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11-4-1894

## To Harry de Forest Smith - November 4, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, Nov<sup>a</sup> 4 – 1894.

My dear Smith,

I feel myself growing thin (!) under this second chorus. I have been working away at it all the week but have not brought any thing to pass—that is, any thing that satisfies me. I send you what I have done however to let you judge for yourself. I shall not do any more with it just now, but shall go on with the dialogue and return to the chorus when the rest of the play is translated, so giving the more difficult parts the benefit of whatever maturity of thought and expression I may acquire in the time between now and the day when I wrote a preliminary "finis" to the business. You cannot imagine what a damnable job it is to make any thing of these choruses. Plumptre's total failure, to say nothing of Franklin<sup>b,1</sup> will give you some idea of it. I am also having a hard wrestle with the two bits of dialogue following the epode (I suppose that is an epode when "Amazement!" comes in, isn't it?). But I can probably get over it in some way and the messengers<sup>c</sup> speech is comparatively easy. At least I think it is from the quick translation I made yesterday.

To-morrow I shall start in on<sup>2</sup> my prose work again and for the present give the translation one hour every afternoon. In that way I can average<sup>d</sup>, I think, eight or ten lines a day, which will do very well. Then will come the re-translating of the whole play;

-2-

and then, if the fates are willing, the printing and distributing of it. I still feel that it is going to amount to something. I have not yet seen any thing (unless perhaps this second chorus) to discourage me, nor do I intend<sup>e</sup>

to let myself see anything that will. The more I think of what I have read of Plumptre's version the more I think that his great fault is his absence of dramatic force, of which there is plenty in the original; and the absence of that means the absence of dramatic poetry. The few scraps of Donaldson's translation given in the notes of the "Ox" are strong but not always pleasant; for example take line 387: "What hap holds sortance

my

with my coming forth.<sup>f</sup>" That is too archaic for ^ taste. The editor of

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

<sup>b</sup> WA adds a "c" before the "k"—which is the correct spelling of the name—but it is not in the holograph.

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

<sup>d</sup> WA has "everage".

<sup>e</sup> This is the last word of the previous line.

the Ox says that D makes low comedy of the messenger's first scene with Creon and condemns him for doing so. That passage gave me some trouble as I was in doubt whether to make it "funny" or not. In the end I

Plumptre

did not. What does Jebb say & how does he translate the line "Are you pained in your mind or in your ears?" Please remember this in your next letter. §How do you like this:

"—money is the most accursed thing  
that man has ever made: it strikes down cities  
And scatters families; it leads away  
good souls of men to foul accomplishments  
And teaches them the practice of all guile  
And all iniquity."

Perhaps I have quoted this before; if I have, do not think too hard of me for it, for the merit is all in Sophocles; the translation is literal, or so nearly so that I do not pride myself much upon it. I must say, however, that I like the lines and cordially hope that Plumptres<sup>h</sup> are not better.

To return once more to Trilby I am compelled to say that my best judgment of a book that I have never read leads me to think that Fords<sup>i</sup> criticism is the best I have yet seen. The Lounger in the "Critic" has some words that you will like and the last Dial is very pleasant with the book. Paynes<sup>j</sup> criticism of Lord Ormont<sup>3</sup> in in the same seems to me almost an insult—not so much for what he says as for what he doesn't say.—I shall try to be a little more prompt in

-3-

sending you my "Critics" here{a}fter<sup>k</sup>. I find them worth looking over and fancy I see an improvement over the past numbers you gave me. I am doing my best to admire the "Dial" and partly succeed; but I cannot always{s}<sup>l</sup> admire their<sup>m</sup>

taste in selecting books for long reviews.

In the last McClur{e}s<sup>n</sup> there is a conversation between Dr<sup>o</sup> Doyle & Robert Barr; also a story by both men.<sup>4</sup> Doyle's in [=is] a little uncanny but a<sup>p</sup> {=is} very fascinating for its way of showing a wholesome writers<sup>q</sup> way of handling

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<sup>f</sup> WA reads a question mark here.

<sup>g</sup> WA omits this space.

<sup>h</sup> WA has "Plumptre's".

<sup>i</sup> WA has "Ford's".

<sup>j</sup> WA has "Payne's".

<sup>k</sup> WA transcribes the "a".

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

<sup>m</sup> This is the last word of the previous line.

<sup>n</sup> WA has "McClure's".

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

<sup>p</sup> WA has "is".

a morbid subject. The last Chap Book is pretty much a fizzle, only saved by PB<sup>r</sup> Goetz's two quatrains. Goetz is h a Harvard man, '93, and has done even better work in the college papers. The notes are entertaining, and I suppose you were glad to see that the Bowdoin Art Museum is a better piece of work than the stone shed I saw going up in the Harvard yard. Harvard architecture is so notoriously hideous that it would be a shame to start<sup>s</sup>

any innovations at this late day. I am glad for Bowdoin & sorry for Professor Norton.<sup>5</sup>

I have not read any thing during the week, putting most of my spare time (includin{g}<sup>t</sup> six hours yesterday) on that infernal chorus. As to my variation<sup>u</sup> {variation} in the number of lines in the strophe & ~~anti~~ antistrophe, I do [not] make any attempt a[t] regularity. In the first chorus there was a still larger difference. I am simply making a poem of a play and do not bind myself in any way to form.

I should like very much to see that article you spoke of in the "Outlook". I do not even know wher{e}<sup>v</sup> it is published & am not positively sure that I ever heard of it before, thought [=though] it seems to me that I have. If you do not treasure the copy too highly, perhaps you will send [it] to me & trust your chance of getting it again.

Sincer{e}ly<sup>w,x</sup>

E.A.R.<sup>y</sup>

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<sup>q</sup> WA has "writer's".

<sup>r</sup> WA has "P.B."

<sup>s</sup> This is the last word of the previous line.

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

<sup>u</sup> WA has "variation".

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

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

<sup>x</sup> WA has a comma here instead.

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

[Enclosure]<sup>z</sup>

Strophe II<sup>aa</sup>

And language has to be learned & mind-swift thought,<sup>bb</sup>  
 And speech and soaring wisdom has he learned,  
 With human measures and a way to shun  
 The sharp and painful arrows of the frost.  
 Full of resource, of all the future brings,  
 Resourceless meets he nothing: Death alone  
 He never shall escape; but he has found  
 [A cure]<sup>cc</sup> for life's unyielding maladies. [a cure.]<sup>dd</sup>

Antistrophe II<sup>ee</sup>

Thus gifted with a shrewd inventive skill  
 Beyond belief, now makes he for the right,  
 Now for the wrong. And first of all the state  
 Is he who honors most the nation's law  
 And the sworn justice of the gods; but he  
 Becomes an outcast whom rash folly binds  
 In evil fellowship, nor shall he dwell  
 With me, nor think with me, whose action thus...

I marvel at this portent of the gods!  
 Knowing her as I do can I deny  
 The maid Antigone? – O wretched girl –  
 Child of a wretched father, Ædipus,  
 Tell me! – they surely cannot lead you here  
 Captured in this wild work against the king!

Unsatisfactory

This is the part that sticks me more than all the rest.

The Ox breaks this line-- you do not. I like it better broken, but can easily change it. How do the authorities<sup>6</sup> agree upon it.

Perhaps this will go.

HCL US, 176-178.

The enclosure is typewritten and undated.

1. EAR was referring to Thomas Francklin's translation, 1766.
2. US reads "start on."
3. George Meredith's novel *Lord Ormont and his Aminta* had recently been published.
4. *McClure's* November issue includes "De Profundis" by A. Conan Doyle, and "The Doom of London" by Robert Barr.
5. See *The Chap-Book*, November 1, 1894, pp. 353-354.
6. US reads "anchorites."

<sup>z</sup> All brackets, lines, and marginal comments in this section are written in black ink.

<sup>aa</sup> Written in black ink.

<sup>bb</sup> This line is written in black ink. WA places it within square brackets after the first typed line, where it doubtless belongs.

<sup>cc</sup> The brackets are from the holograph, written in black ink.

<sup>dd</sup> The brackets and their contents are written in black ink.

<sup>ee</sup> Written in black ink.