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3-18-1894

To Harry de Forest Smith - March 18, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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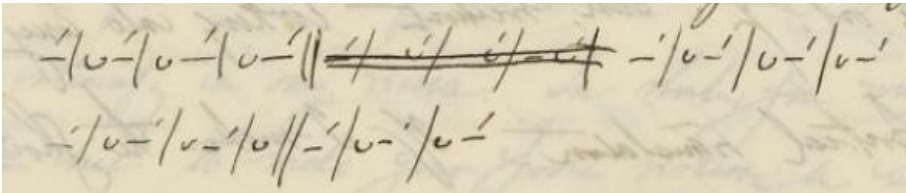
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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, March 18 - 1894.

My dear Smith,

I worked my way over the hills to your house the other day, and brought back a satchel full of books on the Greek drama. I think I have managed to get a fairly good idea of the general scheme of Antigone, though I cannot help thinking that there is a book in existence that would tell me many things I do not know. I have about concluded to write the body of the play in regular English heroic verse, making up a kind of irregular ode for the chorus—I mean irregular in meter but to correspond in the antistrophes, thus making the thing balance and showing up a definite plan on my part. I have this in mind for an opening:



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This, as you see is very simple, but not too much so, if I can keep up a sufficient^a sonority. I cannot recall anything just like it in English poetry, but it must have been used before now. If I remember rightly, the Envoi in "Many Inventions"¹ is very near to it, though I think it is slightly different.

I am afraid I have undertaken a task beyond my abilities, but there will be some satisfaction in an honest attempt. If I fail, the trial must be worth something for the experience it will give me. I have been thinking the matter over during the past week and wondering whether the project is asinine or not. To be sure, Bryant translated the Iliad and Odyssey without being a Greek scholar, but regular hexameter verse in [=is] marvelously different from the split metres of the drama. I am just mutton-headed enough to carry this thing out, if I can, without looking into any English poetical translation. If I make the ghost

^a WA has "sifficient".

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of Sophocles shudder, I cannot help it. Sometimes I am foolish enough to believe that my ignorance of Greek (I think I have said this before) may be a benefit rather than a hinderance. I know that I have something of the Hellenic spirit in me, and have a pretty good conception of what the word means. I may lack some of the "serene and childlike joy of life"² but I have the spirit of wise moderation and love of classical completeness which, I suppose is more ~~marked~~ marked in the later poets of Pericles' time than in the Homeric period. This will help me amazingly in the Antigone. You have much of this appreciation & I shall depend to a large extent upon your judgment as to the choice of words.—Do not think by this everlasting talk on my own part of the business that I overlook you[r] own part of the work; for you know you must give me something more than an ordinary slipshod class-room rendering. You must weigh your words and keep the original spirit in the prose version which I must try to intensify in my verses. In short, you must do your best to make your prose version a work of

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art. The result will probably be that your rendering will prove more satisfying than mine—provided you do your work as conscientiously as you do almost everything you enter upon.

To-day I shall finish the version of my "Parable of the Pines"^b The scheme is pretty good and I really think that the thing might be of some benefit to the world, on ~~it~~ account of its subject matter alone, if it once got circulated. This is my seventh and last sketch for the time being. My work for the next two or three weeks will be the general polishing up and

copying
final ~~copying~~ of what I have done—preparatory to sending it away. I want your opinions very much, and shall probably tire you a little with my questions. But you know that I would be willing to do the same for you if the chance offered, so you may be able

^b WA adds a period here.

to wake a little enthusiasm in the matter. All of my last six pieces are entirely different from "Marshall" but I am beginning to doubt if they are any better.— Yesterday the idea of a very simple and appropriate book-plate came into my mind and I proceeded to draw the rough sketch I enclose.³ It hardly seems possible that it can be original, but I do not think I have ever seen it.

Most sincerely,
E.A. Robinson

HCL US, 140-142

1. *Many Inventions*, a collection of short stories by Rudyard Kipling, was published in 1893. The poetic "Envoy" beginning "Heh! Walk her round!" concludes the volume. (SL)
2. An allusion to the second sonnet of Longfellow's "Three Friends of Mine":

In Attica thy birthplace should have been,
Or the Ionian Isles, or where the seas
Encircle in their arms the Cyclades,
So wholly Greek wast thou in thy serene
And childlike joy of life, O Philhelene!

(SL)

- 3.^c EAR's sketch of the book-plate was not retained with the letter.

^c This is WA's note 1.