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To Harry de Forest Smith - March 4, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, March 4, '94.

My dear Smith,

Your good letter came last Thursday and I was somewhat amused at your remarks on my perceptive powers. I do not think I get a very clear view of the wrinkles on the cerebrum of the men and women I meet, though I generally form some idea of their characters before I a very long acquaintance. There is more in every persons^a soul than we think. Even the happy mortals we term ordinary or commonplace act their own mental tragedies and live a far deeper and believe

wider life than we are inclined to possible in the light of our prejudices. I might name one or two as examples but it is not always best to be too specific upon paper.

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I think that I am somewhat inclined, with all my abstract sympathy, to take an unjustly narrow view of many of my acquaintances; but some unseen force (much the sam^e)^b force, I presume, that led Frederic Harrison¹ to call Matthew Arnold an "elegant Jeremiah") often leads me to say disagreeable if not ~~eruel~~ cruel things of my neighbors. I do not always mean all that I say, but I must acknowledge the dismal truth that the majority of mankind interest me only as studies. They are to me "a little queer", like the Quaker's wife.² I often wonder whether I should be happier if I had the power, or gift, of making friends with everybody. I suppose it stands to reason that I should, but if I were given the opportunity of so changing my nature I am afraid my vanity would keep me as I am. I tread a narrow path, in one sense, but I do a considerably^e)^c

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amount of observing. In fact, I observe so much that my feet often slip and I am forever stumbling over little things that other men never notice. This is one of my

^a WA has "person's".

^b WA transcribes the "e".

^c WA transcribes the "e".

drawbacks, but it is not without its benefits; it opens ones^d eyes to the question of happiness and leads him to analyze that mysterious element of human nature from many points of view. I have discovered by this means that most of my own happiness is of a negative quality—a kind of sublimed selfishness, so to speak. As you know, I seldom laugh. The smoothest part of my face is around my mouth, where the only wrinkles of youth rightfully belong. My wrinkles are in my forehead and I have been more than once reminded of the fact. That, I fancy, is because I think more than some people, and do my laughing in my gray matter instead of upon my face. Real solid laughter is almost a physical impossibility with me. Whenever it occurs it almost frightens me.

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I grin upon the slightest provocation, however, but my grins are not of the sort that makes friends. Somehow they

I feel that ~~it~~ is [=are] all for myself—there is nothing contagious about ~~it~~them.—At a theatre, for example, I may be highly amused, but I cannot give way to my feelings in the ordinary manner. The fact of appreciation seems to monopolize everything else, and I have no doubt that my lack of a reflex expression at such times takes a certain hold upon my vitality. One might find a comparison to this intense mental receptiveness in the bursting of a barrel of beer.³—Now I am down upon the earth again and shall endeavor to stay there. Excuse my big words, but the{y}^e came quite of their own accord. If they convey any meaning to you I shall be glad and I have little doubt that you may interpret them after a fashion. The fact is, I am in a somewhat finical mood to-day, and consequently I write finical sentences^f

This morning I read two acts of "Measure

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for Measure" and was thunderstruck. It is one of the few plays of Shakspeare with which I am not familiar to some extent and for that reason was particularly fascinating.

^d WA has "one's".

^e WA transcribes the "y".

^f WA adds a period here.

The theme, as you know, is not pleasant. It is a comedy of the flesh and a tragedy of the soul. The flesh is paramount, however, and the carnal proclivities of Angelo are wonderfully contrasted with the purity of Isabella. I shall know before night what is needed in the last three acts. Dark as the subject is, there is a rich vein ~~of humor~~ of a rather broad humor running through the play which lends to the whole thing that wonderfully human effect which is a synonym for Shakspeare. It seemed like meeting an old friend when I came across the familiar quotation, "Our doubts are traitors etc,^g"—I won't ask you to read the play, as^h it would do no good; but I am well enough convinced that the time is coming when you will find the gold in these plays

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and wonder at your past indifference to their greatness. Were I the stranger to Shakspeare that you pretend to be I should begin with "Troilus & Cressida". I don't know that I agree with Richard Grant White in calling [it] the wisest play of them all, but I think it is the widest (which is perhaps after all the same thing) in that it gives us a chance to admire the author from so many points of view. It is in that play that we find:

"The end crowns all;
And that old common arbitrator, Time,
Will one day end it."

From this I should turn to the narrowest of the plays, "Timon of Athens"—which is perhaps the most entertaining of them all—in a restricted sense. Forgive this patronizing air of mine, but I am anxious to have you take back your remarks. It is hard for me to conceive of a man who revels in almost everything that is great and good in literature, to overlook the

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great William as you do.

Did I tell you in my last letter that I had lately read Daudet's "Jack?"⁴ⁱ It is a strange thing—as Henry James says, "a brilliant photography of pain"^{5j}

^g WA has a period instead of a comma.

^h WA has "at".

ⁱ The superscript is mine.

James goes on to say that "it is all told with a laugh" but I only half understand what he means. There is humor in the book but the general tone is one of grim inevitableness mixed with a kind of cynicism. Dauded [=t] is strangely irreverent, and perhaps this is where the laugh comes in.⁶ It is a great book anyway and ought to do its work in the world in the way of opening peoples^k eyes and widening their sympathies. I suppose you are tired of hearing me talk about sympathies, but withal my coldness I am at least charitable in my feelings. I am slow to blame people for their misdeeds and (I may as well confess it) equally slow to praise them for their good works.—Well,

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I have given you an evenings^l occupation in deciphering this and will stop when my conscience tells me it is time.

Sincerely.^m

E.A.R.

Do you know of any small book which might have for its title *The History æⁿ* (literary and mechanical) of the Greek Drama? I know of books in which the subject is treated more or less, but I am on the watch for the one little volume which must, of necessity, exist. If you do not will you kindly make inquiries at the Bowdoin library^o

HCL US, 134-137.

NOTES

1. English philosopher and, at times, literary critic (1831-1923).
2. Probably Catherine, the woman of "unbridled fanaticism," in Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy."
3. The extent of EAR's aspirations are perhaps revealed unconsciously in the figure he applied to himself. In the morning, as he noted below, he had been reading Shakespeare with a strong sense of identification. More than twenty years later EAR used the same figure to characterize Shakespeare in the following lines from "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford":

^j WA has a period here.

^k WA has "peoples".

^l WA has "evening's".

^m WA has a comma instead of a period.

ⁿ WA omits this mistake.

^o WA adds a period here.

". . . to see him
You'd never guess what's going on inside him.
He'll break out some day like a keg of ale
With too much independent frenzy in it;"

4. Daudet's *Jack*, 1876.

5. "a brilliant photography of pain": EAR seems to be misquoting James slightly here. The closest reference by James that I could find to EAR's quotation is James' characterizing *Jack* as "this brilliant paraphrase of suffering" (*Partial Portraits* 226). (SL)

6. Apropos of Daudet's humor, EAR probably has this passage in mind from James' *Partial Portraits* (1888):

Daudet's gaiety is a part of his poetry, and his poetry is a part of everything he touches. There is little enough gaiety in the subject of *Jack*, and yet *the whole story is told with a smile*. To complete the charm of the thing, the smile is full of feeling. Here and there it becomes an immense laugh, and the result is a delightful piece of drollery. (218 my emphasis)

(SL)