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ROBINSON ON MOODY

By RICHARD CARY

IN the opening pages of his able essay, "Moody and Robinson" (COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, December 1960), Maurice F. Brown demonstrates that these two poets were by reasons of environment and temperament essentially different. Their tastes in clothes, philosophic perspectives, family experiences, literary influences, and poetic aims and practices impelled notably disparate views of the world. Yet, as is true in any complex of human qualities, there also inhered enough fundamental similarities to draw them together eventually (perhaps in subconscious league against philistinism) and to bring their literary objectives into closer alignment. An air of superficiality may appear to invest some of these similarities, but the motivating drive beneath them strongly testifies the common personality of the buoyant midwesterner and the taciturn down-easter.

In the September 1906 *Atlantic Monthly* May Sinclair rated Robinson and Moody as two of the outstanding trio of contemporary American poets. They had arrived at this eminence arduously, each by his own route. From his undergraduate days, Moody had favored the hothouse aspects of Keatsian and Tennysonian romanticism; Robinson, despite early homage to effete French formalisms and pre-Raphaelite imagery, had taken up Crabbe, Emerson, and Kipling. By 1906 both had achieved, with distinguishable refinements, Moody's asserted purpose to win for language "some new swiftness, some rare compression," and both were considering, with comparable disgust, the complexion of American political and economic morals. What would seem at first glance an incongruous homogeneity of development had its origins in numerous compatible roots.

Both poets grew up in middleclass Puritan households, weaned on a culture predominantly biblical and classical. Both discarded the dogmas and clasped the mystical elements of their heritage, insistently prying into verities beyond mortal comprehension. Although their fathers owned well-stocked libraries, the sons suffered intellectual malnutrition in their constricted provincial surroundings and sallied after richer fare at Harvard, in Boston and New York. Thereafter, neither spoke much of

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his family: Moody's Indiana beginnings were, except for rare revelations, a closed book; and it came as a distinct surprise to many that Robinson had been born and schooled in remote Maine.

Robinson continually resisted the tyranny of a conventional job. He acquiesced only when it became a question of *to eat or not to eat*. His total span of employment was insignificant — the detested interlude in a college administrative office, and two short stints as subway time-clerk and writer of department store advertisements. The Custom House sinecure provided by Theodore Roosevelt cannot properly be classified as work. On the other hand, Moody hewed punctiliously to the tradition of "useful" work in his teaching posts at Harvard and Chicago universities. However, neither bowed to the spirit of acquisition and possession rampant in their society. Although direly in need of a steady income, Robinson turned down an estimable Kansas City editorship. Although offered a full professor's salary in his assistant professor capacity, Moody abandoned the position. Either could have rationalized that the proffered job held alluring "creative" possibilities. But both had made extreme commitments with the Muse, and they followed her down the garden path with divine confidence.

Both had unusual reserves of silence. Richly appreciative in the company of single friends and in intimate groups, they retreated into themselves in the presence of strangers or crowds. Solemn in their contemplation of the world's defects, they had nevertheless the gift of humor. They could make sly or grandiose jokes about their fellows and, better still, could laugh at themselves and relish parodies of their poems. Adverse criticism left them undiscouraged, but neither could endure pretense equanimously.

The chronicle of their harmonies may be extended to the literary realm. While they would not have agreed on Rossetti, Browning, or Swinburne, they respected Thomas Hardy and the Greek tragedians. After enjoying some repute in poetry, both were captivated by the drama for the practicability and subtlety of its techniques in rendering experience.¹

1. Two other likenesses which may be taken as trivial or profound, depending upon what depth of psychology the reader subscribes to, are: a) Both men had auxiliary interest in music — Robinson dabbled with the clarinet and the piano (black keys only), and Moody plunked the guitar; b) Moody wrote a long series of letters to a sympathetic female, Harriet Brainard, which were edited by Percy MacKaye in 1935, and Robinson wrote a similar series to Edith Brover, which are now being edited for publication.

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Robinson and Moody were attending Harvard in 1891-1892, but they might well have been worlds apart. Moody was a matriculating Junior, a member of three college clubs, and an editor of *Harvard Monthly*. Robinson was a special student with no class affiliation, nursing an unfulfilled urge to publish a poem in the *Monthly*. On November 7, 1891, he wrote to Harry de Forest Smith: "In the last *Scribner* you will see a poem by William Vaughn Moody; he is a Junior here. I am not acquainted with him, but as soon as I get fairly straightened out, if I ever do, I purpose to make a strong attempt to get in with the *literati* of Harvard."² Robinson's palpitations of awe and anxiety are understandable purely on the basis of his uncertain status, but the reigning taboos in the Yard make clearer why Robinson and Moody probably never met or talked to each other in this year. Robert Morss Lovett, later a collaborator with Moody on *A History of English Literature*, put the matter bluntly. "As I was a candidate for the *Monthly* myself, the thought of having Moody for a colleague lent energy to my striving. I came to know him by sight, and I suppose he knew me likewise, but it was perhaps characteristic of Harvard in the nineties that we never spoke."³

Robinson had expected "to cut quite a shine as a poet, but Moody was in the field ahead of me and I just wasn't in it." Long after the Harvard interlude, when both had won station in public esteem, the reticent Mainer retained a slight uneasiness in Moody's presence. But the instinctive resentment (Hagedorn calls it "a faint periodic jealousy") which flickered through Robinson's soul gradually melted away under Moody's magnanimity. Moody was among other moguls who sent letters in praise of *Captain Craig* to Houghton Mifflin Company; his suggestion to Richard Watson Gilder sparked Robinson's subsequent appointment to the Custom House; he read and criticized Robinson's verse in manuscript; he begged him to keep at playwriting ("It is only a question of time when you will strike it and strike it hard"); and he tried to talk Charles Frohman into producing *The Porcupine*. One can picture Rob-

2 Denham Sutcliffe (ed.), *Untriangulated Stars* (Cambridge, 1947), 37.

3 In his introduction to *Selected Poems of William Vaughn Moody* (Boston, 1931), xvi.

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inson's startled and gratified reaction when Ridgely Torrence told him Moody had said: "When we're all dead and buried, EA will go thundering down the ages."⁴

Robinson's correspondence reveals intermittent and sometimes involuntary awareness of Moody's activities. In a querulous letter to Josephine Preston Peabody, Robinson refers to Moody's inability to live with "his Temperament," calls him "the fellow," felinely insists that he shows no symptoms of "the Swelled Head," and opines that Moody's "greatest trouble lies in the fact that he has so many things to unlearn."⁵ From this nadir Robinson rose to the qualification that — if he ever grew up — Moody might write like Shakespeare or Ibsen without smoky spectacles. He commented honestly and with growing regard on individual poems as they appeared in print, declaring that Moody had "branded himself the best of living poets" with "The Daguerreotype." The culmination of his judgment was expressed succinctly to Mrs. Edmund P. Mason: "It seems to me that he has written the greatest American verse since the best of Emerson."⁶

Our principal interest in this paper, however, is Robinson's response to Moody's first poetic play, *The Masque of Judgment* (1900). It should be informative to read Robinson's hitherto unpublished observations on this play and to equate them with the claim that Moody's success with this genre enticed Robinson into futile periods of experimentation and emulation.

Moody began his ambitious justification of man to God during the summer of 1897 in Italy, capped a first draft the following year in New York, revised and augmented in London in 1899, and completed the misnamed masque in Boston early in 1900. During the second year of its composition, Moody fell in with Robinson, Torrence, and Percy MacKaye in New York, later renting Robinson's former room at 71 Irving Place. Now they came to know each other intimately, taking long walks from Riverdale to Yonkers while lustily discussing their projects. The extent of their involvement may be gauged by Moody's

4 Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 250.

5 Ridgely Torrence (ed.), *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 32-33.

6 Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1948), 108.

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plaint to a mutual friend: "I am pretty lonely here, as Robinson has gone to Hoboken or Spuytenduyvil or somewhere, to live with the goats, and I only see him once a week."⁷

Reception of the play among Moody's adherents ran the gamut from Daniel Gregory Mason, who gave "generous praise," to Mason's sister-in-law, who found its "main drift and meaning . . . negative and destructive." Moody himself was not unproud of the *Masque*. Although he mocked it as "a rather hopelessly fantastic thing . . . half-lyric, half-dramatic . . . a kind of Hebrew Götterdämmerung," he sent an unbound copy in advance of publication to Edmund Clarence Stedman, an established critic, with the "bold hope" that he might read it. Another such copy he dispatched to Robinson, obviously soliciting a verdict from his quizzical compeer. Robinson complied with "some poor words of congratulation," which Moody grappled with deepest joy, knowing Robinson's "distrust of exuberant language."⁸

In this same month of January 1901 Robinson delivered his opinion of the *Masque* in other quarters. To Josephine Peabody he wrote unequivocally, "I believe the thing is really great," then passed on to typically self-deprecating reflections. In his letter to John Hays Gardiner, a benefactor of long standing, he acclaimed the vitality of the play and disarmed anticipated cavils from the academic dons. But in the end he subtracted more than he added. So much so, that he rather guiltily assured Gardiner "the fellow is in reality one of the most human and attractive of mortals."⁹

In the one hundred and ninety unpublished letters at Colby College which Robinson wrote to Edith Brower, he mentions Moody six times. Miss Brower, a native of Wilkes-Barre and an early devotee of Robinson, had no personal acquaintance with Moody, so it may be presumed that Robinson wrote with absolute freedom. This is not to suggest hypocrisy on other occasions, for Robinson hit hard when he had a mind to. On the whole, however, he preferred to spare feelings that might be stung — maliciously or innocently — by misquotation. Five

⁷ Daniel Gregory Mason (ed.), *Some Letters of William Vaughn Moody* (Boston, 1913), 130.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

⁹ *Selected Letters*, 37-38.

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of his comments were made within a year after publication of *The Masque of Judgment*; the sixth, more than nine years later, a fortnight after Moody died.

The *Masque* undoubtedly roiled Robinson's prevailing ambivalence toward Moody. Despite Moody's carking superiority at Harvard, and aside from his rococo waistcoats and vocabulary, Robinson had come to know him as a sincere and intensely magnetic companion. And yet — and yet — he was having the devil's own time getting published while Moody was proliferating in the best magazines, knowing all the time he was every inch the poet that Moody was. Now the *Masque* caught more attention than anything Robinson had yet done, and he was racked between admiration of Moody's esthetic victories and frustration over the slow bleeding of his own hopes. The specter of the *Masque* would not down, but in four out of five instances it leads to new illumination of the sinuous bonds that held the poets together.

On November 10, 1900, Robinson baldly informs Miss Brower that "My friend Moody has just published *The Masque of Judgment*, which I want you to read. I'll let you have my unbound copy as soon as Betts gets through with it." A month and a half later (December 16) he is equally brief but releases a basal insight: "W. V. Moody, the man of the *Masque*, has been in town (N. Y.) for some time past, and I have convinced myself that he is one of the fellows whom the future will have to deal with."

With the *Masque* two months at hand and Robinson already fostering private dreams of high attainment in the drama, he reveals in full the confused, conflicting diagram of his affinity for the more flashy, more fertile poet. It is characteristic that he assails Moody's volatile temperament, rebukes his immaturity, and impugns his evaluation of the "Octaves" and "Cliff Klingenhagen." (Sardonically, time has sustained Moody as the keener judge in this matter.) It is likewise in keeping with the psychological pattern that Robinson: (a) almost apologetically labels him a "good fellow," unperceptibly turning praise into a tactic of disparagement; (b) shies at spelling out "genius," thereby reducing the term to comic relief; (c) earnestly predicts immortality for the best of Moody.

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January 7, 1901

Moody is beyond doubt the coming man. With his *Masque* just out and his book of miscellaneous poems soon to be published by Houghton Mifflin Co. he can hardly fail to take something like the place he deserves; and beyond all this he is a rattling good fellow, which I take to be the biggest thing of all. If he lives to manage his moods a little and tempers his defensive method somewhat towards his superfluous acquaintances, he will leave little to be desired in the way of the humanities. But I forget that you do not know him or anything about him. You will know, or hear a good deal about him before long. He's a jaynius, and he will be a good deal more of a jaynius when he really finds himself—sometime in the course of five or ten years. He assures me very gently that my "Octaves" are rubbish and that "Cliff Klingenhagen" is great—an observation that convinces me that he can make two mistakes at once. Not that the "Octaves," as literature, necessarily amount to anything; but I always take it upon myself to feel that a fellow has not quite grown up when they mean nothing to him. Moody has not grown up in that way, but he has grown so much more than I have in other ways that he will indisputably be making a big noise in very short order. This in itself does not mean much to me, but in his case I think the noise will last. At any rate, I want you to keep your ears open for its music and to remember what I told you.

The *Masque* permeated Robinson's thoughts and worked itself into this somewhat irrelevant contrast on February 22, 1901: "The aftertaste of this play [Stephen Phillips' *Herod*] is rather nasty and it has a general flavor of belated decadence about it . . . I should not call it comparable with Moody's *Masque*." As a parthian shot he discharged the flaccid pun that "Moody is not moody, by the way."

On April Fool's Day, 1901, Robinson had his last to say about the *Masque* to Miss Brower:

Moody's *Masque* is striking hard wherever it hits at all. You will hear a good deal of the man in the course of the next year, I think. If you don't hear it so soon as that, you will hear it later and correspondingly louder. In the *Atlantic* for last May you will find his big "Ode," and you will find something by him in nearly every number since then. Houghton Mifflin & Co. are booming him.

In Robinson's penultimate statement Moody again emerges bigger than life, blown out of proportion not by envy—as at least two commentators have described Robinson's feeling toward Moody—but by Robinson's consistently thwarted grasps at a destiny he knew to be his. (Pettiness was not one of his failings.) Actually, Moody appeared only twice in the

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Atlantic Monthly between "An Ode in Time of Hesitation," May 1900, and the date of this letter. His prevalence *must* have seemed like surfeit to a poet who had to wait a dozen years before he placed a single poem in a leading magazine.

The last allusion to Moody in the Brower letters comes on November 1, 1910, about two weeks after Moody succumbed to a lingering ailment. Robinson's regret has the stamp of his New England stoicism upon it.

I appreciated what you had to say about Moody. The last time I saw him I could not help knowing what was coming, sooner or later; and I am sure that it is only kindness and good sense on my part to be glad that it did not wait to come later. He did enough as it was to give him his high place in English poetry — probably much higher than most of us realize today.

Robinson's appraisal this time is calm, unstinted. He had watched Moody's spectacular rise as a poetic dramatist with *The Fire-Bringer* (1904), *The Great Divide* (1906), and *The Faith Healer* (1909), and he knew Moody had carved a permanent foothold for himself on the American literary scene. His own fervid aspirations were in some measure appeased. By November 1910 Robinson had published four books in several editions and had found haven in four of the major periodicals, including a coveted appearance in the rockbound *Atlantic* and a dozen in *Scribner's*.

It might easily be designated a case of all passion spent, but not so. What seems practically to have happened to Robinson is that the long-desired corroboration of seeing his poems in print stilled his churning disquietude and wrought within him the maturity he was once incapable of discovering in his friend. In an oblique sense, Moody contributed vitally to Robinson's development. He was a providential obstruction, the irritant rock Robinson needed to thrust his blade against — and so sharpen it.

