

Charles Eliot Norton To Henry James, 13 March 1873, from London

ALS Houghton, bMS Am 1094 (377)

1 33 Cleveland Square. W

2 March 13, 1873.

3 My dear Harry

4 Your letter to Grace, which came last night, is redolent of all the
5 sweetness of the Roman spring. Just two years ago Susan & I were there, & how
6 beautiful it was! The sunlight & the shadows, the violets & the anemones, the pines &
7 the statues of the Villa Borghese seem to me finer than any this side of them. But one can
8 hardly speak of such things without falling under imputation of secondhand feeling, so
9 hackneyed & vulgar have they become,—vulgar only in the sense of being sentimentalized
10 over by people without sentiment. But you & I may safely say to each other How
11 beautiful is a beautiful Roman day! How delicious the harmony between nature & history
12 & art in this place! How each assists & adorns the other! How days in Rome, like days in
13 Venice, enlarge the whole scope of imaginative life! making the time that follows them in
14 one's life wholly different from the time that went before. It is only after them, if spent
15 with love, that one can say with content, Vixi. One has seen Naples & is ready to die.

16 London is not Italian, but in its way it is not without preeminent qualities. It does
17 not so much enlarge one's spiritual vision, as sharpen one's practical sight. There is a
18 keener struggle for existence on the lowest possible earthly terms here, than elsewhere in
19 the world. Men & women here are waging a fierce battle one against the other to get
20 bread, or position, or recognition, or something of the kind. No one would stop to pick

21 violets, if violets were to be gathered. You must buy them, a penny a bunch, if you are
22 fortunate enough to have the penny, and indifferent enough to like bought violets.

23 I wish I were with you there, for after four weeks indoors, I long to get into the
24 sunshine once more. There is very little of it here, but on the whole I am doing well. I
25 have within three days gained the run of the house, and next week shall brave even an
26 east wind. And all the rest of the household are well, and the children gay, and good, &
27 contented. We have taken passage for home on the steamer of May 15, and two months
28 seem a short time even in looking forward. We mean to spend a few days in Cambridge
29 & Boston & then to go for a quiet summer to Ashfield. I look forward to life at home
30 without any misgivings, though your serene patriotism is beyond my attainment. I do not
31 accept even American institutions, social or political, as finalities. I believe in a distant
32 future not in the present as I used to do, & in this faith America is as good a home as
33 another, perhaps a better than any other in some minor respects. I should like to come
34 back to the earth a thousand years hence to see how the world has got on. I think it is not
35 going to have a good time, but I believe that a thousand or two thousand years hence it
36 will be a pleasanter & healthier & happier place to live in than it is to day: Christianity as
37 a creed, & the ascetic morality based on the popular conception of the Christian doctrine
38 have nearly run their course; ~~so far as~~ [^]their influence[^] has become a thing of
39 tradition, rather than an actual force exercising control over the conduct & character of
40 man. And it must take a long time to establish the new morality which is to be the
41 organizing power & animating spirit of the new society.

42 Does the "Fortnightly" get to Rome? There is a striking article by Leslie Stephen,
43 in the number for this month, called "Are We Christians?" He has been to see me often of
44 late, & we find ourselves usually in close agreement of opinion. Indeed he & Burne Jones

45 are ~~almost~~ [^]the[^] only friends whom I have often seen during my illness. Last week I
46 had a very long & amusing visit from Mr. Lewes. I could say much of him if there were
47 more space on this sheet; but there is so much of him in Middlemarch that you have no
48 need of my words in addition. I have not seen “Her” as he calls her, but I must do so
49 before long. I wish I could think as well of Her book as you do. It is impossible. And let
50 me say as my last word that I think you perverse in your feelings in regard to Criticism,
51 & can account for them only by the fact that you have read only the critical notices of the
52 Atlantic Monthly of late. I quite agree with you that the world would gain if they were
53 silenced.

54 Good night. I heartily wish that all may go well with you, & am, ever,

55 Affectionately Yours

56 C. E. Norton.

Notes

5 Susan • Susan Sedgwick Norton

15 Vixi • I have lived

29 Ashfield • Rural town in western Massachusetts where Norton had a summer home

42 a striking article by Leslie Stephen • “Are We Christians?” *Fortnightly Review* 1 March 1873: 281-303

48 “Her” • George Eliot

© This is copyrighted material; reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted by law except with permission of the copyright owners

To cite this letter, according to MLA style guidelines:

Norton, Charles Eliot. Letter to Henry James. 13 March 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>.