

Charles Eliot Norton to Henry James, 21 March 1870, from Florence

ALS Houghton, bMS Am 1094 (374)

1 Villa d'Elci. March 21, 1870.

2

3 My dear Harry

4 That I have not written to you since you left us lies on my conscience, &  
5 would be a heavier weight than it is had I not, during the past three months, been, for the  
6 most part, so far from well that my letters (had I written) would have been likely to be as  
7 good for nothing as myself.—But in looking back I see that life has been very pleasant,—  
8 and if I have done but little, & felt like doing even less, I have enjoyed much, and Italy  
9 has crooned her old songs of enchantment to me, and has said, as if she were playing the  
10 old child's game with me, "Hold still, hold fast, see what I give you." And she has given  
11 me enough.—If one could but feel that it was enough to get what was precious for one's  
12 self,—and that the world had no right to ask, "What have you got, or what are you getting  
13 for me?" Born & bred in New England as we were, ~~don't~~ where[ ] the air we breathe  
14 [ ]is[ ] full of the northern chill, & no other philosophy but that of utilitarianism is  
15 possible,—it is not easy to learn to be content with the usefulness of doing nothing. Italy  
16 is a good place, however, for deadening the over active conscience, & for killing rank  
17 ambitions. It used to be better for this than it is now. The Italians are getting tired of  
18 being the grasshoppers, & want to become thrifty ants. They sing less,—and lay up  
19 winter stores, and yet do not become happier as they become provident.—Sara, as you  
20 have heard, has wisely gone to Spain before it is too late,—before Spain has become

21 modern & American. What will our children do when all the world is depoetized, & the  
22 past dethroned by schools & railroads? To me, who remember ^the[^] Italy of the middle  
23 ages,—the Italy of Gregory XVI, and the Austrians, of the Chartreuse de Parme & the  
24 Neapolitan Bourbons,—the loss seems very great. Happy you, whose youth saves you  
25 from such a standard of comparison! Like Rousseau, I feel like contesting the advantages  
26 of liberty & of what we call civilization;—but first, one must define happiness, and must  
27 ascertain the true sources (more mysterious than those of the Nile) of personal & national  
28 character.

29 ———

30         The spring comes slowly,—but the podere is sweet with violets and bright with  
31 scarlet & purple ranunculuses and yellow daffodils. The slopes under the gray olives are  
32 covered with the vivid green of the fresh grass,—& on the distant hills the blossoming  
33 almond trees look like wreaths of steam. The mountains gain fresh glories of colour, &  
34 all outdoors is lovely. Ten days ago we went to the Certosa. I wonder if you went there.  
35 If not, come back to Florence that you may see it. There are not many convents like it for  
36 picturesqueness,—few so untouched by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was a monk there making  
37 candles for the pious, for church ceremonies, who looked as if he had never heard the  
38 word Revolution, & who certainly was ignorant of Voltaire & Franklin, and Renan &  
39 Emerson and the Atlantic Monthly. They gave us some of the true “Chartreuse” to taste;  
40 it had the flavor of Lethe. As one looked out toward Florence, & saw the purple dome &  
41 the clear cut campanile, it seemed as if they were modern & new worldish, compared  
42 with the Egyptian age of this cloister life. I wish I could photograph for you the arcaded  
43 cabbage garden, set off with wall flowers & lavender, the old well & the white cowled

44 friar drawing water in his copper bucket.—You see no such pictures in England, not even  
45 at Worcester. They vanished when Henry VIII<sup>th</sup> reformed the realm. The institution of  
46 compelled pauperism is not as picturesque as that of vowed poverty.

47 —

48 I hope you are the better for your long stay at Malvern. Do write to me of your  
49 health, & tell us a little of your plans. Our plans for the summer are still uncertain,—  
50 dependent mainly on my health. If I grow stronger we shall, I think, go to Siena, but if  
51 April & May do not bring me up I shall a little dread the experience of the far from  
52 invigorating heats of an Italian summer. But I do not want to move northward. Susan is  
53 now delightfully well. I ought to be well if content could make me so. The children are  
54 all well &, I hope, improving. Little Margaret is worthy of her mother.

55 Good bye, dear boy. I wish I could do more for you, & save you from some  
56 solitary hours. Love from all. Affectionately Yours

57 C. E. Norton.

## Notes

17-18 The Italians are getting tired of being the grasshoppers, & want to become thrifty ants • see La Fontaine's fable of the ant and the grasshopper

19 Sara • Sara Sedgwick

23 Gregory XVI • Bartolomeo Alberto Mauro Cappellari (1765-1846), Pope Gregory XVI from 1831 to 1846

30 podere • estate

34 Certosa • La Certosa di Val d'Ema, outside Florence's Porta Romana, founded in 1341 and designed by Andrea Orcagna. James described the Certosa di Val d'Ema in "An Italian Convent" (*Independent* 2 July 1874: 3-4)

52-54 Susan [...] Little Margaret • Susan Sedgwick Norton gave birth on 15 January 1870 to the Nortons' third daughter and fifth child, Margaret

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