

## ANALYSIS

### THE STYLE OF ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS

(1881-1941)

"Almost without exception, every literary review or critical analysis of Miss Roberts' work makes mention of her prose style, the inference being that somehow or other, her 'style' is an element in her writing which thrusts itself obtrusively on the reader. Even those critics who make more than a superficial attempt to analyze the stylistic devices which Miss Roberts employs fail to integrate their analysis with the functional intention of this style. They forget that 'style' is not an isolated segment of a piece of writing but that it pervades the entire shape of the writing integral to that shape at all points. This is true, I suppose, for all writing but additionally significant for an author who is so persistent in her avowal of aesthetic organicism. Thus, a critical comment that 'Miss Roberts is fond of Fra Angelico, and her style often mingles the Italian's blues and golds' is of some biographical interest, but hardly helpful in evaluating the quality of her work. To try to go beyond this kind of impressionistic critical reverie which implies that 'style' is something like the frosting on a cake, we may begin with Mark Van Doren's astute perception: 'her style being most clearly the expression of a mind which is interesting in its own right. Her style is worth discussing because it in itself is a sort of substance. It is more than a way of saying things; it is something said, something which would not otherwise have been said at all, something, we suspect, which could not be said unless it were said in this way.'

With this attitude toward 'style,' let us review for a moment the kind of stylistic problem with which Miss Roberts was faced. We have seen that for Miss Roberts the interest in life is not focused on the external world of things but on the inner world of sensations becoming ideas. The balance which she tried to attain between poetry and realism requires the literary existence of an active, perceiving, remembering, willing, imagining mind expressing its ideations through sensuous symbols and images. And the 'style' which is reflective of such a mind will tend more to the characteristics of lyric poetry than to what is generally regarded as novelistic prose. To take an extreme antithetical example, the modern 'hard-boiled' realists, who take their accents and rhythms from Hemingway, have a very different stylistic problem. Since their accent is on the physical causation of sensation, they tend to minimize the creative potential of the mind; the world of things is presented as fixed and absolute, and the human condition is, in varying degrees, determined and doomed.

The style which results from this kind of philosophic perspective calls for clipped, staccato sentences, unadorned by qualifying gradations. Flesh is soft and the things of the world are hard, and so action and violent collision become the polarity of the style. Active verbs, interjections, and 'tough' vocabulary are the excitement-making ingredients of the prose, and highly dramatic dialog becomes a premium as a technique of setting the human figures apart from the impersonal forces which move them, much as the traditional disciplines of the theater have differentiated between dramatic physical action and the fixed enveloping stage. It is probably with this kind of novel in mind that Alexander Buchan writes: 'One concedes Miss Roberts the title of novelist because the title is simple enough, these days, to include almost anything written about incident. In every one of her tendencies of style, however, she does not write novels, but narrative poems.'

Conceivably she might have employed the stream-of-consciousness method to give free play to her belief in the image-creating mind, but she found this method unconvincing. 'The exact content or condition of the mind could not, he supposed, be reproduced by speech either written or spoken, however broken the jargon or immediate the rendering.' The Jamesian novel, on the other hand, which invites the reader to participate in a strenuous exercise of what we may call 'the moral imagination,' she valued: 'Henry James seems to induce many high opinions and varying degrees of inspiration. He is excellent material as offering points of departure for those delvings into meaning and half meanings which we like to make in an effort to enlarge the capacity for experience and to revalue the human race.' But it should be obvious that the Jamesian setting and atmosphere would be incompatible with her interests.

So committed to realism was she that she rated Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* a failure; in her journal she noted that she admired its psychological penetration, but felt that its characters and interplay of action were too unrealistic to capture the reader. Her creation of a successful style, then, may be the pivotal point on which the evaluation of her novels will rest. And her present inferior reputation may be, as Buchan suggests, a result of inadequate critical response to her style: 'In the criticisms...much of the failure to understand the books came from a completely vague appreciation of 'poetic style,' and of the skill with which words--the words of narrative and of soliloquy--were combined to create the effect intended.'

Miss Roberts' personal solution to the problem of combining realism and poetry in a narrative form is found in her characteristic combination of the traditional third-person impersonal narrator with the autobiographical point of view. To illustrate this, let us examine the opening paragraph of *The Great Meadow*:

'1774, and Diony, in the spring, hearing Sam, her brother, scratching at a tune on the fiddle, hearing him break a song over the taut wires and fling out with his voice to supply all that the tune lacked, placed herself momentarily in life, calling mentally her name, Diony Hall. 'I, Diony Hall,' her thought said, gathering herself close, subtracting herself from the different life of the house that closed about her. Sam was singing, flinging the song free of the worried strings, making a very good tune of it.'

The first sentence places Diony Hall in a space-time situation, in the act of perceiving and asserting her identity. Thus far, there is no special innovation in narrative technique, the omniscient narrator has merely established his right to go inside the mind of one of his characters and objectively record her mood. The second sentence poses a problem as it moves the focus closer to Diony Hall, transcribes her thought within impersonal quotation marks, and then adds two participial phrases. If the participles are used to modify the subject 'thought,' the uses of the reflexive pronoun 'herself' is unnecessarily ungrammatical; and further, the impersonal narrator has surrendered his 'objectivity.' Continuing with the third sentence, the problem which germinated in sentence two becomes full-blown. Whose perception is it that Sam, while singing, 'was flinging the song free of the worried strings'?

It cannot be Sam's, because we have had no preparation that would justify thrusting his sensibilities abruptly into the scene; if it is the narrator's, then the narrator must be a character involved in the action to some degree who acts as a sympathetic storyteller and has a very subjective angle of vision. If it is neither Sam nor the omniscient third person, it must be Diony, but there is no connective link between Diony and the descriptive phrase. As we read the passage over, and especially as we continue reading, we discover that the perception was Diony's, although it has been appropriated by the narrator. Miss Roberts' impersonal narrative voice and her heroine Diony have identical attitudes of perception, imagination, and sensitivity.

In order to perceive this more clearly, let us examine several sentences at the beginning of Chapter III. Berk Jarvis has asked for permission to marry Diony and carry her with him into the wilderness of Kentucky. Thomas Hall, Diony's father, has violently refused to let her go, and has gone to the smithy to take out his anger on the blacksmith's anvil. 'The blows on the anvil had become little and thin, put there by a careful hand...' At first glance, the above passage seems traditionally realistic and objective in its presentation. Three sensations--sound, odor, and thermal touch--are recorded, and then the main character is visualized. But if one reads the above passage substituting the pronoun 'I' for Diony, and making the appropriate changes in the personal pronoun, the identification of attitudes between Diony and the narrator becomes quite apparent.

Nothing is perceived that is beyond Diony's field of perception; all of the metaphorical content ('the blows...little and thin,' 'anvil's outcry,' 'father's broken step') is such that Diony alone could have thought of these things in this way. The verb forms in this passage are also characteristic: 'had become,' 'had passed,' 'being prepared,' 'still lingered,' 'scarcely gazed,' 'had left off,' 'was heard.' The imperfect tenses and the adverbially qualified past tenses place the action just being complete. The effect is one of immediacy, but an immediacy slowed down to a point where we do not actually hear the blows on the anvil, but we do hear the echoes. The verb forms also create through their accumulation a sense of anticipation, muted, it is true,

by the rhythmic fall of the cadences. This anticipation directs itself toward the main figure, Diony, as though the verb forms were animated sensations and were marching toward the human character to be perceived.

The function of this narrative technique is to enable Miss Roberts to tell her story in a loosely realistic frame, while giving her ample latitude, at the same time, to let the mind of her main character order the details of the action. There is literally nothing, no detail, in *The Great Meadow*, which is not under the direct perception of Diony Hall, and yet the novel has been acclaimed as our finest historical novel. When this technique is working well, it is a perfect instrument for attaining 'precision in rendering sensuous contacts'; when it is working not so well, it can be a source of confusion and, sometimes, even preciousness. Its limitations are rather rigid; only one character can be fully visualized at one time; if more than one is to be fully developed, some such device as the alternating chapters in *A Buried Treasure* must be used. The subordinate characters take on life only when they become absorbed into the main character's field of perception. But that main character can be artistically realized with a fullness unequalled in the more objective techniques of narration. Thus Miss Roberts' comment on Ellen Chesser is one that many readers can share:

'Writing *The Time of Man* I saw Ellen functioning in many situations which I did not use in making the design. She was to me always an organic whole, and I should have known how she looked at all periods of her life and how she would react to any being or event, what she would have said in speaking and what she would have felt in mind or senses.'

And since we have seen that Miss Roberts' philosophic perspective is based on the mind of an individual human being--'The most continually present integer'--we must admit that no other technique of narration could have been as suitable for her purposes.

However, it should also be pointed out that Miss Roberts' style does more than merely direct the reader's attention to the main character; it is also carefully graded to differentiate that character and delineate character change. In reference to Chapter I in *The Time of Man*, the placing of Ellen Chesser into the medium of the novel, Miss Roberts writes: 'The sentences are short, the movement staccato, and beauty and ugliness are sharply opposed, set continually in swift contrast, as is the way in the life of a child.' A random paragraph from Chapter I will substantiate this analysis: 'Ellen went further up the creek....Her father had whipped her once for asking, "Did Screw kill a man?"'

In this passage the cadences are short and clipped, giving a sense of the immediate rush of impressions that would ostensibly occur in a child's mind. The sensations themselves are sharp and strident, allowing little room for gradation and qualification: the slamming of screen doors, the finality of the bloody snake. The sudden juxtaposition of the serenity of the ravine, the brook, and the gentle sounds of quail with the violence of the Screw memory is satisfying motivated by the transition through the finding of the snake, an episode logically connected with the pastoral beginning and the brutal memory which ends the passage. We also notice the limitations of Ellen's capacity for amalgamating her sensations into herself; they come and just as swiftly they are gone.

Notice the difference in style in the following passage, as Ellen rides with Jasper to their new married home the day after the wedding: 'Some little pointed birds in a flock twitted from branch to branch in the sun....The day outstretched laterally, no marks upon it, and she greeted herself intently'....This is a very different prose and a very different Ellen Chesser, although the narrative point of view and the basic alertness of mind are the same. The cadences are longer and more gentle in their blending one into the other. The sensations perceived are much more subtly colored with gradations of significance. And, most important, the sensations are selected in terms of significant reference to Ellen Chesser; they are not, as in the former passage, the indiscriminate rush of whatever is in her field of perception. Her combination feeling of beauty and strangeness as a brand new bride is delicately implied by her attitude toward the cloak and her awed wonder at the beauty of the bird's flight. The two women she sees at their house gates are perceived under the aspirations of her own dream of a secure domestic hearth. And the last sentence, her realization of herself at the dawn of a new life, ties all her other perceptions into a whole.

Commenting on *The Time of Man*, Miss Roberts writes: 'The drama of the first part is the drama of the immediacy of the mind, the swift flow of impression. This element being used less as the work moves forward, drama is then projected by the use of dramatic dialogue.' The stylistic devices of *The Time of Man* can thus be seen as very conscious attempts on the part of the author to make her prose functionally implement the development of her character, while moving the action of the novel forward as well.

Like her narrative technique, Miss Roberts' sentence structure is organically related to her philosophic and aesthetic perspectives. In what is easily the best critical analysis of her style, Alexander Buchan points out: 'Her favorite sentence is simple, a plain subject-predicate assertion followed by a participial construction....When the participle is used not only as a connective, but as a substantive...the style appears to move across a regular succession of *-ing* sounds. These, of course, are unusually frequent in this selection, but it is true that the characteristic sound of her prose is a muted roll, giving an effect of what both Buchan and Van Doren have called 'an agreeable monotony.' For example, let us look at the following passage from *My Heart and My Flesh*, which describes Theodosia playing the violin: Striving to divide her being, to set bounds upon parts, she would turn a half-whimsical gaze inward as she strove to achieve the singing tone and to bow the indefinite legato....'

The participial clauses and the repetitive constructions create a liquid rush of sound, subtly cadenced, beginning in *medias res*, tonally, and drifting off at the end with a kind of sibilant indefiniteness. But although the total effect is one of monotony, there are several crisp phrases imbedded in the passage, which seem to be carefully set off and emphasized by their contrast. To illustrate this, I shall take the liberty of attempting to transcribe this prose into cadenced verse, along the lines of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The result is something like this:

'Striving to divide her being, to set bounds upon parts,  
She would turn a half-whimsical gaze inward as she strove to  
achieve the singing tone and to bow the indefinite legato.  
Does the music come out of me really, out of some inner unit,  
*Myself, all mine?*  
Or do I simply imitate, skillfully or not, what the teacher does?  
She wanted to lay her finger on this integer and say,  
*This is mine.*  
She wanted to go past the bounding of blood in arteries  
And the throb of her pride in her grandfather's witnessing of  
her advancing skill.  
The tone sang more true and she took a great impatient joy  
in it,  
*Searching*, as she was, *more deeply* for the answer to the riddle.  
Or, in the coming of Albert into her senses,  
Her questioning thought would swim in a pool of inattention and  
semi-consciousness.'

It is quite possible that others would transcribe this passage differently, but I think it is clear that the prose is subject to transcription on the basis of repetition and cadenced sound units. Secondly, it is clear that this combination of sound units has a musically monotonous flow, rising and falling in succession, but never falling to a complete finality, or rising to an abruptly high pitch. And thirdly, I think any transcription would have to recognize the emphatic relation of the sound units I have italicized to the less emphatic relation of the sounds which surround them. The unit, 'This is mine,' is quite clearly the most important in the passage, marking a climax in the tonal pattern. The other italicized phrases are of slightly less importance, echoing in a minor key, as it were, the triumphal major chord of the 'This is mine.'

The musical patterning of these sentences is clearly designed to evoke emotional responses which will deepen the reader's sense of the meaning. Dorothea Brande points toward this in her comment: 'This prose is a kind of incantation; the meaning does not reach the reader through his intellect alone. Mind and emotion are equally engaged.' And, like individual barbs aimed to pierce the reading mind, the significant items, or 'the few hard, tender sayings,' in this passage closely related to Theodosia Bell's attempts toward

self-realization, are isolated from the musical monotony of the background. 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. And further, through the incantation effect of the prose, the reader himself is drawn into the process, participating in the immediate experience, and emerging, ideally, with a truly enlarged vision and a heightened sense of life.

In her diction also Miss Roberts is consistent to the pattern of thought we have described. She is deeply aware of language as the cumulative achievement of countless generations of experiencing human beings. She was fluent in French, had studied a little German, and was an amateur scholar in Middle English. But her view of words was that of the poet, not the linguist....She can be seen playing with words in the delightful passage in which Jeremy reflects on the insistent love letters he has been receiving from the Dark Lady....She was drawn to the rural speech of her countryside and the dialect which she so beautifully transformed, not because this speech was quaint, but because it was musical; it was more lineally related to the powerful speech of Chaucerian and Shakespearean England than was her nonrural contemporary American language; and it had the marks of earth experience on it...

Although her strong preference was for the Anglo-Saxon derivations, she was too much the artist to neglect the advantages of contrast. A reexamination of the passage from *My Heart and My Flesh* which was quoted above will show that the significant phrases are Anglo-Saxon in derivation: 'Myself, all mine,' 'This is mine,' 'Searching more deeply.' There is a fairly large preponderance of Latinate words in the rest of the passage, although not as many as might be expected. Still, the less gnarled words, like 'divide,' 'indefinite,' 'imitate,' 'integer,' 'arteries,' 'inattention,' and 'semi-consciousness,' offer a polysyllabic liquid vagueness, which points up the spondaic definiteness of the 'realization' words. And this, of course, is a functional technique of making diction work in an organic cooperation with the other stylistic devices already discussed.

Miss Roberts' particular preference among the parts of speech is for nouns. Indeed, it is not unusual for her to dispense with verbs altogether, transforming a verb form into a participle as in the sentence; 'A woman walking a narrow roadway in the hour of dawn.' This habit of Miss Roberts' may be related to the primitive attitude which invests a name with an almost sacred significance, faint traces of which can be seen in the names of some of her characters--Diony Hall, Theodosia Bell, Berk Jarvis, and Luce Jarvis. However, this preference can be more directly related to the importance which Miss Roberts gives to the perceiving mind. Sensations are not significant until they have been realized or re-created, or, to put it another way, the life outside is absorbed within only when it is named. Going one step further, Miss Roberts will combine two nouns, locking them together with a hyphen in order to create a composite noun, without losing the strength of either unit in a prepositional possessive or adjective: 'man-pleasure,' 'Memory-realization,' 'word-touch.' This habit is proportionally more frequent in her poetry, and it may be the result of the influence of Anglo-Saxon 'kennings,' or the byproduct of her absorbed delight in the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The effects of her handling of dialog should also be mentioned briefly. Because of her subjective narrative technique, she characteristically employs two different renderings of dialog. When her main character is in a situation of relative stasis, the dialog is conventionally handled, often with brilliance. Thus the scene in which Henry Chesser recounts the story of his life to Ellen and Jonas Prather, or the exchange of lovers' vows between Ellen and Jasper, exhibits a dramatic dialog perfectly compatible with the ordinary third-person narrative point of view. However, when her principal character is apart from the dialog, either because of inner dissociation or incapacity to understand--as in so much of the dramatic dialog of *He Sent Forth a Raven*--the effects brilliantly synchronize with the immediate presentation of a character in the jagged process of developing.

It may be instructive here to analyze a fairly representative specimen of Miss Roberts' dialog to observe more closely the kinds of effects she manipulates. The following is a love scene between Ellen and Jasper in the early stages of their relationship....The dialog continues, but to no conclusion beyond what is already reached. The most obvious characteristic of the preceding is its powerful musical quality, the repetition of words and phrases which interweave between the two speakers as in an operatic duet, leaving them apart even as it knits them together. Both Ellen and Jasper reveal and maintain their own personalities in their

speeches: his, masculine and practical; hers, feminine and imaginative. And yet the dialog which seems to be carried out at cross-purposes succeeds in manifesting not only a tonal, but an emotional harmony between the two. Like the doves to which Ellen refers, one calls and the other answers, and although the questions and responses fail to follow one another in logical sequence, there is a dialectic of communion established between them. And this kind of dialog is admirably suited to Miss Roberts' novelistic needs where physical action is always subordinate to the inner drama of self-realization.

Her use of metaphor is the element of her art most difficult to isolate because it is so pervasive. Since the novels are all narrated through an active, imagining consciousness, expository passages devoid of metaphor are almost impossible to find. Indeed, it would probably be fair to suggest that each novel with the exception of *A Buried Treasure* is a very elaborate single metaphor of the experience of its heroine. The mind perceives by combining its new perception with an older remembered perception, and thus, sound is given shape and color, or shape is rendered in terms of nonphysical description. The chaos of sensation in Miss Roberts' novels is continually being yoked into order by the imaginative capacities of her protagonists, and the rhetorical device which expresses the order is the metaphor. Let us examine a sample prose passage from *The Great Meadow*:

'When she awoke the moon had set and the dawn was beginning to light the sky. A planet, performing like a small moon, made a crescent in the east. The birds began to arouse, and the cruel, restless dawn began in the trees, the long slow dawn when the birds were insatiable in their pronouncements. The birds arose above the life of the herbs and declared themselves superior, but their declarations needed to be continual. Diony lay in the soft decaying log and heard the clamor among the birds, feeling the vegetable life awake with the sun, each kind standing still in some lewd demand of the light. She came cautiously out of the log and looked about to discover what way she had come there.'

The first thing we notice is that the metaphorical content of the passage is related completely to Diony. The coming of the dawn is described, not in order to describe a dawn, but to explore Diony's feelings as she experiences this particular dawn. Factually we know only that the sun is coming up, the birds are singing, and Diony awakes from her night in the woods. More importantly, we know that Diony feels isolated from this activity of nature. The planet, 'performing like a small moon,' insinuates the idea of spectacle and spectator, with Diony, the insignificant spectator, lost in the vast amphitheater of nature.

The 'cruel, restless...long, slow dawn' chanted in by the 'insatiable' birds dispels the concealing blanket of night which had allowed Diony to curl up within herself and fill her whole world with herself--something knowable and controllable. The dawn is 'cruel' because it extends the planes of the world, showing Diony to herself as just another speck in the vast forest. The birds make 'pronouncements' and 'declarations.' They blatantly assert their belongingness to the whole scene with irritating little cries of braggadocio. Even the vegetable life makes 'lewd demands' of the sun; it too belongs and is part of the order. Diony is apart from the whole, and this the reader knows only from the metaphorical texture of the passage. This kind of metaphorical writing is, as I said, constant throughout all Miss Roberts' prose, unostentatious, but insistently buzzing at the fringe areas of the reader's consciousness. Indeed, her entire stylistic technique is founded on this indirect metaphorical method of exposition.

Miss Roberts will also, from time to time, employ the more conventional kind of metaphor to emphasize a point, or to shock a reader into awareness, or to vary the pace of her narration. For example, in *A Buried Treasure*, Philly Blair catches her hen sucking on the insides of one of its new-laid eggs: 'The day seemed unjointed and delayed. The old pullet had eaten a hole into the morning; she had bitten with her hard bill a flaw into the steady world that lay outside....She had made a crack in time itself and in the illusions people hold together.' The same devices are at work as in the preceding quoted passage, but the fused images are more incongruous and direct. Or, in the following description of Dickon the carpenter from *He Sent Forth a Raven*, where Miss Roberts somewhat playfully caricatures the character by expanding the metaphor from a simple descriptive statement to a ludicrously cosmic significance: 'There were oaths in his speech. His words seemed to burst from his roughly-shaven face and his stiff throat as if they were pinned together with threats that would crack the day into splinters and rip apart the earth itself.'

The test of a novelist's style is ultimately the individual reader's, and the writer who chooses to create a distinctive style will inevitably run the danger of alienating some readers who will prejudge uniqueness as affectation. The effects of style are cumulative; the rhythms of a prose work must sustain a prolonged pattern at the fringes of the reader's consciousness before they can begin to function as an integral element of the total work. Stylistic analysis can only point a direction; it can neither 'prove' authoritatively, nor make discoveries. But from this discussion I think we can conclude that the extraordinary degree of functional consistency which Miss Roberts' style possesses serves her aesthetic aim by luring her reader into a participative position, where the reading experience may bring a true enlargement of perspective and a heightened sense of reality."

Earl H. Rovit

*Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts*  
(U Kentucky 1960) 129-48

"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 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*  
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain  
(Greenwood 1987) 414-15

Michael Hollister (2021)