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11-21-1894

To Joseph S. Ford - November 21, 1894

Edwin Arlington Robinson

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TO JOSEPH S. FORD

P.S. I suppose I hav no moral right to send any man such a mess as this,
but somehow I was in the mood this afternoon and had no mercy

R.

Gardiner, Maine,
November 21 - 1894.

My dear Ford,

I have not read very much of your friend William Morris¹—nothing, in fact, except two or three hundred pages of "Sigurd the Volsung" and a bit here and there from "The Earthly Paradise. I have not seen any of his later works and I am afraid that I do not much care to see them. I like the sound of "The Story of the Glittering Plain" as a title, but I can imagine too well the contents. The House of the Wolfings and the rest of them I cheerfully leave to you. No, I must say that I do not care for Morris. He [=His] work seems to me to be nothing but splendid tinsel, which makes a great rattle and shines most amazingly, but beyond that is of no particular value—except to the owner, that is, the maker. As a socialist who writes "News from Nowhere"²

editions

and prints fancy with his Kelmstock Press³ and sells them for five hundred dollars a copy, he does not interest me. He reminds me too much of the socialistic gentleman in "Stand Fast, Craig-Royston."⁴ who caused one silver dinner set to be made for him and then broke the dies.—My great objection to Morris's poetry is that there is no soul in it, as there is in Browning & Tennyson. I like the man "one-eyed and seeming ancient," and somebody's blade that shone "blue and bleak"; but there is so much that I do not like that I doubt if I ever take up a volume of is again with any definite idea of reading it. And yet I realize that he is a great poet, but not so great, from the stand point of humanity, as Rudyard Kipling. This will make you laugh, but cannot change my opinion that Kipling is, in many respects, the greatest living poet. I confess that he does not seem capable of any sustained effort either in prose or verse, but

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he has written the Envoi to the Barrack Room Ballads; and it is for something of that kind that I long when I read men like Morris.

"There's a whisper down the field, where the year has shot her yield,
And the ricks stand gray to the sun,--
Singing 'Over then, come over, for the bee has quit the clover,
And your English summer's done'."

I am simple and old-fogy, and a good many other things, and perhaps that accounts for some of my apparent liking for mediocrity. If it does, I do not care. I know what pleases me, and I know that nothing pleases me (unless I write it) that has not some merit in it. Quantity never impressed me. Blanco White, with his one sonnet⁵ (and that not a perfect one, by any means) is greater than many men who have written volumes.

Sometimes I say I do not like Swinburne—and as a rule, I do not—but once in a while I come across something like this and I begin to wonder if I am justified in refusing to give him a place among my own particular masters:

"We have drunken of Lethe at last, we have eaten of lotos;
What hurts it us here that sorrows are born and die?
We have said to the dream that caressed, and the dread that smote us,--
Good-night & good-bye."⁶

That. I fancy. is the tail-end of a rondel, in his "Century" of them. Swinburne has long been accused of working "without a conscience and without an aim" but that seems a little too hard on a man who has labored as he has. I have read a deal of his poetry but only two of his "dropsical dramas" as Mr. Birrell⁷ calls them. The adjective is just, and I wish that somebody could find one adequate for the plays of Browning, which Birrell praises so highly. I have read the Blot on the 'Scutcheon & Luria. The first pleased me, the second discouraged me. Still I suppose they are good.

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Since my last letter I have read a novel which, if not great, is, to speak colloquially, damned good reading. I refer to "Le Maitre de Forges", a rather stocky^a volume of three hundred & fifty pages and infinitely too long in the first half, which fault is mainly brought about by the system of long chapters which the author adopted. The plot deals with the decay of aristocracy, and, while by no means aggressive, must still be hard reading for some of the old families in France. Every character is drawn by the master—so well drawn that one is quite willing to forgive the author his unnecessary attention to pedigree and kindred matters. The story hinges mainly upon two climaxes: the first being the always successful bridal chamber scene where the "parties" separate before the brides gown comes off; the second a duel where the bride rushes forward most theatrically and saves her husband from probable death. The other man was the better shot, and she knew it.—And yet. the book is not sensational in any sense of the word. It is a keen study of true

^a WA reads "sticky".

human nature irrespective of classes. You hav probably read it, or seen it played by the Kendalls.

I have under consideration now *Le Violon de Faïence par Champfleury* and *Le Secret de l'Echaufaud*, which I mentioned in my last letter. It bids fair to be decidedly queer. If I find it worth reading, I shall send it to you and get your judgment. "Jack" also came in a rather attractive edition and you will kindly pardon me for cutting it to look at the pictures. If was my misfortune to read it in translation, so the French edition is new to me. And perhaps here is a good time to speak a little less learnedly of Daudet's literary style. What I meant was that the general effect of a page or a chapter was something like that of Hawthorne; and I could see by the translation what a marvel of perfected elegance the original must be. Read it for

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yourself, and tell me if you do not agree with what I say. As to the pictures I must confess that I like the French way of doing such things. I think I like best of all that on page 658. I[t] seems to be an aquarelle, but there is a good deal of art in it— if I am any judge. Let me warn you once more that in reading Jack you must not look for much "couleur de rose". It isn't there.

I have now done 576 lines of *Antigone*—very nearly half of it if I remember rightly. The great[est] chorus of all is the next thing for me to do, and I am a little afraid of it. The choruses are what trouble me the most of any thing, but I manage to do them in my own "Miltonic" way. That was pretty hard from you, Ford, but I suppose I shall hav to call it all right. Sometimes I get really excited over the dialogue and rattle it off at the rate of twenty lines an hour; and very often I work a whole forenoon and produce nothing. Now, however, I give the translation a second place and attend to my prose in the forenoon. What a subject for good natured ridicule, and perhaps a little pathos, I must be in your eyes! But then, this life is only lived once, and if we are destined to be damned fools, let us be whole fools.

Now let me thank you for your copy of *De Musset*. I have not read it yet, but shall right away, you may be sure. It was good in you to think of sending it, and I assure you that I appreciate your kindness. If Jack is as acceptable to you, I shall think myself lucky—you hav tackled a rather elusive subject in the books of the present, but I am willing to do any thing I can to help you. Sometime this week I shall try to make out a list of the fiction, poetry, and essays that seem to me to be the best work of recent authors. My ignorance of history & biography is so complete that I dislike to meddle with it.

Did you see Gates' essay on "Mr. Meredith and his Amorata" in the last Chap-Book? Rather clever title and a remarkably entertaining criticism.

Most sincerely, Rob.

HCL

1. Poet, artist, manufacturer, socialist (1834-1896). Antipathetic to what he regarded as the ugliness of the modern industrial system, Morris turned to the past for his sources of inspiration in art and literature, mingling classical, medieval, and northern materials, as in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-1870). *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876), using Icelandic mythic materials, is generally regarded as his masterpiece.
2. Socialistic propaganda in the form of a romance, published in 1890.
3. EAR is punning here. In 1890 Morris founded the Kelmscott Press, for which he designed the type, and began printing exquisite and expensive editions of the classics and of his own work.
4. By William Black (1841-1898). See EAR's letter to Smith, March 22, 1891.
5. "Night," {by Joseph Blanco White (1775-1841),} included in William Sharp's *Sonnets of This Century*, p. 251.
6. From "In Harbour" in *A Century of Roundels* (1883). (SL)
7. Augustine Birrell (1850 – 1933), English politician and essayist. (SL)