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To Harry de Forest Smith - April 15, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, April 15 – 1894.

My dear Smith,

This is a magnificent Sunday for the forest, but alas, we are not there—at least, I am not. I suppose I might be if I took the trouble, but there would be a painful absence of you and your shining visage—to say nothing of your pipe and your conversation. A book would be good—"Views and Reviews"¹ if we had it, or better still, a volume of Browning. I think I have found your poet in Browning (leaving out Arnold, of course) and I am anxious for you to read him. Houghton & Mifflin & Co^a sell him for something like ten dollars (six volumes, and pretty big ones, too) and I mean to acquire them at the earliest opportunity. I found Volume II at Barstow's and have held great sessions over it. It contains A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, Luria, Colombe's Birthday—and many other things of which none interested me more than "Waring". Most of Browning's more familiar short poems seem to be in this volume, but of course not "Agamemnon", the thing I want most of all, just at present.

-2-

I cannot join you in your depreciation of Mr. Mosher's book-making.² "Old World Lyrics" is a jewel of workmanship in my eyes, and puts the Riverside Press to shame. I fancy half my enthusiasm over the book is the unexpected (shall I say perpendicularly?) discovery of the title printed horizontally on the back. The contents are pleasing, though it is rather startling to find John Payne's version of Banville's "Ballade des Pendus" preferred to Lang's, which is infinitely better. But how Rossetti does beat them in his Ballade of Dead Ladies.—He seems to keep up the old French spirit without Payne's archaisms. Payne can write sonnets and he had better stick to them. Do you know "Hesperia" and the others in Sharp's collection?³ If you do not, look them up and judge for yourself.

I have copied "The Pines" on my machine, but have concluded to rewrite the last part of it. That is the part that demands the best work and which seems to have received the worst. It is too careless and does not give the sketch the "send-off" which the reader might naturally

^a WA adds a period here.

expect. I say "reader" with vague feelings of guilt and presumption, but my conscience may be clear as long as I confine myself to the singular,--which means—you!

-3-

I wish you would read the second book of *The Task*, and then tell me you don't like Cowper.⁴ I am getting infinite pleasure from that poem now and I am glad that I am only half way through it. This is saying considerable of a poem containing two hundred pages. It is more than I can say of *Paradise Lost*—though I would not place the two in comparison. One is magestic {sic}, the other is merely great. In reading Cowper you feel yourself in the country with London, which you do not somehow care much for, not far away. I won't ask you to read the whole of the *Task*, as it would do no good—only I hope you may fall in with it someday. That will be enough. You won't find anything in it like "When the liquor^b is out, why clink the canakin?"⁵ as you do in Browning, but you do find, as you well know, "God made the country and man made the town",⁶ which, I think, is quite as good as the former—perhaps a little better.

To-day I have been reading "Une Idylle Pendant La Liège" [=Siège]⁷ by my old friend Coppée. This is the last⁽¹⁾ of his prose and it makes me feel badly to think of it. I suppose he will write more some-day,^c however, and give me a chance to draw good lessons from his healthy naturalism. He always leaves a good taste in one's mouth, which is hardly true of most of his confrères.

(1) I mean in the order of my reading.^d

-4-

The "Idylle" [is] largely descriptive of Paris during the siege and on that account would be more entertaining if I knew more about the time. Love and war are wonderfully mixed—so mixed that I am quite willing to forgive the hero—if I may call him one—for not being a better soldier. He is in love with a young married woman whose husband is a cad; and the reader never once thinks of there being anything like moral crime in the affair. And there isn't, for that matter—at least, not yet. He has kissed her twice—

^b WA has "liguor".

^c WA has "some day".

^d WA places this note, without the frame, below the signature.

after the most approved methods—but that is all. He is a moral young man and does not like the idea of finding "Cousin Robert" in her friend's room at nine o'clock in the morning.

I have had two pipes this forenoon and am in a fair way to another before long. To-morrow morning I go to work in earnest and hope to finish the other two sketches in time to pack them off by a week from to-day. When they come back, I shall feel queer, but it wont^e last long. You see, I have had experience.—And, by the way, I am sadly in need of those shoes. Why doesn't the Dial respond?⁸ I think I must write and tell the editor of my condition. Try not to be so irregular in your correspondence this term, and excuse my gall in asking so much of a man with an occupation.

Sincerely,
 R. f

HCL US, 142-144.

1. By William Ernest Henley (1849-1903), essays in appreciation of various authors ancient and modern, 1890.
2. Thomas B. {Bird} Mosher {1852-1923}. {Mosher was a Portland publisher.}
- 3 William Sharp, *Sonnets of This Century* (London 1886). Mowry Saben once told James L. Tryon that it was his opinion "that Robinson knew Sharp's collection of Sonnets by heart." In addition to "Hesperia," two other sonnets by John Payne are included in Sharp's collection: "Sibyl" and "Life Unlived."
4. William Cowper (1731-1800). *The Task*, 1785.
5. From Browning's *The Flight of the Duchess*, XVI. (SL)
6. *The Task* l:749. (SL)
7. A short novel published in 1874. (SL)
- 8.⁸ {Re.} "For a Copy of Poe's Poems."

^e WA has "won't".

^f WA omits the underline.

⁸ This is WA's note 5.