

ANALYSIS

Jingling in the Wind (1928)

Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1886-1941)

"Naturally both Miss Roberts's fluidity and her overwhelming inwardness had an important influence upon her style. Jeremy, of *Jingling in the Wind*, certainly speaks for his creator in his disquisition upon the limitations of words as a means of conveying the quality of experience, their recalcitrance, their lewdness and waywardness. Miss Roberts adds, characteristically, 'He was by reason of his tastes inclined toward the practices and pleasures of poetry, and was thus the most practical of men....' As to the practical side of it, opinions may differ, and even the pleasure depends upon the reader's own cast of mind.

There is a quality of monotony that is undeniable, for while Elizabeth Roberts's style was as unmistakable as that of Henry James, it was far less varied and vital, and one can well understand the objections of those who feel that her narratives are less clothed in her individual manner than embalmed in it. It is true, as her special admirers have always insisted, that her kind of poetic insight is the very thing that is needed to save the novel from its exhausted naturalism and sentimentalism, but in her case (as, long ago, in Meredith's) one may still be permitted to doubt whether further development will be assured until this insight has been wedded to a somewhat sounder narrative method than either writer was quite able to achieve. Apart from all such considerations, the books remain, capable of meaning everything to those to whom they mean anything at all."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 395-96

"*Jingling in the Wind*, we are told, was written concurrently with *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh* as a kind of spontaneous release from the strenuous pressure of these first two novels. It is a poetic fantasy employing the technique of satire, Miss Roberts' only published work to illustrate her belief that she had the mental and temperamental equipment to become a satirist. Miss Roberts herself makes only the slightest reference to this novel in her private papers; so perhaps the assumption that this is a *jeu d'esprit*, conceived as a means of relaxation and fun, is not unfounded. She writes: 'The one reality in this is Jeremy's soul or mind, that alone can be treated seriously.'

Satire is most commonly employed as a tool for social and moral criticism, and, as we know, in the hands of an accomplished satirist, it can be a very deadly weapon. The satirist generally attacks some established institution, tradition, or socially held set of beliefs. But we have already seen that Miss Roberts was not wholly committed to a belief in the objective reality of the external world. Life was, for her, more or less what one was capable of making it, depending on one's creative capacities. Social institutions, traditions, and beliefs had an existence for Miss Roberts, but not the kind of absolute overpowering existence that they possessed for, say, Sinclair Lewis. For the latter, the stupidity which he found in society was of great importance because it operated to stultify those ideals or life qualities which he felt to be significant. Lewis could therefore get angry enough to compose a sustained criticism of society, but the role of social crusader is one in which it is impossible to imagine Elizabeth Madox Roberts. Further, her subjective mode of narration requires an active introspective mind as hero, and we have seen that the focus of her action is never on the outside happening, but on the inner transformation of the happening. Accordingly, we can expect that Miss Roberts' experiment with satire will be a very different thing from what we regard as traditional satire.

For a structural framework she adopts the form of the picaresque novel, using a rather whimsically entangled love quest to get her rogue-hero 'on the road' where he can observe what is going on in the world. But then she suffuses this traditional pattern with a combination of farce, fantasy, and poetry, leaving the

reader with a concoction that should be drunk swiftly with one's eyes shut. Allan Nevins attempts to explain this mixture sympathetically, as follows:

It is a gentle clouded form of satire, sometimes rather wistful, and seldom more than reproachful. It is a mockery that shifts and changes in color and form from page to page, usually defying analysis. The poetry dances, disappears, and reappears. To enjoy the book the reader must surrender himself to its capricious humor; its elfish alternation of tenderness and laughter, its opal combination of fire and vapor, its sudden ascents from rough homeliness to lyricism.'

Kenneth Burke, on the other hand, finds nothing to praise in the novel, except the works which the novel reminds him of: 'The *Jingling* suggests something of Chaucer, *Candide*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, but remains a book of no great moment despite its distinguished antecedents.' I would think that the danger in analyzing *Jingling in the Wind* would be to take it too seriously. Accordingly, I shall examine the novel, not as a unified metaphorical statement of experience--which it isn't--but as a pastiche, parts of which are wonderful in themselves, and parts of which are interesting in the light they shed on Miss Roberts' other work.

First, let us look at Jeremy's mind, the one reality which Miss Roberts felt could 'be treated seriously.' He is the rainmaker of Jason County, sensitive, devoted to his art, and seemingly self-sufficient. Both by choice and temperament he is relatively isolated from the profit-making world.... He possessed seven deadly sins, seven cardinal virtues, twenty-two phantoms, and is sometimes beset by two witches, three nymphs, and five fiends. However, these are not particularly important, since Miss Roberts regards these as the properties of all men. More significantly: 'Pride was his chief enemy, and this one gave him many an under-thrust when he did not suspect his presence.' We have already seen the effects of Theodosia's pride in *My Heart and My Flesh*, and, in truth, the chronicle of Jeremy's plot is really the same as Theodosia's, played in a comic, minor key. When Jeremy is singing over his breakfast, we discover his insufficiency.... Through his pride in his achievements, he has become an isolated man; his heart is closed to love. The plot action of the novel will send him on a romantic love quest to open his spirit, subdue his pride, and fulfill his being.

When Jeremy's friend Josephus returns from the metropolis to tell Jeremy of his adventures, he reveals the fact that he has fallen desperately in love with one Tulip McAfee, a girl who is betrothed to a bespectacled gentleman. As he speaks, Jeremy is enabled to 'see' her as though she were standing before him...'when she comes into his presence, all the birds of a man's heart will begin to sing and the whole sunrise of his soul will begin to dawn in the east.' It is no surprise then that at the end of Chapter Two, Jeremy has unknowingly decided to visit the metropolis...

While Jeremy and his fellow passengers are waiting for the motorbus to be repaired, and whiling away the time by telling stories to one another, Tulip herself appears 'in the heart of a cloud, pursued by four or five wild horses.' Her unconventional vehicle, as she later explains, was a very volatile Freudian dream. Jeremy is smitten to the depths with love, but he discovers that Tulip has undergone a change in heart since Josephus last observed her. In the story of her life, which she shortly relates, she makes cynical comments about love... As 'the lady with the child' remarks, Tulip has become 'what is sometimes described as a hard woman, a 'hard-boiled' virgin.'

On further examination, Jeremy discovers that the change in Tulip from the sweet young vision of Josephus' dreams to the 'hard-boiled virgin' who stands before him has been the result of disillusion in love. The bespectacled gentleman to whom Tulip was engaged had paid court under false colors. As she says: 'I found I had yielded to a non-existent personality. I had been willing to mate for life, even eager to so copulate, with the Amalgamated Irrigation Corporation of North American and Europe.'

The plot thus takes on complications, the love theme becoming twisted to involve both Jeremy and Tulip. While Jeremy's inner being, so long locked against love, has become open, Tulip has closed herself off, taking up the profession of rainmaker in order to be self-sufficient. There is further complication in the stubborn pride of Jeremy, which will keep him from engaging in an open aggressive courtship: 'I shall

perhaps discover ways to make myself necessary to her experience, comely to her sight, brave and honorable in her imagination, always feeling the air for signs of hostility, scorn, weariness, or contempt.... I will keep myself always in the rear of my affection, at least until I see how the land lies.' However, the plot is resolved in the end in the whimsical fashion we might expect. Jeremy becomes the hero of the Rainmakers' Convention, being chosen as 'The Rain Bat' to operate the model rain. He discovers, however, that he is only a tool in the whole operation which has been designed on the upper echelons by Tulip McAfee to counter the Anti-Rain evangelism led by James Ahab Crouch.

Jeremy swallows his pride somewhat reluctantly and prepares to woo Tulip in the accepted 'open' manner. He persuades himself that he is really organizing a new 'Masculine Renaissance' which will usher in a new age: 'Woman is to be gracious and beautiful, the giver of gifts, co-equal with man but different in office. The woman is going to know again the glory of submitting. Man is to be the ruler in the house.' However, this threat is not as distressful as it might seem, because he realizes that 'The first step toward a Masculine Renaissance will be the restoration of flattery and chivalry.' Thus, love conquers all--both pride and amorous disillusionment, and we are perhaps not wrong to suspect that the ladies have the best of it.

On the satirical side, Miss Roberts evidently chooses the subject of rainmaking in order to ridicule the contemporary battle between 'Religion' and 'Science' which was raging around the Scopes 'Monkey Trail.' This can be clearly seen in the...history of rainmaking which Jeremy soliloquizes over.... Her caricature of James Ahab Crouch, 'the most powerful evangelist of the day,' who spends his time spitting anathemas at the monkey men, the rain men, and Zelda Tookington, the 'incomparable dancer of the seven veils,' seems to draw on Billy Sunday for its inspiration and its humor.

In general Miss Roberts' satirical attempts in the novel are directed at the inconsequentiality of most of what passes for significant activity in the great wide world; and at man's proneness to avoid the responsibility of his own struggle for values. The frenzy of the twenties--Prohibition, jazz, advertising, Hollywood, the fads and farragoes of the times (which, as at all times, make loud noises but never sound beneath the surface)--are gently lampooned throughout the novel, most specifically in the scene of the great parade of trivia which passes by the indifferent spinning spider of culture....

But although Miss Roberts registers satirical success here and there, as in her vision of the neon zodiac in which the constellations spell out advertising slogans, the humor is, for the most part, either too heavy-handed or too oblique to bite with the sharp deflating snap of effective satire. She has a tendency to hold on to a joke too long, or to overwrite when understatement would better serve her ends. Her employment of farce and her intrusion of too much burlesque, as in the long unattached episode of Khadija-Pai, concubine to the Sultan Arhaj-Moomug-Ke, serve only to confuse and--let us admit it--bore the reader. Similarly, the long-drawn-out 'gland-story' of Zelda Tookington and the mysterious figure of Mr. Breed have no real function in the novel. The weakness of *Jingling in the Wind* may ultimately lie in Miss Roberts' failure to find an appropriate structural frame within which she could develop her themes. The title and the chain of stories in Chapter II suggest that she may have planned to keep the novel loosely within a framework modeled on *The Canterbury Tales*, but this would account for only one of her five chapters. And that one chapter is not particularly good in itself.

However, there is more to the novel than all this. There is an unbridled ebullience in this book--a singing immersion into the beauty and music of nature which the free play of fantasy allows Miss Roberts to achieve. There is a wise spinning spider, an Irish snake driven out of Ireland by Saint Patrick, and an articulate life in all things that grow and crawl.... Miss Roberts justifies her title in giving voice to the voiceless growth of the earth and reasserting in affirmative tones the rich organic connection between the life of man and the life of nature.

The poetry of her prose reaches its high point perhaps in such passages as that containing the 'life is from within' sentence, where Madame Eglentyne's emblem, '*Amor vincit omnia*,' receives a fresh revitalization. On formal grounds of aesthetic harmony, or in terms of effective satire, *Jingling in the Wind* is probably a failure; but these considerations seem somehow unimportant before the salient achievement of the book; it is capable of delighting a reader. For this we should be thankful, for few serious contemporary writers have deigned to recognize the domain of delight as one of their just provinces."

Earl H. Rovit
Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(U Kentucky 1960) 89-99

"She laughed so hard in reading the manuscript of *Jingling in the Wind* aloud to a friend that she had to stop reading. Such remoteness from others and enchantment with self can have disastrous results on art that must, in the last analysis, be communicated. At the same time Miss Roberts was becoming the most extreme of valetudinarians. She went in now for every kind of fad, believing that the sun was a cure-all, carrying her own drinking water, checking on the temperature of her dentist's office before she would make an appointment. A neurotic can perfectly well be a literary genius, but his greatest danger is always that he will not recognize when he is dull.

Jingling in the Wind (1928) is one of the dullest novels ever written by a first-rank American novelist. Its allegorical character may remove the need for flesh and blood in its people, but allegories should be very sharp and very funny, and it is neither. Jeremy and Tulip, as rainmakers, represent the synthetic, half-baked modern world that cannot wait for the clouds to supply water but must set up machinery to precipitate the precipitations. The novel is shrill and silly, like the later fiction of Edith Wharton, in its denunciation of the cheapness of contemporary American life. The only way that Miss Roberts could demonstrate what America had lost was to show, not what America was, but what America had been, and this, with much happier results, she accomplished in *The Great Meadow* (1930)."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 130

"I shall omit discussion of *Jingling in the Wind* which is for me not only the poorest of the novels but the only dull one. Miss Roberts did not do well with satiric fantasy; when she consciously tried to be humorous, she was self-conscious and heavy-handed."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Preface
Elizabeth Madox Roberts
(Twayne 1963)

"While writing her first two novels, Roberts was also at work on *Jingling in the Wind* (1928), 'a sort of relief or recreation.' Jeremy, a rainmaker, is, in his pride, closed to love, and his beloved, Tulip Tree McAfee, is immersed in the cultural confusion and decadence of the city. The satire that follows through Jeremy's frustrations and a series of Chaucerian tales is good-natured, but it reflects Roberts's profound concern about the historical discontinuity of the age, the growing commercial spirit, the corruption of the human spirit, and the inadequacy of Christianity, which she found to be a 'treeless, barren waste' in her region, to meet these challenges. Finally, love prevails, if as a ghost in the modern heart."

William H. Slavick
"Elizabeth Madox Roberts"
Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 416

Michael Hollister (2021)