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To Harry de Forest Smith - November 11, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO HARRY DE FOREST SMITH

Gardiner, November 11 – 1894.

My dear Smith,

This has been a clearing^a up week with me— not only outside but here in my den. At last I have finished that infernal bugbear of mine "The Black Path and have it stowed away, after a third writing, for future reference. I have tinkered over Antigone a good deal, besides, and shall send with this a first draft (which means practically a seventeenth) of the girl's speech to come. That speech is strong stuff, and I must confess that I felt a little guilty when I undertook it. It is not done now by any means but what I send you may give you some idea as to whether I can make any thing of it or not. You will find my version almost literal—too near it, I am afraid.

Yesterday I read a while in Longfellow's Dante² and wondered if I were not an ass for attempting this thing. I cannot call his translation anything but a dismal failure; if that is the case, what will this Antigone be? But then, Sophocles and Dante are two different things, and I won't^b worry because Longfellow doesn't suit me. And there is another thing to encourage me^c: this play "is mine oyster" which according to my judgment, has never yet been opened. If I succeed in opening it to any great extent, I shall be highly pleased but do not think I shall ever try to open another until I am more at ease as

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regards my time. For some reason I work much more slowly than when I began—probably because I am getting more finical. Perhaps that second chorus stunted my imagination.

Your copy of the Outlook came all right, and I read the article on the poets³ with much interest but not much sympathy. Whenever I hear of, or read of, the Bodley Head I think of the Yellow Book and Mr. Le Gallienne's adulterous nightingales⁴ and some other things that do not impress me much. They are all all {sic} on the wrong track, excepting Mr^d Gale, and he is almost

^a WA has "cleaning" and notes (in his original note 1) that "US reads 'clearing.'" I agree with US here.

^b WA has "won't".

^c WA has "us".

^d WA has "Mr."

sickening sometimes in artlessness, or whatever he calls it. If I rejoiced in cricket & football as he does,^e I should not write some of the stuff that he has written. I say "stuff", but do not quite mean it. Whatever gale does,-- at least, what I have seen—he does well; but his country maidens grow a little tiresome. My^rf {Mr.} WB^g Yeats looks as if he might have the afflatus, and pretty badly, too. His picture is not just what one has a right to look for in this nineteenth century, and I am too conservative to admire the taste that leads a man to make such a "holy show" of himself. That makes me think that I am getting very tired of having Conan Doyles^h rather unexpressive mug thrust into my face from all sides, as it has been for the past three months. He has written some good things for McCluresⁱ--or they have printed them—and I have do^j {=no} doubt that I shou^ld^k like Sherlock

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Holmes if I once took him up. George has just read Micah Clarke,⁶ but does not think over much of it. Joe has read Trilby—or ~~Tribble~~ "Tribly", as he calls it—and says it is queer. That is his only criticism. Everything that Joe reads is queer, or else it doesn't amount to a damn.

I have been trying for a long time to work up courage to read the Greater Glory⁷ and think I shall succeed before long. I know that I shall like it, but still I keep away from it—just as I do from Madame Bovary, which has been on my shelf for a year and a half. Yesterday I took up Le Maitre de Forges (the Ironmaster)⁸ and found it very fine. It is a fairly stocky volume and probably [will] require eight of ten sittings. After that I think I shall be ready for Maartens. I looked into the Prisoner of Zenda⁹ the other day and found it decidedly attractive. It is prettily got up and finely printed on rather small paper—which I always like. Schuman has written some very warm blooded sonnets lately

^e WA omits the comma.

^f The "r" is written directly over what appears to be a "y". WA omits the mistake.

^g WA has "W.B."

^h WA has "Doyle's".

ⁱ WA has "McClure's".

^j WA simply has "no".

^k WA transcribes the "l".

and takes infinite delight in reading them to me. They are refreshing to one who has heard again and again some two hundred & fifty of the things written in the same style and the same vein. The monotony, more than any thing else, I think, will stand in the way of their
 too
 publication. They are,,¹ suggestive of paper "of no particular value except to the owner", but I cannot make the doctor see it in my light. So I let

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him alone now, and hope that Thorne's prophecy, or statement,¹⁰ may prove true. I am afraid, however, that it wont^m, although the doc has done great work—chiefly in single lines such as:

"The desolate dim peaks loom vast and higher"ⁿ

He runs Love a little too hard, it seems to me, but that is his business, not mine. I wish that he could realize a little better than he does that a love poem, to be good, must be very good.

I send a bunch of Critics with this letter and trust that you may find something in them to interest you. I am slowly but surely "souring" on the Dial. I think of what it ought to be, and then of what it is. And then of John Burroughs.¹¹

Most sincer{e}^oly,
 EA^p Robinson.

¹ The holograph contains what appears to be a double comma, and not a caret, here. EAR's intention for them, if he had any, is unclear. WA omits them.

^m WA has "won't".

ⁿ WA adds a period before the quotation mark.

^o WA transcribes the "e".

^p WA has "E.A."

[Enclosure]^q

GUARD

Here is the guilty one that buried him –
We seized her in the work. – But where is Creon?

CHORUS

Returning from the palace – in good time
To meet your opportunity.

CREON

What is this?
I come to meet whose opportunity?

GUARD

O King, 'tis not for any man to say
What things he will not do; for second thoughts
Belie the first resolve. I could have sworn
That I should never come this way again
But slowly, for your threats; yet am I here
(For joy without our expectation
Has none to match it) spite of my past vow,
Leading this maiden whom we found at work
Over the dead man's grave. No shaken lot
Is this, but still my own good fortune – mine,
And only mine.- And now, O Kind, I pray you,
Take her and question her, and do with her
According to your will. But I am free,
And justly clear of this unhappy crime.

CREON

'Tis she you bring! and how? Whence do you bring her!

GUARD

She buried Polynices; you know all
Ther e^r is to know.

^q Line spaces are taken from the holograph.

^r WA does not preserve the space.

CREON

Is this the truth you tell me?

GUARD

I saw this maiden burying the corpse
Against your order. Do I speak straight words?

-Enclosure 2-

CREON

And how was she discovered? and how taken?

GUARD

'Twas thus: In terror of your fearful threat,
As soon as we {w}ere^s there we swept away
The dust that hid the corpse; and having stripped
The body, damp with death, we placed ourselves
High on a windward hill to shun the stench;
And there we waited, busily alert
With hard reproach for any man of us
Who made a sign to shirk. So the time passed
Until the noonday sun stood overhead,
Burning us with his heat – when suddenly
There came an awful whirlwind out of heaven
That filled the plain and all the mighty air
And vexed the woodland with unwholesome dust.
This god-sent plague we suffered with closed eyes;
And when it ceased, after a weary time,
We saw this maiden coming; and she cried
With a quick bitter wailing, like a bird
Over an empty nest. So grieved she then,
When she beheld the body lying bare,
And called down imprecations upon those
Who wrought the deed; and straightway did she bring
Dry dust in her own hands, and from an urn,
Well shaped of brass and lifted high in air,
Thrice did she crown him with poured offerings.

When we saw this we rushed at once upon her
And seized her, unappalled at our approach;

^s WA transcribes the "w".

And of the first as well, she made no sign,
Nor uttered any word in her defense.
At once a pleasure and a pain to me
Was this: for, though it be a pleasant thing
To make one's^t own way out of jeopardy,
Painful it is to send another there
But then all this was naturally less
To me than my own safety.

CREON (to Antigone)

Tell me, you
With your head bowed to earth, if you confess
Or you deny that you have done this thing.

ANTIGONE

[Robinson's note:]^u It would hardly be kindness to Sophocles to reproduce an Attic^v

Yes, I confess. redundancy in a language that won't stand it.

-Enclosure 3-

CREON (to Guard)

You^w You may go where you will,
Acquitted of this heavy charge. – (To Antigone) But you
Will tell me, and that briefly, did you know
The proclamation that made this forbidden?

ANTIGONE

I knew it, and why not?—'Twas^x very plain.

CREON

And you have dared then to tran[s]gress the laws!

ANTIGONE

Yes, for the word was not of Jove at all;

^t WA transcribes the apostrophe.

^u WA places both his note and EAR's note in the brackets. EAR's note is written in black ink.

^v This is the last word of the previous line.

^w WA omits this word.

^x WA has "'Twas".

Nor was it Justice, dwelling with the gods
 Below the earth, that framed your government;
 Nor did I think this edict you proclaimed
 So strong that I could break the laws of heaven,
 Unwritten and unchanging. For, O King,
 They are not of to-day, nor yesterday,
 But for all time they are, and no man knows
 Of their beginning. It was not for fear
 Of any human will that I would pay
 The gods my penalty – for I must die.
 Well did I know that ere I ever heard
 Your proclamation; and if I die now,
 Before my time, so much I count my gain:
 For whosoever lives as I have lived,
 In many sorrows, {w}ill^y by dying reap
 His best reward. Therefore to meet my fate
 The pain is nothing; but if I had left
 The child of my own mother to lie dead
 Without a mound above him – that indeed
 Were sorrow; but there is no sorrow now.
 And if by any chance you still declare
 What I have done to be a foolish thing,
 Then am I charged with folly by a fool.

{EAR adds in pencil:}

Bring this with you, with what more I
 may send, whe{n}^z you come hom{e}^{aa} this winter.
 E.A.R.^{bb}

HCL US, 179-185.

{The enclosure is typewritten, except where otherwise indicated.}

NOTES

1. US reads "clearing."
2. {Published in 1867.} EAR's copy, now in the Robinson collection at Colby College, was presented to him "with cordial regards of I. Mowry Saben. 16 Hastings, March 9, '93."

^y WA transcribes the "w".

^z WA transcribes the "n".

^{aa} WA transcribes the "e".

^{bb} WA has "E.A.R."

3. Katherine Tynan Kinkson, "The Poets of the Bodley Head," *Outlook*, L (October 24, 1894), 620-622).
4. From "Tree-Worship":
 Some Rizzio nightingale that plained adulterous love
 Beneath the boudoir-bough of some fast-married bird.
The Yellow Book, I (April 1894), 59.
5. "Norman Gale," Katherine Hinkson wrote, "is the Watteau of poetry. He sings of shepherdesses, of brooks and flocks and birds, as daintily as a bullfinch could pipe it." p. 620.
6. By A. Conan Doyle, 1889.
7. *The Greater Glory: A Story of High Life*, by Maarten Maartens. Published in 1894. (SL)
8. A novel by the French writer Georges Ohnet (1848-1918). (SL)
- 9.^{cc} By Anthony Hope, 1894.
10. "I do not hesitate to say that Dr. Schuman, though as yet comparatively unknown, is the ablest and most finished poet living in New England to-day." *The Globe*, XVI (July to September 1894), 801.
11. Probably the American nature-writer (1837-1921), though it is unclear what it is about him that EAR is thinking of. (SL)

^{cc} Notes 9 and 10 are WA's notes 7 and 8.