

## ANALYSIS

*The Time of Man* (1926)



Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1886-1941)

"It was, I think, in the summer of 1919 that I began to think of the wandering tenant farmer of our region as offering a symbol for an Odyssey of Man as a wanderer buffeted about by the fates and the weathers."

Roberts

"I have compared this novel to Reymont's tetralogy and, putting the relative smallness of the scale aside, Miss Roberts' book does not suffer much from the comparison. Like Reymont, Miss Roberts seems absolutely saturated in her material and capable of using it with a freedom which suggests rather an intimate experience than any laborious documentation. Moreover she seems to owe little to any of the schools of fiction which have hitherto busied themselves with the treatment of American provincial life. Her mood is original, powerful, and without ever verging upon sentimentality, tender."

Joseph Wood Krutch  
*Saturday Review*  
(28 August 1926) 69

"The most obviously interesting thing about *The Time of Man*, technically considered, and the one by which contemporary reviewers were most impressed, was its treatment of the kind of characters that were generally encountered in writers like Sherwood Anderson with a degree of subjectivity more often associated with Virginia Woolf or Dorothy Richardson. There is no 'plot' in this book. We meet Ellen Chesser in adolescence, go through marriage and childbearing with her, watch the crisis precipitated by her husband's cruelty and unfaithfulness, and, at the end of the book, after Jasper has been driven away from home, falsely accused of barn-burning, we are with her and her children again upon the road, where we found her with her parents at the beginning.

The book has poetic sensitiveness and keen humanity. It is true to primitive humanity and to humanity at large. Certainly such episodes as Jonas Prather's confession of sin--his horror over the hideous resemblance between his own mother and the prostitute's child--are done with great power. And if Ellen Chesser was not so sharply defined a character as Willa Cather's Antonia or the heroine of Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, she still caused a good many readers to think of these personages. For that matter, she was the most vivid character that Elizabeth Roberts was ever to create."

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel*

"Elizabeth Madox Roberts' first novel was begun in the summer of 1922 and published in August, 1926. However, like most of her work, the actual writing commenced only after a number of years spent in brooding over the material and striving to focus on a major comprehensive symbol. In her journal notes she writes: 'It was, I think, in the summer of 1919 that I began to think of the wandering tenant farmer of our region as offering a symbol for an Odyssey [*sic*] of Man as a wanderer buffeted about by the fates and weathers.' Her use of the Homeric reference is not by any means haphazard. Several statements in her private papers reveal her conviction that a modern realistic novel can be infused with the qualities of classical epic. 'The only subjects worthy of permanent consideration,' she wrote, 'are the fundamental passions, or instincts. Homeric themes of blood and waste and death.... Of life.' In another journal entry, she reports being 'struck' on reading Samuel, Books I and II, with the possibilities of what she termed 'the cluster of epic story.'...

It should be recognized at the outset, of course, that Miss Roberts had no intention of parodying the more superficial characteristics of the epic form. She has no invocations to the Muses; she does not begin her action in *medias res*; she has neither superhuman hero, nor animated personifications of godly forces. Her main effort is devoted to the presentation of a 'heroic' character, engaged in the epic struggle for life against the fatal forces of nature. The poetic perception of truth offered by ancient Greek cosmology had to be revitalized to satisfy the exigencies of twentieth-century thought and literature. The rigid classical line between man and nature--between Odysseus and the catastrophes which beset him--had to be blurred to do justice to our contemporary understanding of the enigmatic interaction of consciousness and chaos.

Her choice of hero is dramatically un-Homeric--a fourteen-year-old girl, a child of the earth, uncultured and of no prominence. The Greek prince of many guiles, Odysseus, wanders for ten years, encountering and subduing colossal obstacles; Ellen Chesser wanders for roughly twenty years, grubbing at the very roots of life to sustain her existence. Odysseus returns finally to his own royal hall to live in peace and grandeur, but Ellen Chesser lives at the end as at the beginning, wandering the roads, struggling anew and anew to keep life within her. Obviously the concept of 'hero' has undergone a radical change between Homer's *Odyssey* and Miss Roberts' *The Time of Man*.

The classical hero enters the action of his story full-blown; he is himself--Odysseus, Hector, Achilles, Oedipus. There is no obligation on the author to build up his character by portraying how he came to be what he is, and his noble nature will be inherent in the nobility of his lineage. And the stage on which this hero performs is an exalted one: his battles are for kingdoms, his love affairs are with princesses, and his defeats are signals for universal mourning and desolation. But if the modern author wants to portray a noble character of heroic qualities, he must make this character noble and heroic in a probable life situation, and he must precisely assess the forces which limit the range of his character's self-determined actions. Miss Roberts was committed to realism as the only mode in which she could communicate successfully. Thus, her major problem in attempting to achieve epic strength in *The Time of Man* centers on her main character. Ellen Chesser must somehow incarnate the highest virtues of humanity while being, at the same time, a convincing representative of the 'poor white' southern tenant-farmer class.

First, Miss Roberts establishes and keeps constantly before the reader the spectacular panorama of nature as a continuous cyclical process. Ellen Chesser's daily life is swallowed up in agricultural occupations: setting out tobacco, feeding turkeys, milking her heifer, gathering eggs, helping with the plowing. The succession of seasons, inexorable and merciless, acts out in this setting the role played in ancient epic story by blind and pitiless fate. Harvesttime follows seedtime, and seedtime follows harvesttime; the baby cries for attention, and the heifer noses the front gate to be milked; the demand of the land and the animals must be satisfied. The eternal onward going of time thrusts the child into adolescence, into maturity, into age, calling forth new life out of birth throes, and settling old life back into the earth to become one with it. The 'time of man' is felt in motion, without beginning or end....

Ellen Chesser is just one of the 'children of the earth,' infinite in number, alike in general pattern: working, loving, wanting, and always, in the end, dying. The desertion of her love plunges her to the brink of suicide, but nature asserts itself in her and lays new growth over the deep wounded places.... This

passage...illustrates Miss Roberts' use of rhythmic devices to intensify the emotional effect of her prose. The repetition of constructions, the series of balanced cadences in this passage create a pattern of sound which reflects the endless recurrences of nature--'varying in detail but forever the same.' Miss Roberts keeps the seasonal changes of the landscape constantly before the reader's eyes, employing the images of nature not as a mere background, but as an integral part of the action. The passage of time is always denoted in terms of weather, crops, or landscape....

The literary effect of this constant awareness of the patterned flux of nature is not unlike that of the fixed cosmos of the Greek world, or the divinely ordained order of the Elizabethan world. And the human drama enacted in an involvement with this principle must, by necessity, attain epic significance. It is that F. L. Janney is pointing to in his comment of *The Time of Man*: 'Seen as they are against the seemingly eternal background of seed times and harvest, the story of their lives derives a pathos and poignancy, an epic quality, which attaches to those who silently pursue their lonely ways down a road ending at last in the defeat of their hopes and in oblivion.' I will have to disagree with Janney over his words 'pathos' and 'defeat,' but I think that his perception is otherwise sound. F. W. Knickerbocker comes, I believe, to a more solid conclusion in the following comment: 'Such a rendering of human life as part of the great process of nature recalls Wordsworth's 'Michael,' Hardy's *Tess*, or Reymont's *Peasants*. These figures are all emblems of the common lot. And so Ellen's wandering becomes a symbol of 'that whole time of man' on which she sometimes broods.'

The point that should be stressed here is that Ellen Chesser is a real 'emblem of the common lot,' a symbol of man caught up in the even flow of nature, and that Miss Roberts achieves this symbolism by stripping Ellen Chesser of every refinement of culture not absolutely essential to that which makes her a human being. She is, in a sense, the lowest common denominator of mankind; she is poor, uneducated, one of those who are 'sown thus as wildings.' Miss Roberts chooses her hero to represent that which is most fundamental to the definition of a human being, rather than that which is finest among human beings; to her, as to Emerson, 'representative man' is not the champion of classical times, but the average man. Miss Roberts' epic struggle is between an everyman shorn of all save humanity, and the eternal powers of nature.

A plot summary of the novel will focus on the harsh circumstances and the heartbreaking incidents which envelop Ellen Chesser from beginning to end. Traveling in wagons from farm to farm, staying to work for a little while, and then moving on, the Chesser family settles in a tenant house at Hep Bodine's when Ellen is fourteen. There life for Ellen is composed of housework, gathering firewood, setting out tobacco, and, when all the chores are done, running free. Two years later, the Chessers move on to the Wakefield farm, where Ellen makes friends of her own age, acquires some responsibility, falls in love, and is spurned by her lover. At the next place, the Orkey farm, Ellen marries Jasper Kent, a tenant farmer who has become unjustly implicated in a barn burning. In the succeeding fifteen years, Ellen has six children, one of whom dies, and she changes her home three times. Then Jasper Kent's old incendiary history rises up against him, forcing him to leave again for a new place. The novel ends with the whole family packed into a wagon along with the meager household goods. 'They went a long way while the moon was still high above the trees, stopping only at some creek to water the beasts. They asked no questions of the way but took their own turnings.'

Such a summary of the external action of *The Time of Man* may seem to justify Janney's 'pathos' and 'defeat,' but these events are not the subject of the novel, which is a spiritual Odyssey. Its theme is the development of character, and it ends not in defeat but in triumph.

We meet Ellen in the very first sentence of the novel, writing her name in the air with her finger, secretive and reserved in her childishness, but alert to everything around her. In a journal note, Miss Roberts writes: 'The plan of the book is founded upon additions. The intention was to begin with the least that one could handle, and slowly to add minute particle after minute particle until a being with life experience should be built together.' And, according to this principle, Ellen is developed--painfully, gradually, cumulatively. In her past she holds idyllic memories of Tessie West of the wonderful stories and the geography book; before her lies her whole life and a goal, deeply lying and vague, of a pretty house and security. She makes an abortive attempt to rejoin Tessie and her past, and then settles into an apathy of submission to life, the last deep sleep of childhood prior to the awakening into adolescence. In the Joe

Trent episode the quickening of sex within her makes her aware of herself in a much more complicated way than can be expressed by tracing her name in the air:

'I'm lovely now.... It's unknown how lovely I am. It runs up through my sides and into my shoulders, warm, and ne'er thing else is any matter.... It's unknown how lovely I am, unknownen.' Thus, when the torments of adolescence, 'the perpetual sadness of youth,' begin to beset her with anxious questionings of the value of life, her personality has by this time coalesced sufficiently so that out of the depths of her felt identity comes an irrefutable answer to the tormenting questions. The *how* and *what for* are shadowed into silence by the triumphal realization of *AM*. And this answer is more firmly established with the episode of Judge Gowan's tombstone and her realization that life is unchallengeably more wonderful than death.

As Ellen's confidence in herself increases, she becomes able to submerge her identity in an anonymous group, surrendering her individuality to the group in return for the strength and security which her membership affords her: 'Five shapes were thumping the dry road with their feet, stumbling a little, five abreast now and now drifting into forms like those the stars made in the sky. It was here that she felt them become six, herself making part of the forms, herself merged richly with the design.' As Miss Roberts notes in her journals: 'This is the high pitch of youth. Here is the social being which scarcely divides itself from the group, which loves broadly through the entire troop of girls and boys.' The peak of this period is reached in the harvest dance scene....

And just as the 'certainty' of the wind destroys the wonderful 'chaos' of the dance, so the certainty of life plucks the dancers, one by one, out of the pattern, individuating the members of the group. The first loss of this youthful security in anonymity for Ellen is felt when Jonas confesses his sin to her... Jonas comes to her because she is Ellen Chessier, not because she is one of the dancers in the wind; and she feels both love and compassion for him, not as one of her friends, but as the unique being that her love has singled out. This is the point at which Ellen begins to achieve a true individuality. The climax of this love affair is reached in a remarkable scene in which Miss Roberts uses a fire kindled with two kinds of wood to symbolize the slow beginnings and the passionate fusing of love....

Shortly afterward, Cassie MacMurtrie discovers that her husband has been unfaithful to her for two years, and she hangs herself. Since Ellen is one of the first to enter the house, she has to answer under oath at the coroner's inquest whether she knows any reason why Cassie might have committed suicide. But Ellen can understand only life--filled as she is with her love and her sense of tingling self, she cannot understand death at all.

Ellen's spirit receives its first major blow when Jonas Prather deserts. She is in a state of dissociation from herself and life around her: 'She came down from the pens knowing that all her beauties, assembled, standing around her, serene and proud, were standing about a great hollow inner space. In her body, in her breast, there was gathering a void, and it was spreading past her power to hold it.' As the realization of her inner loss becomes more clear, she is shaken by a lust to kill--to revenge herself on her betrayer. The conjunction of themes is worth noting here as an illustration of Miss Roberts' characteristic techniques. Ellen had instinctively associated Scott MacMurtrie's affair with kinetic sensations of 'lice'--sensations which she had earlier developed in her experience of shame before Mrs. Bodine and which she had trusted as directional signals in her relations to Joe Trent and Sebe Townley. Thus she is somatically prepared for the violence of Cassie's suicide, but, innocent of any similar deprivation of love, she can hardly understand its motivation. After Jonas's desertion, the scene of the hanging is replayed in her consciousness, but this time with shocking immediacy and whole-hearted empathy. She does discover an alternative solution to Cassie's self-destruction, but only after reliving to the depths Cassie's hell.

She withdraws into herself, seeking there for the inner stability of 'Here I am.' After the family leaves the Wakefield farm and moves to the Orkey place, her snug raintight room and her locked trunk symbolize her closing off of all outside contacts... Her father breaks his leg and she is forced to take his place in the fields. She merges her hurt spirit with the earth, for she 'could not give delight...to a muslin or a frill now, her mind one with the wants of the fields, with the beasts and the plowed trenches.' But time and life assert themselves, and Jonas is gradually absorbed into her memory as a fact no longer able to wound. She begins to place Jasper Kent's money in her trunk for safekeeping, and this fact signals the beginning of her return

to life. Finally, after the burning of the barn when Jasper is forced to flee with his savings, she is once more open to life, capable once more of being hurt to the very core of herself, but capable also of sharing her love: 'The chest was no longer locked for it was empty of any treasure. Its key lay on the floor and its lid stood open, waiting, and as she passed into her room and closed the door behind her to sit for an hour or more, her waiting breath whispered, 'He will come.'

Ellen is mature now in her knowledge of herself. Jasper returns to marry her, and in their new farm she bears two children and settles herself into the pattern made long before at the time of her hurt withdrawal from life: 'The land was hard and rough and she must take what she could out of the bitter soil.' She still thinks of 'a place vaguely set among the trees, the consummation of some deeply-lying dream, a house looking toward some wide valley,' but the arch of her spirit has learned a suppleness in dealing with life's offerings, no matter how far removed they may be from the level of her dreams or even expectations. Thus she is able not only to survive her continued poverty, the pitiful death of her last child, and Jasper's blatant infidelity, but she is able to transform such meager sustenance into strength and radiant love.

Long before the final departure of the family when Ellen has no need 'to ask questions of the way,' she has become solidified for the reader as something more than a pawn of the mercurial fates which buffet her about. She has been established as a growing active personality, accepting the brute circumstances of life, but forcing out of these circumstances a pattern, a design, a way of life which is uniquely her own. In Chapter X, Miss Roberts introduces a character, Luke Wimble, to make an explicit statement of the nature of Ellen's modern 'heroism': 'You're a bright shiny woman, Ellen Kent, and it's all I can do to keep my eyes off you.... You got the very honey of life in your heart'....

The fixed forces of life, here, as in the Homeric epic, are forces of relentless destruction; and, as in the classical epic, man's frontal assaults against these forces are futile romantic bursts of bravado. Ellen Chesser, like Odysseus, works within the frame of nature, bending to its will, partaking cooperatively of its strength, but always preserving in the security of her own identity the freedom, within nature's limitations, to create her own life in the best light of her own spirit. And thus, because of Miss Roberts' fundamental faith in the essential nobility of man, this stripped-to-the-bone 'emblem of the common lot,' Ellen Chesser, becomes unknowingly a representative of that which is best and most creative in man--the epic hero. Edward Garnett moves toward this perception in his review comment on *The Time of Man*: 'The explanation of Miss Roberts' genius is not that she brings a new light into common folk's life, but she discovers the beauty that is there. Her spiritual vision has an irradiating power that harmonizes all the details...all are the living parts of the great mysterious whole.'

But before we leave the novel, we should examine it from the standpoint of form. Structurally, it is an almost perfect book, beginning with the slow lurching movements of a wagon on the road, its outer action proceeding as a series of episodes, paralleled always by the periodic thrusts and consolidations of Ellen's inner development, and ending with the same slow movement into the continuing distance with which it began. However, although the inner and outer action roughly parallel each other, they also establish a strong tension in contrast. The thrusts and consolidations of Ellen Chesser's cumulative growth are punctuated with moments of intense identification--as in her fierce realization by Judge Gowan's tombstone that she is 'a-liven' and therefore incomparably superior to the dead judge. In a scene like this one, the march of the narrative ceases abruptly, and the lyrical emotion of the instant of comprehension absorbs the preceding events into a new harmony--a new attainment of form. Miss Roberts herself implies this kind of intention in the following note on the novel: 'Some critic of *The Time of Man* said that it had probably grown up as a vine, bitter-sweet, a little and a little more. This minute growing, yes, but each minute (if you care) burst of life would come with a lyric fan-opening leap of words'....

The structure, as a whole, is...designed to portray the developmental pattern of any man, and also of Miss Roberts' heroic everyman, for as Miss Roberts further suggests, the design of the novel reduces Ellen Chesser to the symbol of man as naked spirit fronting the most essential forces of life: 'The design moves downward toward a nadir, step by step, to a sort of bottomless pit of woe.... The book is an outcry. Man, poor creature, loves his ease, his easy religions, his well-filled stomach, his nice prides in little things. He builds a pretty immortality for himself by way of the pageant enacted by the undertaker. He refuses to look

closely at what he does not want to see. Insofar as he knows only exquisite spiritual sorrows he has not yet begun to suffer and has not yet begun to live.'...

Some critics feel that because the material of *The Time of Man* is selected largely from the underprivileged areas of American life, the novel should therefore be evaluated as a realistic 'documentary' novel or a social-protest novel. They may left-handedly praise the novel as an attempt to show the sordid realities of life without making them completely sordid, or they may mildly shrug their shoulders over Miss Roberts' 'pessimism.' It seems to me that this is somewhat like admiring the Iliad for its verisimilitude or its indignant expose of the brutality of war. Miss Roberts' own defense, on this score, is adequate: 'It could never be an analysis of society or of a social stratum because it keeps starkly within one consciousness, and that one being not an analytical or a "conscious" consciousness.'

The last phase in the preceding passage pinpoints, for me, one significant limitation of *The Time of Man*. We have seen that Ellen Chesser can symbolize the fundamental humanness of man--that quality which can create meaningful life out of the very rocks and roots of experience, but is she an adequate symbol for articulate, 'conscious' twentieth-century humanity? In other words, granting the symbolic effectiveness of Ellen Chesser's contemporary Odyssey along the rut path subsistence level, we must still wonder whether there is not too much of a gap between the experience levels of the novel and the ordinary reader to allow participative identification between reader and protagonist.

However, this limitation ought not to divert attention from the real achievement of the novel. It is precisely because *The Time of Man* is not doctrinaire realism, but realism infused with poetry, that Ellen Chesser's creative struggle through life is capable of exalting and ennobling life itself. Her very 'unconsciousness' serves to implicate her profoundly in the unending process of nature, while, at the same time, it makes her partial victory all the more impressive because it is so 'natural.' Miss Roberts' firm faith in the potency of the human spirit forms Ellen Chesser out of the earth and raises her far above the earth, even as she remains at one with it."

Earl H. Rovit

*Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts*  
(U Kentucky 1960) 9-25

"Miss Roberts' notes for *The Time of Man* show that she conceived it as an Odyssey, with her heroine as the eternal wanderer. The six parts into which she divided the book do not correspond to any chapter division in the text, but rather to the symphonic movements of her idea of the story:

- I. A Genesis. She comes into the land. But the land rejects her. She remembers Eden (Tessie).
- II. She grows into the land, takes soil or root. Life tries her, lapses into lovelessness....
- III. Expands with all the land.
- IV. The first blooming.
- V. Withdrawal--and sinking back into the earth.
- VI. Flowering out of stone.

Ellen Chesser, the sole surviving child of itinerant farmers, Henry and Nellie, is constantly on the move with her parents through the rural areas of Kentucky. She yearns for permanent things, for houses that are more than shacks, with drawers to put things in, and friends who are more than passing acquaintances. This yearning centers in Tessie, a loquacious semi-gypsy given to flights of imagination, from whom Ellen is separated and whom she vainly seeks, running away from the farm on which her father settles for a time. After this single rebellion, her one practical attempt to recapture Eden, she settles down, 'growing into the land,' and Jonas Prather seems to offer marriage and 'blooming.' But after he has confided in her the secret of his affair with a prostitute and of the child that he believes to be his own, he identifies her with the guilt of which he has made her the repository and deserts her for another. Ellen rejects the temptation of suicide, the example of which if offered by Mrs. MacMurtrie, of the local gentry, who hangs herself when her husband goes off with her cousin, and finds the blooming that Jonas Prather had seemed to offer with Jasper Kent, a strong, violent man and an itinerant farmer like her father.

She and Jasper have several children, and she seems at last in tune with the natural things that surround her. But the withdrawal, the 'sinking back into the earth,' occurs suddenly and horribly when Jasper, an adulterer himself, wildly and irrationally accuses her of infidelity and repudiates the child she is carrying. Only when the child is born, a shrunken, sickly bit of a thing, does he repent, but it is too late. The child, suffering from its mother's shock, lives three miserable years and dies. And then Jasper is beaten up by night riders who mistakenly believe him to be a barn burner, and he insists on packing up and moving on. The 'flowering out of stone' occurs when Ellen, realizing that her destiny is irretrievably linked with his, refuses to be left behind, and the Kents move away together in their old wagon with all their few poor goods, asking no directions on the road, taking their own turnings.

To tell this story Miss Roberts limits her points of view to Ellen Chesser's and her own, but she does not pretend to limit herself to Ellen Chesser's simple vocabulary. Ellen, after all, is uneducated. Miss Roberts uses her lyrical prose to convey to the reader the state of being Ellen, which is a far more complicated thing than Ellen could possibly articulate. Ellen loves the countryside and all its creatures, even the pigs that must be slaughtered; she is vitally aware of sound and color, of sun and seasons, of affection and distrust. Her extreme sensitivity is conveyed in a prose-poetry that is at times full of sharp, precise imagery and at times dreamlike in its flowing smoothness.

Ellen Glasgow doubted that rural people talked like the characters in *The Time of Man*. Perhaps they do not. Miss Roberts was searching in her dialogue for a rhythm that would convey the inner as well as the outer man and that would give a sense of the people as a unit and a fraction of the geography. It was part of what she called the 'poetic realism' that she tried to achieve in all her prose. 'Somewhere there is a connection between the world of the mind and the outer order. It is the secret of the contact that we are after, the point, the moment of the union. We faintly sense the one and we know as faintly the other, but there is a point at which they come together and we can never know the whole of reality until we know these two completely.'

Ellen Chesser has such an experience when she sees the mountains of the new region to which her family are moving. It is a complex experience, and she could not possibly have described it to another person. Yet its happening depends not on intellect but on awareness, not on knowledge but on sensitivity. Here is how Miss Roberts describes it: 'The mountains grew more definite as she looked back to them, their shapes coming upon her mind as shapes dimly remembered and recognized, as contours burnt forever or carved forever into memory, into all memory. With the first recognition of their fixity came a faint recognition of those structures which seemed everlasting and undiminished within herself, recurring memories, feelings, responses, wonder, worship, all gathered into one final motion which might have been called spirit; this gathered with another, an acquired structure, fashioned out of her experience of the past years, out of her passions and the marks put upon her by the passions of others, this structure built up now to its high maturity.'

What makes *The Time of Man* a great novel is the extraordinary sense conveyed of Ellen as an almost unseparated part of the tissue of living things, with horses, cows and pigs, and people, beneficent people and hateful people, as if the whole landscape, stretching to the mountains and made up of organisms growing or dying, of corn and grass and animals and humanity and even rocks ('Rocks grow,' Ellen's father tells her), were part of a single carpet on the earth. Ultimately this continuity is sensed in time as well as material. Jasper Kent seems to move into Ellen's life just where Jonas Prather has left off, so that both men, without in the least losing their individuality, seem at times simply to express the male aspect of nature. Similarly Ellen, in the end, feels that her life is so innately an extension of her mother's that she can share her mother's memories: 'Going about the rough barn lot of the farm above Rock Creek, calling in the hens, breaking them corn, Ellen would merge with Nellie in the long memory she had of her from the time when she had called from the fence with so much prettiness, through the numberless places she had lived or stayed and the pain she had known, until her mother's life merged into her own and she could scarcely divide the one from the other, both flowing continuously and mounting.'

There is none of the solemn hymning to the land in *The Time of Man* that we find in Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather. That was to appear in her fiction soon enough, but in the beginning she was free of it. Campbell and Foster point out the interesting twist that Miss Roberts gave to the philosophy of Bishop

Berkeley which she had adopted for her own: 'For Miss Roberts indeed there is no contrast between knowledge of the earthy and that of the spiritual; epistemologically, the two were the same for her, as they were for Berkeley, but the emphasis of the artist and her philosophical master, as might be expected, is different: whereas Berkeley as a philosopher is engaged in transforming what is called the physical into that on which it is dependent for its existence, the spiritual, Miss Roberts as an artist seems at one level to be transforming the spiritual into the physical, the sensuous.'

But the sensuous has far greater significance in her work than it does in that of an ordinary realist. As Miss Roberts put it herself: 'We go into the unseen by way of the visible, into the unknown by way of the known, into nous by way of the flesh and the dust'."

Louis Auchincloss

*Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 125-28

"She conceived Ellen Chesser, a girl from the poor-white class and a descendant of the Kentucky pioneers, and began to record in Ellen's consciousness the life that would pulsate through the book. Like all the Roberts' heroines, Ellen has sensitivity, inner strength, and a restless mind which works from confusion to clarity. Though she lacks cultivation, she is normal in intelligence; she is exceptional in moral resolution and pertinacity. She has insight that is elemental and sometimes elementary; she is the primordial human being set against the primordial reality of earth. She is, as Rovit suggests, an Everyman figure: she represents what is most basic in humanity rather than what humanity may, under the best circumstances, achieve.... Over a period of some twenty years, Ellen evolves both by the false start and by the sudden illumination; her progress is forward, though not always in a straight line.... [Yet] the structural line of *The Time of Man* is direct and chronological, the chief scenes succeeding one another in an undistorted time sequence much like the successive climaxes of 'classical' music...

Chapters I and II present Ellen's life at Hep Bodine's farm where her father becomes a tenant and gives up the gypsy life of the roads.... In Chapter I, Ellen with pained regret renounces all hope of return to a freer life which she associates with her friend of the roads, Tessie West.... In the last chapter her aspirations are renewed in the intellectual restlessness of her son Dick whom Ellen understands more with her instincts than with her mind.... In Chapter II, Ellen is attracted to Joe Trent, a college boy home on vacation...but comes to distrust the furtive nature of Trent's advances.... The men she loves all disappoint her, yet they enable her to grow beyond her former self.... Her expectations from life always exceed what it brings her. Thus Jonas Prather's vows of devotion and Jasper Kent's expressions of tenderness go beyond the capabilities of these men for fidelity....

The middle chapters of the novel (IV, V, and VI) give Ellen's journey from innocence to experience, pain, knowledge of evil, and loss. The pastoral life of freedom and expectancy, as well as Ellen's sense of community with those of her own age, extends through the major portion of Chapter IV. Dramatically, this sense both of personal fulfillment and of unity with others culminates at the harvest dance under the autumn moon; and, just as dramatically, it is dispelled by the storm which scatters the dance. Miss Roberts then concentrates upon Ellen's sense of fracture in her universe.... Chapters V and VI present two significant events...Jonas' courtship and Cassie MacMurtrie's suicide by hanging.... Chapter VII is pivotal in the novel. It records the Chessers' removal to a farm, Orkeys place...to a land less fertile and hospitable than that at Wakefield's.... Chapters VIII and IX chronicle the married life of Ellen and Jasper. In this relationship Miss Roberts emphasizes the initial happiness of the pair set against the verdant countryside at Joe Phillips' farm.... Tranquility is interrupted by Jasper's affair with Hester Shuck and by his accusation that Ellen has been unfaithful to him with Phillips.... [Their] baby's conception...led to bitterness between Jasper and Ellen, his birth caused a tacit reconciliation when Jasper saw that only he could have been the father, and his death brings the parents closer than they have been for years....

Chapter X covers many years with the Kents. The children grow to school age and maturity; and Nannie, the oldest girl, reaches Ellen's age at the time the novel had begun. Ellen feels mystically part of her daughter's personality at the same time that she knows an increased affinity with her mother, Nellie. Thus in Ellen's sensibility the generations are bridged, and the many facets of her experience are fused in her mind as she identifies herself not only with her own mother but with the individualities of each of her



children.... Though the children reach maturity and outer circumstances change for the family, the suspicion that Jasper is a barn-burner still lodges in the popular mind. When a local stable burns, a disguised mob comes at night to horsewhip him. Heroically, Ellen faces the violent men and staves them off. After this disgrace the family taken to the road.... They are in the end what they have always been: symbols of human destiny, meaningful parts of 'the stream of Life... In Miss Roberts' conception they represent 'Man...beset by all the menaces lying within and without, but indestructible finally in creative power'.... The Kents now bring to mind the similar quest of their pioneer ancestors who in *The Great Meadow* moved West in search of 'a promise land'....

Miss Roberts obtained control of her materials by charting with intensity Ellen's reactions to her life and by eliminating all details irrelevant to her psychic development. This novel, as Miss Roberts maintained, 'could never be an analysis of society or of a social stratum because it keeps starkly within one consciousness.... Miss Roberts faithfully recorded, however, the details of tobacco farming and tenant life, the economic circumstances of the Chessers and the Kents, and the primitive passions and sexual lives of her characters.... Miss Roberts consistently revealed in her fiction her sense of the intimate connections existing between the material world and the mental. Awareness of this relationship led her to believe that Poetry--and, by implication, all literature--should 'search into the relation between mind and matter, into the oneness of flesh and thin air... Spirit. Into the wedding of grass, intellect, instinct, imagination.' Ellen's perceptions, therefore, give 'equal and diffused values to the voices within and without' and create thereby the emotional plangency and the unexpected depths characteristic of Miss Roberts' art. All the novels reveal these tensions between sensibility and the exterior world. What is said of Ellen Chesser's psychology would, therefore, apply in large part to the other Roberts' heroines....

During Jonas' courtship the lowing of the cows and the thumping of their feet on the frozen turf are 'merged with her rising tenderness'.... Ellen's memory of Joe Trent, for example, suffuses a 'gentleness' over her surroundings; her love in turn for Jonas and Jasper calls forth her physical beauty and makes more vivid all she knows; and the name of 'Jasper' during courtship spreads through her entire being, then outward to become linked with every beautiful thing.... Emotions, too, become more startling when they are expressed in terms of the concrete. Thus Ellen's disappointment at not being able to continue the life on the roads is translated into 'little darts of pain shooting out from the inner recesses of abdomen and chest, anger making a fever in her blood.' Emotions are sometimes given the attributes of things or else give substance to abstractions. In either case, the emotion or the abstraction becomes a tangible entity rather than merely a state of mind or a concept....

Sometimes abstractions and specific objects are personified: Ellen's thought 'sat down in the doorway,' and farms 'seemed to touch hands' in the early morning to confirm what Ellen and Jasper have decided about their future. Ellen is so sensitive that her imagination often distorts the realities encompassing her.... This acute sensitivity often leads to psychic strain, virtually to neurasthenia.... When Jasper leaves because of the unjust accusation against him and when her neighbors imply that he will not return, Ellen denies this view to herself with such fierceness that her hours lie 'suspended upon the lasting *no* that lay under her breath like a cry'.... She imagines herself stabbing Jonas since her sole desire is to 'kill, kill, kill.' The same uncontrolled passion incenses her when some years later she thinks of Hester Shuck, only to be haunted again by the image of the kitchen knife as a murderous instrument. Her emotion is so overpowering at this time that all things beyond the mind, including her children, become unreal....

Ellen's sensibility is so powerful that she can many time transplant herself into another's identity and temporarily see the world through that person's eyes. With one of these remarkable frenzies of energy characteristic of Miss Roberts' heroines, Ellen, after the desertion of Jonas, thrusts herself into his spirit in order to experience vicariously the pleasure which he must have had in kissing the ripe lips of Sallie Lou Brown, her rival.... For a while she shares the relationship between her friends Dorine Wheatley and Elmer Ware... Ellen, in addition, dramatizes her own existence, sometimes regarding herself from the outside as though she were viewing another person.... After she marries Jasper, she looks back on her old self as a much less perceptive being, 'as something surpassed and rejected'.... We have been tracing what Miss Roberts has called, in discussing this novel, 'the drama of the immediacy of the mind.' For a woman like Ellen whose mind is always vibrant, new realms of significance open out continually...

A new, somewhat mystical knowledge of the earth as a free rather than a restrictive power comes to her when she thinks that for the birds of the air and the bees there are no such boundaries as farms.... Despite tragic and painful experiences, Ellen's outward beauty remains unimpaired as a sign of her nearness to Earth and of her purity of soul. Other characters who keep their poise, partly through their sensitivity to earth and partly through Ellen's influence upon them, are Joe Phillips and Luke Wimble (the son of earth whose way with trees reveals his full accord with nature... But the primitive life close to nature can coarsen as well as ennoble.... Dorine, for example, immediately begins to lose freshness after she becomes a farmer's wife. Nor does Cassie MacMurtrie, despite her advantages of wealth and position, possess Ellen's resilience. Instead of bringing out the best in Jonas Prather, the natural life brings out the worst, he yields easily to his sexual impulses and fails to follow the best when he recognizes it in Ellen. His abandoning of Ellen is prefigured in the courtship scene by the fireside on the December night. Two sticks of sycamore and ash, representing the lovers, burn out after a brilliant blaze...

Like Ellen, Jasper Kent is, for the most part, in accord with the dynamic powers of nature. He is typical of his class in that his history is one 'of labor, of wandering from farm to farm, of good seasons and bad, of good luck or evil.' Stooped as if to meet the earth from which he emanates and to whose service he is devoted, his face 'darkly stained with years of sun and wind, heavy with work,' he is at least master of the soil; he accomplishes in a short time, for example, the cultivation of the field which saps Ellen's strength. During their courtship he brings solidity to her universe, and he is a part of what has for her most meaning: all that is beautiful in nature itself.... Because his inner power is less than Ellen's, he is used up quicker than she; he appears old and weary and all but effaced by the end of the book, whereas Ellen retains her beauty and her feeling for life to the end....

For the small farmer, living by his own labors, nature often seems a harsh, constricting power rather than an animating one. Pain and deprivation are, in fact, more constant realities in Miss Roberts' rural world than joy and fulfillment. If Ellen asserts positive energies after all that happens to her, her triumph is a spare one. In accordance with the subdued and grim tone of the book, the pathos and the tragedy of Ellen's life register with more immediacy than her affirmations.... From the time that her shoes are stolen at Hep Bodine's farm in Chapter I, we know that Ellen will be a victim. Her parents have had sorrow also; of their seven children Ellen is the sole survivor. Although Ellen at Wakefield farm experiences more joy than pain, the curve of her development even there runs toward the enlargement of her spirit through suffering....

Later, her pain is even more violent when Jasper Kent deserts her for Hester Shuck and when she endures her fifth pregnancy, scarcely knowing whether she is alive as a result of pain and Jasper's cruelty. Miss Roberts evidently thought that the pangs of life outweighed its satisfactions when, talking of the patterns of *The Time of Man*, she said, 'The design moves downward toward a nadir, step by step, to a sort of bottomless pit of woe.... Ellen abandons herself too swiftly to her hatred of Hester. Miss Roberts' presentation of the psychology of the pregnant woman torn by jealousy and hatred is masterly, however.... Though life is more harsh than enjoyable, Ellen, exemplifying Miss Roberts' own stoic values, lasts because of her moral firmness, her sense of the steadiness of earth, and her active response to its challenge. She thus exemplifies what Miss Roberts pointed to as 'the strong, elemental, spiritual quality which I tried to symbolize with my story of Ellen'....

Part of the pathos and tragedy of *The Time of Man* stems from Ellen's loss of confidence and strength as the result of forces over which she has no control. Eventually, however, her apathy dissolves and she regains her spiritual equanimity. Her loyalty and fidelity are her most appealing qualities.... Her constant protectiveness of Jasper, of course, is in ironic contrast to his easy abandonment of her before Chick was born. Through all vicissitudes, except for her few frenzies of jealousy, Ellen retains her spiritual poise....

The numerous images based upon stone conveys most fully Ellen's sturdiness and strength... The stone imagery runs through the Orkeys place section of the novel, and it underlies Ellen's recovery from Jonas's desertion.... Ellen's rocklike hardness of nature enables her to survive the shock of Jasper's infidelity with, ultimately, a cold indifference. Rock may be thus interpreted symbolically as the chief obstacle which all workers on the land must overcome (at Goddard's, later in the novel, even Ellen cannot overcome the barren soil about their cabin) and also as an emblem of that spiritual strength which can alone insure a triumph over the land. This is, to some degree, the significance of St. Lucy's tower near Orkeys farm, which

is a presiding presence over the district. The tower partly connotes spiritual and religious aspiration... In ruggedness and aloof strength the tower is like nature; the chiming of its bell expresses, too, some other qualities of earth, the sound being 'elegant and tranquil and patient.' At dawn the bell suggests the mystery and repose of nature, and the plangency of its sound becomes associated in Ellen's mind with the beauty of the morning star [a traditional symbol of Christ]....

The psychic life...operates between...poles of permanence and change. In this realm the one indisputable reality, corresponding to the reality of earth in the external world, is the perceiving mind or self-reliant spirit which orders into meaningful patterns the flux of sense impressions. Like Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, Ellen Chesser experiences, as she sews, a mystical illumination into reality in which a supernal force gives form to the welter of life.... In harmony with the flux of this outer world, the inner life of Ellen proceeds by quick alternations of mood, one feeling quickly succeeding its opposite.... Images of motion predominate in the novel to suggest that nothing stays and that all is in the dynamic process of becoming or of evanescence.... To suggest the free, the large-dimensioned, and the infinite in nature and in man's soul, Miss Roberts used for her most striking visual effects the heavens, in both their near and distant aspect, and the winds which are a presence felt rather than seen.... Throughout the novel nature is seen in monochrome rather than in bright hues, and it is thereby brought into harmony with the minor key in which the novel is written....

Though the book is taut, such formal excellence does not, in all respects, compensate for flatness of subject. There are too many separate, unrelated incidents in the early part of the novel, whereas the most momentous phase of Ellen's career are compressed into the last three chapters; Jasper Kent, though he means more to Ellen, is no more exhaustively presented than Jonas Prather; and the Kent children have all too little individuality....

#### Style

The muted tones of Miss Roberts' style are in accord with her view that in painting, line and design are of greater significance than color values: '...if I were an artist, I should like to be a fine draftsman rather than a painter.... I see that color is purely relative, depending on what lies near. A blue is blue according to the value of the red that stands opposite. But in line I see the absolute, the making of design. When I yield to my desire to draw, the line is likely to be put upon paper in black or scratched into terra cotta.'

The reference to moonlight in the concluding sentence of the last quotation reminds us that the most fully dramatized incidents in the novel are moonlit rather than sunlit. A spectral illumination therefore clothes these scenes, and it increases their imaginative impact and emotional resonances. The chief of these scenes are Ellen's trip to Rushfield to find Tessie West, the harvest moon dance when Ellen feels unity with and division from Jonas, her return from the Barnet farm when she learns definitely of Jonas' marriage, the courtship night spent with Jasper amid the dolomite rocks, and the journey of the united but dispossessed Kent family to another region.

The carefully spun, intense, and sustained style of *The Time of Man* is the most complete measure of its success. The style itself often reflects Ellen Chesser's tentative and inarticulate responses to the reality of the containing earth and of the people she knows. If it sometimes makes firm what Ellen may only dimly know, it also suggests the groping of an unsophisticated mentality, her consciousness 'being not of an analytic nature or a "conscious" consciousness.' The style is marked, as in much of Miss Roberts' best work, by simplicity and limpidity; only occasionally appears the artifice that characterizes a self-conscious portrayal of the primitive. As Miss Roberts herself remarked, she was trying for a fusion of the direct and the sensuous: 'I find that I have tried for a poignant speech as direct as a simple equation-- $2+2 = 4$ . And I have tried for great precision in rendering sensuous contacts--the points where poetry touches life.' The flowing sentences, whose patterns and rhythms vary subtly, capture also the forward movements and the sidelong motions of nature and of the human life poised against it.

General comment and explicit analysis in *The Time of Man* are subordinate to Ellen's personal impressions which are rendered with the greatest lucidity and suggestive power. As Miss Roberts indicated in her notes for the novel, the impressions at first are sharp and disjointed, 'devoid of reverie,' to accord with the child's perceptions in the final chapter and in part of the second. Thereafter the stylistic 'norm'--'a

common level of impression and reverie--for this novel (and most of the others) is reached in the flowing prose which captures the essence of a richly contemplative mind. Intellectual, religious, and moral values derive from the operations of Ellen's keen sensibility, not from her intellectual analysis of her experience. Thus her most significant encounters with God are direct ones, not the result of prolonged thought. God appears to her not as an abstract spirit but as a voice, once when she is stripping tobacco stems and then years later when she is mixing dough. Rovit has brilliantly summed up the relationship in Miss Roberts' fiction between style and a character's sensibility: 'The prose style is thus thoroughly functional in its attempt to parallel the actual process of a mind perceiving sensation and gradually transforming it into realized experience.'

The following excerpt from the novel reveals Miss Roberts' stylistic skill, where, at the level of theme, she indicates the relationship between nature and revealed religion, the significant differences between them, and the effects of both orders of reality upon those who, like Ellen, exist entwined with the land:

A deep voice held the saying, Kent's voice as he sat beside the house door, 'Autumnal equinox comes a Friday after next.' A cool breeze sprang up from the low-lying space toward the corn field and a shiver passed over her body. A deep voice held the saying or spoke again out of the hill, rolling out a great blast of oaths, admonishing the mules, bearing down the plowing team, getting the lazy mule along beside the tired old mother. The morning star stood high above the sunrise, pale now. The Brothers would put on their white robes and walk into the church in the morning quietness of the bell, in the fresh stillness of the new dawn, indifferent to the autumnal equinox and the days and nights grown even, and there would be no knowledge among them of the stubborn beasts upon which one cried with storms of words and oaths, and no knowledge of the crying hens, afraid of the skunk, of herself standing guard in the cool dawn. No knowledge of herself holding in mind a voice, 'autumnal equinox,' 'morning star,' and the great words rolled out upon the lagging beasts. The corn in the garden stood high and about it clung the beans, all inclined toward the wonder of the sun but belonging to their own hunger and to their labor in the furrows, all grown out of the soil and the rain and the seeds, but turned toward the wonder of the equinoxes, toward the light moon and toward the morning star.

This passage is a typical example of Miss Roberts' prose. The sentences are of the same pattern but of different lengths; they are simple or compound sentences to which modifying phrases parallel in structure and syntax are sometimes added. A favorite device is the long compound sentence, one or both elements of which will be weighted with descriptive phrases, often participial in their structure. The 'complex' sentence, with the subordination of one idea to another, is in abeyance. The parallel elements in Miss Roberts' prose contribute to the illusion of movement, slow or fast as the occasion demands. In this passage the relaxed but still dynamic prose enfolds disparate orders of experience--the secular, the natural, the religious--and suggests their fundamental harmony with one another.

It remains to mention some of Miss Roberts' other stylistic devices. First, at several points of tension or crisis, diffuse conversations occur among two or more characters as they give their inmost thoughts. Any given speaker is not inattentive to the others, but he is most interested at the moment in expressing his deeper self. Notable examples of such use of counterpoint to record the thoughts of two or more individuals occur when at Bodine's Ellen recalls to herself the words of Joe Trent and her mother complains of Henry's lateness to dinner, when at Wakefield's Ben talks of the sale of the mules to distant buyers and Ellen recalls the life of the roads in Tennessee, when at Orkeys place Ellen tells of loneliness and of the dove's call and Jasper of his strength, when on the night before their marriage Ellen thinks of a new country and of far lands and Jasper of a desired farm, and when at night the Kent family are forced from home and its members disclose their thoughts and aspirations.

In these passages each speaker is intent upon his own thoughts and ideas, but they blend in harmoniously with those expressed by the other persons to give effects of richness and depth to these sections of the novel. Increasingly, Miss Roberts resorted to this sort of 'dramatic dialogue' as *The Time of Man* progressed, and she used it to supplement 'the drama of the immediacy of the mind, the swift flow of impression,' which predominates in the first sections of the novel.

Secondly, Miss Roberts enhanced the poetic allusiveness of her style by artful use of repetition. The reiterated image or word fixes an impression or idea indelibly in our minds by the added emphasis thus given it. In the following, for example, the repetition of the noun 'down' and of the modifier 'ragged' inevitably conveys the ordered disorder to be found in the spectacle of a cotton field: 'She remembered cotton fields where men and women and children were bending over white flowers that puffed out raggedly into down, in a great ragged field of white down.'

Thirdly, when the starkness of the drama required it, Miss Roberts often used crisp, economic phrasing, the 'hard, crude, twisted, bitten speech' she found among the Kentucky farmers. If sometimes the prose seems loose and diffuse, at other times Miss Roberts secured force by concentrated, compressed utterance. Understatement, an implied cynicism, terseness, and an offhand manner are the principal characteristics of the following:

The land was hard and rough and she must take what she could out of the bitter soil...  
(254)

Hester had had her way with Jasper. (334)

Ellen lay on her bed almost continually, scarcely knowing that she continued in life.  
(345)

One bright morning in early February, Ellen fastened the small children into the kitchen, tying the latch with a string. Then she bore her child alone, being finally delivered toward the noon of the day. (347)

These elements I have just discussed are relatively constant in Miss Roberts' style. Of course, she modulates her prose to accord with her subject of the moment, and in her last novels--where there is greater complexity in the mental processes of the heroine--longer, more involved sentences are abundant. There the sentence patterns tend to be more complicated, with a greater aggregate of adjective phrases and participial constructions, as the protagonist, with greater or lesser strain, tries to define elusive, intangible values. There also a wrenching of language from normal patterns of diction and syntax occurs more often. Always present, of course, is the vivid image which gives to every page of Miss Roberts's work a characteristic timbre, a resonance and depth, an allusiveness and precision that characterize a poetic and a highly individual but not an eccentric style."

Frederick P. W. McDowell  
*Elizabeth Madox Roberts*  
(Twayne 1963) 38, 43-53, 58-62

"The first pages of *The Time of Man* reveal that Roberts would meet the challenge as a Modernist, employing the mythic method--using symbolism and mythology to order experience and to shape an inner, psychic journey to rebirth, transformation, and a harmonious existence. Everywhere there are extraordinary correspondences between man and nature, mind and landscape. Ellen Chesser is the first in a series of feminine 'cerebro-sensual interpretations or interpreters' at the center of the story who descends into the depths of the soul to find wholeness and a mystical sense of oneness with life. Throughout the novel, there is a complex interweaving and repetition of images, motifs, and experience characteristic of Modernism. Like Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Joyce, Roberts creates her world, a style, and a voice that allow her to discover an order in the chaos. 'Poetic realism,' she called it--reality, the perception of the truth of things, heightened by poetry.

In *The Time of Man*, Roberts presents 'the sweet soil...and white sun mystically braided in life form, all life, which is Ellen.' She would, she once explained, 'bring the physical world close to the mind so the mind rushes out to the edge of sense, like Emily Dickinson.' So Ellen's journey is in large part discovery of the myriad symbolic correspondences of man and nature. Out of the rite of farming, folk wisdom and speech, and Ellen's imaginative experiences of nature, Roberts fashions a symbolic harmony. 'A white clover of thought' passes through Ellen's mind; emotions find physical reflections. She discovers in nature 'those structures which seemed everlasting and undiminished within herself.' The rocks she wonders about are

emblems of the time of man but also of Ellen's time, of the order she sees in the autumn equinox and the monks' routine and the mysteries she and Jasper acknowledge humbly with an exclamation, 'God knows.'

Roberts saw 'the wandering tenant farmer' of the region as 'offering a symbol for an Odyssey of man as a wanderer buffeted about by the fates and weathers.' As that representative wanderer, Ellen is a Demeter-Persephone figure, pastoral, close to the earth, aware of its mystery and sacredness and communing with it, often a solitary, lonely wanderer, immersed in the cycles of sowing and harvesting, birth and death, strongly maternal, even a matriarch.

That journey is also the unique story of Ellen Chesser Kent's personal progress to what Jung calls integration of personality, the radiance in harmony with life that Luke Wimble recognizes in repeating, 'She's got the honey of life in her heart.' Ellen journeys from self-identification and capture of the physical world to an experience of pain, evil, and rejection that leads to a withdrawal from society and self, and then to a 'flowering out of stone' that reveals the strength and harmony she has found in life, and to the generosity of love--of life, the physical world, Jasper, and her children. It is 'necessary love for the self to live,' Earl H. Rovit observes. 'Life and herself, one, comprehensible and entire,' she realized, and 'a sense of happiness surged over her.'

'I tried to achieve a form in which the uses of poetry and prose were identical,' Roberts wrote afterward. She describes *The Time of Man* as 'a symphony brought into words.' The highly individualized prose style she developed to serve Ellen's reflective expressions of 'the points where poetry touches life' is marked by an 'agreeable monotony,' which critics see accomplished by rising and falling sentence rhythms, repetition of sentence patterns, word and phrase repetition, piled-up *and's* and compound sentences, frequent use of the 'would' tense, and a falling-away phrasing that creates rhythms close to verse. She, too, had learned much from Pound about poetic composition. And like J. M. Synge, who found in Anglo-Irish speech a rich resource, Roberts fashioned a language to serve her purposes out of her knowledge of medieval, Elizabethan, and frontier speech, 'strong old utterance,' and often ungrammatical colloquialisms caught by her perfect ear. The poetry is lyrical; her objective was a language 'as being some essence from the roots of life.' Ellen incarnates the highest virtues of her land in the epic struggle of Henry Chesser's phrase, 'the time of man.' But the folk song she lives is not 'Bangum rode to the boar's den,' which she once thought real; it is one reflecting the common experience of man--'But now I know better how the world is, a little'--as she renews her hope for 'a strong house that the wind couldn't shake and the rain couldn't beat into.'

William H. Slavick  
"Elizabeth Madox Roberts"  
*Fifty Southern Writers after 1900*  
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Michael Hollister (2021)