THE LITERARY CAREER OF WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY
AS SEEN IN HIS LETTERS

by

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present study of William Vaughn Moody is to examine the discrepancy between what now seems the extravagant praise of his friends and the present obscure position of his work. Moody's friends have tenaciously maintained that his achievements should place him among the greatest of American poets; more conservative, and especially more recent, opinion would place him among the poets of unfulfilled promise. The publication, in 1935, of letters addressed to Harriet Brainard, whom Moody married during the last year of his life, provides a new opportunity to understand Moody's genuine modesty and the embarrassment to which the enthusiasm of his friends subjected him, and, at the same time, they explain why he inspired such admiration. In addition, a careful examination of these personal letters reveals a man who was an idealist of genuine talent and an artist of the highest aspirations.

The first chapter of this paper attempts a synthesis of the literary aims of Moody as they can be discerned in his critical work and in his letters, and as they have been represented by critics. It will be apparent that William Vaughn Moody, always a persistent thinker
on the larger questions of the nature of poetry, did not have an original or a carefully formulated theory of the art of poetry. He was rather an eclectic, selecting from the ancient and modern poets certain principles to be followed in his poetry. Although we shall call Moody's literary aims a theory of poetry, it is not to be understood as a complete or logically self-sufficient philosophy of art.

Moody's writings are inseparably joined with the environment in which he lived. At all periods of his life, he was particularly sensitive to both the stimulating and the depressing influences of his association with people or places. No adequate interpretation of Moody's achievement in literature is possible without, first, a knowledge of his intention and, second, an understanding of the influences which can be discovered from a study of the letters and from other biographical sources. Chapter two recounts the career of Moody as a student at Harvard; chapter three reviews his career as university teacher and editor in Chicago; and chapter four deals with the career of Moody as he wrote in the field of drama while in New York. With this review of the life and work of Moody and a summary of his literary aims clearly before us, we are prepared in chapter five
to re-evaluate the achievement and understand the character of a minor but nevertheless interesting literary personality.


Critical essays referred to in this paper are:

The bibliography includes a list of Moody's major published works, a list of his earlier rejected poems, and a list of studies and articles referred to in this thesis. An indication of the great interest that has been shown in the career of Moody is seen by the scope
of the bibliography of critical comment on Moody which appears in David D. Henry's *William Vaughn Moody, A Study*. Percy MacKaye has brought the Henry bibliography up to date by the additional material in his bibliography to *Letters to Harriet*. 
CHAPTER I

A THEORY OF THE ART OF POETRY

Most of the critical essays by friends and students of William Vaughn Moody have been written with the belief that he deserves a wider reputation than our generation has accorded him. With this aim in view, critics have approached his works either in part or as a whole. The present research has been made with the intention of discovering what qualities in the artist or in his art have kept Moody from being classified as one of America's major poets.

A comprehensive analysis of the life and works of Moody will follow in subsequent divisions of this paper. The purpose of the present chapter has been to examine Moody's theories concerning the function and end of poetry and its appropriate form. With an understanding of these literary theories, we can come close to an understanding of Moody and of his works.

It must be kept in mind that William Vaughn Moody, poet, playwright, critic and editor of much promise and some distinction at the turn of the twentieth century, was a scholar long dedicated to the great traditions of poetry. At no time were his life and art separated; he lived for his art and as a student and great appreciator of literary forms. Thus one sees from a study of his letters and from accounts
of his life that his theories of the art of poetry are those of a man who admired the "great" poets and who aspired to match them in achievement. While a student at Harvard, Moody, in his early poetic attempts, became an imitator of the nineteenth century writers, notably Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, Swinburne—and even of Kipling and William Morris. Later from readings and study, he chose as his masters, Euripides, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and, later, Whitman. He had a thorough and well grounded knowledge of literature and from each of these many poets who influenced him, he accepted and made his own some practicable principle of their art. Speaking of the outgrowth of this early study, Robert Morse Lovett, one of his fellow teachers, has said:

It is Moody's strength and glory that he worked in the great tradition of poetry. A scholar by instinct, he went to the past not only with his mind but with his heart. Its learning, its technique, he brought to the service of a spirit essentially modern.

The epithet of "ancient yet modern" seems particularly apt for Moody. The characteristics of the ancient Greeks, of the English "masters," and of the introspective romanticists were paradoxically fused in the poet and the man. Moody's work seems to have been dedicated to the revered past and

1. See bibliography.


3. Ibid., p. 392.
yet marked by fidelity to experience of the present. One finds in Moody's poetry an adherence to the older standards of stanza form, diction, and rhythm. It is in his awareness of contemporary issues that one notices the spirit of the conscientious modern. Despite Lovett's contention that Moody held to a fundamental tenet of contemporary workmanship—freedom of manner and thought, Moody was not interested in contributing new techniques to American letters. Specifically, there is nothing essentially new in Moody's belief as to what constitutes poetry or what the role of poet should be.

Early in his life Moody observed that not every one is endowed with the creative spirit. He believed fervently that instinct for poetic expression is a divine gift that must first be inherent with the individual before it can be exercised or cultivated. The poet thus empowered by divine inspiration has foresight and knowledge to comprehend life and the fuller meanings of beauty and truth. While still a youth, Moody felt that he was one of the fortunates who possessed the creative spirit, and became, therefore, ever watchful for supernatural inspiration. In his comprehensive study, David Henry testifies to Moody's belief in his poetic capability:

He [Moody] was full of life, possessing an exuberance of animation which inevitably created a resentment against any harness which was placed upon him. Moreover he was constantly alert for any signal which Poetry might give to him. He believed literally in supernatural revelation and inspiration, and he felt, quite modestly always, that he himself was one of those capacitated to receive it.5

In one of his letters, Moody testified to his receiving inspiration and hints at other such moments:

To speak plainly, as I was walking along the street and thinking of nothing but the good taste of the air, suddenly something clicked inside my head, a kaleidoscopic down-rush and up-thrust and over-tumble of broken pictures and half-thoughts passed before my mind, whirled a minute, settled into place, and behold! there was the third part of my trilogy. For an hour, or a quarter of a second, or however long it lasted, it was as plain as print and as perfect as the atomic structure of a jewel. This morning it is dim and disjointed again, but that does not much discourage me, for I have seen it once and I shall see it again, according to all the precedents in my mental history...6

Poetry then, to Moody, is the self-revelation of the poet. The deity enhances the poet's perspective powers and gives him the all important imagination to see and use universal truths in giving added meaning to life experiences. The Aristotelian theory that the poet must see the universal in the particular was one which Moody adopted as his own. This exalted conception of the poetic function Martha Shackford observed in Moody, and she wrote that Moody:


... is the associate of older truths, of inherited ideas which he has pondered with all of a poet's kindling passion, and which he, in his era, seeks to understand and to transcend in a fuller, richer meaning, if possible. 7

If the end of the poet is to write so as to bring larger interpretations of life to his audience, the poet then must indirectly or directly assume the role of teacher or counselor. Moody observed that

... great poets of the past have been no mere dabbers in the material of life ... They have been men of definite clear-cut convictions. They have sought to express life as it appeared to them and to relate and bring to a focus the seemingly diverse elements of human existence. 8

Moody's poems, plays, and criticism are evidence that Moody believed that no poet can be great without at the same time possessing something of the philosophic spirit. Although this point of view is prominently formulated in Moody's work, his poetic philosophy, like that of Wordsworth, is unsubstantiated either by proof or reasoning. Life, he felt, should be looked at as a whole and steadily. Consequently, in his art, there runs a deeper purpose than that of lyrical ecstasy or emotional response to beauty. The hidden meaning of life fascinated him—yet perplexed him—and we know from his poetic themes that to him the poet should not be an unthinking hedonist but must advance as

questioner or protestor.

The philosophic or didactic spirit lends intellectualilty to poetry. Emotions and feelings may have their way; yet the intellect must serve to restrain and add coherence to the didacticism. As the critic, Dickinson, has commented, Moody had "the forthright quality ... of coming to grips with the spirit of the age and expressing a message with force and pure beauty." All his art proceeded from moral convictions and mental necessity. Dickinson further adds that Moody "wrote because he had something to say that appeared to him to be of moment." In the treatment of philosophical themes, Moody used a wide symbolism in which the message was to be relevant to man in his human and divine relations. In addition, if the poet believes that his duty is to use the creative spirit to gain large and fuller meanings from observation of life, then the trivial will hold no attraction for him. His subjects will be generally of weighty implications. A grouping of Moody's shorter poems will show his high seriousness. These poems fall into several clearly defined categories: Social and Political problems, Religion, Philosophical Inquiry, the Quest of Idealism, Love, Woman, and Nature. A discussion of these poems will follow in later chapters. Moody merged in his poetry the


10. Ibid., p. 136.
characteristics of thinker and singer.

In viewing life in America, Moody found elements about which he was assured that the poet should speak. Intensely patriotic and yet free-thinking, Moody protested against the orthodox religion of his day, against increasing American nationalism, and against the materialism and ugliness which accompany industrialization. The Moody who was a scholar and in his own words "an ancient," was in conflict with the Moody who was the modern and the patriot. Thus, he became a protestor, a questioner. Nelson Adkins in discussing Moody's philosophy underscores this conflict:

Disturbed and shocked by the discrepancies, disharmonies, and injustices of human life that daily left their stings in his sensitive soul, he sought in his poetry to spin subtle harmony out of rank chaos, and to call forth life and beauty from distorted and sundered poles of human thought and emotion .... Broadly speaking, people may be divided into two classes. There are those who see life from the visionary's standpoint,—who create for themselves a world apart from other men, and live in the realm of their own imagination. There are others who are purely practical. These are often so violently in love with life and the very joy of existence as quite to forget the things of the spirit, finding no stimulus in imagination, no pleasure in emotional experience. Moody not only observed in others these two divergent tendencies ... but .... he experienced within his own soul the two antagonistic forces, as now one and now the other sought to gain mastery over him. For the peace of his soul Moody sought to adjust these two warring elements. 

When Moody protests and tries to reconcile these "warring elements," we see the struggle that exists between his idealism and his social conscience. Religion, nationalism, and the social problems of industrialism were subjects to which Moody, the modern, could not close his eyes.

In writing about Moody's revolt against the theology of his day, Henry has concluded in his study:

Although much of Moody's poetry is of a religious trend, most readers are impressed by the seeming confusion of his religious ideas. In Moody we find neither conformity to or consistency with conventional belief. At one time he is iconoclastic, at another passionately devout. 

Of this we can be sure: Moody was no creedist, no conventional theologian. Brought up and trained in the religious atmosphere of strict Puritanism, Moody early found himself out of sympathy with the Puritan plan of salvation. The doctrine of divine sovereignty, of racial sin, and impending judgment fell far short of Moody's concept of a benevolent God. He could not reconcile Puritan belief in sin and judgment with his own optimistic religion. Furthermore, Moody felt that there were times when he had direct communication with a sympathetic God. This inner revolt called for outer expression.

Moody sounded the patriotic note during his era. However his loyalty to country was not blind or without criticism. There was a quality of uncompromising patriotism—

my country to make it right. His roots were deeply American and he would have his country fulfill its promising and noble destiny. At all costs, he would have her remain unsullied and innocent of grasping imperialism. Recognizing his part as patriot, Moody wrote with frankness and candor of the problems close to the heart of his fellowman. There is a note of national pride in a letter which he wrote to Edmund Stedman:

... I am at bottom more jealous for poetry and especially for the poetry which shall be recognized as in a large sense American, than I am for my own poems. 13

Not only was Moody's fire directed against America's nationalism, but it was leveled against the evils of increasing industrialization. As Bruce Weirick has put it: "What he hated was ... our commercial coarseness and our outer ugliness." 14 It is true that he disliked the ugliness connected with industrial pursuits, but what he feared outright was the materialistic spirit which it reflects. Moody recognized that the concern for economic right could result in misplaced social values. Thus, of paramount concern to Moody were the preservation of character and the salvation of the personality of individuals from the complexities of social organization, from standardization of life. We can see now


that Moody wrote about contemporary problems—religious, political, and social—in full accord with his belief that the poet must speak concerning the issues of his age.

From the above discussion we can deduce three closely allied theories of what poetry is and what is the function of the poet. First, poetry is the reflection of the creative spirit within the poet. This creative instinct is a gift from the divine. Second, poetry is the poet's self-revelation and must be expressed so as to lead to a fuller understanding of life in all its spiritual and moral values. And third, the poet must possess the philosophic spirit in order to have meaning for his age. Therefore, the poetic subjects to be used by the poet are those which hold significant meaning for that age. These principles are basic in Moody's art and are the result of his study and reading.

If we look now at Moody as critic, editor, and university teacher, we can discover the principles of form and technique which he thought necessary to true poetic expression. Moody's venture into prose criticism was chiefly the result of the desire to augment his teaching salary and thus allow himself time to devote to his art and to travel. He regarded his critical comments and editing mostly as hack labor. Nevertheless, his criticisms are discerning and readable, and they enabled him "to crystallize his opinions on the poet's craft and to put them into definite
pronouncements."¹⁵ The bulk of his prose criticism¹⁶ is not large; it consists chiefly of introductions and notes for a series of editions of the classics for high schools. William Vaughn Moody also collaborated with his friend and colleague, Robert Morse Lovett, in writing *A History of English Literature*. This one-volume history has been generally recognized as a superior piece of scholarship. His editorial and critical work shows Moody to have been a penetrative critic. He analyzed studiously the technique of writers such as Bunyan, Milton, Scott, Coleridge, Lowell, Pope, and De Quincey. In making editions of these writers, Moody came to recognize certain techniques which he was later to apply in his works. He noted with relish, for example, the "joy" poetry of Milton's early years and "all the warm and gorgeous imagery which clusters about the Hebraic idea of paradisiac love."¹⁷ When citing the sensuous and spiritual in Milton's vital conceptions, Moody anticipated his own use of this quality in poetic dramas. He admired, too, the organ-toned language of the great poet; it is Moody, the poet, that wished to equal such achievement who says:

... Milton's imagination takes fire, the images gain in majesty and richness, and the language gathers a kingly confidence of rhythm and phrase,


¹⁶. See bibliography.

a shadowed but triumphant music, like the chanting of young seraphs awe-struck at their theme...

Moody was fascinated by word-sense. His comment upon Bunyan's word usage reflects his own theory of the importance of words:

For anyone who has the sense of language, to whom words have a subtle individuality of their own, who can linger over and taste a phrase coaxing its flavor to the palate as if it were an old wine, the passages of The Pilgrim's Progress will possess an enduring fascination.

Elsewhere, Moody condemned the lack of music in Lowell's work, but praised his unusual power of picturization. About The Vision of Sir Launfal, Moody wrote: "It is full of pictures too vivid to be easily forgotten..." In the same essay, Moody is excited over the "spacious music" and the "peculiar entralling beauty" of the delicate metrical effects and subtle shades of sound and color in the diction of Coleridge. One forthright generalisation found in this series of criticism states:

There are two things without which poetry cannot exist: the poet must make us see his thought, not as an abstraction, but as a reality glowing with color and movement; and he must do this through the medium of musical language ... Comparatively few persons are sensitive to the more delicate

18. Ibid., Introduction, p. xii.
effects of meter... The greatest poems have a shape, an outline so to speak, which is in itself beautiful. There is no redundancy about them anywhere; they are clean-cut and balanced, part to part, as a fine statue or a fine building.31

Here one notices two underlying principles of poetic practice in Moody's own work. These are: an insistence upon the use of figurative language which embodies subtle metrical effects and the insistence upon beautiful structural unity. An adherence to these two practices in the spirit of Greek classicism provides the poet with merits for form unity—compression, condensation, suggestiveness—and unifies a poem's content elements of phrases and ideas. Elsewhere Moody has termed unity of form and content the "music of ideas"22 which leads a poet to distinction as a stylist.

When Moody points to the fault of stately diction in Scott and to frequent triviality and diffuseness in De Quincey, one recognizes that it is Moody, the poet, citing pitfalls to avoid. One notices, too, a desire to attain the power of conveying "emotions of mystery and grandeur"23 which he finds in De Quincey. To his criticism Moody brought both scholarship and appreciation. The enthusiasm he had for merits of fine poetry caused him to incorporate within

21. Ibid., pp. 95-78.


his own work the technique of those he admired. These influences upon his career reinforce his natural disposition to observe the traditional methods of English versification. A devoted scholar of the romanticists, of the Elizabethans, and of the seventeenth-century poets, Moody quite naturally "echoed the tones of the singers to whom he was accustomed to listen." Furthermore, it is well to remember that William Vaughn Moody lived in an age quite antipathetic to poetry and especially to innovation in verse forms. The traditionalism of Moody and his contemporaries is described by May Sinclair, who declared:

The young American poets of today are, as far as form goes, anything but revolutionary; they are the born aristocrats of literature, careful of form, and fastidious to a fault in their choice of language. So far from being 'sans culottes,' they are most particular about the arrangement of their draperies, many of them preferring the classic mode to any other. They refuse to be hail fellows well met with every subject, and are aware of the imperishable value of selection.

By nature and by perseverance then, Moody was a stylist. Although the ornamental, the finely wrought, and the richly colored found a prominent place in his work, his firm sense of structure restrained this quality of opulence. Later in this paper follows a discussion of Moody's method of handling poetic inspiration to secure effective expression. It is sufficient to emphasize now that Moody's

principles of form stressed the technical side of artistry. He consciously strove for unusual concepts, colorful imagery, suggestiveness of phrase, and melody of line. May Sinclair has praised this workmanship:

... No poet since Shelley has united such masterly metrical plasticity, such exuberance of sensuous imagery with so vast a sweep of metaphysical imagination.  

The most striking phase of Moody’s technique is his diction and his use of figurative language. Lovett has testified to the principle apparent to even the casual reader that Moody "... always dissented from Wordsworth’s theory that there should be no difference between the diction of poetry and that of prose." We have seen from his comment on Bunyan’s word-sense that Moody, too, had "language sense." For him the word must always be employed with a reverent sense of its use in the past, by the poets and by the people. His aim was precision and if "le mot juste" was unfamiliar or had to be reminted, he yielded to the necessity. One critic, speaking of the peculiar nature of his words, concluded that he had "the habit of conserving the qualities of things rather than the things themselves, the emotional impression of objects rather than outlines."  

26. Ibid.  


Even as he was precise in diction, Moody was equally careful in the use of figures of speech. He moulded each figure (usually a metaphor) with loving care. Indeed, so elaborate and abundant are his figures that at times his lines are lacking in transparency. Miss Ella Ernestine Stone has made a minute classification of the sensory images in his poetry and has discovered that there is an average of nearly two to a line—a total of some fourteen thousand, five hundred and fifty-nine. The inference of this accounting is more interesting than the arithmetical figures. Moody had made figurative language his natural expression.

Moody’s own prose criticisms and the critics’ explanation of Moody’s poetry supply us with information regarding his theories on poetic form. In reality, these are few and in no wise new. First, a poem must possess unity in its parts and as a whole. It must be embellished with figurative language—to give it color and movement. And lastly, it must be written with subtle metrical effects so that rhythm and phrase are the poet’s “triumphant music.”

However, despite the fact that Moody believed that the poet should be a consummate craftsman, we have Lovett’s word that he also believed in the “aesthetic principle that the form of poetry should grow out of the subject rather than

that the subject should be fitted to a given form...\textsuperscript{30}

Form, therefore, must always be appropriate to idea. Moody's own attitude toward the problem of form versus idea appears very clearly in his criticism of Trumbull Stickney:

But he did not, as so many nympholepts of verse—music have done, lose himself in the sensuous aspect of the subject. He knew that there is, quite literally, a music of ideas as well as of sounds, and that only from the organic union of the two is poetry born. With many temptations, thereto, he refused to work in the spirit of virtuosity. His melodies are simple, his color temperate, his images unstartling.\textsuperscript{31}

This "music of ideas"—a perfect harmony between idea and form—was to be the ultimate aim of the poet. To achieve this end, Moody seemed convinced of two things: the poet first should choose to write about subjects pertinent to his age with a philosophic point of view, and the poet secondly should make the elements of a poem—especially diction, imagery, and metrical effects—structurally beautiful but always appropriate to idea.

With this comprehensive examination of Moody's theory of the art of poetry, we will now move to a consideration in some detail of the application of this theory in his life and in his writings.

\textsuperscript{30} R. H. Lovett, "Memories ...," p. 387.

CHAPTER II

THE POET AS STUDENT

No definitive biography of William Vaughn Moody has as yet been written nor can it be until certain reminiscences and letters appear for publication. The only information available about Moody's life is to be found in the introduction and notes to editions of his poetry and of his letters which have been written by his friends, John N. Manly, Daniel Gregory Mason, Robert Morse Lovett, and Percy MacKaye. A study of his life and creative output has been published by Daniel D. Henry; however Mr. Henry added nothing to the facts known about Moody's life, nor did he have access to the most recently published volume of letters, which appeared in 1935. A final biography must await further publications of letters to friends such as Josephine Preston Peabody, E. A. Robinson, Ridgely Torrence, Percy MacKaye, Ferdinand Schevill, and Robert Morse Lovett, and publication of reminiscences by Torrence and Schevill—w ith whom Moody traveled much in Europe and in America. It is understood, too, that Julia Moody Schmals, a sister, is compiling memorabilia and letters which comprise data about the poet's

ancestor and early life concerning which very little is known. 34

The now available sources, however, supply many important facts and viewpoints invaluable to an estimate of Moody and his works. Moody's published letters, dating between the years 1892-1910, provide one with a relatively complete picture of the events in his life and also of his personal attitude toward his art. In the study of Moody's life and of the development of his literary theory, we have relied as far as possible upon the information contained in these letters. A study of William Vaughn Moody naturally falls into three periods: his youth in Indiana and his education at Harvard (1869-1894); academic years of teaching and experimentation at the University of Chicago (1895-1903); and the years devoted solely to writing, particularly of drama, in New York and Cornish, New Hampshire (1903-1910).

William Vaughn Moody was born in 1869 in the little town of Spencer, Indiana. His father, Francis Burdette Moody, had emigrated from New York to the Middle West and was for many years a steamboat captain. 35 To him, Moody owed his introduction to good books. Scott, Dickens,

34. Ibid., Introduction, p. 17.

Thackeray, and many of the English poets were on the shelves of the home library. His mother, Henrietta Stoy Moody, seems to have had the larger share in the guidance of the boy and in the stirring of his ambition. That Moody's mother left an abiding impression upon him in his youth can be evidenced by his poem, *The Daguerreotype*, which is an idealized picture of universal motherhood. Moody was "next to the youngest" of seven children and we can judge from his diligent attempts to finance his education that the family had only a meager income. About 1871, according to Manly, the Moody family moved to New Albany, Indiana, and there his mother died in 1884 and the father in 1886. Consequently at the age of 17, William Vaughn Moody was called upon to assist in augmenting the family income. After his graduation from the New Albany High School, he taught in a country school and in 1888, Moody entered the Riverview Academy in New York to prepare himself for Harvard. From Lovett's account of Moody's early life, one learns that sometime between 1885 and 1888, he studied art at the Pritchett Institute of Design, Louisville, Kentucky, and that he had been editor of the high-school

38. Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
paper and had contributed some verse attempts. All accounts of Moody as a boy relate that although he was an omnivorous reader, he was still fond of all vigorous physical activity and had enthusiasms for music and painting which were to remain with him throughout his adult life.

While at the Riverview Academy, Moody supported himself by tutoring Charles Rowley's son. The influence that academy training had upon Moody has been summarized adequately by Professor Lovett:

Riverview was a military school, and the discipline was severe. The only reminiscences of his life there that I ever heard fall from Moody's lips was of marching around the drill field ... a stated number of times as penalty for smoking. He had other memories which he did not divulge. The head master was Harlan Page Amen, afterwards head master of Phillips Academy, Exeter, whom Moody loved and admired always. To Amen's fine ideals of scholarship and discipline Moody owed the rare intellectual training, especially in the classics, which fitted him for a distinguished university career.

With this excellent preparation, Moody entered Harvard University in the fall of 1889. He had borrowed money from an uncle, and these loans he repaid by working at tasks such as typing, tutoring, proctoring, and editing. This determination to partake of higher education indicates that his education was a very serious matter to him and that


41. Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.
he was bent upon receiving as much as possible from formal
education.

As student at Harvard, Moody showed judgment in the
selection of his courses, worked hard, and distinguished
himself by graduating second in the class of 1893. About
Moody's program of study, Lovett has written:

He chose his courses with fine economy, selecting subjects in which guidance counted most, and
avoiding those, such as English Literature or
composition, which he could master himself.

Most of his time as undergraduate Moody devoted to a study
of the classics and medieval literature. Professor Manly
recalls that George Kittredge remarked to him that Moody
had an insatiable appetite for medieval French romances.

Later in life when Moody was being interviewed about his
college training, he replied:

... the greatest benefit I derived ... was the
time I had to pause and reflect before coming
into the world of realities. My four years at
college gave me much-needed leisure to contem-
plate life before actually participating in it.

From all accounts it is evident that Moody had little time
for the frivolity of campus life. Lovett recalls that he
was not an "organization" man as such but that he entered

42. R. M. Lovett, "Memories of William Vaughn Moody,"
Atlantic Monthly, CLVII (March, 1931), 387.

43. Manly, op. cit., p. x.

44. News item, St. Louis Republic, February 10, 1909. As
cited in Henry, op. cit., p. 17.
into extra-curricular life mainly to keep from isolating himself by absorption in his own tasks. He was a member of the Browning Club, the Comedy Club, and belonged also to Signet, Delta Upsilon, and the O.K. Club. 45

Moody's grand resource at Harvard was his work as one of the editors of the Harvard Monthly. This undergraduate literary publication was a convenient outlet for his poetic efforts. Poems or occasional book notices and sketches by Moody appeared in nearly every issue from the spring of 1890 to that of 1892. In the capacity of editor, Moody soon gathered about him literary aspirants who became his loyal, lifelong friends. Among these were Robert Herrick, George Santayana, Norman Hapgood, George P. Baker, Bliss Carman, Trumbull Stickney and many others, who, like Moody, were eager to rise in the world of American letters—either as writers or critics. 46

Of the seventeen poems published in the Harvard Monthly during the period of 1890 to 1892, 47 only two are included with little or no change in the final edition of Moody's work. 48 The sonnet, "Harmonics," and "How the Mead-Slave

45. Lovett, "Memories ...," p. 386.
46. Ibid.
47. See bibliography.
"Was Set Free" are the two poems which were not excluded from his Poems which appeared in 1901. He regarded the others as apprentice work and largely imitative, sentimental, and "literary." "Harmonics" is a love sonnet whose theme echoes the sentiment of those who lived before.

"How the Head Slave Was Set Free" is a romantic tale of love which conquers all. Both contain elements that remind one of the youthful Keats or Rossetti.

Since Moody had completed his credits needed for graduation in three years, he spent his senior year, 1892-93, in Europe as a tutor of Ingersoll Bowditch. This was the first of five sojourns abroad in Europe and England (1893-1893, 1894, 1902, 1907, 1909). The tour was notable for a walking trip through the Black Forest and Switzerland with Norman Hapgood, Lovett, and Louis Dow, for the winter which he spent in Florence, and for his first visit to Greece. It is at this period that we begin to have published letters to which to turn for firsthand accounts of what the poet was thinking and doing. That he was traveling rapidly and wholly enthusiastically there is no doubt. He also was sending poems back to Harvard as contributions to the Monthly. In a letter to Lovett, October, 1893, he wrote:
I hope to receive the Monthly regularly. Am sorry not to send anything for the October number. I have turned Pegasus out to pasture and he eateth much grass, but inclineth not to soar ...

However, in November of the same year, Moody sent a poem with the hope of constructive criticism from Lovett:

... I send a piece of verse—for which I fear your blue pencil will have ... horrible affinity. Read it yourself first and let not mercy season justice. If it is printed I should like to have a proof if possible ...

In just these two excerpts there is evidence of the poetic disposition to which many of his friends have attested. Moody could write only when inclined to and every scrap of verse he put to a rigid scrutiny for faults and he urged his friends to pass judgment upon the composition. In a letter to Lovett, dated April 11, 1893, we learn a little of Moody's first year in Europe:

... We had the good fortune to strike some of the Lord's people on leaving Italy, Mr. Edward Lowell and family, and spent three weeks with them in Greece—three weeks of flawless enjoyment for me, in spite of the resin in the wine and the ubiquitous prowling of the Philistines. After doing what could be done from Athens—Eleusis, Phyleae, Aegina, and Marathon—we went down to Nauplia in the Peloponnesus, and made flying trips to Epidaurus, Argos, and Mycenae ...

40. Mason, op. cit., p. 5.

50. Ibid., p. 8.

51. Ibid., p. 7.
One has hints here of the love Moody was to have for Greece and the vigor with which he entered into all his trips—crowding into short time all the experiences possible in order to have firsthand touch with the past he revered. Later in the same letter, Moody refers to his lack of writing and toward what study he was directing his energy:

... I am sorry not to have been able to send anything for padding, but I have had neither time nor inclination to write ... I have put all my spare time on Dante so far, and probably shall not try now to work up Sheldon's course—I have not the nerve to throw such sand in the maw of the faculty Gerberus, lest he should turn and rend me ... 53

Moody had to return to Harvard for the June Commencement of 1893, for he was to deliver the Class Day Poem entitled "The Song of the Elder Brothers." In this case, the "elder brothers" were Longfellow, Emerson, and other Harvard graduates who had made literary marks in the annals of American letters, and in the poem Moody shows that he was conscious of his personal debt to the traditions of Harvard. In the letter before cited, Moody hints of his plans for possible further study at Harvard:

... I have applied for a fellowship next year, and if I get it shall come back for an indefinite period ... 53

Moody received the fellowship and spent the next year in

53. Loc. cit.

53. Loc. cit.
Cambridge in study for a Master of Arts degree. He eked out a slender income by editorial labors on Bulfinch's Mythology with Mr. Lovett. A reference to this work occurs in a letter to Lovett:

...Do not hurry back on Bulfinch's account, however; I will have a general supervision over Zeus's amours, and will keep Heré out of his hair until such time as the color fadeth out of the Waterville sky and the dregs in the wine cup grow bitter...54

The following year, 1894-95, Moody was appointed to an instructorship in the English departments of Harvard and Radcliffe. One notices a bit of hesitancy to take the routine work of teaching English composition, when he wrote to Lovett:

I don't know whether you know that I have decided to shuffle about next year in your old shoes—with Gates in English 33. I should hesitate to accept it did I not have such splendid examples before my eyes of gorgeous scholastic butterflies hatched from this dull cocoon.55

Moody shows that he was beginning to wish to be free from academic labor in order to devote all his time to his art. Academic pursuits weighed upon his creative spirit and he found himself often without time to write—for he continued to do extensive readings and study in philology. The fatigue of his labors was upon him when he complained to

55. Ibid., p. 16.
Lovett in February, 1894:

The midyears have left me limp as a rag, and have convinced me that, instead of an amiable divorce such as you suggest, Philology and Minerva are destined to part with mutual scorn and vituperation. 56

We hear little more about this year except "early morning and midnight coping with the English 22 fortnightly." 57

However, during this period as graduate student and instructor, Moody published five poems in the Harvard Monthly, only one of which finds entry in the 1901 collection. The poem that survived for inclusion was "By the Evening Sea," later entitled "The Departure." One finds in this the tone of personal dejection, even of grief, which recurs so frequently in his verse as well as in his letters:

The smoky music burst into fire,
And I was left alone in my great need,
One foot upon the thin horn of my lyre
And all its strings crushed in the dripping weed.

The specific meaning of "The Departure" can not be readily ascertained; but its mood is consistent with those moments of depression that Moody experienced when his poetic output fell short of his own expectation.

Robert Morss Lovett, then a professor at the University of Chicago, urged Moody to join the faculty there. At first Moody declined, feeling that he should remain at

57. Ibid., p. 23.
Harvard another year and work toward a doctorate.

However, the attractive salary offer from Chicago caused him to change his mind. His viewpoint, in the spring of 1895, is expressed again in a note to Lovett:

... I have today received a letter from my people which changes the outlook for me somewhat, as it makes it necessary for me to reap larger harvest of shekels than I have any immediate prospect of doing here. If you have not as yet made an offer of the Chicago position to any one else could you possibly hold it open until you come East? ... I hope you will not think I take an altogether mercenary view of the situation; you must take the spiritual sub-intention for granted.58

The summer of 1895, Moody and Daniel Gregory Mason sailed for Europe and traveled extensively in various parts of France. Mason recounts that at Caen Moody made the first sketch of the poem which eventually became "Jetsam" and that at Tessy-sur-Vire he found the source for the speech of the Third Youth in Act IV of the *Masque of Judgment*. The experience also at Havre of hearing a beggar chanting, "Pourquoi," "Pourquoi," was the germ of the poem, "Old Pourquoi," written many years later.59 Upon his return to the United States, in 1895, William Vaughn Moody took up his duties as instructor at the University of Chicago.


One period of Moody's life was completed, a period of study at Harvard and rapid travel in Europe. The verse he wrote at this time was largely imitative of Keats, Rossetti, and Browning, and he later destroyed most of it. It was not until the summer of 1895 that we find Moody drawing from "life," or from experience, for poetic material. Letters and accounts from his friends of this youthful period show Moody to have been a conscientious scholar and instructor who chose his friends from among the literary-minded and who sought in Greece, Italy, and France the inspirations of the older poets whom he loved. Perhaps the excerpts from letters herein quoted give the key to Moody's attitude toward teaching. Moody had to have remunerative employment and as the least uncongenial he selected teaching. If it had been financially possible, he would have preferred, at the age of twenty-four, to have spent his time in writing and in study. The six years spent at Harvard gave the youth "leisure to contemplate life." We now turn to the young man who was to participate in it.
Moody’s residence in the Chicago of the 1880’s had a marked influence on the development of his creative spirit and of his literary theory. He had migrated to Cambridge in the search for culture; he found it and avidly absorbed all he could. Life in Chicago shook him out of the academic tranquillity of New England and left him homesick for the old environment and atmosphere. The crudeness of the realities which he faced stunned him and for a short time Moody made odious comparisons between the “West” and the “East.” He wrote to Josephine Preston Peabody concerning his period of adjustment:

I have put off sending you the verses with the naive thought of using them for a link between the old Cambridge and this new one. Scoff at my superstition, but do not too scornfully entreat the pathetic little versicle of a bond-bearer, shivering with the double knowledge of the portentous mission and his own objective comicality. Cambridge—mellow and autumnal—begins already to take on really mythic colors— to loom symbolic, under the stress of this relentless prairie light and vast featureless horizon. I begin to believe ... that all my life there in the east was a sort of tragi-farce, more or less consciously composed, as rudely awake and in earnest is everything here ....

I do not know what this place is going to do for me, but am sure of its potency—its alchemical power to change and transmute. It is appallingly ugly for one thing—so ugly that the double curtain of night and sleep does not screen
the aching sense. For another thing it is absorb-
ing—crude juice of life—intellectual and social
protoplasm. Far aloft hovers phantom Poetry, no
longer my delicate familiar. But I dream of an-
other coming of hers, a new companionship more
valorous and simple-hearted.

This first written reaction to life in its glaring reality
seems fair and just; it also shows Moody eager to ponder
new material upon which to exercise the creative spirit.

At other times, he was less optimistic and more complaining:

The truth of the matter is, I suppose, that
I am dissatisfied to the point of desperation
with the kind of life that is possible out here.
... out here there is nothing to relieve the
gaseous tedium of a mushroom intellectuality, no
straining wickedness or valiant wrestling with
hunger to break the spectacles of Gospel-peddling
comfort,—the imagination doth boggle at it.

Moody's dissatisfaction with his life in Chicago partly lay
in his feeling that teaching was a restraint upon his crea-
tive energies. However, he received some pleasure from his
teaching and wrote to Daniel Mason about his two classes—
"nearly two-thirds of whom are girls"—and about his sur-
prise in finding them not "anemic, simpering creatures" but
some of them at least "stars." He continued:

...Lecturing before them is like a singing pro-
gress from Boötes to the Lyre, with wayfaring
worlds to lift the chorus. At the beginning I
made an honest man's efforts to talk about the
qualities of style and the methods of descrip-
tion, but I am a weak vessel. Now I drool
blissfully about God in his world, with

61. Ibid., pp. 36–37.
Although teaching was a drain on his time, Moody did manage to continue to write poetry occasionally. He started to polish the poem early that year in France and sent it to Josephine Peabody for her criticism. When Moody wrote under the heat of inspiration, he felt often that he was achieving the kind of poetry he had esteemed in others.

Usually, however, following the written expression, he was plunged into a mood of depression in which his self-criticism and humility were especially marked. Such typical reaction Moody described to Miss Peabody in December, 1895:

... After I sent off the poem [Jetsam], the inevitable revulsion set in; I lost faith in it, and then being in a state of nerves, took the easy step of losing faith in myself and in the future. Still I kept hoping against hope that you would find a stray line to like and praise.63

Moody needed encouragement from his friends in order to be able to rewrite and polish and to lift himself out of the depths of despair. Later in the same letter, he continued:

... Then your letter came, and I read, stupidly at first, not understanding your generous words of praise ... and when I understood them, they filled me with joy which would have been out of all proportion to the matter at stake except that for me it was one of these pivotal small things on which the future turns silent and large ... So I took a deep breath, and sat down

62. Ibid., p. 33.
63. Ibid., p. 43.
Moody missed the circle of friends with whom he gathered and discussed art in Cambridge. He complained of the "shallow kindness" of the group to which he belonged in the west. "People are so eager to give you credit for virtues that you do not possess that you feel ashamed," he wrote, "to put forth those that are yours." He longed to become an adequate self-critic, and feeling that he was not, he declared:

... I sigh, like the ancient worthy, for a stern friend, one who will not be gullied by any thimble-rig sophistry, who will puncture with sweet skepticism my little soap-bubble eloquences, and by so doing give me heart to try to be wise ...

However, Moody was too quick to judge the qualities of his new friends for later he was to receive the intellectual inspiration for which he yearned. Among his colleagues at the university were, in English, Robert Morse Lovett, John M. Manly, and Robert Herrick; in history, Ferdinand Schevill; in Greek, Paul Shorey—all of them men of scholarship and intellectual attainment. Later Moody found congenial companions among writers such as Harriet Monroe, Hamlin Garland, Henry Fuller, and William Morton Payne. Also, in Chicago, Moody met Mrs. Harriet Tilden Brainard who

64. Ibid. cit.
65. Mason, op. cit., p. 47.
66. Ibid., p. 48.
was to become his wife in the last year of his life. The bulk of his published letters are those written to her and one sees readily that she figured importantly in the encouragement of his abilities.

Moody continued to write even though much of his time was spent in the classroom and in theme correction. We can infer the efficiency of his teaching from his own remark, "I am known in Chicago theyery as the Man in the Iron Mask, and you may wager I live up to the title." The first change in Moody's writing that impresses one is that he was beginning to experiment with subjects which were brought to his mind by news items or from contact with non-academic people. Although The Faith Healer was not published until 1909, Moody began writing it in 1896. His first reference to it appears in a letter to Mason in December:

"... I am losing sleep over a project for a play, dealing with a character and a situation which seem to me intensely significant and eloquent, that of Slatter, the "New Mexico Messiah," who has been doing things in Denver of late. But I need not bother you with dough still in the kneading."

Before this time, Moody would not have thought of writing about a man "who has been doing things in Denver of late," nor would he have thought of writing poetry about a girl.

67. Ibid., p. 59.
68. Ibid., p. 41.
whom he noticed by chance. This he did, however, in the
"Heart's Wild Flower," begun in 1896 and entitled then
"Wilding Flower." When he sent the poem to Daniel Gregory
Mason for consideration, he explained the source from which
it began:

... I send you a poem which I have just written
about the Creature I once hinted to you of—a Girl
who haunted the symphonies last winter. I hope
you will like it, because it is almost the first
thing I have done which has been a direct impulse
from "real" life, and you know I have theories
about that. Also what I tried to say is a thing
which constitutes much of the poetry of a young
man's life, I think, and if I could have got it
said would have had a certain large interpreta-
tive value. Let me know your opinion ...69

In this letter, Moody said that he had theories about what
subjects from "real life" were fit for poetry. After receiv-
ing Mason's reply in which the latter took Moody to task for
a lack of simplicity of language, Moody expounded his theory
about poetic language:

... The adjectives are too many, I know; but I am
worried over your specific objections to phrase ... I
think you are not tolerant enough of the in-
stinct for conquest in language, the attempt to
push out its boundaries, to win for it contin-
uously some new swiftness, some rare compression,
to distill from it a more opaline drop. Isn't it
possible, too, to be pedantic in the demand for
simplicity?70

69. Ibid., p. 56.

70. Ibid., p. 63.
The adherence, then, to elaborate phrasal patterns was one which Moody had accepted from his youthful years at Harvard and which he refused to relinquish. He recognized that writing from "direct impulse" was a development in his theory about poetic subjects. Moody was looking for new things to say but not for new ways in which to say them. Over-elaborate language usage was distinctly a part of him—a mannerism that he could not find it within himself to change.

Until the spring of 1897, Moody was busy for months in Chicago, teaching, occasionally writing poetry, and editing *The Pilgrim's Progress* for the Riverside Literature Series of Houghton Mifflin Company. He was pushing himself to do these things and he laments that "all my schemes of spiritual conquest are done up in mothballs for the time being." Frequently he felt the swift passage of time and unfulfilled hopes so that he wrote:

... I echo poor Keats's cry "O for ten years that I may steep myself in poetry"—with the modest substitution of weeks for years, and willingness to compromise on as many days if Providence will only undertake this shiny taste of themes and literary drool out of my mouth, and let me taste the waters of life where they are near the well-head.

By this time, Moody was feeling less hampered by the western

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71. Ibid., p. 50.
72. Ibid., p. 68.
I am writing, not much, but with time enough to listen to fairy echoes, to turn and taste again, to fix and prefer. I shall never have a lordly shelf of books to point to ("Paint my two hundred pictures, some good som!"") but if I live out the reasonable span, I think I can hope to have one little one at least, or two maybe, which will be in their own way vocal from cover to cover. Whether the voice will be one that people will care to hear, matters less to me than it did—perhaps less than it should.73

When the volume of Poems appeared in 1901, only Moody's friends and a few critics found it worthy of much praise. It seems that Moody realized early that his work would not appeal to the popular taste.

In the spring of 1897, Moody managed to get away from the university for a six months' trip to Italy and the Austrian Tyrol. During this period of leisure and sightseeing, he wrote "Good Friday Night," the "Road Hymn for the Start" and began work on the Masque of Judgment. The suggestion for "Good Friday Night" was the Eastertide procession at Sorrento which Moody saw that spring. The "Road Hymn" was inspired by the new found freedom of doing the things he wanted to. His conception for the Masque

73. Ibid., pp. 72-73.
was fully outlined in a letter, dated June 8, 1897, to Ferdinand Schevill:

... I am at work now on a rather hopelessly fantastic thing, I fear, half-lyric, half dramatic; I shall try to excuse the willfulness of the form by calling it a Masque. The subject is the Judgment-day—no less—a kind of sketchy modern working over of the theme, from the point of view of the accusing human. God Almighty promises to be an engaging figure with proper foreshortening. The protagonist is the archangel Raphael, a staunch humanist (his enemies—Heaven confound their counsels!—would say a sentimentalist), and principal roles are sustained by such pleasing characters as the Seventh Lamp of the Throne, the Angel of the Pale Horse, the Lion of the Throne, and the spirit of the Morning-Star. I foresee great possibilities,—a kind of Hebrew Götterdämmerung, with a chance for some real speaking-out-in-meeting—hoop-la!—Excuse my barbaric yawp; it is merely meant to express enthusiasm.

Moody's theory of the art of poetry was beginning, in this letter, to take shape. We notice, first, the intention of a wide symbolic structure; second, there is the inclination to use older themes with a new viewpoint; and third, the possibility of "speaking-out-in-meeting"—or rather—the reinforcement of the theme with Moody's own philosophic ideas.

Upon his return from Italy in 1897, Moody began "a substantial job of book editing" which was to prepare notes and an introduction to the complete works of Milton. Mason had urged him to go to Spain in the spring of 1898, but Moody replied: "In the first place, I haven't the cash to travel, in the second, my Milton is not yet completed, and in the

74. Ibid., p. 87.
third, the climacteric, I want to get a little volume of verse ready for press before fall at the latest." In order to accomplish these ends, Moody went to New York during the spring quarter of 1888 (when he usually vacationed from teaching). While there he worked on the *Masque* and the prose play, *The Faith Healer,* in addition to finishing the Milton work and his own volume of poems. The *Poems* were not accepted for publication until 1901. The criticisms of his Milton editing were complimentary in most cases, but the *New York Nation* found many faults therein. To use Moody's own words, the *Nation* did "not leave enough of me to bury."76

Life in New York appealed to Moody and he discovered that it was the place in which to do inspired work. Speaking of the friends there, he concluded: "... these chaps here, though very moderately elegiac and of a dubious report, are splendidly American and contemporary; and I feel convinced that this is the place for young Americans who want to do something."77 In his plans from then on is the hope of earning enough money to be able to settle in New York for long periods of uninterrupted work. From 1898 to 1907, Moody was officially on the staff at the University of

75. Ibid., p. 96.
76. Ibid., p. 13.
77. Ibid., p. 101.
Chicago. However, whenever he could, he applied for leaves of absence and did not teach from the spring of 1897 to the winter quarter of 1901. During that time he went to England for six months and finished the *Masque of Judgment* and spent the remainder of his leave in Gloucester and Boston. He wrote the "Ode in Time of Hesitation," "Gloucester Moors," and the "Menagerie." And, while in New England, he revised *The Faith Healer* and published *The Masque of Judgment*. During all this period, he spent his afternoons and evenings writing a substantial portion of *The History of English Literature* of which Robert Lovett was writing the remainder. This task of writing a high-school text consumed much of his time but he did it so that he might have a permanent though small income. Moody returned to Chicago as an assistant professor and lectured for two quarters. He did not teach there after 1902 although he maintained a nominal connection until 1907. However, after his resignation from active work at the University of Chicago the time Moody did not spend in travel was divided among his friends in New York, Boston, and Chicago.

Life in Chicago had been a very important period of development for William Vaughn Moody. He had published one volume of poems, one poetic drama, and, with Lovett, the history of English literature. In addition he had edited the Complete Poetical Works of John Milton and compiled

Significant to us is the development of Moody's theory of the art of poetry and growth in his own practices. He was no longer content to use literary inspirations. He awakened to the possibilities of his environment and began to see the value in using life experience. Although the "Heart's Wild Flower" and some other poems in the 1901 volume show some kinship to Rossetti in subject, diction, and melody, there is sincerity and individuality of thought and phrase. We have seen that "Good Friday Night," "Road Hymn for the Start," and portions of the Masque of Judgment were inspired by incidents met in his travels. The "Ode in Time of Hesitation" and the shorter poem, "On a Soldier Fallen in the Philippines," were written in protest against the political trend in the United States. The awakening of Moody's social conscience also took place in this period. "The Brute" is the fullest single expression of the voice of labor and the mass feeling of revolt against the.

78. This ode was written on the 125th anniversary of Washington's taking command of the American Army. It was published in the Harvard Monthly, October 1900.
inhumanity of industry and the machine age. "Gloucester Moors" also has suggestions of awareness of social problems by its complete sympathy with the downtrodden and an angry antagonism to the forces and circumstances which cause misery. "The Menagerie" is Moody's handling of the theory of evolution and shows him, despite the obvious ironical treatment, to have been aware of the growing scientific viewpoint.

Another significant growth in poetic development, attributable to these years, is the enlarging scope of Moody's efforts. He began experimenting with the poetic drama and even with the prose medium for a play. The original conception of the Masque of Judgment was on the scale of a Paradise Lost in which Moody was going to justify the ways of man to God. He was trying his hand at longer endeavors, to which the five acts of the Masque are ample proof. And, though he knew that it was generally accepted then that plays should be written in prose, Moody felt that iambic pentameter was a better mode for expression and used it with the grand air of a Shelley in the Masque. During his brief visit in New York, Moody became acquainted with a small group who were writing in the field of drama. They had urged him to attempt a prose play. The Faith Healer

79. The Faith Healer is the last title given to the play. Moody called it many other names before deciding upon this.
was the first such experiment. We have Moody's own feeling concerning this medium:

...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.80

The awakening of social conscience and using direct impulse for creative inspiration are outgrowths of life in Chicago. The other change of experimentation in the longer forms of poetic and prose dramas can be attributed to new groups of friends made in Chicago and during the brief New York visit. In only one particular did Moody's theory of the art of poetry not change somewhat. He still believed that the language of verse need not be overly simplified. Highly figurative language, obvious even in his letters, was especially evident in his poetry. Only in prose attempts was Moody willing to be held to the medium of everyday speech.

As we have seen, William Vaughn Moody had spent seven years preparing himself to reach greater heights in his art. At the still youthful age of thirty-three, he was determined to keep himself free from any hampering influences of teaching. Now that he was financially able, all his time was to be spent in travel or in writing. For that reason, he chose New York as his headquarters and we must look for the maturing poet there.

CHAPTER IV

THE POET AS DRAMATIST

William Vaughn Moody left his tasks of lecturing and editing which marked the seven years of apprenticeship with a sense of elation and freedom. The last eight years of his life were devoted solely to travel and to writing. One might say devoted solely to his art, for travel was undertaken with the predetermined idea of finding the background material for the things about which he wished to write. Our source of information for this last period of Moody's life is minutely supplied by the most recent volume of letters, those which were written to Mrs. Harriet Brainard, whom he married just one year before he died. These letters cover in detail the years from 1801 through 1909 and reveal the poet's mind and heart as he devoted himself to his chosen work. The appeal of these letters is not that of "love letters" in the usual connotation of that term, but as many-sided revelations of the poet's mind, in which he unselfconsciously laid bare the mystic sources of his creative growth and wrote a behind-the-scenes commentary upon his contemporary period and upon his own work. One notices several changes in Moody during these last years. There are many references to short sieges of sickness, to long
periods of depression, and to long hours of polishing and adding refinements in his poetry. The first insight into Moody’s change of feelings and emotions dates with the last trip to Greece in the spring of 1902. Moody had conceived the idea of using the Promethean theme for a poetic drama. He left for Greece with the hope of gathering mood and material for what was to become The Fire Bringer—his treatment of the Promethean theme.

In order to prepare himself for the treatment of the ancient Greek theme, Moody, still the scholar and still somewhat academic, began to steep himself once more in the literature of the Greece he loved. From the boat he wrote:

... I have read two books of the Odyssey since the ship started. I intend to read at least a book a day during the voyage, not attempting the drama until a more strenuous time.81

Again he wrote of his reading Homer, and reflected:

... It has been a great experience to read Homer against the background of unreclaimed primeval sea. The rhythms take on a new meaning when timed with the swing and swell of the water, here in mid-Atlantic. The hexameter would never have arisen except among a race of sailors or coast dwellers.82

Enroute to Greece from Italy, Moody referred to his attempts to learn Greek. He felt that he needed a command of the language or the association of a scholar of Greek in order

81. Ibid., p. 96.
82. Ibid., p. 97.
to achieve his purpose:

... I have been making feints at beginning to learn enough modern Greek to get along with when alone in the interior, but it seems dreadfully hard. I feel discouraged by the language difficulty. The whole success of my enterprise will, I fear, depend altogether on my finding a good guide and interpreter within my means. There is also the possibility of falling in with some American or English student in Athens who knows the language and who is bent on the same kind of jaunting that I want to do. 83

Greece was a country which, through landscape, history, literature, and contemporary peasant life, entered most deeply into Moody’s consciousness. The classic feeling of joy in life restrained by measure and the decrees of the gods was one which Moody understood. In one letter, he wrote, “So long as this atmosphere endures the old gods cannot die, but will go on ‘delicately marching through most pellucid air.’” 84

Not only did the beauty and atmosphere of the Greece of his day pervade Moody’s senses, but he had several occasions there (and in Italy) when he felt he had come face to face with his Lord and Maker. It has been said that Moody was a mystic and upon reading his poetic dramas, one is almost certain of it. In May, 1902, Moody recorded one such experience:

83. Ibid., p. 103.
84. Ibid., p. 104.
... a man dressed in a long dark robe of coarse stuff, bareheaded talked earnestly to a stooping sailor. I took him for a Greek priest, by reason of his long hair and spiritual profile. There was something in the spare frame of the man, the slight stoop of the shoulders, and the calm intensity of the attitude, which made my heart stop beating. Presently he turned to look at me, and it was indeed He. This has happened to me twice now—once before at Sorrento seven years ago.85

During the 1902 Greece trip, we find Moody becoming more introspective, more subject to moods of long depression or of short elation. These periods of depression were partly the result of his driving himself and partly the result of finding modern Greece far different from the Greece of his ideal. Dejection and disappointment occurred simultaneously in one letter from Athens:

Dullness and the blues are on me tonight— one of those times that are so hard to bear because of their meaninglessness, when one simply feels emptied of power and purpose, and there is nothing to say about it. A part of it I suppose is due to the heat and disappointment at finding the season so far past the prime, and a part to the fact that I went to see Colonus this afternoon (where Sophocles's lovely play Oedipus at Colonus is laid) and found it a dust heap, inhabited by goats and dogs. The attempt to see old Greece through the Greece of today is not always easy.86

During his stay in Greece, Moody was reading avidly in the Greek drama. Many times he was so filled with admiration for the work of the Greek tragedians that one can

85. Ibid., p. 106.
86. Ibid., pp. 107-108.
readily see that he felt his own work, in comparison, was a failure. The full recognition of the greatness of the Greek masters only served to increase his self-deprecation and augment his desire to achieve, by laborious effort, higher standards in his own work. In one typical letter, he records his reaction to the beauties of Sophocles:

"As for me, I am simply prostrated by the Greek drama, now that I am beginning to see it as it was and is, in all of its simplicity and grandeur. I have just finished the Oedipus at Colonus; am perfectly bowled over by it. It is for one thing, so unclassical. A more romantic conception than the coming of Oedipus to Colonus, and his passing into death in the grove of Eumenides, does not exist in poetry. The choruses are inconceivably good. I haven't yet mastered the intricate metres, and I see the lyrics therefore through a veil, but even so they are maddening. I sometimes take my book down to the old Dionysiac theatre on the south slope of the Acropolis, and read there, evoking the chorus and watching them dance while they chant the tremendous lines. Ah, me!"

Again, after further reading, Moody acquired a clearer understanding of the Greek conception of life:

"...Fiske is altogether wrong in saying that the Greeks had no conception of the after life save as a shadowy and joyless existence. This is indeed true of Homer and the early poets; but the Orphic poets, the teachers of the Dionysiac cult and the hierophants of Demeter at Eleusis seem to have taught something far different—a doctrine of mystic regeneration, to be achieved however not through denial of this life but by a complete entering into it."

87. Ibid., p. 112.
88. Ibid., p. 117.
Each day while in Greece, William Moody found himself forming new opinions upon "classicism." As with Oedipus at Colonus, Moody found Agamemnon "romantic à entrance. I wonder how Hasars. Pope, Baileau, and Co. ever succeeded in foisting into the canon of art that absurd category of classicism, anyhow? Moody had virtually made the trip to Greece in order to more fully comprehend the legend of Prometheus. Strangely enough, he was somewhat disappointed in the conception of Prometheus Bound. He wrote concerning it:

Today I have been reading or rather digging out with pick and hammer, the Prometheus Bound. Doubtless it is unwise to judge it currently, but my first impression is one of disappointment. There is a certain dryness—coherence—about it, in conception. The language (as I dimly perceive it through a maze of difficulties) is grand beyond conception, however, and the choruses will keep me awake nights when I have got once into their musical secrets.

Moody stayed only six weeks in Greece and then decided to go to France. He had not been wholly satisfied with his trip. Later in retrospect he attributed the cause to his having overworked. He thus summed up his stay in Greece:

... I realize now that, though I did not know it at the time, I lived at a fierce pace while in Greece. Besides the excitement and fatigue of travel, I read ten plays (the equivalent of two college courses) got up enough modern Greek to travel with, gutted the libraries of the American

89. Ibid., p. 120.
90. Ibid., pp. 118-119.
and the British school for what they had consonant to my purpose, and behaved generally like a man who was to be hanged on Friday.  

What Moody momentarily failed to summarize in his trip was an accident which he had while descending from Parnassus—a fall in which he strained his hip-joint and which incapacitated him for several days. From this time on, Moody had recurring ailments from that fall, and his overwork caused a breakdown in his health to which he referred in many later letters and which finally terminated in his death. In addition to these illnesses, Moody was to entertain almost monthly fits of feeling incapable of working and devoid of all inspiration—all which became markedly noticeable after this tour. One letter, written three weeks after he left Greece for Paris, is explanatory:

When I left Greece, whether it was by reaction from the vivid excitement and physical strain I had been under in the Peloponnesus journey, or whether from some more mysterious cause, I do not know, but I went down at once into such a valley and shadow of despair as I have never, I think, had to pass through before. Feeling round through my darkened kingdoms I could find no hopeful thing, no joy, no sovereignty. This is a rather large way of saying that I was profoundly discouraged at not having recovered my tone of body and mind, that I felt spiritually deserted, God-forsaken, without power or hope or purpose, as if some Finger had been laid upon me saying 'Thus far and no farther'; and again 'Why, is it not simple? We have finished with thee!' and 'Behold, these many things were all done, and these well enough. This is the Book. Why dost thou tarry?'

91. Ibid., p. 135.
I think I went through Italy, and stood in many a holy well-beloved place. I know that at Rome I laid two roses on Keats's grave—and an ivy-leaf on the slab that covers Shelley's ashes. But none of these things availed ... 

Nevertheless, Moody did regain his spirit, when he "felt the breath of health and joy" in his lungs, and at such times he wrote and rewrote diligently. From the middle of the summer of 1902 until January, 1904, Moody worked on The Fire Bringer almost exclusively. He wanted to write slowly on it, for he found his material difficult to organize. He referred frequently to his slow progress and to his problems:

... I shan't know for at least a couple of months yet whether anything is coming of the Prometheus. Nine-tenths of the time I am in despair about it, and the other few minutes think it is the greatest show on wheels. It will either be good or nothing, of that I am sure, so that there won't be that harrowing indecision between the printing-shop and the waste basket.

Moody returned to America in late fall of 1902, feeling "that to remain abroad would have been a fatal mistake." He had intermittent weeks of illness which he termed importantly "grippe," all the time trying to finish The Fire Bringer, writing a new play (although never finished), and revising the original History of English Literature which

92. Ibid., p. 131.
93. Ibid., p. 137.
94. Ibid., p. 149.
95. Ibid., p. 151.
had been accepted by Scribners for the college market on condition that he would recast the text on simple lines for the high schools. He spent months on the revision which was published in 1905 as A First View of English Literature.

After much redrafting The Fire Bringer was published in February, 1904, and Moody immediately conceived the idea of a trilogy in which The Fire Bringer and The Masque of Judgment could stand as the first and second parts respectively. With this thought in mind, Moody hurriedly began writing The Death of Eve that was to round off the third part of the trilogy. He was not satisfied with this first draft and we see his reasoning in a letter to Harriet in which he wrote:

The fact is ... I wrote under too great a strain of excitement. It often happens that the excitement of "vision" reaches a point where it obscures some of the other faculties necessary for the excellent balanced play of the heart, mind and imagination together, without which there is no sufficient art. Usually I am advised of this, and go out and cool my head in the rain-barrel before proceeding, but this time I didn't, and the result ... is perturbed and inultimate. It will have to settle a good while before I can draw off the pure liquor which I feel is there.

For the necessary "cooling-off" period, Moody decided to go alone to Arizona in April, 1904. Two years he had devoted himself to writing and to travel and the result was one published poetic drama and the start of another in which

96. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
Moody had diligently tried to pattern his work after that of the Greek tragedians. He had not made any advancement in the theory of the art of poetry from the Chicago days. Rather, he returned to the medium he had used in *The Masque of Judgment* in order to write companion pieces. There was not, during these two years, any talk of the prose plays or of short poems "inspired by direct impulse" or as "reactions on a notable experience." Perhaps he felt that his manner was becoming stereotyped. Whatever the reason, William Vaughn Moody spent two months in the Grand Canyon region of Arizona. One might think that Moody needed a relief from Greek forms and things ancient, but in his first letter from Holbrook, Arizona, he declared:

... The air and sunlight here on the Arizona plateau is the most wonderful I have ever seen except in Greece, in fact the color and form of the country, as well as the atmosphere remind me constantly of Greece.  

Another reference to his work made on the trip into Arizona was:

... As for the Canyon I won't waste any words on it, except to say that when I saw it I saw the picture I was trying to realize three years ago, when I was writing the last act of the *Masque*. This is the Valley of Judgment.  

Moody did no writing on the trip and having received a newspaper clipping of the reception given *The Fire Bringer*

97. Ibid., p. 190.

98. Ibid., p. 192.
remarked that it "was enough to make one forswear the pen forever." However, Moody did not "forswear the pen," for he was particularly impressed with the vast desert and the unspoiled inhabitants. In a minutely descriptive passage from letters to Harriet, one notices that it is the artist writing for his own memory who records:

... I wish you could see with your own eyes some of the patriarchal and primeval pictures which Fred and I have seen these two weeks—groups of old women weaving baskets on the borders of the 'Flute Well,' while waiting for their water jugs to fill under the slow trickle, files of girls carrying jugs of water up the rocks, a distant line of dancers returning from Walpi to their home on the 'second mesa,' in ceremonial garb, four aged priests sprinkling sacred corn-meal to mark and hallow the path across the desert. The photographs which I send (films) will give you something, and one of these days—before the thing is spoiled by missionaries and school teachers (and they are hard at it) you must go with me and see it yourself.

Moody returned from Arizona with renewed zest and with the embryo idea for a prose play which later became The Great Divide.

Before he began work on the play set in Arizona, Moody busied himself on the final revision of the textbook for high schools, re-titled A First View of English Literature. He complained bitterly over each hour spent on the hated labor, but when it appeared in print late in 1905, Moody realized

99. Ibid., p. 197.
100. Ibid., p. 199.
that the monetary reward was worth all his effort and by way of it, he would not have to return to teaching. His comment on the text's success was:

The Scribner news was nothing very epoch-making—merely that the text book was making its way with all to be wished for speed, and that in their manager's sober opinion, its reception by the high school public was certain to be cordial ... At the same time the sales of the previous book have not fallen off but substantially increased. This is of course matter of mint and cumin, but it has its value in the large scheme.101

Between the period 1904-1905, Moody also wrote two shorter poems, "The Second Coming" and "The Fountain." The first of these was suggested by the experience in Greece of believing Christ had returned. "The Fountain" was Moody's treatment of the fountain-of-youth theme. We have his own words for its conception:

... I tried to write ... from the point of one who had not found, was in fact almost despairingly far from finding, but who surmised wistfully from observation. I thought such a point would be more poignant, or at least more conceivable and 'convincing' ... I was much out of conceit with it for a day or two, but begin to pluck up a little faith in it again.103

In April, 1905, Moody underwent an operation for the removal of a growth from his leg—the direct result of his fall from Parnassus. His recovery was slow and irksome to him. He wrote:

101. Ibid., p. 240.
102. Ibid., p. 208.
The visual aspect of the 'wound' gives me little encouragement. It is deep as a well and as broad as a church door, and looks as if it would serve for any end of diabolical and unbearable detention.

He recovered sufficiently so that he was able to walk with a cane. However, a year later he began to complain of "sick and blinding headaches" which would not permit him to write. He remained active, nevertheless, and made frequent trips into New England and one to Florida. He spoke of the theatre as his grand resource and his subsequent writing is allied to the interests of the theatre.

Moody was gaining a share of fame in American letters and he was invited to become a member of the American Institute of Letters in May, 1905. Moody recorded his reaction: "... I ate ... my maiden dinner with the gentlemen of the American Institute of Arts and Letters, and was decorated with a purple ribbon, à la French Institute. It was very dull." A similar recognition came to him later in 1908 when Yale conferred a Doctorate of Literature upon him.

The Great Divide, first entitled A Sabine Woman, was Moody's first really popular success. Strangely enough he had written this prose play about the conflict of Puritan morals with those of the liberal West in a very short time.

103. Ibid., p. 229.
Henry Miller produced the play in New York in October, 1906, with overwhelming success. Moody spent virtually the whole year re-writing, revising, assisting at rehearsals. Ironically, overnight Moody rode the crest of fame. Perhaps, it was this theatrical success that made him begin again on the last part of the trilogy, The Death of Eve, and the prose play, The Faith Healer, which he had tried to write during 1895. Two significant references are made:

... The plan for the Eve drama, fishes from the bottom of my trunk and the refuse heap of my mind, takes on alluremerit. It seems to me, on coming back to it after giving time for the decomposing process to strip it bare of its more perishable integuments, that the idea has dramatic vitality, and is worth fussing with. 105

And then six months later:

I am making very slow progress with The Faith Healer. It is a vastly more laborious job than writing a wholly new play would be. It is like building a new house out of the materials of the old one, while a family for whom you care is occupying the premises. 106

Moody did finish The Faith Healer and Henry Miller attempted to groom it for theatre production. The try-out performance in the spring of 1909 failed dismally. Moody expressed his purpose for writing it when his play was being severely

105. Ibid., p. 394.
106. Ibid., p. 333.
What I wanted to point out in The Faith Healer is the power of the soul over the body—a doctrine not new with Christian Scientists, as you know—and the power of love to pluck back the soul from failure. The play is simply a brief for the soul, you see, and you will find that the same idea is in the back of all of the sermons and most of the plays ever written, if by 'soul' one measures the instinct upward toward the right. 107.

Moody could not comprehend the failure of this last play nor the huge success of The Great Divide. In both, he felt that he was speaking of things vital to him and his audience, but he was certain that The Faith Healer was the better play. The progress of his illness prevented his writing any more and he left the Death of Eve in fragmentary form.

The end of William Vaughn Moody's life is tragic—as is the death of all young poets. He had tried not to take his illnesses seriously, and instead pushed himself at a suicidal rate in an attempt to accomplish the many things which he had planned. When he did realize that he must relax and give up all arduous work it was too late. He married Harriet Brainard in April, 1909, although both knew he had a small brain tumor. The remainder of his life was spent under the watchful care of his wife; they traveled in England and then returned to America where Moody hoped to spend his time in reading and painting. Life ended for him in

October 17, 1910, at Colorado Springs.

This last period of Moody's work is notable for its emphasis upon dramatic forms. He began what was to be a period of leisure for writing as he wished by literally saturating himself in the classical themes and forms at their source—Greece. For a period of two years, he applied himself to writing in the grand manner of the great tragedians. His interest in modern American drama became marked in 1904 and he wrote two prose plays, one of which was very well received by both American and English audiences. This interest in drama grew almost proportionately with his interest in real themes as contrasted to his previous more or less academic subjects. Critics have speculated as to whether he would have continued to write stage plays or poetry. We have Moody's own reply to the possibility of his giving up poetry:

I trust not. Poetry is the salvation of the stage. By that I mean poetic feeling. I tried to put that feeling into The Great Divide. Without it a play cannot exert any great appeal. Ibsen is recognized as a great dramatist, but I doubt whether most people see the tremendous poet who stands behind the dramatist. It is the poetry in a play that makes it great.108

No reader of Moody's letters can doubt that he had always dedicated his life to the art of poetry—although at times circumstances convened to make him critic, editor, historian,

end, finally, successful playwright. As we have studied in some detail the life of William Vaughn Moody, we have also watched the development of his theory of the art of poetry. It is time now to analyze the literary career of William Vaughn Moody in order to ascertain what in his life or in his work kept him from achieving his high purpose.
CHAPTER V

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY

The apparently cheerful, often gay, letters of William Vaughn Moody are, when they are studied in connection with the writer's life and accomplishments, a revelation of the underlying tragedy of this poet's existence. One first becomes aware from a study of these letters of the struggle and conflicts that existed within the soul of the man, who from early youth, wished fervently to dedicate his life to the art of poetry. Superficially observed, the events of his life would indicate that in his forty-one year span Moody had been singularly fortunate. He lived almost wholly in the society of a literary and university group from whom he reaped much pleasure and many hours of fruitful companionship. He was able to travel in the United States and abroad, doing at those times pretty much as he pleased. Reports from his friends and the characteristic tone in his letters would indicate that he was a likeable, poetic fellow—alternately serious and gay—who had a zest for life and who found especial enjoyment in his many activities. If however one probes into the literary career of William Vaughn Moody, one sees why he did not achieve more than he did and why he does not loom larger in the annals of American literature.
From the first, Moody was enslaved by a love of bookishness, of rhetoric, of concerns extraneous to intrinsic poetry. His training and education only served to enhance a natural tendency toward pedantry. The high standards of poetic attainment of the heroic Greeks, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, and of the romantic Keats, Morris, and Browning were those that Moody early adopted as his aim. He had surrounded himself with friends of a cultivated art group who were eager to encourage him to become a Milton or a Keats. Moody early set his goal to exceed his grasp; anything short of the aspiration was in his own mind failure.

Unfortunately for him, Moody chose to follow the plan of preparation for creative work which he had observed from his study that Milton used. He was to spend the early years of maturation in studious preparation for work that would speak to his age as Milton had spoken to the seventeenth century.

In any period in Moody's brief career, one may note his devout following of the muses. The conflict between the world's demands and the impulses of a creative personality formed for him a constantly irritating perplexity. From financial necessity, Moody chose teaching and editing as the means of hastening his day of freedom when he should be able to pursue the dictates of his heart. He drudged many days and months at tasks which he disliked in order to insure himself years of leisure for poetic contemplation.
Moody's estimate of himself as lecturer and editor overflows in the following comment on Milton as pedagogue:

To see the author of *Lycidas* putting by his lyre in order to seize the sword of controversy is enduring, but to see him in the schoolroom pottering over Frontinus's *Stratagems* and the egregious poet Manilius, without the excuse of pecuniary necessity begets in us nothing but impatience.109

It was with a genuine personal sympathy that Moody recorded Milton's consecration to the persistent ambition of adding a great poem to English literature. There was an intense longing behind the sentences that follow. Moody spoke not only about Milton but of himself:

It was fortunate for the harmonious development of Milton's genius that during the critical years between youth and manhood, years which in most men's lives are fullest of turmoil and dubiety, he was enabled to live a life of quiet contemplation... The facts of real significance, however, are the ones which cannot be chronicled,—the drama which goes on in every sensitive life between the soul and the spirit of nature. The episodes are nothing—a ramble by starlight along a piece of water, a nesting bird in the hedge, a speaking light at dawn—but the results, when the one actor is young enough to meet the eternal youth of the other, are not to be measured.110

From the available letters, we are fortunate in being able to view the "drama" which went on in the sensitive life of Moody. At Harvard he thought he was doing the apprentice work that naturally befalls to every youthful poet. He


surrounded himself with great models, wrote diligently, com-
pared and destroyed, and primed himself again for strenuous
effort. His senses, naturally keen to the beauties of music
and color, were schooled to the recognition of the fine dis-
tinctions between good and perfection. Whenever he saw that
his own efforts fell short of the perfection at which he
aimed, he was prone to discouragement and impatience. One
of his own poems, "A Grey Day" echoed the note of dejection
which recurred so often in his letters:

I wonder how the heart of man
Has patience to live out its span,
Or wait until its dreams come true.

Moody brought to his art the mind of a precise scholar and
an avid reader. His knowledge of foreign and ancient liter-
ture filled his thinking with literary allusions not gener-
ally known and with the sentiment and phraseology of the
older poets. Seldom did Moody address the audience of his
day at their level. It was rather as if he were trying to
superimpose the traditions of classic art upon an age that
was growing in scientific and commercial directions. Al-
though he was intensely concerned with the issues of his day,
Moody had so detached himself from life in study and in
association with friends of analogous backgrounds that he
had no true voice with which to speak to the twentieth
century.

Critics have pointed to the likeness of Moody's manner
to that of Milton. So obvious are these likenesses it is
only reasonable to assume that they were the conscious out-
growth of the study Moody made of Milton's career and work.
Moody had admired the highly wrought imagery, the sonorous
sweep of blank verse, and the nature lore and classical
allusion he found in Milton's work. A parallel can also be
drawn between their idealism of theme and seriousness of
purpose. There is no doubt, too, that Moody, who was edit-
ing the Cambridge edition of Milton at the time, attempted
to incorporate in his _Masque of Judgment_ the Miltonic deli-
cacy of touch in description and the Miltonic harmony and
melody of verse structure. The plan of sedulous preparation
for a great poem had, for Milton, culminated in _Paradise
Lost_, but the plan failed for Moody. The various elements
of Moody's creative temperament—his intuitive artistic
sense of classic simplicity and grandeur, his native endow-
ment for subtle comprehension which made him impatient of
slowness of intellectual grasp in others, and his love of
the luxuriant and highly colored in diction—have their par-
allel in Milton. Although he had an aristocratic disdain
of the rabble—wanted a "fit audience though few"—Milton
is a universal poet. Milton spoke to his age and every
future age.

William Vaughn Moody, like Milton, strove to be the
poetic voice of his age. His theory of the art of poetry
had been formulated with that end in view. However, the
nature of the weaknesses in his diction prevented Moody from
speaking comprehensibly to his reader or hearer. This fact has caused the resultant neglect of his poetry. Between the end and manner of Moody’s poetry there constantly intervenes artificial, literary, and affected diction. His excessive and undisciplined use of language alienates the average and the discerning reader; thus he is left with virtually no audience. In several letters, Moody referred half-humorously to his “florid” vocabulary and at other times he defended his attempts at conquest in language “to distill a more opaline drop.” Moody's audience, however, resented his too frequent use of unusual and obsolete words. A random paging of The Masque of Judgment will reveal a multitude of precious words: sibilance, eterne, soaur, refluent, purlieu, nadir, chrysoprase, divagant, chalcedony, pleached, taborists, neap, adrad, vespereine, choregie, minatory, chrysalid, macrous. At times, too, the phrasal turns verge on the absurd such as: delicious panting, honeyed swoon, clot of anxious clay, harsh blood, ripening suns, grey winds, amethystine dells, rejoicing sinews, woods of light, choiring orbs, drumming foam, shredded mist of song, beetling rosy crag, brows that wont to beacon, glow-worm ghost.


112. Ibid., pp. 280, 277, 279, 282, 359, 383, 391, 290, 293, 303, 305, 309, 322 respectively.
One critic has tersely called Moody's attempt at poetic expression a "soliloquy."113 Certainly one can see from Moody's theory of poetry that he had no intention of being abstruse; yet one can not always be judged in the light of his intention. The bulk of his poetry is self-centered, written apparently for the intellectual minority to which he belonged. He was determined to write out of the best in himself; therefore he assiduously avoided the obvious and resorted to an involved diction that did not communicate to the many. In his shorter poems, Moody came closer to his audience than in his later and more largely conceived attempts—excepting, of course, the prose drama, The Great Divide. That he was dissatisfied with what he had achieved in the shorter works can be ascertained in a letter to Richard Watson Gilder, who wished to publish a poem about Moody whom he considered a promising poet:

At the risk of seeming ungracious and insensible of the honor which you have planned to do me, I am going to ask you to publish the poem in the Atlantic without my initials. I do so because of no boyish mock-modesty, but because I know in the bottom of my heart that I have not yet reached a point in the practice of our divine art which entitles me to this sort of recognition from a man like you ...114

Moody had a larger literary plan than his short poems, he


felt, could meet. A trilogy, consisting of The Fire Bringer, The Masque of Judgment, and The Death of Eve, was to be the fullest expression of his vision of life, the poetic solution of the universe. We can not condemn Moody for his high purpose; we can only lament that he did not attempt sufficiently to overcome the apparent weaknesses of otiose diction. It must be remembered that Moody was more interested in meaning than technique—more reason, therefore, to regret that he was unintelligible to his age.

We have said that the tragedy of the life of William Vaughn Moody reveals itself only from a careful understanding of the "behind-the-scenes" comment on his work found in his letters. Passages in his letters such as the following speak volumes to the student of Moody:

I have been very low in my mind for some days, perhaps owing to the failure of Eve (for as it stands it is unquestionably a failure), though I don't like to think so small an inducing cause could bring me down. Whatever the cause, I 'struck slate,' not for the first time in my life as you know, but each time it seems as if the heavens had fallen and buried me, or rather as if the principle of life had been mysteriously withdrawn from the world ... leaving it inhabited by joyless automatons, vacantly pursuing their functions under an automatic sun ... 115

And again, "I am working away at The Faith Healer, one day tremendously encouraged and the next dashed to the nethermost pit of forlornity." 116

116. Ibid., p. 347.
Along with his high aims in his art, Moody seems to have had always a sense of inadequacy. He was not at ease in Zion. In almost all his letters there is evidence of his diffidence, a tendency to self-ridicule. Half-humorously he apologises for his aspiration—"the subject is the Judgment-day—no less ..." Such self-deprecation is not usually characteristic of the great poets who create from intense inspiration or who know their plan for achievement. There can be no doubt that there was something basically wrong in Moody's approach to his art. We have seen from his letters that he was temperamentally a mystic who heard the divine music and who, in youth and maturer age, saw with his physical eyes the habitants of heaven. When we compare Moody's method of handling the Promethean theme in *The Fife Bringer* we are mindful, in contrast, of the youthful Keats. "On Reading in Chapman's Homer" was the sonnet that Keats wrote in the intense excitement which followed his reading. The sonnet has lived for a hundred years as a result of its structural beauty and the poet's inspiration and feeling. Moody, before he felt he could write *The Fife Bringer* made a trip to Greece to saturate himself in the mood and atmosphere of that ancient country and to read in the original the legend, "Prometheus Bound." Writing did not follow upon the desire to create; sedulous research and much intellectual reflection must intervene. As a result, the intellectual appeal in that poetic drama is so great that
there is no human or emotional appeal. The voice of Moody to his age was not heard. Even though *The Death of Eve* was never finished, one feels that it would not have had a more receptive audience for it was an integral part of the trilogy, so much misunderstood.

We remember that Moody was deeply wounded by the criticism which his work received and that he remarked that it was enough to make him want "to forswear the pen." He had failed completely in his own mind, because he had failed to fulfil his idea of the role of the poet. Perhaps in revolt or despair, he made one desperate attempt to address his audience vis à vis, and, tragically enough, *The Great Divide*, an inferior composition (to his mind) was the only work to win a huge success. Another attempt in the prose medium intended for the audience of *The Great Divide* was *The Faith Healer*. Moody died with the knowledge that this play was a dismal failure and that once more his meaning had been misunderstood or not comprehended. The poet had exerted enormous effort and had held to his highest purpose in poems, poetic dramas, and prose plays. Only once did his poet's passion reach the ears of a large audience—and that time he descended to their level. His high seriousness, his cosmic speech made walking on the earth an annoyance.

Clearly the only thing which had true worth for Moody was poetry. He felt that his teaching and editing put
demands on him which sapped his creative energy. Herein lies further irony in the life of William Vaughn Moody. All the prose criticisms which Moody wrote have been acclaimed as eminently satisfactory. Professor Lindsay Todd Damon, the general editor of the Lake English Classic series, has reported:

Mr. Moody's work as editor was of the highest quality. For many years after his death the volumes he edited for us sold into the thousands every year. He had the rare combination of high scholarship and penetrating literary judgment which goes to make a successful editor.\(^{117}\)

And the latest editor, Harris Francis Fletcher, of the recently revised Cambridge edition of Milton's works speaks of his indebtedness to Moody's fine editing:

William Vaughan Moody edited the Cambridge Edition of The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton in 1899. His edition soon became the most widely known and used American edition of Milton's poetry. It was published without change until 1934 ... Moody was almost ideally fitted to edit Milton's poetry, and the combination of poetry and editor was a most happy one for both. The appreciation and study of Milton's poetry in this country during the present century are largely due to Moody's remarkably successful and stimulating introductions to the individual poems and groups of poems in this edition.\(^{118}\)

A History of English Literature which Moody wrote in collaboration with Robert H. Lovett, has had the phenomenal success of being considered for nearly fifty years the best

\(^{117}\) Henry, op. cit., p. 43.

book in its field. The reviewers for the Dial were usually lavish in their praise of the history when it appeared. In general, their opinion was the prevalent one:

It stands in refreshing contrast to formal textbooks, ... It has ... the literary grace and delicacy of phrase that we look for in the critical essayist who addresses an adult audience. They [Moody and Lovett] have produced the best written elementary textbook of the subject that we have ever read ... It is a book that can be read through with pleasure. 119

This history is still widely used in high schools and colleges throughout the country and will continue to be accepted popularly until, and if, a superior book is written.

In view of these successful ventures into the field of criticism, one cannot doubt that Moody had more talent as a critic than as a poet. Yet he despised his greatest talent. A typical letter shows (once more) the distaste with which he viewed critical writing:

... Think of me as one who has been human and may in the fullness of time be so again, but who is at present a maker of textbooks and an offense to the sunlight. 120

Writing prose criticism was an odious task to Moody which he justified on the basis that it would make him financially free to pursue at leisure his muse.

Any reader can readily see from the few passages quoted from his letters that Moody possessed the rare quality of

120. P. Mackaye, op. cit., p. 87.
immediate appreciation for the consummately beautiful in all forms of art. In his own poetic work, Moody lacked the taste which he was quite able to use when writing criticism. This revelation suggests that William Vaughn Moody had a native capacity for creative criticism. We can not but think that he misjudged a rare capacity for appreciation to be poetic passion for personal creation, that his theory of the art of poetry was a criterion for criticism, not a standard to be achieved by himself. The inefficiency of expression exhibited in his own work was not at all evident in his criticisms. His dictum set forth in Song Flower and Poppy caused him to push himself beyond his real capacity:

Heart, we have chosen the better part!
Save sacred love and sacred art
Nothing is good for long.

Moody's approach to art was as a poet; we feel it should have been as a critic. If he had continued with his critical work, he would have become outstanding in that field. He was able to take complex literary personalities and problems and reduce them to fundamentals, understandable to the adolescent yet thought-provoking to the adult. His style was exceedingly readable and refreshing, for he maintained a liveliness of tone, a precision of manner, and an aptness for generalization. Further, his judgments have been discerning and his conclusions accurate. He did not
exaggerate or underestimate and never did he allow his sympathies to distort his vision.

We have formulated William Vaughn Moody's theory of the art of poetry and reviewed in some detail the events of his life and the development of his practices in his art. Our study has made us conclude that Moody did not achieve his desired purpose because he misjudged his best talent. His background, training, and naturally keen sense of appreciation qualified him to become one of the best critics of his age. Because his poetry was self-centered and written for himself and his private group, it could not live for his generation or beyond it. Moody's theory of the art of poetry demanded a poet like Milton. William Vaughn Moody, for all his enormous efforts, was no Milton.
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Early Poems of William Vaughn Moody Not Reprinted in Final Edition of His Work

"A Chorus of Wagner," Harvard Monthly, April, 1890.

"Life and Death," Harvard Monthly, May, 1890.

"Daffodils," Harvard Monthly, June, 1890.


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"The Song of the Elder Brothers," Class Day Poem, Harvard, 1893.

B. Secondary Sources


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