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lem having to do with words, and with meanings which are attributes of words—it becomes a moral problem of judging attitudes, which are the attributes of a man.

In a sense, however, it does not matter how Annandale went out. What matters is the kind of question Robinson put to the event. Here in life he was confronted with the problem which is presented in poem after poem, of a human enigma in which we must learn to accept that we must remain in ignorance and doubt. The physician is not telling us what happened—he is saying what Robinson conjectures he might have said could we ask him. For no one knows how Annandale went out, really. Except, perhaps, Annandale himself.



MOODY AND ROBINSON

By MAURICE F. BROWN

ON May 8, 1898, William Vaughn Moody wrote from Chicago to Daniel Gregory Mason in Cambridge, "Note what you say of Robinson with interest. Do not know his work. Wish you could get me a line of introduction from some friends."¹ Mason's eventual introduction of the two poets began a friendship, important to the careers of both, which lasted until Moody's death in 1910. Biographers and critics, with the exception of Hermann Hagedorn, have tended to shy away from the thorny problems involved in speculation on the nature and impact of the relationship.

There is some difficulty in understanding why Moody might have been interested in knowing Robinson: differences in their characters and poetic aims are so striking they would seem to make any kind of friendship impossible. Moody, the Midwesterner, was spontaneous and emotional, "florid and careless" in dress, with a "barbaric taste for magnificence in waistcoats,"

¹ From a letter in the Princeton University Library. Published by permission of the Library and William Vaughn Moody Fawcett.

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according to Mason, while Robinson tended to be quiet and self-conscious. Robinson's sensitivity to the potential misery and the quiet ironies of human experience were balanced by Moody's buoyant enthusiasm and his love of the grand and the dramatic. Although both of Moody's parents had died while he was still in high school, he escaped the agony which pervaded the slow disintegration of Robinson's family in the nineties.

Similar oppositions of poetic interest and aim are obvious in these two young poets. Robinson's early circle, dominated by Alanson Tucker Schumann and Caroline Swan, while it had turned him to practice in late Victorian poetic forms, had drawn him to seek subjects in his own experience and the world around him. And Schumann's example had developed in Robinson a taste for simplicity and precision in the use of words. Moody's Harvard circle had been one of young enthusiasts in search of rare words and brave worlds of Pagan release from the curse of Philistinism. Moody's subjects and language were drawn from literature itself, and no poems before 1895 drew on personal experience. Where Robinson understated, Moody overstated. Where Robinson found pathos or irony, Moody found vibrant passion or heroic drama. Where the surface of Robinson's poetry was matter-of-fact, that of Moody's was richly sensuous or emotional. Where Robinson's diction was plain, Moody's was luxuriant.

Something of the contrast in underlying poetic aim can be seen by juxtaposing passages from letters of the mid-nineties in which the two poets comment on their work. Moody replied to an objection to his diction by Mason, asking for tolerance of his "instinct for conquest in language, the attempt to push out its boundaries, to win for it continually some new swiftness, some rare compression, to distill from it a more opaline drop." Both the desire expressed and the style of the expression here differ significantly from the prosier statement Robinson made to Arthur Gledhill shortly before the publication of *The Torrent and The Night Before* (1896). If, as Denham Sutcliffe maintains, Robinson blows "no self-conscious trumpets of rebellion"—Robinson was, I think, more attracted to clarinets anyway—the poet is certainly aware of the extent of his rebellion in this passage:

When it comes to 'nightingales and roses' I am not 'in it' nor have I the smallest desire to be. I sing in my own particular manner, of heaven and hell and now and then of natural things (supposing they exist) of a more prosy connotation than those generally admitted into the domain of metre. In short I write whatever I think is appropriate to the subject and let tradition go to the deuce.²

Robinson is reacting against the late Victorian modes of poetry, or at least against their subjects, not with an appeal to the longer English poetic tradition but to "natural things" of a "prosy connotation." His statement indicates what a study of his early poetry and letters reveals—that Robinson's major impetus to "prosy" subjects and the diction of speech came through his voluminous reading in the French and English novel. Moreover, in comments on Daudet, Hardy, Collins, Carlyle, and Shakespeare, Robinson is concerned with definition of paradoxical minglings of humor with the "grim" or "dark" subject—the characteristic mood of many of his poems. While Robinson was so occupied, Moody was searching the English poetic tradition for guidance in his practice.

The passing of years, however, have obscured those elements in the poetry of both Moody and Robinson which made for the community of interest on which their association as poets rested. Obviously the classical revival of the late nineteenth century was important to the work of both—though in different ways—and the American cultural heritage, religious, moral, and poetic, helped produce similarities of outlook and concern. More immediate to the relationship, however, was Moody's growing interest in life around him. In 1895 he left the "elegaic air" of Cambridge for Chicago. The shock of the raw, bustling, immigrant city was immediate. He became concerned with social and political issues and began to work with material "from 'real' life," writing to Mason, "I have theories about that." He saw his Harvard existence as "theatrical," and his life in the east as "a sort of tragi-farce, more or less consciously composed." Moreover, Moody was in a position to appreciate Robinson's achievement in diction and rhythm at least as early as January 1899. At work on a prose play, he wrote Mason:

² Ridgely Torrence (ed.), *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 13.

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I found myself embarrassed a good deal at first by the dull monochromatic medium of everyday speech, but am getting more used to it now and find that when you do get an effect in it it is more flooring than anything to be got with bright pigments.³

There is, on the other hand, much of the temper of the nineties in Robinson. It has been passed over briefly by critics, first, in the interest of his more attractive affiliations with twentieth century poetic practice, and more recently in the concern with Robinson's strong roots in English literary tradition. In at least half of Robinson's poems of the nineties, forms and techniques Moody was employing are to be found. Here are the familiar ballades and sonnets of the late Victorians, the occasional *fin de siècle* tone, some use of Pre-Raphaelite symbolism, sharp tonal contrast, syntactical inversion, an addiction to the adjective, and a reliance on rhetoric in preference to image. While Robinson experiments with colloquialism in three or four poems—among them, "Fleming Helphenstine," which Moody praised—Robinson, both in the nineties and throughout his career, generally followed Schumann's chaste injunction against prostitution of style to contemporary slang. His preference was for simple but "good English." Throughout this period, Robinson tends to depend on medieval romance for his imagery, and he has, of course, already established his characteristic simple cluster of Light-Dark symbols. There is often use of themes popular in the nineties as well. In a poem like "The Night Before," Robinson, somewhat unexpectedly, writes a passionate monologue. And he was, unhappily, dabbling in Herbert Spencer and discussing idealism and mysticism in the Quadruped meetings.⁴ He catches the "transcendental manner" of the period in his pseudo-philosophical poems, which depend for their effect on vaguely-expressed faith, on the evasive but "big" emotional idea, on the contemplation of "the crater of the Scheme," "Thought's prophetic endlessness," "life's wide infinity," and so forth.

The association of Robinson and Moody, supported then by certain mutual poetic concerns, found in 1899 its locus in

³ Daniel G. Mason (ed.), *Some Letters of William Vaughn Moody* (Boston, 1913), 107-108.

⁴ "The Quadruped" was the name by which Robinson and three of his Gardner friends of the mid-nineties identified themselves. See Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 92-94 and *passim*.

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New York City. Robinson was attracted to "the biggest conglomeration of humanity and inhumanity that America affords," and Moody, as early as 1898, recognized New York as "the place for young Americans who want to do something." By 1902 both poets had written friends—somewhat imperceptively—that New England was out of their blood. Their New York relationship, as reconstructed from letters to each other and to friends, was marked by mutual admiration, which was accompanied by a touch of envy on Robinson's part and rendered uneasy by differences in personality and attitude to poetry. The early tone of the friendship received its awkward twist from Robinson's Harvard experience. There is no record of a meeting at Harvard in the early nineties, but Robinson knew of Moody. Moody—a regular student on a large scholarship, a junior who was famous for his unprecedented election as a freshman to the elite undergraduate literary magazine, *The Monthly*—was successful, popular, and confident. Robinson was an insecure special student who worried over grades constantly and unsuccessfully attempted to gain acceptance by the Harvard *literati*. The spirit of naive awe with which Robinson contemplated Moody's literary circle is painfully evident in a mistake in his letter of December 8, 1891, to Harry de Forest Smith. Robert Morss Lovett, editor of *The Monthly*, called on Robinson. As the young poet recounts the visit, he inadvertently substitutes for Lovett's name that of Eliot, Harvard's president! In another letter (May 9, 1892) Robinson describes watching the class games to Smith, adding, "It was good fun at first, but I soon sickened of [it]. Men like W. V. Moody and R. M. Lovett seemed to enjoy it, however, so I am probably at fault."

Although Robinson grew more sure of himself, little had happened between 1892 and 1900 to change his attitude. In his letters of the first years of the friendship, there is frequent direct or implied comparison of himself and Moody. Robinson gravitates between suspicion that he is "probably at fault" and criticism of Moody. Moody's success as a poet using a diction of which Robinson disapproved was disconcerting. The inability to be successful on the world's terms, a frequent concern for Robinson, breaks through in a reference to Moody's "additional gift of chronic ability to make a living." Robinson

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shows insecurity about his lack of a college education as he calls mocking attention to Moody's knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, a course Robinson dropped at Harvard. But, he writes friends, Moody's scholarship is in his way, and "he has so many things to unlearn." Robinson was torn between admiration and aloof disapproval of Moody's personality. In one letter to Josephine Preston Peabody he writes of Moody "with his Temperament," and in the next points out his own advantage in "not having a temperament." Robinson felt Moody's lack of sensitivity to the sorrow in life and lashed out at the immaturity of "Von Moody, the pessimist man-child," who "with all his pre-digested experiences is not yet more than half so old as he thinks he is." Yet in the same letter he tells John Hays Gardiner that Moody is "one of the most human and attractive of mortals."

Robinson's early comments on Moody's poetry give an agonizing glimpse of confused ambivalence in attitude. He found *The Masque of Judgment* "an astonishing work of art and almost flawless in construction," and he liked Moody's way of "making laddered music spring skyward from prophets' pillows," telling Mason that Moody had "the God-given bulge, so to speak." Letters to Moody himself move from extravagant praise to aggressive attack. Robinson criticizes and later apologizes, explaining that his attitude was based on hasty reading. There is praise of Moody's "Ode," yet Robinson is suspicious of poetry of grand scope. He finds "too much billiard-work with the western world," and feels Moody shows self-consciousness in search of the commonplace at one point. In "Gloucester Moors," Robinson finds "occasional and obnoxious use of archaic monstrosities." One passage is "too 'creative'—not to say feminine and illogical," while another seems "a trifle sophomoric." He tentatively observes that "perhaps there is too much color and not enough light" in Moody's work, and the color he finds is purple, which has "a mortal smell." Praise of Moody's "The Daguerreotype" takes on the characteristic tone when Robinson writes that the poem has convinced him that Moody's "private little hell with purple curtains and fountains running beer ['wine' was written and crossed out] is not, and has never been" Moody's "proper dwelling place." Robinson's aggressiveness transcends the limits of even close

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friendship, and a letter of May 1901 indicates the extent of his confusion. After a tortured passage that treads unsteadily between harsh criticism and praise, Robinson writes unhappily that he has enjoyed Moody's acquaintance, but that perhaps he won't see much of Moody in the future. The result of this wrestling with Moody's poetry comes in a letter of July 7, 1901, to Mason. Robinson writes,

I am simply incomplete and made up as far as I am made at all of what must have been left over after the manufacture of some 16 or 17 fellows who were more fortunate perhaps than I am. By this description, if by no other, I am a man of parts—some of them pretty little, and none of them fastened together very well. This is where Moody is big while I am small. He can do the world's work for the admirable reason that he has a brain.⁵

Moody seems to have understood Robinson's character and conflict, and this understanding kept the friendship from floundering. His answer to a letter from Robinson praising his masque expresses surprise, which he explains:

I thought in New York that you were bravely trying to be generous (you would have said 'just') toward a thing you rootedly deplored but suspected yourself of being by nature prejudiced against.⁶

He continues, accepting what he says he now recognizes as Robinson's clear and considered opinion. Moody's early attitude to Robinson's work is expressed in a simple statement to Mason—one which very few would have made or even understood in 1901. Moody commented on Robinson's praise and concluded, "Well, he can afford to be generous."

There are only a few letters after Moody's final move from Chicago to New York in 1902. The eight years to follow brought a growing friendship and an easier relationship, although one might wonder how much part the constant comparison of himself with the more successful Moody might have played in Robinson's despair through 1904. In 1902 we find Moody joining others to praise to Houghton-Mifflin the volume that eventually became *Captain Craig*. In 1904 and 1905 we glimpse Robinson and Moody dining together occasionally, talking "over the coffee and cigars," and watch-

⁵ *Selected Letters*, 43.

⁶ *Some Letters*, 136-137.

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ing the election returns together until dawn. In 1905 Moody played a part in Roosevelt's preferment of Robinson, and in 1906 Moody "gathered in Robinson and Torrence for a celebration" after signing a contract for the production of *The Great Divide*. Robinson immediately caught "the dramatic fever acutely," and an ill-fated period devoted to play writing, reading, and theatre-going with Ridgely Torrence, Percy MacKaye, and Moody ended in the rejection of Robinson's *The Porcupine*, in spite of Moody's aid. Yet even with increasing rapport and the relaxation of Robinson's tensions, the personalities of the two poets clashed at times. Moody, recovering from a serious bout with death, wrote MacKaye in 1907 that the doctors were becoming optimistic. He continued,

The blow of disillusion will fall sharpest upon poor Robinson who has taken a final farewell of me, and no man likes less than he to have his arrangements discomposed, especially when they are of a gloomy character. We must rally round him and lend the needed support at this trying juncture.⁷

Moody's humor here takes on something of an edge.

On Moody's death in 1910, Robinson wrote to MacKaye, "Well, he did enough to give him his place among the immortals, and I believe he did no man an injury while he lived." The tribute to Moody, the man, is a fine one, yet in the "he did enough" one feels the disappointment of Robinson's fondest hopes for Moody. Moody was to have grown up someday and written like Shakespeare, "or maybe like a new Ibsen without smoky spectacles." And Robinson had written that he didn't expect to hear Moody's "real voice" until the fourth or fifth book. Had he heard that voice, or was he unable to shake off the suspicion that Moody was too much one of the many "pensioners of dreams" and "thirsting heirs of golden sieves that held not wine or water" produced by the nineties? Perhaps he wasn't quite sure himself. Moody's best-known comment on Robinson was made to Ridgely Torrence, and if casual, it was probably honest as well: "When we're all dead and buried, EA will go thundering down the ages."

⁷ From a letter in the Princeton University Library. Published by permission of the Library and William Vaughn Moody Fawcett.

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The most obvious effect of the friendship is the aid Moody gave Robinson in entering cultured and literary circles in New York. And there was, throughout the relationship, a certain championship of Robinson by Moody, although it was not crucial to Robinson's career and he had other, and more effective supporters in Gardiner and Mrs. Richards. Neither Robinson nor Moody was essentially changed by the friendship, but early impulses in the personalities and poetry of the two men were certainly strengthened by their acquaintance.

Robinson's example and dicta encouraged Moody to greater experiment with the immediate subject drawn from life and with simpler diction. After meeting Robinson, Moody again took up his prose play, *The Faith Healer*, which had been put aside for four years. Robinson's success with colloquialism must have stimulated Moody's experimental "The Menagerie." And Moody sometimes worked in an idiom that sounds very Robinsonian in a passage like this one from "Until the Troubling of the Waters":

. . . The bitterest thought
Of all that plagued me when he came was this,
How some day he would see the difference,
And drag himself to me with puzzled eyes
To ask me why it was. He would have been
Cruel enough to do it. . . .

Yet, if Moody sought a simpler prose movement in his lines after the turn of the century, it had to be "capable of gathering itself up, when needed, into the passion and splendor which prose is incapable of." Moody, indeed, retained a distrust of realistic tenets to the end, telling an actress who asked him to transfer his *Eve* play to a contemporary setting that he "didn't intend to expose it to cobwebs and museum shelves by putting Adam in creased trousers and Eve into glove-fitting etcetera."

Robinson's work shows little continuing interest in the experimentation which absorbed Moody throughout his career. Exceptions can be found in Robinson's Napoleonic monologue and "The Man Against the Sky," where he experiments with the neo-Miltonic verse Moody used in "The Daguerreotype." Perhaps the lack of reaction to Moody's generally skillful use of rhythm and sound must be located in what Yvor Winters

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identifies as “a certain deficiency in Robinson’s ear, which results at times in a somewhat mechanical and imperceptive rhythm . . . and a distrust of the suggestive power of language in favor of an unnecessary fullness of expository statement.”⁸ Robinson’s “distrust of the suggestive power of language” affects his imagery to the extent that there is little change in its function or sources after 1900, and he used imagery less and less frequently as a major vehicle for poetic communication. Moody could have helped Robinson to an increasingly subtle symbolism as well, but Robinson preferred to perfect his own subtle and effective use of Christian and classical reference in contemporary contexts. The most one can say is that there is greater security in Robinson’s handling of the grand manner after 1902, though the manner itself was used in his early poetry.

At the same time, Moody’s interest in social and political themes, his “billiard-work with the western world,” and his success with “the big thing,” had an undoubted impact on Robinson’s work. While Robinson generally—and wisely—resists the temptation to follow Moody into philosophical probings, a new breadth of theme comes in 1910 with *The Town Down the River*, which included poems on Lincoln, Napoleon, and Roosevelt. Robinson’s break-through with *Merlin* in 1917 finally opened the path to success in the long poetic narrative based on traditional material. Early attempts at the long poem had been made, and Robinson’s interest in large literary forms was not new. Indeed, his past was strewn with his trials from “The Night Before” to the unsuccessful dramas and novels based on them. If Robinson’s desire to write big works, combined with Moody’s successful example, led him to a form which magnifies his greatest shortcomings—his deficient sense of drama and his prolixity—the form also provides a larger arena for display of Robinson’s strengths—his sensitivity to complex states of being, his sympathy with human suffering, his keen sense of irony, and his ability to catch life in a net of words.

⁸ *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1947), 147.