

Charles Eliot Norton to Henry James, 5, [8] December 1873, from Cambridge

ALS Houghton, bMS Am 1094 (379)

1 Shady Hill. December 5, 1873.

2 My dear Harry

3 My heart reproaches me for the slackness of my pen,—for my
4 heart has not been ungrateful to you during these long months through which my pen has
5 kept silence. But the mere effort to get through the days with tolerable composure,
6 cheerfulness, & seeming indifference, has been enough to make direct expression of any
7 kind ~~an effort~~ an unwelcome addition of weariness. But if Sir Kenelm Digby's, or rather
8 Lord Herbert of Cherbury's dreams of the Sympathetic Powder had come true in our
9 time, you would often have been conscious of the share I was taking in your interests &
10 emotions. There was an engraving that took my boyish fancy captive of Lord Herbert
11 lying on a green bank, by a running stream, in a thick wood, with his shield resting on his
12 left arm above his heart, and on the rim of the shield the words Magica Sympathiæ. Even
13 if you have not recognized consciously the breath of sympathy from me, I have gratefully
14 recognized ~~& helpfully felt~~ and felt the tender & helpful touch of your sympathetic
15 friendliness.

16 And I have thought often, also, of some of the words you said in your letters from
17 home when you were here two or three years ago. You did not exaggerate the quality of
18 the experience; you will find that vivid as your impression of it may be, ~~your~~ [^]the[^]
19 image falls short of the truth. For, day by day, America drifts farther & farther away from
20 Europe. The great currents of cosmic life drive us—~~great~~ [^]immense[^] floating,

21 unattached continent that we are,—farther away from all that is rooted in or anchored to
22 the past.

23 America is the land of cocagne for the buoyant, the healthy, the optimist, the
24 materialist,—in fact for the shallow, cheerful existence of whatever sort. It takes down
25 the conceit of philosophy to see a country in the progress of which thought, and any but
26 the lower scientific form of intelligence, has so little share. No doubt there is great &
27 restless vivacity of mind, much brightness of surface; & certainly there are many virtues
28 to be found, even in the newest & roughest sets (at least Bret Harte, our latest immortal,
29 so assures us,)—and Cambridge is no doubt as near the centre of the earth as any place so
30 far north can possibly be. But it is a barren & solitary earth,—and it would be a wretched
31 and unworthy patriotism, or a mere love of paradox, or an unmanly timidity and self
32 distrust, that would hinder one who has known the best, from saying distinctly, “this is
33 not the best & will not in our time be the best.” I am not ready to say with Stendhal, “J’ai
34 vu de trop bonne heure la beauté parfaite.” It makes me neither misanthropical nor
35 unpatriotic; but the memory of it is the secret treasure of my life, feeding all its springs
36 with their sweetest & most healthful waters. It must be a serious, very likely a solitary
37 life, ~~one~~ [^]a life[^] filled, at least, with a tender intermingling of sadness & of joy, that
38 one who has felt what life might be, who has experienced the fullness of resource of the
39 world, who has been brought into sympathy with the artistic emotions of ~~the cheap~~
40 Florence or of Venice,—that such an one must lead in America. But a serious, solitary
41 life, with a strain of sad joy running through it, is by no means the worst that may be led.
42 It is the only one consistent with genuine dignity, and purity of memory, of aim, & of
43 hope.

44 —

45 I miss Lowell from Cambridge. He writes me homesick letters, & will
46 come back to Elmwood as to the dearest spot of earth. He has not found Europe what it
47 was when he was young; and familiar use & wont & habit & association are worth more
48 to him than the unfamiliarities even of Italy. But to be sure Cambridge itself will be
49 unfamiliar to him. It has little left that recalls it as it was when I was a boy. It grows from
50 day to day more suburban. You hear, no doubt, of such little incidents as belong to the
51 common life of the town; there are not many of them. I see few people who can tell me
52 anything of more important matters. I hear no authentic tidings from any spiritual world.
53 Not even yesterday, which I spent with Emerson at Concord, gave me anything much
54 better than gossip; to be sure it was gossip about the prophets, for he read me long
55 extracts from his diaries of his visits to England in 1833, and in 1848. The first chapter of
56 “English Traits” contains a part of what he read, but perhaps not the best part.

57 I was greatly

58 —

59 I was interrupted here, my dear Harry, the other evening, and in the
60 course of the three days that have passed I have forgotten ~~how~~ to what my broken
61 sentence was to relate. But I have just been reading afresh your letter from Siena, and can
62 have nothing better to say than to thank you for it most affectionately. The memories of
63 the happy months we spent there, in the very heart of all that is most Italian, knowing
64 ourselves happy, & yet sobered by the very experience of such full enjoyment of life, are
65 very dear to me,—and yet there are times when I cannot dwell on them,—but those are
66 not my best seasons.

67 I understand your complaint of the discord between “ones essential and
68 indefinable modernness” with the sentiment of old Italy. But I do not fully sympathize

69 with it. The poet, that is more or less consciously, in all of us is of no epoch or age,—but
70 his native land is Italy. It is the prose of the world that surrounds us, & forces itself upon
71 our company elsewhere. The imagination is more at one with circumstance in Italy, than
72 in France or America. One must betake himself to hard work here, and find such
73 satisfaction as he may in it. You ask me what I am doing. I study & read much, but I
74 write ~~but~~ little ^though something every day[^], and with no desire or ^immediate[^]
75 design for publication. There are too many books, and one must be possessed with
76 confidence in the worth to others of his own genius, before he would willingly to their
77 number. I approve Carlyle’s principle of silence; and, in his case, I approve his practise as
78 against his principle.

79 I am glad to think of your brother’s being with you, & of the pleasures you will
80 share. Remember me most kindly to him. Do not tempt him to linger too long, as I fear
81 you did last spring in Rome.

82 My Mother, Jane & Grace send affectionate good wishes to you. The children are
83 all well & doing well. I am as strong as I have a right to be. Ever affectionately Yours

84 C. E. Norton.

Notes

1 Shady Hill • Norton’s Cambridge home (see Mary Walsh James to Henry James, 21 September [1869])

33-34 J'ai vu de trop bonne heure la beauté parfaite • Too soon did I see perfect beauty

46 Elmwood • James Russell Lowell's Cambridge home

56 "English Traits" • *English Traits*, by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1856; London: Routledge, 1856)

61 your letter from Siena • No personal letters from Siena by Henry James to any of the Nortons have survived; but James's June 1874 *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Siena" (664-69), had been written and sent to Cambridge by this time, for in his 22 December [1873] letter to his father, James asks if he had heard William Dean Howells (the *Atlantic's* editor) mention having received "from me long since an ... article on Siena"; possibly Norton had been able to read this article in manuscript

82 My Mother [...] The children • Catharine Eliot Norton (1793-1879); Eliot Norton, Sara (Sally) Norton, Elizabeth (Lily) Norton, Rupert Norton, Margaret Norton, Richard Norton

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To cite this letter, according to MLA style guidelines:

Norton, Charles Eliot. Letter to Henry James. 5, [8] December 1873. James Family Papers. Houghton Library. Harvard University. Cambridge, Mass. Dear Henry James.org Ed. Pierre A. Walker et al. 2005. Salem State College. [insert your date of access here] <http://www.dearhenryjames.org>.