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Edwin Arlington Robinson on Higher Education

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any abridgement of the rights of American citizens in any re-
pect,” Wilson finally secured the defeat of these resolutions
in March 1916. Dated: February 14, 1916 (ironically, St.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON ON HIGHER
EDUCATION
By CECIL D. EBY, JR.

In his biographical study of Edwin Arlington Robinson, Her-
mann Hagedorn records a conversation between the poet and
Barrett Wendell, the distinguished professor of English com-
position at Harvard. Wendell, an admirer of Robinson’s poet-
ry, asked him where he had obtained his education. To Rob-
inson’s reply, “Right here, such as it was. I had to leave after
two years,” Wendell retorted, “You’re damn lucky.”1 Unfor-
tunately Mr. Hagedorn does not provide us with the source
from which he drew this dialogue, but he dates it during Rob-
inson’s sojourn in Cambridge between 1897 and 1898. How-
ever, unless a newly-discovered Robinson letter be wrong, Wen-
dell 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 for-
mal instruction in English for the creative writer, but he did
not depreciate the value of higher education. Robinson’s un-
published letter to Waitman Barbe is printed in full.

1 Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography (New

York, 1938), 138.
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. Robinson

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INDEX BENEFACTORUM

Dauntless investigation of space yields daily triumphs to unpent 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

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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.