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10-28-1894

## To Harry de Forest Smith - October 28, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

[Gardiner, Maine]  
Oct<sup>a</sup> 28 - '94.

My dear Smith,

It gives me a comfortable feeling to have so much Antigone on hand, and, unless ~~up~~ [something] unpleasant happens, I shall feel still more comfortable before long—when I have turned it into metre. I send you to-day the result of something over ten hours of diabolically hard labor. You will not like it at first because it is not literal, but if you will take the trouble to examin<sup>e</sup><sup>b</sup> it a little more closely you will find that it is not so far from a translation as it seems on a first sight. I had to throw out Many are the marvellous things and that very Uncomfortable expression "offspring of horse". The Greek language could say things which the English language cannot, and that is one of them. The Oxford Edition has offspring of the steed, which is a little better, but still bad enough to spoil the whole strophe for me. There is no need of worrying so much, however, over an occasional omission as all translations are

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full of them. The first principles of poetical translation demand them, and I could do infinitely better work if I could bring myself to make my version a little more flexible. Over-fidelity to the original is the great fault of Longfellows<sup>c</sup> Dante & Taylors<sup>d</sup> "Faust"<sup>1</sup> (I am not making comparisons) and if you will read a page of Longfellows<sup>e</sup> translation and then one of Careys<sup>2f</sup> you will appreciate the truth of what I say. I have never seen Plumptre's version of this second chorus but I am willing to

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<sup>a</sup> WA adds a period here.

<sup>b</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>c</sup> WA has "Longfellow's".

<sup>d</sup> WA has "Taylor's".

<sup>e</sup> WA has "Longfellow's".

<sup>f</sup> WA has "Carey's".

wager that he is farther from the original text than I, withal his advantage of writing from the original. I do not know how much more tinkering this of mine will require, but if you will kindly point out any parts that ~~parts that~~ you think won't<sup>g</sup> do, I will do my best to fix them.—While I think it, let me copy this note by the editor of the Oxford version: "I cannot resist giving my Readers this sentence from the translation of Adams: 'He traverses the hoary main in stormy winds, by the rattling tremors of swollen sails, and pierces the supreme incorruptible land of the immortal gods, year after year returning to

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plow it with horse-kind."

I received a letter from Butler not long ago containing the rather surprising statement that "Pembroke"<sup>3</sup> is infinitely greater than "Trilby."<sup>h</sup> Perhaps that letter had something to do with my [the book]<sup>i</sup> causing J.J. Ward to carry it back to the store when I got it and took it home. The book is strange in its very simplicity. Everything is drawn against a tragic background of subdued passion and some of the scenes are almost magnificent in their treatment. To the careless modern reader the plot—or rather the plots—will seem impossible & contrary to human nature; but to one who knows any thing<sup>j</sup> about ~~Puritanism~~ Puritanism the book will be interesting & impressive. Narrow minded & unsympathetic readers had better keep away from it. It is a rather significant fact that it finds more appreciation in England than America, which is perhaps due to the fact of England's<sup>k</sup> undeniable ability to tell a good thing and not be deceive{d}<sup>l</sup> by outward show, which I cannot help

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<sup>g</sup> WA has "won't".

<sup>h</sup> WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

<sup>i</sup> I read the square brackets in the holograph. WA uses normal parentheses.

<sup>j</sup> WA has "anything".

<sup>k</sup> WA has "England's".

<sup>l</sup> WA transcribes the "d".

thinking that Time will prove to be a certain percentage of "Trilby."<sup>m</sup>

I was surprised to find some things treated so openly in Pembroke, and I rather admire

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Miss Wilkins<sup>n</sup> frankness and nerve, if the word is required. There are a few animal touches that are hardly like any thing<sup>o</sup> else that I hav{e}<sup>p</sup> ever seen in novels. I hope you will see fit to read it bef{o}re<sup>q</sup> long as I am anxious for your opinion. It is eminently qualified for reading aloud. It never drags for a page and is always either bright or gloomy. Although it "ends well" in a way, Pembroke life is not a summer vacation. It is pretty much like any other life—that is, relatively.

I was on the point of investing a couple of dollars in the first three Chap Books by [=but] my scanty purse compelled me to do something else. I could hav{e}<sup>r</sup> bough[t] them then for ten cents a copy. Something told me the<sup>s</sup> {=that} they would be valuable some day, and I think I told you as much. As it is, I am glad that I have one set.

George goes away to-morrow, so I must finish Treasure Island by myself. I like it im-mens{e}ly<sup>t</sup>. There are no pseudo-historical caricatures in it with their long stilts & "I love thee's"<sup>u</sup> It is all blood & thunder and rum and such like and I shall be sorry when I com{e}<sup>v</sup> to the end.

Most sincerely,  
E.A.R.<sup>wx</sup>

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<sup>m</sup> WA places the period outside the quotation mark.

<sup>n</sup> WA has "Wilkins".

<sup>o</sup> WA has "anything".

<sup>p</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>q</sup> WA transcribes the "o".

<sup>r</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>s</sup> WA simply has "that".

<sup>t</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>u</sup> WA adds a period here.

<sup>v</sup> WA transcribes the "e".

<sup>w</sup> WA omits the underline.

<sup>x</sup> After the signature, WA includes--for reasons that are not quite clear to me--the "enclosure" that I have placed with the letter to Smith for November 26, 1893. This is where I found it, but it seems probable that WA found it with this letter originally, and that the Harvard librarians subsequently moved it.

HCL US, 173-176.<sup>y</sup>

NOTES<sup>z</sup>

1. The American poet, critic and novelist Bayard Taylor's (1825-1878) well-regarded translation of *Faust*, which attempted to convey not only the text but the meter of the German original, was published in 1870 (Part 1) and 1871 (Part 2). (SL)
2. The widely praised blank verse translation of *The Divine Comedy* by Rev. Henry Francis Cary (not "Carey") (1772 – 1844) was published in 1814. (SL)
3. A novel by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), published in 1894. (SL)

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<sup>y</sup> WA includes a note beneath the library attribution: "The enclosure is typewritten and undated." I have removed this note, as the enclosure to which it applies has been moved elsewhere.

<sup>z</sup> WA's note 3, originally written for the enclosure, has been moved to the Nov. 26 1894 letter to Smith, where the enclosure is transcribed.