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To Harry de Forest Smith - May 21, 1891

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Me., May 21, 1891.

My Dear Smith: -

Perhaps I shall find no better time than now to write you a few lines, so I will improve the opportunity. I would go down in the stable and have smoke, but as I am out of tobacco, I will try to console myself with a short season of composition. I think my coming to Brunswick this spring is rather doubtful. but will let you know in time. There is considerable work to be done around the place, and as I am laying my plans to go to Cambridge the first of July, I must gauge myself accordingly. I was talking with Schuman¹ the other day concerning Harvard when he made the remark that the whole damned institution ought to [be] wiped out. I can hardly agree with him, although I think myself that it is the root of a world of unlicensed deviltry; but for that matter, who can name a place of any considerable size that is not?. The matter seems to me something like this: the college is there with its corps of instructors. and the student has his choice as to improving the opportunities placed before him or not. If a fellow goes there and spends all his time in raising the devil, it does not seem exactly a fair thing to lay the whole burden of blame upon the college. If a man should find a dollar and a dogtird side by side in the street would it be the fault of the

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dollar should the finder choose itts less resplendent neighbor for his reward? (As a rule I do not approve of vulgarity, especial{-}ly in friendly correspondence, but as I desired to make myself clearly understood I trust that you will take no offence at my ex{-}ample.)

I think I told you that I would copy off ~~th~~ ode of Horace, and I will do so upon another

sheet.² You will find it rather too literal for a poetical translation - a little prosy in places. I have not tried Horace since and I doubt if I ever do it again. It is too much work for the pay. I have never seen an English translation of Horace that seemed satisfactory to me; perhaps I am over particular, but I doubt if the thing can be done to catch the spirit of the original. Horace is Latin, or nothing.³ For example, make a poetical translation of "cras ingens iterabimus aequor", or "Integer vitae, scelerisque purus." Bulwer says, "Tomorrow again the great sea-plains", but it sounds rather far-fetched to me. His translation of the odes and epodes is a rather unique one however, and it would pay you to examine it if you have never done so. He attempts to reproduce the ring of the different metres in different styles of English blank verse, mostly of his own invention I should say. If I remember rightly he renders "dulce loquentem"--"her the sweet-talking" - objective of course.

Well, I think I shall have to paddle down

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street through the rain after a plug of tobacco and have a smoke. I will copy that ode and take this letter along with me.

Please excuse the dimness of the type: ~~the~~ there is evidently a scarcity of ink.

Yours truly,

E. A. R.

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Horace: Book I., Ode XI.⁴

I pray thee not, Leuconoe, to pore
 Upon forbidden things - what end may be
 By destiny allowed for you and me -
 Nor blind Chaldea's starry page explore.

'Twere better, oh! far better, if you bore
 Your lot contented: whether Jove decree
 More winters yet to come, or whether he
 Assign this one whose worn, wave-eaten shore
 Shatters the Tyrian sea to-day the last -
 Be wise, I pray; and rack thy wine, nor fill
 Thy bosom with large hopes; for while I sing
 The envious close of time is narrowing:
 So seize the day, be merry ere 'tis past,
 And let the morrow come for what it will.

E.A.R.^a

HCL US, 18-20.
 Typewritten.

NOTES

1. Dr. Alanson Tucker Schumann.
2. EAR did not mention, in this letter at any rate, that his translation, in sonnet form, of Horace's ode to Leuconoe had already been published. It first appeared in print in the *Boston Journal*, April 1, 1891, a fact hitherto unnoted. Later EAR rebuilt the poem in a masterful way and printed the revision as "Horace to Leuconoe" in *The Torrent and The Night Before*. See his letter to Smith dated December 14, 1895.
3. Three books that EAR owned played a part in the shaping of his translation of Horace's ode. On February 19, 1889 EAR acquired Sir Theodore Martin's *Horace* (New York, 1885), which contains an English translation of the ode to Leuconoe that varies greatly in style from EAR's version. On April 30, 1890 he acquired the first volume of *The Works of Horace* (London, n.d.) edited by Joseph Currie and apparently found the notes helpful. In February 1891 he bought Samuel Waddington's *The Sonnets of Europe, A Volume of Translations* (London, 1886), which contains an essay on the difficulties of translation, including a minatory statement of D.G. Rossetti that EAR surely took to heart: "The lifeblood of rhythmical translation is this commandment—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one."
4. On the verso of the sheet on which the poem is typed, Harry de Forest Smith wrote the following note: "Sent me while in college, i.e., before 1891. Written on his old cheap typewriter—a disc machine—with his initials. H. de F. S. May 21/91. Copy attached to copy of letter. H.S."^b

^a The initials are written in black ink at the bottom corner of the page.

^b It is not quite clear to me what the meaning of Smith's note is, or what WA wished to imply by including it. My guess is that EAR had previously—"before 1891"—sent the poem to Smith, and that this version is a second "copy."