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To Harry de Forest Smith - February 25, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITHGardiner.^a Feb^b 25.^c '94.

My dear Smith

There is a kid asleep in the next room so to-day I shall use a pen instead of the machine, trusting you may be able to make out what ~~after~~ I write after a little struggle. In the first place, what are you having for weather down in Rockland? This morning at seven o'clock our thermometer stood -20° in the sun. I like cold weather but this is a little too much even for me. I think, though, we feel better at such a time.

The past week has been a rather dull one for me and pretty much wasted. I have not been able to do much of any work, for some reason I cannot explain. I hav{e}^d felt well enough bodily but I have been in a bad mood. Yesterday I partially drove it off by making a rondeau ~~ballade~~ and a villanelle. The latter is a little mystical perhaps and is an attempt to show the

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poetry of the commonplace. Here it is,--you may judge for yourself. Tell me what you think of it and do not be afraid of hurting my feelings.

^eThe House on the Hill.
(Villanelle of Departure.)

They are all gone away,
The house is shut and still:
There is nothing more to say.

Malign them as we may,
We cannot do them ill:
They are all gone away.

Are we more fit than they
To meet the Master's will?—

^a WA has a comma here instead of a period.

^b WA adds a period here.

^c WA has a comma instead of a period.

^d WA transcribes the "e".

^e I have added the preceding line space.

There is nothing more to say.

What matters it who stray
 Around the sunken sill?—
 They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
 For them is wasted skill:
 There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
 In the House on the Hill:
 They are all gone away,
 There is nothing more to say. . .¹

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This kind of thing may not interest you much, and please do not hesitate to say so if that be the case. These old French forms always had a fascination for me which I never expect to outgrow. I don't^f know that I care to outgrow it, but still it interferes with my more serious work to an unpleasant extent. When one of the things begin to run in my mind there is little rest for me until it is out. Fortunately this one was made very quickly (in about twenty minutes) so did not steal much of my time.

I have been thinking a good deal lately about the "Antigone" scheme. I like it and would like to carry it out; but I am half afraid that the double load of that and my prose work will [be] a little too much. On the other hand, the time and trouble might be a good investment for the practice it would give me in the choice and arrangement of words. Perhaps we had better try it and see how fast we progress. I could hardly hope to arrange more than ten lines a day. At that rate the thing would be done in about a year if I have a correct idea of the length of the drama. Isn't it something like three thousand lines. I should want a good translation to thoroughly familiarize myself with the work and then you could send me your version—a little at a time.

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At this rate we ought to do a thousand lines during your vacation which would be a good start. I am inclined to

^f WA has "don't".

think, up[on] the whole, that the time would be well spent though as I am now situated it is a question of conscience rather than labor. When I have one definite idea to work out, have I a moral right to let such a laborious amusement interfere with it? That is the trouble. It is a little different with you, as you are making a living and have the summer to improve as best you may. I know something about the labor involved in a task of this kind from my past experience in translating Virgil and an ode from Horace. In the "days of my youth" about eight years ago I put the whole of Cicero's first oration againsts Cataline into blank verse. I began it for fun and carried it through to save myself the chagrin of giving the thing it [=up]. Sometimes I am afraid it would be the same with Antigone, though of course I should go into this work with much more earnestness. I have a presentiment that the thing will be done, and that we shall be really glad that we have done it. It is no small undertaking, and must reflect some credit upon the men who carry it through—even though it be a questionable success.

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In years to come we could look back upon the business and feel that we had left the common ways of men and at least strove² [stiven?] for higher things. When the thing is completed (if it ever is) it would be a good plan for you to submit it to some Brunswick man whom you think well qualified to test its merits from all points of view—that is, if you are upon sufficiently familiar terms with any of them to warrant your asking so much.³ If it were good # for anything it would be folly not to preserve it in print. I should prefer to do the metrical work without having seen any poetical translations whatever. Th[en] I could feel that I was not imitating. I should want a greek text—to follow the form of the lines (a knowledge of the alphabet would be enough for that) and I think it would be a good plan for you to bring the books you mentioned in your letter. I do not mean that I intend to attempt anything like a reproduction of the Greek metres—my idea is merely to suggest a little of the original form to the American eye—thus preserving an ocular resemblance between the translation and the Greek text.

I trust your belated letter of last Monday will not interfere with your writing to-day.

Yours sincerely

E.A^g Robinson

HCL US, 131-134.

NOTES

1. Published in this form in *The Globe* IV, No. XVI (September 1894), 828. Revised considerably before publication in TNB.
2. US reads "striven."
3. Later EAR himself asked the advice of Professor Henry Johnson of Bowdoin College. See EAR's letter to Smith, April 24, 1897.

^g WA adds a period here.