparently an early Sophoclean experiment. Whether it was part of a larger whole, what its antecedents were, or whether there were subsequent results remains a mystery" (138). (For Weeks, Jr.'s transcription of the translation, see his article, p. 138.) (SL)