

ANALYSIS

A Buried Treasure (1931)

Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1881-1941)

"*A Buried Treasure* (1931) may best be described in musical terms as a fantasia or as variations upon the theme of the discovery by an old couple of a pot of gold--its effect upon them and upon the community in which they live. Though it can hardly be claimed that everything in this novel is organically related, the performance is still a brilliant one, and a higher degree of intensity, or quality of excitement, is achieved than is often the case in Miss Roberts' books."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 390

"It is usually impossible to specify with any accuracy the actual physical occurrence which may trigger the creation of a work of art. And even in those few cases where we can be fairly certain that we know the stimulus, our information is still of dubious value in the assessment of the completed imaginative work. One thing that we can do is to measure approximately the distance that separates the end product--polished, complicated, and set into artistic form--from the stark raw material which was its genesis. There is a kind of value in being able to observe the quality of an artist's mind in the process of work. To a certain extent we are able to do this with Elizabeth Madox Roberts's fifth novel, *A Buried Treasure*, since there appears among her collection of private papers the following newspaper clipping:

PLOWS UP ANCIENT COINS IN CORNFIELD

'While plowing corn on his farm near town on Thursday, June 1, Mr. Sam Bottom found three Spanish dollars and an American half-dollar. The Spanish coins were dated 1784, 1804, and 1820, and the United States coin bore the date 1811. Mr. Bottom said, "I realized I had a gold mine in my place but it never dawned on me until finding these coins that I owned a silver mine. I expect to dig up every inch of that field and sift the dirt until I find every piece of coin buried there".'

It is interesting to speculate on the impact which that newspaper story might have had on Miss Roberts' imagination. The discovery of buried money in a cornfield does not seem enough in itself to enkindle the fires of creativity. But when we add the fact that the buried money dates back to the earliest Kentucky settlements, the news story becomes more provocative. Here is treasure, sunk into rich meadowland for over one hundred years. The vision of generations of hardy settlers, tilling the soil, planting and harvesting, comes almost inevitably to mind; and the treasure within the earth begins to make an ironic contrast with the treasure that is the earth. The final paragraph of the clipping caps the provocative potentialities of the story with the note of unconscious irony in Mr. Sam Bottom's statement. Here, in miniature, are the elements which must have appealed to Miss Roberts' sense of humor and sense of story. A naive humorless man dedicates himself to a search for treasure on his property, overlooking all the elements which, for Miss Roberts, are the real treasure lodes in life. This is the main contrast of *A Buried Treasure*. And the long-lying heritage of generations symbolized in the old concealed coins is its minor theme.

Because it is more natural for her to work with a heroine than with a hero, Mr. Sam Bottom (Andy Blair) is relegated to a subordinate position, and his wife, Philadelphia Blair, becomes the focus of the narrative. The minor theme--that of the heritage of generations--is developed in an independent subplot. Miss Roberts is reported to have told Grant Knight that she meant *A Buried Treasure* to be 'an experiment in the presentation of shifting points of view.' In the analysis of *The Great Meadow* we noted that Miss Roberts apparently was searching for a way to overcome the limitations of her intensely subjective mode of

narration; this 'experiment in the presentation of shifting points of view' is perhaps a logical next step as she copes with the problems of her craft.

The novel is written in five chapters, Chapters I, III, and V being narrated from Philly Blair's point of view, and Chapter II and IV from Ben Shepherd's. The action, from the discovery of the iron kettle filled with treasure, to the denouement on Midsummer Night, takes only a few weeks; the characteristically long development of Miss Roberts's protagonists is thus sacrificed in order to exploit the effect of a single dramatic episode. This is a radical departure from her customary methods of narration. Her use of symbolism is different also from the large designs which we have observed in *The Time of Man*, *My Heart and My Flesh*, and *The Great Meadow*. In those novels the main symbolic patterns emerged from the struggles of man against and within nature; in *A Buried Treasure*, however, Miss Roberts resorts to the device of investing a physical object with the full weight of her symbolic connotations. The symbolic movement of the novel will depend ultimately on the meaning that the buried treasure takes on for the two major characters, Philly Blair and Ben Shepherd.

The character of Philly Blair is established in the opening chapter--she is a middle-aged woman possessing an extraordinary capacity for empathy, as well as the sensitivity we have come to associate with Miss Roberts' heroines. Philly, like Theodosia and Diony, is engaged in a search into her life pattern attempting to discover what values she possesses and what she lacks. The theme, however, is treated with a much less serious tone than is Theodosia Bell's search. Philly is a mature woman, and experience has given her a perspective on herself, an ironic sense of self-proportion, which Theodosia completely lacked. And Ben Shepherd's observation of the action is fundamentally colored by his adolescent conviction that romance--love, sexuality, beauty--is the exclusive property of adolescence. This doubly ironic frame succeeds in placing Philly's self-examination in a humorous light; indeed, the discovery of a pot of gold has a grotesquely comic quality in itself, and the general atmosphere of the first chapter creates a pastoral lightness, inappropriate to a chronicle of a descent into the soul. We recall that Miss Roberts is reported to have 'thought of the book as a comedy in five acts.'

Chapter II reverts in time to the day of the discovery of the iron kettle, and Ben Shepherd becomes the focus of the narrative. The timespan of the first two chapters stand in a contrapuntal relation to one another. The buried treasure has impelled Philly to examine herself for strengths and weaknesses, and this, in turn, has engendered in her a feeling of thwarted maternity. She has turned from the buried treasure toward her young cousin Imogene, seeing herself in the girl--young, fecund, in love; her self-search continues in the search for the daughter she never had. Ben Shepherd, on the other hand, comes to the Pigeon River country, trying to know himself through discovering his fathers; he is young, denied admittance to the world of Giles and Imogene, because he is only on the outermost edge of adolescence. His buried treasure, the Shepherd graveyard, leads him, like Philly Blair, to center upon Imogene, trying to find within her the secret of life. And at the end of Chapter II, the two themes are played side by side, as Philly Blair sits with her feet on the iron pot, and Ben Shepherd stands by the doorway with the stolen metatarsus in his pocket. But in the remaining chapters Philly's story and Ben Shepherd's subplot are not so well integrated. The third chapter, told from Philly's point of view, advances both stories, the fourth takes up where it leaves off and brings Ben's story to a close; the fifth, Philly's again, resolves the complications of the plot and provides a symbolic resolution of the novel's underlying themes.

Philly's story begins with the discovery of the treasure, and her immediate determination to 'do something' with this new prosperity to help her young cousin points both to Philly's thwarted maternity and to the theme of self as a principle of creativity.... Philly has a moment of clear perception in which she understands the motivations which drive Sam Cundy to deny all suitors access to Imogene. Philly looks at Imogene and sees instead Lispy, Imogene's mother--dead these seven years... Sam Cundy's love for his daughter has become a perverted love--perverted because it denies life to Imogene in order that Sam Cundy may retain his grasp on the dead. So, in arranging Imogene's marriage, Philly is not only giving happiness to Imogene, whom she identifies both with herself and with the daughter she has never had, but is helping the creative life principle to triumph over a destructive and life denying principle.

The symbolic functions of the treasure itself are quickly developed. While Philly and Andy keep their discovery a secret, planning to reveal it to the neighbors at a party, Andy removes the pearls, keeping them

to himself. Philly wonders 'that he should take out some part and retain it from their common keeping,' but she reflects that he has had prior claim to the treasure, and besides she is 'amused and pleased that he should have a secret.' When Andy asks her to find an old key, however, she looks also for 'the small sack containing the two pearls'.... The search into secret drawers and the inserting of keys into locks suggests a sexual significance for this passage, which is confirmed by her reflection on the productivity of her sister and her own barrenness. When we remember that Philly is searching for two pearls sewn into a little sack, the general meaning of this passage becomes fairly clear. The theme is developed as her search continues.... The fumbling in the dust and mold, 'the ends of herself meeting the fine ends of these withered things,' is a metaphorical self-examination. Finding a lack in herself--the fact that she is barren--she turns her examination on Andy to find out what it is that he lacks. The two pearls are quite obviously a symbol of male fertility, but we must remember that they are just one part of the buried treasure.

Later, she stealthily searches Andy's body at night, finding the pearls strapped to the forepart of his trunk by a piece of tape, and wonders if he carries them thus 'to make up somehow for whatever he lacked.' Her delight in what Andy has done grows as she thinks about it, and he becomes, in her eyes, an 'increased' man. Philly is alarmed when she finds that the pearls are missing, and immediately it becomes clear to her that Andy has given them to Hester Trigg, 'for Hester could easily get the best that any man had.'

It is only after the disappearance of the pearls arouses Philly's jealousy and pride that the full significance of the treasure held in common by Philly and Andy is made explicit in Philly's clear sudden realization.... The buried treasure which she and Andy possess together represents the love that they have cumulatively built up between them, the love which they share jointly 'in common keeping.' The two pearls are part of the treasure, though Andy has a special right of ownership to these. If he removes the two pearls from the kettle permanently, the treasure--no longer held in common--will become depleted forever and lose its value to Philly. In other words, she needs love in order to be lovely....

Thus, with the climactic discovery that the kettle is no longer buried under the hearth, Philly sees 'a vacant world stretched out in all ways, as if the walls of the house and all the air and the ground were taken away.' With the treasure missing, the world comes apart for Philly. The inner loveliness which she had felt, glorying in the shared love between herself and Andy, is shattered.... It is clear that Philly's 'poverty' and 'ugliness' are here qualities of the spirit; and the buried treasure, ripped out of the Blair cornfield, is meant to signify that nontangible wealth of human love and companionship so integral to Miss Roberts' thought. The relationship of sexuality to love seems to be indicated by the male and female phallic shapes of the symbols--the two pearls and the ovular iron kettle.

The relationship between sexual love and death is also pointed to in the Ben Shepherd subplot; there we see Ben's dim realization that the dead--the bleached random bones of the graveyard--were once themselves vital human beings, bursting with blood and imposing on the generations to come their heritage and their bone structure. The very fact that the kettle of gold had been placed in the middle of the long line of Shepherd succession is testimony that these bones once accumulated their own buried treasures. The minor theme of the treasure residing in the earth and the generations of men who have tilled appears in the very first paragraph of Ben Shepherd's opening chapter....

From Ben's point of view, the kettle of nineteen hundred gold coins is the product of the 'long sequence of harvests and plantings' coming to light in 'the acute moment.' Thus we have represented two kinds of vision--the subjective, caught-in-the-event observations of Philly Blair, and the objective, above-space-and-time view of Ben Shepherd.

We meet Ben on a pilgrimage to find himself, since he enters the Pigeon River country intent on visiting the land that his ancestors had settled, and 'he had dismissed from his mind much that he knew of the world by the way of his own lived past, and as he stepped...he viewed with pride the fine void he had brought to his memory.... He had wanted to become nothing so that he might then try a new way of being.' He, like Jeremy, is eager to know answers, to discover 'from-whiches and toward-whats'....

His role is that of the student--young, impetuous, a little pompous in his unattained maturity, but eager to examine and to learn. He is amused and intrigued by the discovery of the gold in the Blair cornfield,

having secretly watched the scene, but he discovers for himself the second 'buried treasure' in the novel--the graveyard of the Shepherds: 'The richness of the burying-place in its multitude gave him a new sense of the country as it spread here and there beyond his ledge, as if the people had become a floescence that arose with branchy steams and wide flowerings that reached into every hollow and spread up over every hill, dividing again and again.' The life urge which these buried bones once possessed has cleaned and tilled the land and peopled it with all its inhabitants. Ben Shepherd himself, like the iron pot which was dragged out of the earth into 'the acute moment' after lying dormant for many generations, is a product of the earth--seven generations removed from the original Tobias Shepherd, but formed and shaped by him and all the descendants of him. Ben removes a bone from the burying ground as a reminder of his heritage, and, fittingly enough, startles a pair of lovers in the brush as he leaves the graveyard....

This swift juxtaposition of death and young passionate sex confuses him with its violent contrast, and later when the girl he has surprised in the graveyard refuses to dance with him, his anger is only partly at the rejection. He resents also the irreverent intrusion of sexuality into the burial ground of his ancestors. His note to her, to be accompanied by the metatarsus, is a double-edged reminder of the scene in the graveyard: 'You have got a proud back and a pretty face. Mr. Stoner says you are my cousin ten steps removed or more. You do not want to dance with a wraith now, but some day you may need to. I recommend on that day this bone.' But as he enters the busy life of this community, Ben begins vaguely to sense the correlation between the needs of the teeming earth and the sexual love of human beings, reflecting on the people about him.... These themes are joined in Ben's meditation as he listens to Stoner's reminiscences....

The long line of his ancestral dead--which in his youth he cannot imagine except as old, inanimate bones--becomes somehow connected to the youthful burst of life which he recognizes in Imogene. For a moment he returns to the mood of his note to Robbie May.... But this attitude does not last long. Working for the rest of the week in the rhythm of the harvest, he comes to a slow realization that the people of Pigeon River are the products of the bones in the graveyard. He is surprised at his earlier desire to hurt Robbie May and he 'unsays' the note. Then, at the end of Chapter IV, he makes a ritual journey to the graveyard to return the stolen metatarsus.... His 'treasure' he finds ultimately to lie within himself: the inherited skeletal structure of the Shepherds, the generative power of man, and a feeling of belongingness not only to the dead whose name he bears, but also to the living, who, being human, are his relatives. Thus, searching for a father in order to discover himself, he finds himself and his father within him.

As we have already noted, *A Buried Treasure* was planned in the comic spirit, and we can justly expect the complications to be resolved with traditional alacrity in Act Five's Midsummer Night's scene. The kettle is safe; the reservoir of love which is Philly's right to draw upon for 'joy' and 'pride of life' has suffered no change. The pearls are also safe; Andy had 'lent' them to Hester Trigg, but they are now returned. Further, and in the traditional vein of folk humor, the pearls have been instrumental in smoothing out the problems over Imogene's marriage; Hester Trigg has shown the pearls to Sam Cundy, and Sam's life-denying love for Imogene has been rechanneled in a healthier direction.

In the final scene the action expands into a larger frame of reference, as the young men and girls of the countryside come to celebrate Midsummer Night with dancing and singing. The young people organize a 'wheel-dance' and play 'drop-the-handkerchief' and, in Miss Roberts' description, the mergence into a community created by love and the physical force of sex which serves as a basis for love is strongly implied.... The force of sex as the power which drives the world forward, which creates generations creating generations, is represented in the metaphor of the wheel turning under the power of the girls and boys chasing one another around the rim. And, perhaps more subtly, the ability to enter into the turning of the great wheel is made dependent on an inner feeling of 'loveliness,' which can best be attained through the ownership of a buried treasure of shared love. Thus Philly can join the dance and give to the dance, because she has something to give. The novel closes on a note of pastoral harmony.... The world is restored to order and the two buried treasures lie in gentle peace.

Although I have taken pains to analyze the rather complex design of *A Buried Treasure*, I think it is perhaps the least successful of Miss Roberts' novels. The shifts in viewpoint and the complexities of the symbolism are intellectually understandable, but it seems to me that in the reading experience they do not attain that fusion of thing and idea which makes for successful achievement in symbolic presentation. The

reader is not inevitably led to connect the Ben Shepherd 'treasure' with Philly's iron kettle; he is confused by the prevalence of references to the insect life which likewise abounds beneath the earth. One is never certain whether to take the kettle as an allegorical object designating a fixed human quality, or as an exfoliating symbol which can move through several levels of abstraction. If one is to interpret the kettle in the first way, the range of meanings becomes limited; if one chooses the latter way, the kettle becomes too heavy to move easily from one meaning level to another, and the device takes on a color of contrivance inimical to the successful operation of the symbol.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the novel is the faulty integration of the Ben Shepherd plot to the rest of the story. Ben Shepherd himself is a poorly realized character, and although his quest begins positively enough, it fades to a very weak ending. Worse, the significance of his story is never very closely tied in with that of the main plot. It is possible, as I think we have done, to bridge the two plots by analytical interpretation, but I do not think that this bridging is effectively done within the frame of the novel. The characterization of Philly Blair, on the other hand, is one of the finest achievements of the novel, and the presentation of the deep love shared by two very unromantic, inarticulate middle-aged people is both tender and penetrating, and, to my knowledge, unduplicated in contemporary fiction.

A Buried Treasure has also something of the fabulous quality of the folktale, creating a world which is illuminated more by the sheen of moonlight than the hard glare of the noon sun, and where a kettle containing gold coins and a Midsummer Night's meadow dance are appropriate symbols. The use of folk material is very fitting in a novel whose theme places so much emphasis on sexuality both as a vehicle of love and as the generative factor in the life of man. The detailed symbolic treatment of sex and its relationship to the organic pattern of Miss Roberts' thought is new in her work, although we can see similar designs operating in her earlier novels, particularly in *My Heart and My Flesh*. The novel is almost, in its largest sense, a lusty paean to love.

However, in the last analysis, *A Buried Treasure* must be regarded as one of Miss Roberts' minor novels, although it is frequently interesting and charming in itself. Here there is nothing of 'the colossal, warlike, Homeric, blood-and-anger thrust' which Miss Roberts demands from great poetry. It is, at its best, a playful, pastoral idyll, told with an earthy robust humor and delicate charm; at its worst, it is two ill-connected short stories, forcibly held together by an unconvincing contrivance."

Earl H. Rovit
Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(U Kentucky 1960) 99-116

"*A Buried Treasure* (1931) seems to belong more to the dramaturgy of our time. It is a dreary little tale, once more allegorical, full of fantastic characters who foreshadow the world of Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers. Andy and Philly Blair, the old couple who dig up a pail of gold coins and bury it again in fear of robbers, Ben Shepherd who comes to town to transcribe the dates of his ancestors from the tombs in the cemetery and finds a bone of one which he carries about in his pocket, a hen that eats her own eggs, a father who claims that his daughter is illegally married in order to get her home to be his cook--we begin to recognize the whimsical southern cast that has fascinated later audiences. But they fail to come alive."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1963) 131-32

"*A Buried Treasure* (1931) and *Black Is My Truelove's Hair* (1938) have less breadth and depth than the other novels I am discussing, but within their limits they are often evocative and fresh. Like *The Time of Man*, they present human beings near to nature, but the central characters are imagined on a slighter scale. These two novels only incidentally reach the epical dimensions of *The Time of Man* in which Miss Roberts had illuminated the life of the race through the life of one predominating individual. Earth continues, however, to be a strong influence in these two later books; it enhances incident and character and frequently opens vistas of significance beyond the literal. Emphasis in both works is upon the resolving of psychological discord and the removing of obstacles to a free personal existence rather than upon one individual's heroic struggles as they suggest the aboriginal aspirations and defeats of mankind....

Andy Blair unearths a pot of moldering coins at the base of a decaying stump. Miss Roberts thereafter analyzed the disquieting effects of this discovery, not so much on Andy Blair (who predictably begins to fear almost at once for the safety of the hoard), as on his wife Philly and on Ben Shepherd, the youthful visitor to the countryside from further North who has watched the Blairs dig up the gold.... Her intention, Miss Roberts once said, was 'to compose a piece which would follow a five-part comedy form and which would attain the effects of a pastoral in music.'

For both Ben and Philly, the discovery of the treasure is decisive. For the boy, commissioned by his father to gather information in this region about the pioneer Shepherds, the incident is psychologically overpowering; it prevents him for the moment from going to any other place, even back to his home. The 'seductive' thought of the kettle dominates his mind, even entering his dreams as he sleeps in the open. When he watches Andy and Philly dig up the gold, he fears that 'the accustomed ways of life' in this region may be disrupted, and he is curious to see what will happen. He thereupon decides, for the time, to settle in the Elk Creek country in order to probe more deeply the connections between these people and their pioneer ancestors and to study the effects of this country upon himself. For Philly, existence is completely reordered: 'the pot went back of everything she knew and made there a new beginning.' For an interval, the land becomes dim in her consciousness and only the kettle is bright in her thoughts. This exciting novelty breeds insecurity, however, and she sometimes longs nostalgically 'for the old-time unconsciousness and ease, for the day when a hidden pot of money had never come into her thought.'

For both Ben and Philly, the discovery of the treasure leads, therefore, to an exploration of the ordinarily undisturbed inner self. Philly tries to evaluate, given her new perspective, the quality of her life with Andy, and she notes a failure in generosity and understanding. He has not fathered a child; whether this has been by design or accident is not clear, but she feels a gift has been withheld from her. Philly's search for a key to fit the brass lock for securing the treasure and her search for the pouch in which her husband has hidden two pearls comprise in part, as Rovit points out, a quest for sexual fruition: 'her double search, for a key and a sack, became a triple search in which she probed Andy minutely to see where he lacked.' Acutely conscious of her unfulfilled nature, she wishes to use part of the money in the service of love, in doing something for her cousin's girl, Imogene Cundy. Imogene's father is possessive, and out of jealousy and expediency he discourages all his daughter's admirers. At this point Philly wants to forward the romance of Imogene and Giles Wilson and to give the lovers a wedding. She is also far less fearful than her husband of losing the money.

In their first enthusiasm the Blairs wish to assemble their neighbors in order to announce a 'surprise,' but just before the party, they conclude they cannot risk spreading word about their find. After the people arrive, Andy, sullen and withdrawn in fear, engenders a comparable reaction in Philly; but she overcomes anxiety to take delight in the gathering and to wish that she had thought of a party long before. Knowing that her friends expect some arresting news, she is equal to the situation without disclosing the discovery of the money; but Andy, under the influence of a revivalist preacher, Hez Turner, is in some danger of betraying the secret. Giles Wilson has entrusted his newly obtained marriage license to Philly, and she suddenly sees a way out for herself, a way to rescue Andy from Turner's importunity, and a way to help Imogene. Rather than eloping, the lovers, she discerns, can make use of the preacher who is badgering Andy, and she arranges for the marriage to take place at the party. Philly's thoughts, even at a time of personal crisis, go out to others; Andy's turn within to intensify his insecurity. She is able, by courage and resourcefulness, to accomplish for Imogene what the girl's other advocates among the village matrons would like to do for her but cannot. Even after the wedding, which in a sense saves Andy, he is unwilling to buy Imogene a present, to furnish, as he puts it, 'crockery for Giles Wilson's kitchen.'

Despite his uncouth appearance and narrow nature, Andy has been all-important to her, Philly realizes; and at times she has been able to invest the man as he is with a glamour reflected from her own rich imagination. Like that of other Roberts' heroines, her life in the mind is so abundant that it transfigures an unexciting reality. If Andy is generally not the elegant man she had at time regarded him as being and if at other times he seems almost a stranger to her, he has nevertheless inspired in her the love which has illuminated her life through the years and which has caused her soul, her real 'buried treasure,' to expand. Especially after the party, her affection ranges beyond its firm basis in Andy to include the whole community. When for a time at the end of the novel it appears to Philly that the money has been stolen, she

feels, as a chief cause of regret, her inability to give others of her bounty. Appropriately enough, at the ring dance a little while later the youths want to pass around her; she is now physically at the center of their activity, just as spiritually she is the perhaps unacknowledged center of their most generous and spontaneous thoughts.

Philly's awakening is true to the facts that are given, but she is somewhat undeveloped as a character. Externally she is authentic enough, but she is insufficiently analyzed from her central role. She lacks, I feel, that full immersion in milieu and in the depths of the psyche which gives profundity to the meditations of the heroines of Miss Roberts' major novels. Given her unsophistication, she is presented too sketchily to support the subtlety of her perceptions. Andy, as the cause of inner illumination, is even less satisfactory. Miss Roberts failed to bridge the gulf between Andy's instinctive selfishness and the life-supporting qualities he should possess to engage Philly's heart completely. The grotesque need not exclude the noble, but here it does to an extent damaging to Miss Roberts' symbolic pattern in the novel. Philly's negative impression of Andy after he digs the treasure is not easily effaced: 'She sensed the soggy, flabby, sour, unwilling and crooked rottenness of lean flesh and the little mouths of the skin out of which came mean ill-odored vapors.'

Philly is not the only person to be profoundly affected by the events which follow the discovery of the gold. Ben Shepherd is considerably more mature at the end of his sojourn in the Elk Creek region than when he arrived. At first he has unreasoned dislikes for ants and for the lovers whom he surprises. Nor is he full grown physically and mentally. When he uses the ancestral thighbone (which he has picked up in the graveyard thicket) to measure his own shorter frame, we can infer that his body may yet reach that great stature common among his pioneer forebears and that his mind will, in the future, appreciate still more the significance of the heroic past commemorated by their bones. In his first Pigeon River days, the sight of two girls, Robbie May and Bonnie, riding together unsettles him: he wishes to experience the love and life which emanate from them. After he meets them, he regards his present existence as 'unhoused' and 'unclean,' and he hopes for some order in his own life as a result of affection for someone outside the self. Ben is sensitive to nature's life; that he does not as yet embrace it completely is made clear by his revulsion against the ants. More than a full acceptance of nature, Ben must gain a full understanding of people.... It is just this increased knowledge of his fellow men which Ben acquires through his sojourn in the community.

Ben finds the incarnation of the vital life he is seeking in Imogene who haunts him 'as a picture, as a shape, a desire, a fear, a dim recollection.' He feels that the people in this countryside seem to have lived more deeply than he has; and Imogene represents most fully such an abundant existence. The emotion which Imogene arouses in him combines reverence, sexual fervor, and pantheistic exaltation: 'It seemed to him, dreaming, that it would be a pleasant thing to load risk upon her, to put upon her, to lavish, to spend, to take, to pile up, to make her the earth itself, to give to her, to plow her deep, to plant her with a harvest, to fertilize her with rain, to fling himself down on one of her cool hills in the shade.' In Ben's mind, tenderness and violence are the paradoxical elements of sexual veneration. He regards Imogene as a source of life; but he also sees that, as a rallying point for the vital energies in others, she not only excites their aspirations but their all too human frailties. The boys and men become 'more lustful and hearty and cruel' in her presence and the girls more 'careful and cunning, preserving her and her way of life.'

In general, the characters in *A Buried Treasure* are deficient in substance and force. Miss Roberts was, however, fully immersed in her themes: the regenerative effects of earth, the progress of spiritual change in the individual, the direct relationship between sexuality and individual fulfillment, and the abiding influence of the past upon the present. The ideas are not always fully identified with sharply defined characters--indeed, they are often separable from them; at the same time, the ideas are lucid and imaginative expressions of Miss Roberts' poetically sensitive temperament. Thus what she says is, in the abstract, most provocative, but figures like Ben and Imogene are too nebulous to embody with assurance the values Miss Roberts wished to associate with them. Style, with its varied rhythms and the evocative image, in a measure compensates--just as it does in narrative poetry or in a novel like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*--for failure to accentuate sharply at all points the external, idiosyncratic aspects of the various characters.

The Ben and Philly portions of the novel do not interweave closely enough. The one chief point of contact between these two ordering intelligences occurs when Ben prevents the Blair hearth from being torn up at the party (the kettle has been temporarily hidden under the main hearthstone, and the Blair dog smells it out). Later Ben comes to warn Philly about the shifty painters, Grove and Larkin, his fellow workers on the Stoner farm. The relationship between Ben and Philly is perfunctory, however, considering what they have in common--sensitivity, reverence of Imogene, feeling for the Kentucky past, and affection for humanity. Ben's absence from the ring dance, which is mostly a fete for Philly, is conspicuous since he is the one who best understands some of her deepest instincts. In view of their spiritual affinity, Ben and Philly are too casually separated. The summons home arbitrarily disposes of Ben before his values can prevail to the extent that would justify Miss Roberts' intricate elaboration of them.

We can derive pleasure, however, from the symbolic intonations which inhere in the people, scenes, and incidents of *A Buried Treasure*. Except for the ring dance at the conclusion of the novel, the most evocative touches are found in Chapters II and IV, those given from the point of view of Ben. These chapters suffer from Ben's haziness as a character; but idea and incident--placed against the wild enclosing hills, the dignified and deserted Shepherd burial ground, and the mild life on the farms--acquire expansive power independent of Ben's somewhat flattened identity.

Miss Roberts in these sections acknowledged the earth ('Terra--the first, the earliest, the most ancient oracle, the most profound deity') and the historic past as potent forces upon Ben as sensitive observer and, inescapably but less powerfully, upon the country folk as a whole. In a letter to Marshall A. Best, August 16, 1931, Miss Roberts indicated that Ben 'represents the broad sweep of the country and the people. His chapters are given to the broad view, to seeing in the large. The woman's sight is in the little, in the immediate and near. As the prose makes the transition from one view to the other there is a merging--as when Philly, at the end of ([Chapter] I), feels the approaching rush of the whole countryside.

In the Elk Creek region Earth is powerful with the strength of the hills and streams, of the corn and rye, of 'the growing herbs having some deep business with what lay under the surface of the soil,' and of the verminous ants even. The repulsive yet energetic ants give astringency to Ben's otherwise idyllic conceptions. The ants are symbolic of nature's persistence and, in the elaborate organization of their life, of the order underlying the apparent aimlessness of her activity. The wood mites which Philly muses upon in the opening pages serve a similar purpose. The surviving members of the Shepherd stock (all of them at Elk Creek by now have other names) represent this same resilience and this same attainment of a modicum of order. The subterranean labyrinths of the ants and the bifurcating Shepherd family tree are identified in Ben's mind, and each branch of the tree seems to have its pupa case which will burst forth into new life. The forms of nature thus correlate with each other and amplify each other's significance.

A law of compensation also operates in the universe: the ants have leached the bones of the Shepherds but Ben in the harvest field cannot deviate from the routine of his work to spare the journeying ants, while he thinks, 'Thus do the bones of the Shepherds become for a little while, the destiny of the ants.' The insects--ants, wood mites, bees, beetles, grasshoppers, gallinippers, tumblebugs, hot-weather locusts--mentioned so often in *A Buried Treasure* attest to the profuseness of nature's nonsentient life, the abundance and intricacy of her forms, and the curious manifestations of her energies.

Throughout the novel, the pioneer past hovers over the life of the rural community. The present moment in history and nature is the tangible expression of elusive forces which have long been converging upon it. In that part of the novel recorded through Ben's mind, the writing 'spreads wide into the generations past--up and down in time--and off into the whole near-lying space.' Thus the rolling motion of the hills connects with the flow of time itself and links 'the acute moment, the fine and most immediate present' of the husbandmen (who seem to Ben like 'shapes filched out of the clods and set up in life') with a legendary frontier.

The settlers, men of great stature and moral strength, often have biblical names like Tobias, Joel, and John to suggest their seriousness and strenuousness: 'They, those men were mythical giants stalking through the land in long leathern shirts and breech-garments that scarcely covered the knees. They had cleared the soil of the trees, a little at a time, generation after generation getting itself born for the labor.'

The presence of those who were transcendently impressive in their own day and in ours pervades the very contours of this land, contours which call to mind the fabulous and the mythological: 'The rim of the east hill lay along the horizon in rolling lumps of slightly heaving masses a great good lain down to sleep at the edge of the sky.' When Ben eats the wild berries, he is again gathered to the past, for the settlers often had to depend upon them for food. The berries give him a sense of security, 'as if in the fruits the whole land contrived to establish him in a way of life.'

In his mind, Ben sets the denizens of Shepherd graveyard against the people now living on the land, who make up its numbers for what they may as individuals lack in grandeur: 'The richness of the burying-place in its multitude gave him a new sense of the country as it spread here and there beyond his ledge, as if the people and their generations had become a florescence that arose with branch stems and wide flowerings that reached into every hollow and spread up over every hill, dividing again and again.' The pioneer qualities are thus diffused through a whole countryside, and the richness of the original stock has only been diluted, not dissipated.

Miss Roberts explored the complex relationship between pioneer days and present in describing Ben's symbolic journey into his family past. When he visits the burial ground, he finds an eroded grave in a thicket; the exposed bones seem to him familiar and friendly, not formidable and sinister parts of a skeleton. He takes a metatarsal bone from the disintegrated skeleton and puts it in his pocket. Surprising a young man (who is not named) and a woman (Robbie May) as he comes out of the thicket, he realizes that lovers make the bones which lie under the flesh and which eventually survive the flesh. Lovers in the present repeat age-old patterns; if fulfillment through sex in the past had been impossible, these bones and the great men they supported could never have existed.

The intimate connection of past and present, death and life, dissolution and sex is conveyed by the metatarsal bone which for Ben assumes gradually a phallic significance when his determination to keep it is transformed to 'a sharp spear of will,' when he feels it become 'a stiffness at the side of his thigh' as he thinks romantically of Imogene, and when he wishes momentarily to humiliate Robbie May for her indifference to him by sending her the bone along with a scornful note. Bone is also emblematic of the basic reality of matter which is given its individual form both by local circumstances and by the perceiving mind. Ben's ancestors seem reduced to 'random bones...branching, stony spines of one calcareous matter,' at another time, living beings seem to Ben, when in a cynical mood, nothing more than material skeletons, 'a bone rubbing upon a bone.'

Such cynicism is momentary, however, for Ben concludes that the living Shepherds at Elk Creek are more valuable than their ancestors and his, no matter how heroic. A living present is thus more vibrant than a legendary past. Without this great tradition to nurture them, however, the living Shepherds, more obscure than their forebears, would be less sturdy and staunch. At the end of the novel, Ben in his newly acquired wisdom knows that he must return the filched bone to the thicket grave. For now he has oriented the present to the pioneer heritage and complete his pilgrimage into his ancestral past, and he has lost his hatred of Robbie May and overcome his injured pride at her distant attitude toward him.

Ben Shepherd's self-conscious spiritual journey thus provides one major movement in the novel. The other main direction derives from the less intellectual, less articulate Philly, who is great by what she is rather than by what she knows, whose mind dwells--but significantly and perceptively--'among the little things of her life, small objects that are intimately handled and sensed.' Under her influence the novel moves from discord to harmony, as Andy gets over his suspicions and as Philly feels her own life enriched with new meaning. The marriage of Imogene to Giles dissipates the mounting tensions at the Blair party. The marriage is 'surprise' enough for the assembled guests (since Andy cannot reveal the secret of the treasure), and good humor once again prevails. This state of harmony, however, is only temporary: the thieving housepainters, still in the neighborhood, suspect that the Blairs may be worth robbing, and Imogene's father still fumes at his daughter's marriage. Philly sees in the pullet which gets sick in swallowing its new laid egg, an image of the repulsive, possessive Cundy who would obliterate his daughter's identity to establish his own more firmly. Philly regards the hen's cannibalism--and by extension, Cundy's possessiveness--as a wanton, perverse act, disruptive of nature's unity and harmony: 'She [the pullet] had made a crack in time itself and in the illusions people hold together.' The neighbors regard

Cundy's treatment of Imogene as 'devilment,' and he seems quite literally a fiend when he sets fire to his daughter's dresses and books after her marriage.

Sometime after the party, Philly on Midsummer Day has an intimation of the spiritual reality of the self as she sews a quilt: 'a knowledge of herself as being lovely both without and within, as having inside herself a warm flow of blood and little tremors of delight.' This vision of harmony and order has for external counterpart the ring dance later in the day when the neighbor boys and girls, with some of their elders, come to pay homage to her. The dance ends the remaining disharmonies. One of the thieves is removed from the circle by the sheriff, and the other one flees; Imogene's father accepts the inevitable, turns his attention to a neighbor widow, and allows the certificate of the Wilson marriage to be filed. With her relationships to Andy, Imogene, and her neighbors now more firm, Philly feels a surge of outgoing love for those who honor her, and her sense of fulfillment is made even more complete when a straying black heifer finds its way home. This heifer weaves in and out of the last pages of the book, serving as Miss Roberts maintained 'to hold the ideas apart, to mellow the lump, as it were.' The real treasure, as Philly discovers, is not the money one hides from fear but the love which one spontaneously, and even carelessly, expends.

As Campbell and Foster have indicated, the dance is another link between past and present. The ancient fertility rituals, celebrated on Midsummer Eve, survive in Kentucky in transmuted form: the kindling of fires has yielded to singing, dancing, and the playing of rustic games--to 'drop the handkerchief' and stock-calling contests. Such communal activity allows those close to the earth a means of expressing their sense of unity with one another and with the land which nurtures them. After the discovery of the kettle, the land was displaced from the center of Philly's thoughts, but it could not for long be excluded: 'the land wound and turned, drawing nearer to wind her up into its strange core.' In their dance, the youths and neighbors execute a winding and turning motion similar to that which Philly had sensed as underlying the land: 'The great wheel turned, making ready a world, a world of mankind turning all together...as the earth itself the wheel turned under the moon...' The great wheel of the dance is a copy both of the great wheel of the planet Earth, which is always in circular motion, and of the undulating land, dipping, rolling, tilting, winding, turning.

The dancers in their fellowship are emblematic of men aspiring to serene accord with their neighbors and with Providence; they are emblematic, too, of the age-old patterns which all men, as Ben had previously seen, must follow, 'turning about in the same dance to the end of the earth.' Philly, more intensely than anyone else, feels thus drawn to her friends and to the land which she has always known. The spontaneity of this folk ritual gives freshness and intensity to the final pages of the book. If all that had gone before had shown such lucidity and depth, the novel would have been more nearly the full success that, given its many poetically evocative sections, it deserved to be."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(Twayne 1963) 63-74

"In *A Buried Treasure*, a kettle of gold coins Andy and Philly Blair find leads to the emergence of Andy's individuality and Philly's awareness of herself 'as being lovely both without and within'--and to their recognition of the treasure of love they have amassed. The shadowy figure, Ben Shepherd, come to the community to learn of his family's past and so of himself, is a figure of the past witnessing the human comedy. The idyll ends in a midsummer night ring dance: drawn by the power of sex and love, in harmony with the rhythms of the earth, 'The great wheel turned, making ready a world, a world of mankind living all together'...."

William H. Slavick
"Elizabeth Madox Roberts"
Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 417

Michael Hollister (2021)